Communally constrained decisions in workplace contexts

Megan K. McCarty a,⁎, Margo J. Monteith a, Cheryl R. Kaiser b

a Purdue University, USA
b University of Washington, USA

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.

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 on 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 communal goals more than men (Diekman, 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;
see also Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997). Diekman and colleagues have applied this theory to understanding women’s under-representation in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields. For example, Diekman et al. (2011) found that greater communal goal endorsement among women was associated with less interest in STEM careers, and that depicting STEM careers as affording communal goals increased high communion individuals’ attraction to those careers. Our research extends goal congruity theory to investigate the implications of strongly valuing communal goals for perceptions of work environments generally (Study 1) and decisions to pursue career advancement opportunities in work environments (Studies 2a and 2b).

Overview of the present studies

The current work tested the communally constrained decisions perspective in three studies. Study 1 tested the first part of our analysis. Specifically, low communion work environments should be perceived as more aversive and prompt stronger avoidance reactions than high communion work environments among people who value communion strongly, whereas the effect of work environment should be less pronounced among people who do not value communion strongly. Study 1 used an autobiographical recall method in which participants recounted an actual work experience from their lives, with instructions to focus on an experience that involved a coworker who was highly agentic but also possessed characteristics suggesting that s/he was either low or high in communion. Participants reported how much positive affect and discomfort they experienced in the coworker interactions. Aversive reactions to the work environment were measured more directly by assessing participants’ perception of the quality of the work experience. Avoidance reactions were assessed by the extent to which participants reported that they would avoid interactions with the coworker in the future.

Whereas Study 1 focused only on aversive/avoidant reactions to work environments varying in their degree of communality, the next two studies additionally investigated whether the communal nature of the work environment influenced participants’ decisions about whether to pursue an opportunity for career advancement. Specifically, participants in Studies 2a (using an undergraduate sample) and 2b (using a more diverse sample with greater work experience) took the perspective of the protagonist in a detailed narrative, written in the first person, in which the protagonist (i.e., participant) was offered a promotion at work to a managerial position. The promotion position involved increased salary and status and frequent interactions managing highly agentic subordinates who also were either low or high in communion. Participants reported their evaluations of the anticipated subordinate interactions (i.e., positive affect, discomfort, and aversive/avoidant reactions). In addition, participants reported whether they would actually accept or decline the promotion, thus allowing us to examine whether communally constrained decisions operate in the context of decisions to accept career advancing, high status positions.

We expected participants with strong communal goals to report more aversive/avoidant reactions to the low than the high communion environment, whereas this difference should be less pronounced for participants with weak communal goals. Furthermore, we anticipated that high communion participants would be less likely to accept the promotion in the low than the high communion environment condition (i.e., communally constrained decision), whereas communion environment would not affect acceptance of the position among low communion participants (i.e., unconstrained decision). Moreover, our theoretical argument is that aversive/avoidant reactions to low communal environments among high communal people are what drive these individuals’ decisions not to pursue opportunities for career advancement. Thus, we also tested whether the interaction between participant communion and communion environment when predicting decisions about whether to accept the promotion was mediated by aversive/avoidant reactions to the work environment.

Importantly, we expected covariation between participants’ gender and their own endorsement of communion in all studies, such that women would value communion more strongly than men. We do not suggest that women are particularly constrained in their choices by their communal orientations. Instead, we suggest that anyone high in communion, regardless of gender, will demonstrate communally constrained decisions. However, finding that women on average are higher in communion would suggest that women are more likely than men to face communally constrained decisions.

Study 1

Method

Participants & design

One hundred and thirty-five Introduction to Psychology undergraduate students (70 female; Mage = 19) participated in exchange for partial course credit. The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian (85%); 2% identified as African American, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Hispanic, and 9% indicated other identifications.

Procedure

Participants signed up for an online study presented as investigating people’s ability to recall particular types of events. Participants were directed to the URL and were instructed to complete the study when they would have at least 20 minutes without interruption. Participants were randomly assigned to a low or high communion environment condition.

Communion environment manipulation. After reading and completing a consent form, participants were instructed to think of someone with whom they had worked closely in a work or academic setting who was not a relation or close friend. All participants were told that this person should be someone who was “successful and competent, liked power, recognition, and achievement, and who had a competitive edge.” Thus, all participants were instructed to think about a highly agentic person. Participants in the low communion environment condition were told that this person should also be someone who “did not seem to enjoy working with others and helping people, did not make strong connections with people, and did not go out of their way to do good deeds for others.” Participants in the high communion environment condition were told that this person should also be someone who “enjoyed working with others, helping people, connecting with people, and doing good deeds for others.” Once participants thought of someone who fit the described criteria, they wrote about a time when they interacted with this person and this person’s traits were particularly obvious. Participants were instructed to describe as much detail as possible and to write at least one long paragraph.

Afterwards, participants indicated the gender of the person they described. They also answered questions to reinforce the cover story that the study focused on memory, and to test for memory-related differences across conditions. Specifically, participants rated (from 1, not at all, to 7, very) “How vividly did you recall this memory?” and “How hard was it to come up with the event that you recalled?” (reverse-scored), which were later averaged (r = .32, p < .001). Ratings were also made for “To what extent do you still think about the event you recalled?” (r = .62, p = .001).

1 The university at which this research was conducted has a large international population of Asian undergraduate students. We excluded 15 self-identified Asian/Pacific Islander participants who indicated that their native language was not English because the study relies heavily on reading and writing in English. Also, three participants were dropped because they answered all questions with the same response, and seven participants were excluded because they scored beyond three standard deviations from the mean on variables. Finally, eight participants did not follow instructions for the essay task (e.g., described a close friend rather than a coworker), so their data were excluded.
Dependent measures. Next, participants responded to one of our primary dependent variables by completing six ratings regarding aversive reactions to the coworker interaction, using scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so). These items were worded positively (e.g., “I enjoyed interacting with the person I described,” and “The situation I described was positive”), so we reverse-scored and averaged them to form the aversive reactions composite (α = .97). Participants were then instructed to imagine that in a few years they end up working with the described person in a professional setting. They indicated their desire to avoid future work interactions with this person across five questions (1 = not at all; 7 = very much so), such as “Would you like to work with the person you described on a daily basis?” (reverse-scored) and “Would you try to avoid the person you described in your work setting?” Although conceptually distinct, the items concerning aversive reactions and desire to avoid working with the coworker in the future loaded on a single factor in a principle components analysis. Thus, for purposes of concision, these items were combined into a single index of aversive/avoidant reactions (α = .98).2

Next participants indicated their feelings about the described interaction on 28 affect items, with scale ratings ranging from 1 (does not apply at all) to 7 (applies very much). Of primary interest were nine items. Responses to “uneasy,” “bothered,” “tense,” “anxious,” and “uncomfortable” were averaged to form an index of discomfort (α = .89). Responses to “friendly,” “happy,” “optimistic,” and “good” were averaged to form an index of positive affect (α = .93).

Participants then completed manipulation check items. They were asked to think about the coworker described and rate (1 = not at all; 7 = very much) the extent to which the person possessed six agency-related characteristics (e.g., “sought recognition” and “focused on achievement”; α = .78) and five communion-related characteristics (e.g., “enjoyed helping people” and “made strong connections with people”; α = .96).

Participant communal and agentic goals. Participants also completed an individual difference measure assessing their own agency and communion (Diedkman et al., 2011), which was presented either at the beginning of the study or at its conclusion (order did not affect scores on these measures, nor did it influence responses to the study’s dependent variables). Participants indicated how important 10 communion goals (e.g., “working with people” and “helping others”) and 14 agency goals (e.g., “achievement” and “recognition”) are to them on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely important). These responses were averaged to form composite measures of participant communion (α = .88) and participant agency (α = .82).

Finally, participants completed demographic information and were presented with a debriefing form.

Results

Manipulation checks

Participants’ ratings of communal characteristics of the target they described were submitted to a 2 (communion environment) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA. The expected main effect for communion environment was significant, F(1, 131) = 366.72, p < .001, ηp² = .737, with lower ratings in the low (M = 2.31, SD = 1.07) than the high (M = 5.69, SD = .97) communion condition. As expected, no significant effects were obtained in the analysis of coworker agentic characteristics, ps > .29, and overall ratings of agency were high (M = 5.56, SD = 1.0). Participant gender did not have significant effects, ps > .22.

Additional analyses indicated that communion environment was not significantly associated with the gender of the coworker that participants chose to write about, χ²(1, N = 135) = .23, p = .63. However, male participants were significantly more likely to write about male (n = 56) than female (n = 9) targets, χ²(1) = 33.95, p < .001. In contrast, female participants were more likely to write about female (n = 44) than male (n = 26) targets, χ²(1) = 4.63, p = .03.

We also conducted analyses on the index tapping the degree to which participants rated the described event as important and still thought about it. This analysis yielded a significant main effect for communion environment, F(1, 131) = 3.80, p = .05, with higher ratings in the high (M = 3.34, SD = 1.52) than the low (M = 2.81, SD = 1.52) communion condition. No significant effects were obtained in the analysis of the index tapping vividness/difficulty of recall, ps > .67.

Participant communal and agentic goals

A 2 (communion environment) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA performed on participants’ ratings of their own communal goals revealed as expected that women (M = 5.46, SD = .92) scored significantly higher than men (M = 4.98, SD = .93), F(1, 131) = 10.61, p = .001, ηp² = .075. In contrast, no significant effects were obtained when analyzing participants’ agentic goals, ps > .11 (M = 5.06, SD = .68).

Overview of regression analyses

Table 1 presents correlations among the main measures from Study 1. Regression analyses were used to test our remaining hypotheses. In all of these analyses, outcome variables were predicted using participant gender (0 = male, 1 = female), participant communal goals (centered), and communion environment (0 = low communion, 1 = high communion) as predictors. We controlled for participant agency given our desire to examine the effects of participants’ degree of communion independently from their degree of agency.2 Main effects were assessed simultaneously at Step 1, two-way interactions were assessed at Step 2, and the three-way interaction was assessed in the final step. When significant interactions were obtained, they were probed after trimming non-significant effects using MODPROBE (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). Given this trimming, df sometimes vary across analyses. Predicted values were computed based on 1 SD above and 1 SD below the mean of participants’ communal goals. The complete results of these analyses are provided in Table 2.

Affect indexes

We first examined whether participants’ reported feelings of discomfort and positivity in the coworker interaction varied according to their own communal goals and the communion environment condition to which they had been randomly assigned (see Table 3). Analysis of the discomfort index showed a significant main effect for gender, t(130) = 3.02, p = .003, β = .240, with more discomfort reported among women than men. More importantly, a main effect for communion environment, t(130) = 5.65, p < .001, β = −.426, was qualified by the expected interaction with participant communion, t(127) = 2.46, p = .02, β = −.257. As anticipated, participants reported significantly more discomfort as their communal goals increased in the low communion condition, t(130) = 2.08, p = .04, b = .370. In contrast, the effect of participant communion was not significant in the high communion condition, although there was a tendency toward a negative relation, t(130) = 1.70, p = .09, b = −.327. In addition, the effect of communion environment was highly significant among high communion participants, t(130) = 5.97, p < .001, b = −2.08, whereas the effect of communion environment was much less pronounced among participants low in communal goals, t(130) = 2.18, p = .03, b = −.754.

Analysis of the positive index also revealed a main effect for communion environment, t(130) = 7.77, p < .001, β = .552, that was qualified by a significant interaction with participant communion, t(127) = 3.49, p = .001, β = .334. Whereas positive affect decreased marginally as

2 Participant agency was correlated significantly with participant communion in Study 1 (r = .20, p = .02) and Study 2a (r = .37, p = .002) but not in Study 2b (r = .08, p = .20). We tested whether participant agency interacted with predictor variables in all analyses and in all studies, and it did not.
participant communion increased in the low communion condition, \( t(131) = 1.85, p = .066, b = -2.99 \), positive affect increased with participant communion in the high communion condition, \( t(131) = 4.13, p < .001, b = .751 \). Also as anticipated, participants with strong communal goals felt less positive about interactions with a low communion coworker than with a high communion coworker, \( t(131) = 8.97, p < .001, b = 2.924 \). In contrast, the effect of communion environment was much less pronounced among participants with weak communal goals, \( t(130) = 2.83, p = .005, b = .953 \).

In sum, the affect findings suggest that participants with strong communal goals uniquely experienced strong discomfort and weak positive affect in the low communion environment.

### Aversive/avoidant reactions

Analysis of this index indicated that participants’ own agency was a significant covariate, \( t(130) = 2.03, p = .044, \beta = -.120 \), with participants higher in agency reporting weaker aversive/avoidant reactions. Additionally, there was a significant main effect of gender, \( t(130) = 2.09, p = .038, \beta = .126 \), with women rating interactions as more aversive and reporting greater desire to avoid future work interactions than men.

More importantly, we found a significant effect for communion environment, \( t(130) = 12.65, p < .001, \beta = -.722 \), which was qualified by an interaction between communion environment and participant communion, \( t(127) = 4.45, p < .001, \beta = -.333 \). As shown in Fig. 1, our expectation that participants who were high in communion would have especially negative reactions and be less desirous of future interactions when their coworker was low in communion was confirmed. Specifically, participant communion was positively related to ratings of the interaction as aversive and the desire to avoid future interactions in the low communion condition, \( t(129) = 2.34, p = .02, b = .356 \). In contrast, participant communion was negatively related to ratings of the interaction as aversive and the desire to avoid future interactions in the high communion condition, \( t(129) = 4.29, p < .001, b = -.722 \). In addition, participants who were both low and high in communion favored the high communion environment over the low communion environment, \( t(129) = 6.17, p < .001, b = -1.814 \) and \( t(129) = 13.04, p < .001, b = -3.868 \), although the effect was stronger for the high communion participants. These results indicate that communion environment was more important in determining perceptions of aversiveness of the work environment and desire to avoid it among participants who were high rather than low in their own communal goals.

In sum, these findings are consistent with the prediction that individuals who are high in communion are at a distinct disadvantage when dealing with low communion coworkers. They are more likely to find these interactions aversive than individuals who are lower in communion, and they are more likely to want to avoid future interactions, relative to participants who are low in communion.

### Discussion

Study 1 provides support for a critical component of the communally constrained decision perspective—namely, that people who are strongly motivated by communal goals find interactions in a low communal environment to be especially aversive. Participants guided strongly by communal goals reported greater discomfort, less positive affect, and stronger aversive/avoidant reactions if they recalled a work interaction with a low rather than high communal coworker. In contrast, the results confirmed the expectation that individuals with weak communal goals are less affected by whether the environment is communal or not. Importantly, participant communion, but not participant gender, drove these effects. Thus, those high in communion are likely to experience low communion environments as particularly aversive, regardless of their gender. However, because women scored higher than men on communion, more women than men should be faced with this predicament.

Although this study provides strong evidence that the communal nature of the work environment is differentially important depending on one’s own communal goals, which is a critical first step in substantiating the communally constrained decisions perspective, it does not speak to people’s decisions about whether to pursue positions of high status and power. Studies 2a and 2b tested our

### Table 1

Bivariate correlations among variables in Study 1 and Studies 2a and 2b.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2a</th>
<th>Study 2b</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Participant gender</td>
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<td>Participant communion</td>
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<td>.22***</td>
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<td>.20***</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>.11**</td>
</tr>
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<td>Participant communion × gender</td>
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<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant agency × gender</td>
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<td>.63***</td>
<td>.72**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversive/avoidant reactions</td>
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<td>.09</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>.78**</td>
<td>.56***</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Notes: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. Study 1 values appear on the lower diagonal, and Study 2a and 2b values appear on the upper diagonal. The variable “Likelihood of Accepting Promotion” was assessed in Studies 2a and 2b only.

### Table 2

Study 1 results.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Effect</th>
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<th>Positivity</th>
<th>Aversive/avoidant reactions</th>
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</thead>
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<td>1.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communion environment ×</td>
<td>.458</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant gender</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
assertion that people high in communion make the decision not to pursue positions of high status and power that involve frequent interactions with subordinates who are high in agency but low in communion, as they find these low communal environments to be particularly aversive.

Studies 2A and 2B

Studies 2a and 2b extended the investigation of the communally constrained decision perspective to a career advancement context involving a high status promotion position. Participants read a detailed story written in first person that described the possibility of their accepting a promotion to a managerial position, which would bring benefits such as increased status and salary. In this promotion position, the participant would frequently interact with and manage several subordinates. The subordinates were described in detail, and the descriptions suggested they were high in agency and either low or high in communion. We assessed both aversive/avoidant reactions to the work environment and whether participants would accept the position. Thus, we could test the mediational hypothesis suggested by the communally constrained decision perspective that high communion people forgo high status positions characterized by low communion work environments because they anticipate having aversive/avoidant reactions to these environments.

Studies 2a and 2b employed the same procedures, but they were conducted one after another and with different samples of participants. Study 2a used an undergraduate sample, whereas 2b used a more diverse sample with greater variability in terms of age and work experience. Because the results replicated across studies, we combine their presentation herein.4

Method

Participants

Participants in Study 2a were 1255 (62 female; Mage = 20) Introduction to Psychology undergraduate students who completed the study in exchange for partial course credit. They were recruited in the same manner as in Study 1. The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian (81%); 2% African American, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% Hispanic, 1% Native American, and 6% indicated other identifications.

Participants in Study 2b were 2306 (132 female) people who received $4.40 through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for completing the study. MTurk is a website through which people can complete tasks, including psychological research, in exchange for compensation (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Participants were from the United States and had the following ethnic breakdown: White/Caucasian (79%), African American (5%), Asian/Pacific Islander (12%), Hispanic (2%), and “other” (3%). As intended, this sample was older than the sample in Study 2a, Mage = 34.76, SD = 13.23. Twenty-eight percent of participants reported being currently employed part-time, 39% currently employed full-time, 21% students, and 5% reported being retired. The average number of years participants reported having worked was 14.77, SD = 12.04.

Procedure

Studies 2a and 2b were presented as investigating perspective taking. After completing a consent form, participants read a detailed story from the perspective of the person who wrote it and were instructed to imagine that they were in the described situation. The story was written from the first person perspective to facilitate perspective taking. Participants were randomly assigned to either the low or high communion environment condition.

Communion environment manipulation. The story, which was adapted from leanin.org, was written in the first person and described a person who was working at an accounting agency and was recently offered a promotion. The protagonist (i.e., the participant) was described as happy and financially comfortable in their current position. The promotion to a “Managing Director” was described as a prestigious position involving a raise and increased status. The key component of the job was described as spending long hours closely supervising a team of three subordinates, motivating these subordinates, and representing their progress at monthly meetings with the company president.

After learning information about the scope of the promotion position, the protagonist seeks out additional information about the team s/he would be managing. For all participants, the team was comprised of two men and one woman, all of whom were described as highly

4 Although the results of Studies 2a and 2b are combined for concision purposes, given concerns about replication (e.g., Giner-Sorolla, 2012) it is important to emphasize that these studies were intended as two separate tests of our hypotheses. Indeed, Studies 2a and 2b were initially analyzed separately, and support for the constrained decision perspective held in both cases.

5 Twenty-three Asian/Pacific Islander participants in Study 2a who indicated that their native language was not English were removed from the sample. Three additional participants were dropped because they answered questions with the same response.

6 Study 2b differed from 2a in that at two points in the study, participants were instructed to leave a response blank so that we could assess whether they were paying attention (see Atler, Oppenheimer, & Zemla, 2010; Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). Ten participants who responded to the items that they were instructed to leave blank while completing the study were dropped from the analyses. Three additional participants were excluded because they answered all questions with the same response. Eleven participants were excluded because they scored beyond three standard deviations on variables.
responses to “α reactions; much so) (e.g., interaction). Participants then completed nine items assessing aversive/avoidant reactions (e.g., Would you enjoy interacting with these people? Would you dread coming to the office to work with these people? and Would you try to avoid these people in your work setting?) (reverse-scored where necessary so higher scores reflect greater aversive/avoidant reactions: α = .96). Next, participants rated their feelings about connecting with each other, and the working environment was described as “very productive, but cold.” In the high communion environment condition the story indicated that the subordinates “enjoyed working and connecting with each other,” and the working environment was described as “very productive and warm.” (See Appendix A.)

Dependent measures. After completing filler items designed to reinforce the perspective-taking cover story (e.g., “I found it easy to imagine myself in the described situation”), participants responded to the primary dependent variables. Of central interest, participants rated their likelihood of accepting the promotion on a scale from 1 (very unlikely to accept the promotion) to 7 (very likely to accept the promotion). Participants then completed nine items assessing aversive/avoidant reactions using scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so) (e.g., “Would you enjoy interacting with these people?” “Would these people be unpleasant to interact with?” “Would you dread coming to the office to work with these people?” and “Would you try to avoid these people in your work setting?”) (reverse-scored where necessary so higher scores reflect greater aversive/avoidant reactions: α = .96). Next, participants rated their feelings about managing the subordinates on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so). Responses to “uneasy,” “bothered,” “tense,” “anxious,” and “uncomfortable” were averaged to form a discomfort index (α = .89). Responses to “friendly,” “happy,” “optimistic,” and “good” were averaged to form a positive index (α = .89).

Participants then completed manipulation check items by indicating the degree to which the subordinates possessed certain qualities on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so). The four agency items (e.g., “highly goal oriented” and “seeks out recognition, achievement, and success”) were averaged to form the agency manipulation check (α = .75). The five communion items (e.g., “enjoy working and connecting with each other” and “like helping each other out in stressful times”) were averaged to form the communion manipulation check (α = .96).

Participant communal and agency goals. The same communal (α = .85) and agency (α = .89) goal measures used in Study 1 (Diekmann et al., 2011) were completed either at the beginning or the end of the study. No order effects were obtained.

Finally, participants completed demographic information and were debriefed.

Results

The data were first examined treating Study (i.e., 2a or 2b) as a factor, but few Study effects were obtained, and none were of theoretical interest. Therefore, we collapsed across the two studies in analyses reported below. The complete results of analyses are provided in Table 4.

Participant communal and agentic goals. The same communal (α = .85) and agentic (α = .89) goal measures used in Study 1 (Diekmann et al., 2011) were completed either at the beginning or the end of the study. No order effects were obtained.

Finally, participants completed demographic information and were debriefed.

Manipulation checks

A 2 (communion environment) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA performed on the communion manipulation check showed the expected main effect for communion environment, F(1, 351) = 1200.30, p < .001, ηp2 = .774, with lower scores in the low communion condition (M = 2.11, SD = 1.09) than in the high communion condition (M = 5.75, SD = .88). Additionally, participant gender interacted with communion environment when predicting the communion manipulation check, F(1, 351) = 5.11, p = .024, ηp2 = .014. Both men and women perceived the low communion environment to be lower in communion than the high communion environment (ps < .001), although this effect was more pronounced among female participants than male participants.

The ANOVA performed on the agency manipulation check also yielded a significant main effect for communion environment, F(1, 351) = 5.00, p = .026, ηp2 = .014, such that participants perceived the low communion environment to be higher in agency (M = 6.30, SD = .85) than the high communion environment (M = 6.09, SD = .89). Although unanticipated, this effect was minimal in comparison to the size of the main effect for communion environment on the communion manipulation check. Participant gender had a marginally significant effect when predicting the agency manipulation check, F(1, 351) = 3.69, p = .055, ηp2 = .010, (Mmales = 6.11, SD = .86, Mfemales = 6.29, SD = .89).

Participant communal and agentic goals

A 2 (communion environment) × 2 (participant gender) ANOVA performed on participants’ ratings of their own communal goals showed the anticipated main effect for gender, F(1, 351) = 13.83, p < .001, ηp2 = .038, with women endorsing communal goals more (M = 5.14, SD = .90) than men (M = 4.77, SD = .97). We also found a main effect for gender when predicting participants’ own agentic goals, F(1, 351) = 18.32, p < .001, ηp2 = .050, with men scoring higher on agency (M = 5.09, SD = .89) than women (M = 4.68, SD = .90).

Overview of regression analyses

Table 1 presents correlations among the main measures from Studies 2a and 2b. The same strategies used in Study 1 were used for these regression analyses. A summary of all results is presented in Table 4.

Affect indexes

Participants agency was a significant covariate in the analysis of the discomfort index, r(350) = 3.28, p = .001, β = −.170, with participants higher in agency reporting less discomfort. Also, women reported greater discomfort than men, r(350) = 2.61, p = .01, β = .135. More relevant to our hypotheses, the main effect for communion environment was significant, r(350) = 6.70, p < .001, β = −.328, and the expected interaction between communion environment and participant communion was marginally significant, r(347) = 1.92, p = .056, β = −.138. The pattern of this interaction can be seen in Table 3. As anticipated, in the low communion environment condition, levels of reported discomfort increased as participants’ communal goals became stronger, r(349) = 2.16, p = .031, b = .224. In contrast, the effect of participant communion on discomfort was not significant in the high communion environment condition, r(349) = .87, p = .388, b = −.089. In addition, the effect of communion environment was significant among both low and high communion participants, r(349) = 3.22, p = .001, b = −.613 and r(349) = 6.30, p < .001, b = −1.21, although more pronounced for the latter.

Participant agency was a significant covariate in the analysis of positive affect, r(350) = 4.94, p < .001, β = .237, and women reported less positive affect than men, r(350) = 2.72, p = .007, β = −.130. The main effects for participant communion and communion environment were both significant, r(350) = 2.02, p = .05, β = .096, and r(350) = 9.34, p < .001, β = .422. More importantly, participant...
Low communion and low communion environment interacted with each other, $t(347) = 3.39, p = .001, \beta = .224$. Probing this interaction, we found that the anticipated effect for participant communion did not reach significance in the low communion condition, $t(349) = .94, p = .347$, $b = -.078$, although it was in the anticipated negative direction. In the high communion condition, positive affect increased significantly as participant communion increased, $t(349) = 3.89, p < .001, b = .320$. Finally, the effect of communion environment was significant among both low and high communion participants, $t(349) = 4.25, p < .001, b = .646$ and $t(349) = 9.15, p < .001, b = 1.402$, and stronger for participants higher in communion.

In sum, these affect findings indicate that heightened discomfort and reduced positive affect are outcomes experienced by people who value communal goals strongly and are in low communal environments.

### Aversive/avoidant reactions

The regression analysis predicting aversive/avoidant reactions indicated that participant agency was a significant covariate, $t(350) = 4.47, p < .001, \beta = -.191$. More importantly, a significant main effect for communion environment, $t(350) = 15.32, p < .001, \beta = -.617$, was qualified by an interaction with participant communion, $t(347) = 3.24, p < .001, \beta = -.190$ (See Fig. 2). In the low communion condition, participants high in communion anticipated greater aversive/avoidant reactions than participants low in communion, $t(350) = 3.58, p < .001, b = .300$. In other words, the high communion participants were once again especially dissatisfied with the low communion environment. Participant communion was not significantly related to aversive/avoidant ratings in the high communion condition, $t(350) = 1.16, p = .24, b = -.096$. In addition, for both low and high communion participants, greater aversive/avoidant ratings were made in the low than the high communion environment, $t(350) = 8.54, p < .001, b = -1.331$ and $t(350) = 13.29, p < .001, b = -2.084$, with this effect being stronger among high communion participants.

### Likelihood of accepting promotion

The outcome variable of greatest interest was the likelihood that participants would accept or decline the managerial position. The analysis of this variable indicated that participant agency was a significant covariate, $t(350) = 7.35, p < .001, \beta = .364$. A main effect of participant gender also emerged, $t(350) = 1.99, p = .05, \beta = -.088$, with male participants indicating greater interest in the promotion position ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.90$) than female participants ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.76$).

Most importantly, a significant main effect for communion environment, $t(350) = 5.83, p < .001, \beta = .273$, was qualified by the anticipated interaction between participant communion and communion environment, $t(347) = 3.57, p < .001, \beta = .243$. As can be seen in Fig. 3, in the low communion condition, participants with strong communal goals were much less likely to accept the position than participants with weak communal goals, $t(349) = 3.43, p = .001, b = -.449$. In contrast,

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**Table 4**

Study 2 results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Discomfort</th>
<th>Positivity</th>
<th>Aversive/avoidant reactions</th>
<th>Likelihood of accepting promotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$t$</td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$t$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion environment</td>
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<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>-.328</td>
<td>9.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant gender</td>
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<td>.101</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.376</td>
<td>.046</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant agency</td>
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<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>-.170</td>
<td>4.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant gender × communion condition</td>
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<td>-.082</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant communion × participant gender</td>
<td>0.78</td>
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<td>-.054</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant communion × communion environment</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>-.138</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant gender × communion environment × participant gender</td>
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<td>.649</td>
<td>-.227</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Fig. 2.** The effect of participant communion and communion environment on aversive/avoidant reactions, Study 2.

**Fig. 3.** The effect of participant communion and communion environment on likelihood of accepting the promotion position, Study 2.
in the high communion condition, participant communion was positively but not significantly related to decision ratings, \( t(349) = 1.35, p = .177, b = .176 \). Also, even with the power afforded with the combined data set, the effect of communion environment was not significant among low communion participants, \( t(349) = 1.75, p = .082, b = .420 \). In other words, participants with weak communal goals were as likely to accept the position when the environment was low in communion as when it was high in communion. This finding shows the unconstrained nature of low communal participants’ decisions. In contrast, the effect of communion environment was strongly and positively related to the decision to take the promotion among high communion participants, \( t(349) = 6.63, p < .001, b = 1.61 \). This finding indicates that high communion individuals are indeed disinclined to put themselves in a working situation—even if it comes with the benefits of status and salary—if the working environment does not foster a sense of communion. Their decision about accepting the promotion was constrained by whether the environment was communal.

Next we performed a mediational analysis to determine whether participants’ anticipated aversive/avoidant reactions played an underlying role in driving their promotion decisions. Following Hayes’s (2013) recommendations, we tested whether the indirect effect of communion environment on promotion decision through aversive/avoidant reactions depended on participants’ own degree of communion. Using Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 8) with 5000 bootstrap samples, we found evidence of significant mediation (see Fig. 4). Specifically, the confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero, \( .106 \leq b \leq .463 \), indicating that significant mediation was achieved. Thus, although the interaction between participant communion and communion environment remained significant in the mediational analysis, the size of this effect was significantly reduced.

Supplemental analyses of study 2b

Additional analyses of the data from Study 2b were performed to test whether age, number of years worked, or current employment status influenced the results. Although occasional main effects were obtained (e.g., as age increased, less agency was reported, \( p < .05 \)), none of these variables modified the pattern of results described above. Thus, the logic driving the communally constrained decision perspective held regardless of age, years worked, and current employment status.

Discussion

Studies 2a and 2b provided additional support for the communally constrained decision perspective in the context of career advancement, where these decisions come at the cost of declining increased status, power, and future opportunities for professional advancement. As in Study 1, the communal nature of the working environment had a larger impact on participants who were high in communion than participants who were low in communion. Participants with strong communal goals anticipated greater discomfort, less positive affect, and more aversive/avoidant reactions when interacting in a low than high communal environment, whereas the extent to which the environment was communal had a much smaller influence among participants with weak communal goals.

Of greatest importance are our findings concerning participants’ decisions about accepting the promotion position. Although participants low in communion anticipated more positive interactions with high communal subordinates than with low communal subordinates (but not to the same degree as participants high in communion), the communal nature of the working environment did not factor into these participants’ decisions to accept the promotion. Thus, those low in communion faced unconstrained decisions regarding positions of power and status, as they were as likely to pursue the promotion regardless of how communal their environment would be. On the other hand, participants high in communion were constrained by the communal nature of the promotion position, being more likely to forgo the increased salary and high status of the promotion when the environment would lack communion. In tandem, these asymmetrical effects should contribute to the underrepresentation of high communal people in positions of high status and power.

Additionally, we found support for anticipated aversive/avoidant reactions as a mechanism for these communally constrained decisions effects. Aversive/avoidant reactions were a significant mediator of the interaction between participant communion and communion environment on likelihood of accepting the promotion position. Thus, high communion individuals were more likely to forgo the promotion position when it involved a low communion environment because they experienced this environment as aversive.

As in Study 1, participant communion as opposed to gender differences drove the communally constrained decision effects. Thus, both men and women who were high in communion demonstrated similarly communally constrained decisions. However, because female participants were more likely than male participants to endorse communal goals, more women than men should face these communally constrained decisions. Furthermore, Study 2b included a diverse sample varying in age, work experience, and current employment, and these variables did not modify the findings of interest.

General discussion

The present studies provided support for a novel explanation for why individuals may choose not to pursue certain professional positions, which we are calling communally constrained decisions. According to this perspective, low communion work environments are uniquely aversive to high communion people, prompting them to avoid such work environments, even when these positions involve high status, power, and professional advancement. Study 1 used an autobiographical recall method that focused participants on their own past experiences working with highly agentic individuals who were low or high in communion. High communion participants rated interactions with low communion coworkers as more aversive and were more likely to want to avoid future work interactions with these coworkers than low communion participants.

Studies 2a and 2b extended these findings by exploring the communally constrained decisions perspective in the context of career advancement positions, in which communally constrained decisions would come at the cost of losing out on increased power, status, and career advancement. Participants in Studies 2a and 2b read an elaborate work scenario and imagined themselves as the protagonist, who was deciding whether to accept a professional advancement offer involving more power and status. We found that as participants’ communion increased, they anticipated aversive/avoidant reactions to subordinates who were described as low in communion, which in turn affected decisions about whether to accept the promotion position. Specifically, high communion participants’ decisions to pursue a position of power and status were constrained by the communal nature of the position; they were less likely to accept the position when it involved close interactions with low communion subordinates. Thus, although people who are high in communion may not lack the desire, skills or fortitude to pursue positions of power, status, and professional advancement, they are averse to low communion work environments. On the other hand, low communion participants’ decisions were unconstrained by the communal nature of the position. They were equally likely to accept a promotion position, regardless of the communal nature of the working environment.

These results are in line with other work suggesting that communion is a fundamental and consequential motivational orientation (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) that figures importantly in career...
decisions (Diekman et al., 2010, 2011). Experiencing incongruity between this important person-centric variable and the working environment results in disinterest in pursing certain types of positions, which is consistent with person–environment fit theories (Heilman, 1983; Roberts, 2006, Chapter 1; Snyder & Ickes, 1985). In contrast, individuals who do not place a high value on communion are not faced with the same decisional dilemma. Our results indicated that people for whom communion is unimportant perceived high communion environments favorably (i.e., as eliciting more positive affect, less discomfort, and fewer aversive/avoidant reactions) compared to low communion environments. These results are consistent with conceptualizations of communion as a strongly positive characteristic (Fiske et al., 2006). However, the working environment simply was not a pivotal factor in decisions about accepting a position of increased power and status for people with weak communal goals, as low communal participants were equally likely to accept a promotion whether the environment was low or high in communion. Note that our results are therefore not a straightforward matter of a person–environment fit analysis, which would predict that those low in communion would react more positively to low than high communion work environments. Rather, people with weak communal goals appear to enjoy the benefits of a highly communal environment but do not factor this into their decision about pursuing a high status position of professional advancement.

Notably, in all of our studies, the work environment was highly agentic, involving people focused on recognition, achievement, success, competition, and so on. As one would expect (e.g., Bosak & Szcesny, 2008), participant agency was positively related to interest in positions of professional advancement. More important for the present purposes is the fact that participant communion was unrelated to interest in these highly agentic positions, unless they also entailed a low communion environment. That is, participants high in communion were not disinterested in pursuing highly agentic positions of power, status, and professional advancement as a rule, but rather only if the positions also were not communal. These findings suggest that decisions for high communion people are not constrained by the agentic nature of the working environment, but instead by the communal nature of the working environment. Considering communion is thus of critical importance for understanding why perfectly able people may not pursue positions of power and status. Although previous research has generally focused on the importance of agency in positions of power and status, the present work contributes to a growing understanding of the importance of communion in these positions (Cuddy, Kohut, & Neffinger, 2013).

**Implications for diversity in positions of professional advancement**

Support for the communally constrained decisions perspective was obtained even when considering positions involving high status, power, and opportunities for career advancement. Thus, the constrained decisions of people with strong communal goals in combination with the unconstrained decisions of those with weaker communal goals may work in tandem to result in high communion people being underrepresented in high status professional positions.

Furthermore, the current work has implications for the representation of women and other groups who tend to value communion highly. Very few participant gender effects were obtained in our studies, and the communally constrained decision pattern was not modified by participant gender. These results suggest that communally constrained decisions are driven by participants’ communal goal endorsement, as opposed to their gender. Thus, women and men who score similarly high in communion should face similarly constrained choices and ultimately be underrepresented in positions of power and status, contributing to the lack of deep level diversity in these positions. However, certain groups tend to be higher in communion than others and thus should be more likely to face constrained decisions, resulting in implications for surface level diversity as well. In particular, as women generally score higher on communion than men (e.g., Diekman et al., 2011; the current Studies 1, 2a, and 2b), as a whole, more women are likely to face constrained choices than men, contributing to the lack of gender diversity in high status professional positions. People in other cultures that foster communion (e.g., Asian cultures; Hofstede, 1980; Kawahara, Esnil, & Hsu, 2007; Sinha, 1984) may also be more likely to experience communally constrained decisions.

Women continue to be underrepresented in high status professional positions. For example, in the United States Fortune 500, women held 16.6% of board seats (the seventh consecutive year with no growth) and 14.3% of Executive Officer positions (the third consecutive year of no growth) (Catalyst, 2013). Debate surrounding the causes of this gender gap in positions of high status and power has seen a resurgence in recent years, fueled in part by controversial popular publications like Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) “Lean In,” and Anne-Marie Slaughter’s (2012) article, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.”

Eagly and Carli (2007) characterize the multitude and complexity of the barriers women face in achieving high status positions as a “labyrinth.” First, women must overcome the stereotype that they are less capable of and qualified for high status positions than men (for a review, see Eagly & Carli, 2007). Specifically, women are viewed as lacking masculine characteristics that are assumed to be necessary in high status professional positions (e.g., executive management positions, see Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998). A second hurdle is confronted when perceivers see that women have the necessary agentic qualities for these high status positions, but simultaneously view them as “violating prescriptions of feminine niceness” (Rudman & Glick, 1999, pg. 1004). Rudman and colleagues’ work has demonstrated that this second hurdle results in backlash, where agentic women are disliked and face hiring discrimination for behaving in
counterstereotypic ways (Rudman, 1998; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012).

Our research suggests an additional hurdle: When agentic women who also value communion strongly are presented with opportunities to step into high status positions of professional advancement, they may make the decision to opt out because the working environment is incongruent with their high communal goals. Thus, the current work demonstrates one way in which “lean in” problems (Sandberg, 2013) may be affected not only by individuals’ characteristics, but by elements of the environment as well.

A potential remedy to the lack of surface-level diversity as it is related to communion is to encourage high communion people to reduce their adherence to communal goals, or at least do so to adapt to work contexts. However, one cannot simply will one’s value orientation to change (Graziano & Tobin, 2002), nor do we think that the onus for change should be on the shoulders of people who are high in communion. We suggest that changing work environments is a more realistic and advantageous avenue to improving fit.

Interventions could be focused on concerted efforts to attract communal people to positions, especially to positions of high status and power. Attracting more communal people to these positions could have a cascade of positive consequences by changing the normative environment to be more communal and subsequently attract more high communal people. In turn, groups of people who tend to be more communal should then gain better representation, such as women and certain ethnic minorities. Thus, the presence of high communion people in positions of power and status, regardless of gender and race, might encourage greater diversity in these positions. White men in high status positions who are high in communion may be in a unique position to facilitate this change, as they do not face the same barriers to success in these positions as women and minority members. Attracting more communal people to high status positions may also be beneficial because people who are high in both agency and communion may be the most effective in high status, leadership positions (Cuddy et al., 2013; Korabik, 1990). A variety of leadership typologies have acknowledged the importance of communal leadership behaviors (e.g., Bales, 1958; Bass, 1997; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939), and the types of leadership that fuse agency and communion are associated with positive outcomes, including increased productivity and subordinate satisfaction (e.g., Degroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000). Of course, future research is needed to test the viability of these speculations about the positive effects of changing communal aspects of the work environment.

Other communal perspectives

Our research might be viewed as part of a growing trend to acknowledge and investigate the role of communion in shaping career-related issues. Research examining high communal leaders, as summarized above, is one example of this. Another excellent example, and a perspective that is closely related to the present line of research, is Diekman and colleagues’ (Diekman et al., 2010, 2011; Evans & Diekman, 2009) goal congruity model. This model and related research examines women's underrepresentation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The research has shown that people perceive STEM careers to impede communal goals. For instance, people may not believe they will be able to help and connect with others in engineering careers. Diekman et al. (2011) found that greater communal goal endorsement was associated with less interest in STEM careers, and that depicting STEM careers as affording communal goals increased attraction of high communion individuals to those careers. As in our research, Diekman found that female participants scored higher on communion than males, making the findings applicable to understanding gender differences in career choices.

Our work diverges from that of Diekman in that the communally constrained decisions perspective focuses on the importance of the communal nature of working environments, as opposed to the degree to which a certain career domain (such as STEM) affords communal goals. We suspect that regardless of the degree to which a particular field affords communal goals, the communal nature of working environments will affect interest in specific positions. By focusing on the role of communal work environments in constraining high communion people’s choices to pursue career advancement opportunities, the current work extends previous goal congruity work by blending it with person–environment fit theories, which emphasize the importance of work environments.

Future research

As a first step in testing the communally constrained decisions perspective, we had participants recall working with a low or high communal coworker (Study 1), and take the perspective of a person making a career decision regarding a promotion (Studies 2a and 2b). These methods have both strengths and limitations. A strength of the autobiographical procedure is that participants wrote about their actual life experiences, but Studies 2a and 2b were able to provide greater experimental control. A potential limitation of Studies 2a and 2b is that participants imagined being poised to accept or decline a promotion, but they were not actually facing this decision. Thus, a next step for testing the present perspective is to explore the operation of communally constrained decisions in actual work environments where there is a real possibility of assuming professional positions involving high status and power. Although exploring actual reactions to working environments is an important avenue for future research, we believe that our procedure does have ecological validity. That is, decisions about whether to enter a new environment are inherently about perceptions and imagining what those environments will be like.

Many other avenues for future research can extend the current work in other important ways. For instance, we cannot make causal claims about people's communal values based on the present findings because participant communion was measured rather than manipulated. Although achieving situational fluctuations in communal goal endorsement through an experimental manipulation may be difficult because it is a fundamental value and orientation to life, temporarily activating communal goals (e.g., Diekman et al., 2011) may be more successful. Future research should also explore the degree to which people high in communion are conscious of the ways in which their decisions are communally constrained. High communion people may find their aversive/avoidant reactions to low communion environments readily apparent, making communally constrained decisions conscious. Alternatively, as with many aspects of social cognition, communally constrained decisions may often operate implicitly. High communion people may be aware that they aren’t interested in a certain position, but they might not realize the extent to which the communal nature of the working environment is informing this perception, and may justifiably or explain their decisions not to take the position in other ways. The extent to which these processes operate consciously may have implications for the types of interventions that will attract high communal people to career advancement positions.

Research may also explore the degree to which the aversive nature of low communion environments affects work decisions above and beyond other factors, such as work-related self-efficacy, performance, and salary, as a variety of factors are likely to contribute to career advancement decisions. Finally, the current work obtained support for anticipated aversive/avoidant reactions as a critical mechanism leading to communally constrained decisions. Future research may explore in more detail what contributes to high communion people’s aversive/avoidant reactions to low communion working environments. It may be that the anticipated interactions with the low communion people are themselves expected to be aversive, or that aversive/avoidant reactions occur because high communion people anticipate having to
Conclusions

The current work provides initial evidence that communal goal endorsement and communal work environments play a significant role in affecting aversive/avoidant reactions to working environments, and even interest in positions of career advancement, power, and status. Specifically, people who strongly value communion find low communion work environments to be particularly aversive and decide not to pursue high status career advancement opportunities with these environments. People who do not value communion as much appear to perceive high communion work environments as more pleasant than low communion work environments, but they pursue career advancement opportunities regardless of the communal nature of the working environment. Thus, only high communion people face communally constrained decisions, leading to an underrepresentation of high communion people in positions of high status and power. Because women endorse communal goals more than men, more women are likely to experience these constrained choices. Thus, the current work provides evidence of an additional complexity women may face in negotiating through the labyrinth toward professional positions of advancement and power (Eagly & Carli, 2007), one that is determined not only by individual differences, but by the interaction between work environments and these individual goals. Our hope is that identification of communally constrained decisions as another factor to consider will facilitate recognition of possible solutions.

Appendix A

Allow communion environment (manipulated portion of the story only.)

Mark said that this group has amazingly similar personalities and styles. All of them are highly goal oriented. They seek out recognition, achievement, and success. Paul, Trevor and Shannon all tend to stay focused on their own goals and needs. They have competitive mindsets. At the same time, Mark said that the team members didn’t always seem to enjoy working and connecting with each other; he said they just weren’t “that kind” of people. They didn’t go out of their way to celebrate each other’s achievements. Mark said he could tell that they didn’t especially like helping each other out during stressful times. He said they were more independent, and not particularly friendly. In general, Mark described the working environment as very productive, but cold. I was grateful for Mark’s honesty and perspective on the position. With Mark’s insights and my own goals in mind, I began to consider my decision.

High communion environment (manipulated portion of the story only.)

Mark said that this group has amazingly similar personalities and styles. All of them are highly goal oriented. They seek out recognition, achievement, and success. Paul, Trevor and Shannon all tend to stay focused on their own goals and needs. They have competitive mindsets. At the same time, Mark said that the team members enjoyed working and connecting with each other; he said they were just “that kind” of people. They went out of their way to celebrate each other’s achievements. Mark said that he could tell that they liked helping each other out during stressful times. He said they were pretty interdependent and friendly. In general, Mark described the working environment as very productive and warm. I was grateful for Mark’s honesty and perspective on the position. With Mark’s insights and my own goals in mind, I began to consider my decision.

References


