



Communally constrained decisions in workplace contexts[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Highly communal people experienced low communion work environments as aversive.
- They were also unlikely to accept a high status promotion in such an environment.
- In contrast, low communal people were unconstrained by work environment communion.
- On average, women scored higher in communion than men.
- This may contribute to the underrepresentation of women in high status positions.

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ABSTRACT

We propose that people who value communion strongly experience low communion work contexts as aversive and avoid them, and consequently forego even those work opportunities that promise career advancement. In Experiment 1, participants varying in their own communal goals described a prior work experience with a coworker who was either low or high in communion. Participants with strong communal goals had greater aversive and avoidant reactions to low communion work environments, relative to high communion work environments. This difference was much less pronounced for participants with weaker communal goals. In Experiments 2a (undergraduate sample) and 2b (MTurk sample), participants took the perspective of a protagonist considering a high status promotion in which subordinates were described as low or high in communion. Again, participants who strongly valued communion had especially aversive and avoidant reactions to the low communion work environment. Furthermore, high communion participants reported they were less likely to accept the promotion in the low communion environment condition, whereas the communal nature of the environment did not influence low communal participants' decisions. Thus, work decisions are constrained by the communal nature of the environment, but only among people who strongly value communion. Importantly, women scored higher on communion than men in all experiments, suggesting that women are more likely to experience communally constrained decisions.

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Introduction

"I've worked with plenty of truly collaborative men, but I've also encountered those who weren't, and in those instances, they tended to take on an alpha-male dynamic. That's where you see the jockeying. I find that if men feel they can't be the alpha, that's when the fist-pounding and the chest-thumping and all sorts of stuff happens. You can watch it escalate so that people get their way.... A lot of that goes on in the workplace today."

This passage from Doreen Lorenzo, President of Quirky, appeared in a discussion of gender and leadership in the New York Time's "Corner Office" series, a section that features interviews with influential executives (Bryant, 2013). In the interview, Lorenzo offered her perspective on how the mismatch between non-communal workplace cultures and the desire to connect and relate to others can create an aversive working environment. We argue that not only do people who value communion perceive low communion environments as aversive, but they may also decide not to step into positions within these environments, even when these positions involve high status and career advancement. We also argue that because women on average value communion more than men (Diekmann, Brown, Johnston, & Clark, 2010), more women than men are likely to experience these communally constrained decisions, which may contribute to gender disparities in women's career advancement.

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Communion and agency

Communion and agency are two fundamental dimensions along which people vary (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006). Communion refers to a variety of other-focused traits and “relates to social desirability, to morality, to consideration, to expressiveness, to the moralistic bias, to nurturance, and to an interdependent self-construal” (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, p. 752). Agency refers to a variety of self-focused traits and “relates to intellectual desirability, to competence, to initiating structure, to instrumentality, to the egoistic bias, to dominance, and to an independent self-construal” (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, p. 752). Constellations of personality traits align according to the communion/agency distinction (Digman, 1997). For example, the interpersonal circumplex for organizing traits, motives, and interpersonal behavior rests on the distinction between nurturance/warmth and dominance/ambition (Wiggins, 1991). Furthermore, warmth and competence appear to be universal dimensions on which people evaluate others (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 2006). Given this widespread evidence for the centrality of agency and communion, it should come as no surprise that they also appear to constitute two fundamental goal orientations (Bakan, 1966; Pohlmann, 2001).

Communion and agency have traditionally covaried with gender. Research in the '70s and '80s demonstrated a greater association between women and communal traits and between men and agentic traits (Bem, 1974; Eagly, 1987; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). However, these gendered associations have changed in recent years. Twenge's (1997; see also Twenge, 2001) meta-analysis revealed a “highly significant” rise in women's endorsement of agency-related traits (e.g., assertive and independent) since the 1970s, with men and women becoming increasingly more similar. In contrast, women endorsed communion-related traits (e.g., understanding of others and gentle) more than men, and they did so consistently across time. Diekmann and Eagly (2000) found that people believed men in the 1950s were more agentic than women at that time, whereas men and women were seen as equally agentic “at present” (i.e., when the research was conducted). However, women were perceived as more communal than men both in the 1950s and at present. In terms of goal orientations, Diekmann and colleagues (Diekmann, Clark, Johnston, Brown, & Steinberg, 2011; Diekmann et al., 2010) found that contemporary college men and women scored similarly on agentic goals (e.g., valuing recognition, achievement, and status), whereas women endorsed communal goals more than men (e.g., valuing connections with others and serving humanity).

These gender differences and their changes across time can be understood in terms of social role theory (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984), which maintains that prescriptive and descriptive stereotypes correspond with the social roles that people occupy. The flood of women into the workforce in recent decades can account for their increased agency; however, women's continued caregiving and familial roles account for greater communion among women. Importantly, gender differences in the value placed on communion are expected to endure, corresponding with persisting differences in the roles played by women and men with respect to childbearing, childcare, and home life (see Diekmann & Eagly, 2000).

In the present research, we investigated whether the extent to which people possess communal goals is related to their perceptions of and interest in pursuing work environments characterized by high agency, but varying in their degree of communion. More specifically, we investigated the possibility that people who strongly value communal goals experience communally constrained decisions in work contexts.

Communally constrained decisions

Person–environment fit theories (e.g., Heilman, 1983; Roberts, 2006, Chapter 1; Snyder & Ickes, 1985) maintain that people seek out environments that provide a good fit with their personality and goals. The environment component can be conceptualized at a variety of different levels, including relationships with coworkers and the organizational climate (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

People who strongly value communal goals, which is more likely to be the case among women than men, may be unlikely to feel that they fit well in environments with people who do not value communal goals. Given the strain on psychological well-being that can result when people are consistently in situations that are mismatched with life goals (Pohlmann, 2001), perfectly competent individuals who are communally oriented may perceive low communion work environments as aversive and opt out of them. These fit processes are not necessarily problematic, but they may be costly in the context of decisions about whether to pursue high status, career-advancing positions. We argue that because communion is a central human value, high communion individuals may avoid positions that involve close interactions with low communion others, even when these positions promise increases in salary, status, power, and career advancement opportunities.

In contrast, we suggest that the communality of environments is unlikely to factor into low communion people's decisions to pursue professional positions because relationships and connections with others are not of central importance to them. Because high communion is generally thought of positively (Fiske et al., 2006), people low in communion are likely to enjoy interactions with high communion coworkers more than with low communion coworkers. However, when it comes to making a decision about pursuing professional positions, the communality of environments should be perceived as basically irrelevant to low communion individuals, allowing them to make unconstrained decisions.

Thus, the constrained nature of high communion individuals' decisions coupled with the unconstrained nature of low communion individuals' decisions may contribute to the under-representation of high communion people in positions of high status and power, which may contribute to gender disparities in these positions. Specifically, because women on average value communal goals more than men (Diekmann et al., 2010, 2011; Evans & Diekmann, 2009), more women than men will encounter communally constrained decisions.

Our arguments derive from and extend other theoretical perspectives. First, our arguments are consistent with person–environment fit theories (e.g., Heilman, 1983; Roberts, 2006, Chapter 1; Snyder & Ickes, 1985). However, our focus is unique in its emphasis on understanding the distinct workplace decisional challenges encountered by people who value communion strongly, and by implication the distinct decisional challenges faced by many women. Also, person–environment fit theories would predict a preference for low over high communal environments among people who do not value communion. We argue instead that communion is infused with such positively perceived qualities (e.g., Fiske et al., 2006) that even low communion people appreciate the warm and humane treatment they receive in high communion work environments. Nonetheless, such environments should not be perceived as critical to low communion individuals' decisions about accepting positions of high status and power, giving them the freedom to make communally unconstrained decisions.

Second, the communally constrained decision perspective is theoretically linked to Diekmann and colleagues' (Diekmann et al., 2011) goal congruity theory, which maintains that people select specific social roles that correspond with their valued goals. Whereas social role theory focuses on the causes of gender differences in traits and values (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), goal congruity theory focuses on the consequences of these differences for the selection of particular social roles (Evans & Diekmann, 2009; Diekmann et al., 2011;

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