

Agentic vs. Communal Goals: Understanding the Difference

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Introduction to Agentic and Communal Goals

The psychological study of motivation and personality frequently employs the dualistic framework of **agentic** and **communal goals** to understand fundamental human strivings. This dichotomy, deeply rooted in social and personality psychology, posits that individuals are primarily driven by two overarching categories of life goals: those focused on the self and mastery (agency), and those oriented toward connection and relationship maintenance (communion). Understanding how individuals prioritize and pursue these goals provides critical insight into their behavior, social interactions, career choices, and overall psychological well-being. These goal categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they represent two essential dimensions of human existence that often interact dynamically within an individual's motivational hierarchy.

The concepts of agency and communion stem from the seminal work of David Bakan in 1966, who proposed these as the two fundamental modalities of existence for both individuals and organisms. **Agency** refers to the impulse to master, separate, and assert the self, emphasizing individuality, competence, independence, and self-protection. Conversely, **communion** represents the drive toward union with others, focusing on interdependence, affiliation, cooperation, and relationship maintenance. Modern research has adapted these broad concepts into specific goal constructs, recognizing that they shape how people define success, manage conflict, and allocate resources, providing a powerful lens through which to examine gender roles, cultural norms, and developmental trajectories across the lifespan.

Psychological research emphasizes that both goal types are essential for optimal functioning. While **agentic goals** facilitate personal achievement and efficacy, **communal goals** ensure social integration and belongingness, which are fundamental human needs. The relative strength and balance between these pursuits are highly predictive of various outcomes. For instance, an overemphasis on agency without sufficient communion can lead to isolation and interpersonal difficulties, whereas an excessive focus on communion may result in a lack of self-definition or personal stagnation. Therefore, a mature and adaptable personality often involves the successful integration and flexible deployment of both sets of goals depending on the situational demands and developmental phase.

Theoretical Foundations and the Gender Schema

The theoretical lineage of agentic and communal goals is strongly tied to early theories of personality and gender. Bakan's original formulation highlighted the potential dangers of pursuing one dimension without the constraint of the other, suggesting that unmitigated agency leads to tyranny, while unmitigated communion results in absorption. This framework was later refined and popularized in the context of gender research, particularly through the work of Sandra Bem and Janet Spence, who examined these traits not as fixed gender characteristics, but as measurable

psychological dimensions that could coexist within any individual, leading to the concept of psychological **androgyny**.

Spence's influential measure, the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ), operationalized these traits by characterizing **agency** with attributes like competence, independence, and assertiveness, and **communion** with characteristics such as warmth, expressiveness, and concern for others. This shift allowed researchers to decouple these psychological orientations from biological sex, recognizing that while societal expectations often link agency to masculinity and communion to femininity, individuals possess varying degrees of both. This theoretical advancement provided the foundation for understanding how individuals' self-concepts and their surrounding social structures influence their goal selection and pursuit, moving the focus from rigid biological determinism to flexible social cognition and motivation.

Further theoretical elaboration connects these goals to broader motivational theories, such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and achievement goal theory. Within the SDT framework, communal goals often align with relatedness needs, while agentic goals relate closely to the needs for competence and autonomy. This integration helps explain the intrinsic motivation associated with pursuing these goals. Furthermore, when goals are pursued for deeply personal, intrinsic reasons, they are more likely to yield positive psychological outcomes, regardless of whether they are primarily **agentic** (e.g., mastery for personal growth) or **communal** (e.g., helping others out of genuine care). The theoretical consensus underscores the motivational power of these goals in shaping long-term life trajectories.

Characteristics of Agentic Goal Pursuit

The pursuit of **agentic goals** is characterized by a focus on self-enhancement, achievement, and differentiation from others. These goals are fundamentally oriented toward maximizing personal gain, demonstrating competence, and asserting dominance or mastery over the environment. Key behavioral manifestations include striving for high performance, seeking positions of authority, investing heavily in skill development, and maintaining self-sufficiency. Individuals prioritizing agency often define success in terms of objective metrics, such as wealth accumulation, professional status, competitive victories, or intellectual superiority. The underlying psychological need driving this pursuit is often the desire for autonomy and control over one's life outcomes.

In professional settings, agentic goals translate into ambition, innovation, and strategic risk-taking. A person high in agency might prioritize career advancement, focusing on tasks that showcase unique abilities or lead to leadership roles. They tend to be highly proactive, setting challenging targets and exhibiting resilience in the face of setbacks, viewing obstacles as opportunities to prove their capabilities. However, when **agency** is pursued excessively or without regard for social context, it can manifest as arrogance, competitiveness that undermines collaboration, or a

reluctance to seek necessary help, potentially damaging interpersonal relationships and team cohesion.

Moreover, agentic goals are closely linked to self-regulation processes designed to maintain a positive self-concept of competence. This involves meticulous planning, diligent effort, and internal standards for excellence. Individuals driven by strong agentic motives are often highly organized and effective in goal management, utilizing feedback primarily to adjust strategies for future success rather than dwelling on past failures. They seek environments that offer clear performance metrics and opportunities for **self-expansion**, where they can continually prove their efficacy and distinguish themselves from their peers.

Characteristics of Communal Goal Pursuit

Communal goals revolve around the desire for harmonious relationships, deep connection, and contribution to the welfare of others. These goals are inherently relational, emphasizing interdependence, emotional support, and the maintenance of social bonds. Individuals prioritizing communion define success not through personal accumulation, but through the quality of their relationships, their ability to nurture others, and their contribution to the collective good. Behavioral indicators include high empathy, willingness to compromise, investing time and energy in supporting friends and family, and actively seeking opportunities for cooperation and shared experience.

The psychological needs underlying communal pursuit are belongingness and relatedness. In organizational contexts, communal motives drive behaviors such as mentoring, conflict resolution, and fostering a positive team climate. Individuals prioritizing **communion** are valued for their ability to facilitate group cohesion and manage the emotional dynamics of a team. Their focus is often on fairness and equity, ensuring that resources and attention are distributed in a way that supports the entire group, even if it requires personal sacrifice or deferring their own agentic needs temporarily.

A crucial aspect of communal goal pursuit is the adoption of a responsive orientation, meaning the individual is highly attuned to the needs and emotional states of others. This requires sophisticated social cognitive skills, including perspective-taking and emotional regulation, to ensure that interactions are supportive and constructive. While highly beneficial for social networks, excessive or unmitigated **communion** can lead to self-neglect, chronic people-pleasing, or difficulties asserting personal boundaries. In extreme cases, a person may become overly dependent on external validation derived from their role as a caregiver or supporter, compromising their own autonomy and well-being.

Measurement and Assessment Methodologies

The assessment of agentic and communal goals relies on various methodologies, primarily utilizing

self-report instruments, but increasingly incorporating behavioral and implicit measures. Self-report measures, such as the aforementioned Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) or the Goal Content Scale, ask individuals to rate the importance they place on goals related to power, achievement, and independence (agency), versus goals related to intimacy, affiliation, and contribution (communion). These measures provide a direct assessment of explicit motivational priorities and the value individuals consciously assign to each domain, offering high face validity and ease of administration across large samples.

However, acknowledging that self-reports can be subject to social desirability bias, particularly concerning socially valued communal traits, researchers have developed implicit measures. These methods, such as the use of thematic apperception tests (TAT) or conditional reasoning tasks, assess motivational themes that operate outside of conscious awareness. For example, researchers analyze narratives for themes of mastery, control, and unique accomplishment (implicit **agency**) or themes of helping, supporting, and relational harmony (implicit **communion**). The discrepancy between explicit and implicit goals can sometimes reveal internal conflict or highlight goals that are deeply ingrained but not consciously acknowledged.

Furthermore, behavioral observation and experimental manipulation are employed to study the actual pursuit of these goals. Researchers might observe allocation of resources (time, money, effort) toward solitary, skill-building tasks versus cooperative, relationship-building tasks. Experimental paradigms often manipulate situational cues to prime either **agentic** or **communal** motivations, allowing researchers to observe subsequent changes in performance, negotiation strategies, or cooperative behavior. These multi-method approaches ensure a robust understanding of how these goals manifest both internally and externally.

Contextual and Cultural Influences

The prioritization of agentic versus communal goals is heavily influenced by both immediate situational contexts and broader cultural norms. At the situational level, individuals typically shift their focus based on the demands of the environment; a competitive job interview will prime agentic goals, whereas a family gathering will likely activate communal goals. These situational shifts demonstrate the flexibility and adaptive nature of human motivation, allowing individuals to align their behavior with expected roles and outcomes.

Culturally, there are significant differences in the emphasis placed on these goal dimensions. Western, industrialized nations, which are typically characterized by **individualism**, tend to explicitly value and reward agentic goals, such as independence, personal achievement, and self-reliance. Educational systems and professional environments in these cultures often structure competition to promote individual excellence, making agentic pursuits highly salient and socially desirable. This cultural context often influences individuals to prioritize personal growth and status

over communal harmony in ambiguous situations.

Conversely, many East Asian and Latin American cultures, characterized by **collectivism**, place a higher value on communal goals, emphasizing group harmony, interdependence, respect for hierarchy, and fulfilling familial or societal obligations. In these contexts, the pursuit of purely agentic goals that isolate the individual from the group may be viewed negatively or as immature. Consequently, individuals in collectivist cultures are often motivated by the desire to bring honor to their family or community, integrating their personal achievements into a communal framework, thus illustrating how culture mediates the definition and acceptable expression of both **agency** and **communion**.

Outcomes and Optimal Functioning

The successful pursuit of agentic and communal goals is strongly linked to various indicators of psychological well-being, though the most positive outcomes are typically found when both are pursued effectively. High **agency** is positively correlated with self-esteem, life satisfaction, and objective success measures, providing individuals with a sense of control and competence necessary to navigate complex challenges. High **communion**, however, is crucial for mitigating stress, building social capital, and achieving deep emotional fulfillment, serving as a buffer against life's inevitable difficulties through supportive relationships.

Research consistently shows that individuals who score highly on both dimensions--often described as psychologically androgynous--tend to exhibit the highest levels of adaptability and mental health. This dual capacity allows them to be assertive and goal-directed when necessary, while also being warm and supportive in relational contexts. This **optimal functioning** suggests that true maturity lies not in choosing one goal orientation over the other, but in possessing the emotional and behavioral repertoire to satisfy both the fundamental need for self-determination and the equally vital need for relatedness. The ability to shift between these orientations is key to managing the diverse demands of modern life.

Furthermore, the intrinsic motivation associated with these goals significantly impacts long-term persistence and fulfillment. When individuals pursue **agentic goals** because they genuinely enjoy mastering a skill (intrinsic) rather than simply seeking external rewards (extrinsic), and pursue **communal goals** out of genuine care rather than fear of rejection, the outcomes are more sustainable and contribute more deeply to overall happiness. Thus, the quality of goal pursuit--whether it is self-concordant and intrinsically motivated--is as important as the content of the goal itself in determining psychological health and life satisfaction.