



Links between unmitigated communion, interpersonal behaviors and well-being: A daily diary approach



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ABSTRACT

We examined the links between unmitigated communion, interpersonal behavior, and well-being on a daily basis with 79 college students. After completing a baseline questionnaire, participants completed brief on-line questionnaires at the end of the day to assess support interactions, interpersonal behavior, and well-being for 10 consecutive days. We used multi-level modeling to examine whether unmitigated communion was connected to support and interpersonal behavior, whether support and interpersonal behavior were connected to well-being, and whether unmitigated communion moderated the latter relations. Unmitigated communion was related to increased support provision and a host of interpersonal difficulties. Daily support provision and being overly nurturant were positively related to well-being, but these relations were limited to individuals characterized by low unmitigated communion.

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1. Introduction

In her theoretical papers on communion and agency, Helgeson (1994) and Helgeson and Fritz (1998) argued that it was time to move beyond sex differences in relationships and health and to focus on the implications of traits that are socialized in women and men. The gender-related traits that have been connected to being female in our society are communion and unmitigated communion. A great deal of correlational and longitudinal research has connected communion to positive relationship outcomes, and unmitigated communion to negative relationship outcomes and poor health. The goal of the present study is to examine the specific behaviors that are connected to unmitigated communion and the implications of those behaviors for health using a more ecologically valid design than has been employed by past research. Before introducing the present study, we provide some background on communion and unmitigated communion and their associations to relationship behaviors and health.

Communion is a broad personality construct that was first introduced by Bakan in 1966 as a fundamental modality of human existence. He described communion as a focus on others and connection. Measures of communion first appeared in the form of sex-role instruments designed to measure aspects of psychological femininity, such as the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, &

Stapp, 1974). These instruments measure traits that are consistent with a communal or other-orientation, including items such as “kind” “warm in relations” and “helpful to others.” And, females on average score higher than males on these traits.

There is a great deal of research that connects communion with positive relationships. Communion is related to higher marital quality and greater perceived support (Helgeson & Fritz, 1996; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999, study 2; Helgeson & Palladino, 2011; Reevy & Maslach, 2001; Smith, Traupman, Uchino, & Berg, 2010). However, communion is typically not related to psychological or physical health (Helgeson & Fritz, 1996, 1999, Study 2; Hirokawa & Dohi, 2007).

By contrast, unmitigated communion, a gender-related trait defined as an overinvolvement in others to the exclusion of the self (Helgeson, 1994; Helgeson & Fritz, 1998; Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979), is connected to health. There is a large literature, consisting of both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, documenting relations of unmitigated communion to psychological distress (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998, Study 1; Helgeson, 2003; Helgeson & Fritz, 1996) and indicators of poor physical health (Helgeson & Fritz, 1996; Helgeson & Palladino, 2011; Trudeau, Danoff-Burg, Revenson, & Paget, 2003).

What are the behaviors associated with unmitigated communion that might have implications for health? There are two components of unmitigated communion: an overinvolvement with others and a neglect of the self. Unmitigated communion has been linked to a host of interpersonal difficulties that are linked to overinvolvement with others, such as being overly nurturant and

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intrusive in relationships with others (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998) and to having intrusive thoughts about another's problems days after those problems were disclosed (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). Unmitigated communion also has been linked to indicators of self-neglect, such as having difficulties with assertion, failing to take care of one's health (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999) and being overly accommodating in negotiation (Amanatullah, Morris, & Curhan, 2008). There is evidence that unmitigated communion is related to unbalanced relationships in terms of providing support without necessarily receiving it, whereas communion is related to good relationships and more reciprocal relationships in terms of support provision and receipt (Helgeson & Fritz, 1996, 1998, 1999, Study 2; Helgeson & Fritz, 2000). Unmitigated communion also is related to problematic relationships with others, whereas communion is not (Helgeson, 2003; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999; Helgeson & Palladino, 2011).

A major limitation of this body of research connecting unmitigated communion to problematic relationships, overinvolvement with others, self-neglect, and poor health is its overreliance on retrospective surveys. Respondents are typically asked to recall how they have behaved or how they have felt over past weeks or months. It is important to know how unmitigated communion manifests itself on a daily basis in terms of both relationships and health. To address this question, and rectify the limitation of past research, we utilized an ecological momentary assessment methodology in which college students completed brief questionnaires about their behavior and well-being for 10 consecutive days. Only one other study, to our knowledge, has adopted this approach to study unmitigated communion (Reynolds et al., 2006). That study did not find relations of unmitigated communion to daily well-being, but did find that unmitigated communion moderated the relation of interpersonal conflict to well-being. Specifically, conflict was associated with declines in well-being only for individuals high in unmitigated communion. In the present study, we examine how unmitigated communion is connected to interpersonal behaviors on a daily basis, how those daily interpersonal behaviors are linked to well-being, and whether the links of interpersonal behavior to well-being differ for high and low unmitigated communion individuals.

Thus, the study had three goals. First, we examined how people who score high on unmitigated communion behave on a daily basis. We hypothesized that individuals who score high on unmitigated communion and high on communion would provide support but only individuals high on communion would also receive and request support, in line with the notion that high unmitigated communion individuals have more imbalanced relationships compared to high communion individuals. We also hypothesized that individuals who score high on unmitigated communion would engage in behavior that is indicative of the dimensions of overinvolvement with others and self-neglect—specifically, being overly nurturant, intrusive, interpersonally dominant as well as easily exploitable and being afraid of being evaluated by others. We hypothesized that communion would not be related to any of these interpersonal difficulties.

Second, we examined how these support behaviors and interpersonal behaviors would be related to well-being on a daily basis. We hypothesized that support provision would be related to higher levels of well-being, because research has linked helping behavior to good mood (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). We did not make any hypotheses about the links of support receipt or support requests to well-being. Support receipt could be beneficial if the support was helpful, but support receipt could also reflect a need for support or some sort of distress. We hypothesized that all of the interpersonal behaviors assessed would be related to poor well-being, as they each reflect either overinvolvement with others or self-neglect.

Finally, we examined whether unmitigated communion moderated the relations of the three support indices to well-being and of one interpersonal behavior to well-being. Little research has explored whether high unmitigated communion individuals benefit from support provision and support receipt in the same way that others do. With regard to support provision, we hypothesized that high unmitigated communion individuals might not benefit as much from support provision as low unmitigated communion individuals in line with previous research (Jin, Van Yperen, Sanderman, & Hagedoorn, 2010). In fact, high unmitigated communion individuals might be more stressed than low unmitigated communion individuals by support provision, as high unmitigated communion people tend to become overinvolved in others' problems. High unmitigated communion individuals also might neglect themselves in response to support provision. Rather than examine how unmitigated communion interacted with each of the five interpersonal behaviors, we examined the most prototypical unmitigated communion behavior and the interpersonal behavior with the strongest correlation to unmitigated communion in past research—being overly nurturant. We hypothesized that being overly nurturant would be especially detrimental to high as compared to low unmitigated communion individuals, in part for the same reasons that we hypothesized unmitigated communion individuals would not benefit from support provision. Being overly nurturant toward others may cause more stress for the high than the low unmitigated communion individual because this person takes on others' problems as one's own. In addition, support recipients may be less appreciative of support and nurturance from a high unmitigated communion individual because their behavior is overbearing. To the extent that high unmitigated communion individuals realize this, they may benefit less from support provision and become more distressed from being overly nurturant.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

We enrolled 81 college students (30 males, 51 females) who completed the study as part of a course requirement. They responded to two separate questions about race and ethnicity. In terms of race, they self-identified as Asian (44), Caucasian (26), Black (4), Caucasian and Asian (4), Caucasian and Black (1), and 2 declined to answer. In terms of ethnicity, 3 identified themselves as Hispanic (2 Asian race; 1 declined to answer race) and 78 identified themselves as Nonhispanic.

2.2. Procedure

The study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. When participants signed up for the study, they were emailed a link to the study. Respondents read an on-line consent form and were asked whether they agreed to participate in the research. After indicating consent, respondents were provided with a link to the baseline questionnaire. This baseline questionnaire consisted of the personality characteristics unmitigated communion and communion as well as demographic variables. Once the baseline questionnaire was completed, participants were emailed a link once a day at the end of the next 10 days (6 p.m.) to complete the daily questionnaire. If participants failed to complete a daily questionnaire, they were emailed a reminder the next day that they could not miss two consecutive daily questionnaires to remain in the study. Our goal was to have participants complete 10 questionnaires over a minimum of 10 days and a maximum of 14 days. If a participant missed one day, we allowed him or her to continue with the study as long as they did not miss 2

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