

Original Article

Upholding the Social Hierarchy: Agency as a Predictor of the Ideal Level of Economic Inequality

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Abstract:

Many societies are becoming more economically unequal, and some people tend to be in favour of higher levels of economic inequality than others do. Traditionally, agency has been associated with high-status and high-power groups. In this research, we examined whether participants' agency led them to think there should be higher levels of economic inequality. In Study 1 ($N = 191$) we used a correlational design and found that participants' agency predicts higher levels of ideal economic inequality. In Study 2 ($N = 204$), using an experimental design, we revealed that priming agency (vs. communion) also leads to higher levels of ideal economic inequality. These findings extend prior evidence on the psychosocial effects of agency and illustrate the connection between agency and the ideal levels of economic inequality.

Keywords: agency–communion, self-perception, economic inequality, preference for inequality, social status

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Publication Ethics

All procedures performed in this research involving human participants followed the ethical standards of the Vicerealty of Research and Scientific Policy of the University of Granada, and it is in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. All participants were informed in writing about the objectives of the study and the voluntariness of participation.

Authorship

Eva Moreno-Bella, conceptualization, data collection and analyses, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Guillermo B. Willis, conceptualization, writing – review & editing

Miguel Moya, conceptualization, writing – review & editing

All authors approved the final version of the article.

Open Data

Open Data, Materials and Preregistration: All datasets, syntax files and the preregistration of the study are available at Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/j825h/>).

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Abstract

Many societies are becoming more economically unequal, and some people tend to be in favour of higher levels of economic inequality than others do. Traditionally, agency has been associated with high-status and high-power groups. In this research, we examined whether participants' agency led them to think there should be higher levels of economic inequality. In Study 1 ($N = 191$) we used a correlational design and found that participants' agency is associated with higher levels of ideal economic inequality. In Study 2 ($N = 204$), using an experimental design, we revealed that priming agency (vs. communion) leads to higher levels of ideal economic inequality. These findings extend prior evidence on the psychological effects of agency and illustrate the connection between agency and the ideal levels of economic inequality.

Keywords: agency–communion, self-perception, economic inequality, preference for inequality, social status.

Upholding the Social Hierarchy: Agency as a Predictor of the Ideal Level of Economic Inequality

Agency and communion are two social constructs that people use to define themselves and others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Bakan, 1966). Importantly, these constructs have been associated with social groups with differing status and power (e.g., men/women or high-socioeconomic status (SES)/low-SES people). In particular, agency has been associated with high-status and high-power groups (Rucker et al., 2018). Agency self-perception has also been shown to predict the justification of groups inequality (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016). In this paper, we build upon these findings and examine whether self-perceived agency predicts people's 'ideal' level of economic inequality.

Previous studies have examined the relationships among economic inequality, agency, and other related constructs. For instance, economic inequality positively predicts preferences for strong leadership (Sprong et al., 2019) and competition (Sommet et al., 2019)—and these characteristics have been associated with agency (also called masculinity; Bem, 1974; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Moreover, research has shown that people who perceive a more unequal society (vs. a more egalitarian one) tend to imagine its inhabitants as more independent and with more leadership abilities, that is, more agentic than communal (Moreno-Bella et al., 2019). In this paper, we aim to examine whether the opposite causal relation also holds true: Given that agency symbolizes achievement, status, and power (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Rucker et al., 2018) as well as its relation to the maintenance of inequalities (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016; Weaver & Vescio, 2015) we hypothesize that self-perceived agency predicts what people think would be an 'ideal' level of economic inequality.

Agentic and Communal Self-Perception

Agentic self-perception reflects assertiveness, independence, and leadership, among other characteristics (Hauke & Abele, 2019). It represents achievement and a merit worldview orientation. Conversely, communal self-perception reflects traits such as kindness, sensitiveness, understanding, and affectivity. In other words, it represents an orientation towards others' needs and well-being (Bem, 1974; Ellemers, 2018).

Although a person can be both agentic and communal to different degrees, agency and communion traditionally have represented what men and women should be (Ellemers, 2018; Sczesny et al., 2019). The extent to which men and women perceive themselves in agentic and communal terms has changed, at least in Western societies: women attribute to a lower intensity traditional communal features to themselves (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017) and also see themselves as more competent (i.e., agentic) than they did in the past (Eagly et al., 2020). Men have slightly moved into traditionally female roles and perceived themselves as more communal than in the past (Bosak et al., 2018). In the Spanish context, where our research was conducted, recent cross-cultural research has revealed that Spanish participants perceived themselves as moderately agentic and moderately communal. Consistent with prior research, there are no gender differences in agentic self-perception; however, there is still a gender gap in communal self-perception (Kosakowska-Berezcka et al., 2022): Spanish women perceived themselves as more communal than their male counterparts.

Further, if people who describe themselves mainly as having goals focused on self-interest are also less motivated to redistribute than those who are worried about others' needs (Aydin et al., 2018; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017), we consider it worthwhile to apply this rationale to the study of the two orientations of the self: agency and communion. Concretely, in this paper, given that agentic self-perception (of both sexes) is related to a greater preference for status and power differences (Abele & Wojciszke,

2019; Rucker et al., 2018) and that agentic self-perception has been associated with support for social inequalities — such as gender inequality (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016) —, we argue that agency will also predict support for higher levels of economic inequality, and that this applies to both sexes, respectively.

The Psychology of Economic Inequality

Over the past few decades, income differences between the wealthiest and the poorest have increased in most countries (Alvaredo et al., 2018). Spain, where we conducted this research, is one of the most economically unequal countries within the European Union (EUROSTAT, 2023). Several studies have examined the negative associations between economic inequality and life satisfaction (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Oishi et al., 2011), well-being (Napier & Jost, 2008), and mental health (Alesina et al., 2004; Kondo et al., 2009, 2012), and its positive relationship with the rise of far-right populism (Jay et al., 2019), anti-immigrant sentiment (Jetten et al., 2015), and a longer list of social issues (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). A substantial body of empirical work suggests that when perceived economic inequality is high (vs. low), people tend to infer that other people are more masculine, individualistic, and competitive (Moreno-Bella et al., 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Sommet et al., 2019), and also prefer a strong national leader (Sprong et al., 2019). Indeed, people associate economic inequality with a higher presence of advantaged and high-status groups (Fiske et al., 2002), to the detriment of a more diverse climate (Moreno-Bella et al., 2022). In other words, economic inequality is also related to other forms of social inequalities. Likewise, when the context is highly economically unequal, people see themselves as more independent from others (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019), tend to self-enhance more (Loughnan et al., 2011),

orient themselves towards achievement (Sommet et al., 2019), and are more concerned about their social status (Layte & Whelan, 2014; Payne et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019).

All these findings depict the symbolic core of being agentic and self-interest — that is, a desire for success, achievement, independence, strong personality, leadership, and so on (Bem, 1974; Sczesny et al., 2019; Wojciszke & Abele, 2019). In a similar vein, evidence suggests that people are less communal in societies with greater economic inequality: in highly economically unequal contexts, people trust (Fiske et al., 2012; Uslaner & Brown, 2005) and help others less (Paskov & Dewilde, 2012), tend to be less agreeable (de Vries et al., 2011), and are less willing to contribute to other people's welfare (Paskov & Dewilde, 2012). While these studies imply a positive relationship between economic inequality and agency, there is limited evidence for the causal direction between these constructs. Some scholars have argued that economic inequality has a causal effect on agency (Connor et al., 2021) and contributes to the formation of perceptions regarding other types of inequalities (e.g., ethnic and gender; Moreno-Bella et al., 2022). Here, we propose that the reverse causal relationship may also be plausible, as highly agentic people would prefer the groups and societies to which they belong to be more unequal.

Concerning the distribution of economic resources, people hold expectations regarding the extent of the economic gap between those who earn the most and those who earn the least (Willis et al., 2015). In this sense, prior literature has examined the *ideal economic inequality*, which refers to the degree of inequality that people consider to be appropriate (García-Sánchez et al., 2018). Empirical research has shown that individuals prefer a more egalitarian income distribution than the one they perceive to exist (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Moreover, the level of economic inequality that people perceive works

as a reference point for estimating the level of economic inequality that people consider appropriate (García-Sánchez et al., 2018). However, there are individual characteristics that influence the degree of inequality that people prefer. For instance, those individuals with higher system-justifying beliefs and politically oriented towards the right wing tend to prefer higher levels of economic inequality (Norton et al., 2014; Son Hing et al., 2019; Trump, 2020). Importantly, those oriented towards self-interest, such as members of the advantaged groups (i.e., high-SES individuals and men), report higher scores on the ideal level of economic inequality (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton et al., 2014).

Building on the empirically established association between self-orientation and agency on the one hand, and between other-orientation and communion on the other hand (Ellemers, 2018; Moya, 2003), we expect that agency affects people's preference for a more unequal society.

In this research, we present one correlational study and one preregistered experiment, in which we predicted that agentic self-perception may positively influence attitudes towards economic inequality, operationalized as the ideal wage gap between the better-paid and the worse-paid workers (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Willis et al., 2015).

Study 1

In Study 1, we explored the relationship between the ideal level of economic inequality and the participants' agency–communion dimensions in a correlational study¹.

¹ We also explored the association between agency-communion and perceived economic inequality, given that the latter is strongly related with the ideal levels of economic inequality

Similarly—and considering that prior evidence has shown that gender, political orientation, and socioeconomic status (SES) are related to either economic inequality or agency-communion (Ellemers, 2018; Evans & Kelley, 2004; García-Sánchez et al., 2018; Irwin, 2018; Willis et al., 2015)—we included them as control variables in the analyses. The data, syntax files, and supplementary materials can be found at the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/j825h/>).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our objective was to recruit 200 participants within a period of three weeks. Subsequently, a total of 196 participants from the general population were enrolled in this study. We excluded three participants who indicated that their native language was not Spanish and two participants who did not report it. After these exclusions, the final sample comprised 191 participants older than 18 years ($M_{age} = 21.60$, $SD = 2.91$; 105 women and 86 men). A sensitivity analysis was conducted for a multiple linear regression (R^2 increase). It suggested that our sample ($N = 191$, $\alpha = .05$) allowed us to detect an effect size as small as $f^2 = .04$ with a power of .80. This indicates that our study had sufficient statistical power to detect a small to medium effect (if it exists). The participants were recruited using incidental sampling. One researcher went to the bus station of Granada — a city located in southeast Spain — and asked people to participate in this study. Data collection was conducted using a paper questionnaire. Participants provided their consent for participation through an informed written consent form. They were also provided with

(Willis et al., 2015). We did not observe an association between these variables. See Supplementary Materials.

information about the voluntary nature of their participation and assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

Measures

We presented the following measures in a counterbalanced order: some participants first completed agency–communion measures, followed by the economic inequality measures, while others completed the economic inequality-related measures first and then the agency–communion measures. Finally, all participants reported their sociodemographic data.

Agency and Communion Self-Perception. We evaluated participants' agentic and communal self-perception with the Spanish adaptation of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974; Páez & Fernández, 2004). This measure consists of 18 items (see Supplementary Materials), with nine items measuring agency ($\alpha = .68$; e.g., “dominant” and “acts as a leader”), and the remaining nine items measuring communion ($\alpha = .73$, e.g., “gentle” and “sensitive to the needs of others”). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they identified with each presented trait. The answer format was a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Ideal Economic Inequality. To measure the participants' ideal level of economic inequality, they were instructed to think about the largest and most important company that could exist in their ideal society (see Supplementary Materials). Subsequently, they were asked to estimate the ideal monthly wage in Euros for an employee in the highest-status position—possessing the highest qualifications and most responsibilities—and an employee in the lowest-status position—having the lowest qualifications and least responsibilities (ISSP Research Group, 2017). We then calculated the logarithmic ratio between the ideal wages for the highest-status-position and the lowest-status-position

employee (Castillo, 2011). Higher values of this ratio indicate higher ideal economic inequality, with a ratio of 0 indicating absolute equality.

Sociodemographic Variables. Participants provided responses to questions regarding sociodemographic data, including gender, age, monthly familiar income (from 1 = *Below €650* to 10 = *More than €5800*), educational attainment (from 1 = *Primary studies* to 8 = *PhD studies*), nationality, and native language. Additionally, political orientation was assessed using a 10-point scale where 1 indicated *left wing* and 10 indicated *right wing*. SES was also measured with the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000).

Results

Due to the inclusion of variables measured with different response scales, all variables were standardized for analysis. We corroborated the different statistical assumptions for the presented analyses. Results showed that a normal distribution of our data cannot be assumed. Nonetheless, this tends to be common in large samples (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012). However, given that other statistical assumptions (linearity and homoscedasticity) were met, and with a sufficient number of participants to mitigate bias in parametric analysis (Lumley et al., 2002; Sainani, 2012), we proceeded with parametric analyses after transforming the data to address deviations. Correlations between all variables and descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Spearman Correlations between Variables in Study*
 1. Means and Standard Deviations are Presented in the Diagonal Line

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Agency	3.75 (0.77)						
2. Communion	-.11	4.74 (0.82)					
3. Ideal EI	.20**	-.20**	1.41 (1.50)				
4. Gender	-.14	.17*	-.29***	-			
5. Age	.15*	.05	-.002	-.07	21.60 (2.91)		
6. PO	.08	-.01	.03	-.03	.03	4.49 (2.07)	
7. SES	.13	-.03	.19**	.11	.14	.33	5.47 (1.45)
8. CP	.04	-.05	.17*	-.04	.003	-.02	.07

Note. EI = Economic inequality; PO = Political orientation; SES = Socioeconomic status; CP = Counterbalanced presentation; Gender (1 = woman = 1, -1 = man); * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Ideal Economic Inequality from Agency

We ran a hierarchical regression analysis to examine whether a agency predicts ideal economic inequality. In Step 1, the participants' gender (*woman* = 1, *man* = -1), age, political orientation, SES (Adler et al., 2000), and the order of presentation of measures (counterbalanced; *first BSRI* = 1, *second BSRI* = -1) were included as covariates. In the second step, we included agency and communion as predictors. As shown in Table 2, Model 1 was significant, $R^2 = .1$, $F(5, 176) = 5.57$, $p < .001$. Only participants' gender negatively predicted ideal economic inequality ($\beta = -.32$, $p < .001$) indicating that men preferred higher inequality than women, while participant SES ($\beta = .16$, $p = .031$) positively predicted it. That is, men and individuals with higher SES reported higher ideal economic inequality scores. Model 2 was also significant, $F(7, 174) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $\Delta F(2, 174) = 3.92$, $p = .022$. Communion was not significantly associated with ideal economic inequality ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .122$). However, consistent with

our hypothesis, participants' agency positively predicted ideal levels of economic inequality ($\beta = .15, p = .038$).

Table 2. Results of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Ideal Economic Inequality

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	β	t	p	β	t	p	β	t	p
Step 1									
Gender	-.32	-4.50	<.001	-.28	-3.93	<.001	-.27	-3.86	<.001
Age	-.10	-1.43	.154	-.12	-1.65	.102	-.12	-1.73	.084
PO	.03	.49	.624	.02	0.29	.770	.01	0.19	.851
SES	.16	2.17	.031	.13	1.90	.059	.13	1.83	.068
CP	.11	1.56	.122	.10	1.49	.138	.10	1.47	.143
Step 2									
Agency				.15	2.09	.038	.24	2.07	.040
Communion				-.11	-1.56	.122	-.12	-1.69	.093
Step 3									
Gender \times Agency							-.11	-.98	.327

Note. PO = Political orientation, SES = Socioeconomic status, CP = Counterbalanced presentation; Gender (1 = woman = 1, -1 = man).

Because of the observed effects of gender and agency on ideal economic inequality, we decided to explore their interaction. Consequently, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis like the previous one. In this analysis, we included the interaction between gender and agency as a predictor in a third step. We observed that Model 3 was significant, $F(8, 173) = 4.69, p < .001$. However, the addition of this interaction term did not significantly increase the explained variance of ideal economic

inequality, $\Delta R^2=.01$, $\Delta F(1, 173) = 0.97$, $p = .327$. Stated otherwise, the effects of agency on ideal inequality were not significantly qualified by participants' gender.

Discussion

Study 1 provides evidence that participants who rated themselves as more agentic also expressed a preference for higher levels of economic inequality in society. This finding offers initial support for our hypothesis that self-perceptions of agency may contribute to a greater preference for economic inequality. Likewise, although men preferred more ideal economic inequality than women, gender did not interact with agency when predicting the ideal economic inequality. It is important to note, however, that because Study 1 employed a correlational design, causality cannot be inferred. To overcome this limitation and further investigate the relationship between agentic self-perception and ideal economic inequality, we conducted a preregistered experiment.

Study 2

Study 2 examined the effects of priming agency (vs. communion) on ideal economic inequality. We employed a subtle priming procedure to experimentally manipulate participants' agency (vs. communion), followed by the assessment of participants' ideal economic inequality. Our preregistered hypothesis predicted that participants assigned to the agency priming condition have higher means on our ideal economic inequality measure than participants in the communion priming condition.

The preregistration details for the hypothesis, measures, as well as data and syntax files can be found at OSF² (<https://osf.io/j825h/>).

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted an a priori power analysis with G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). For a *t*-test (two groups) with an effect size of $d = .40$ ($f = .20$), statistical power of .80, and $\alpha = .05$, the minimum desired sample size was determined to be 156 valid observations. We planned to collect a minimum of 200 valid observations before March 15, 2020. Ultimately, we recruited 208 participants. As preregistered, we excluded four participants who did not indicate Spanish as their native language. The final sample comprised 204 participants ($M_{age} = 21.63$, $SD = 4.09$), including 126 women and 78 men. Like Study 1, participants were recruited using incidental sampling. One researcher of our team visited various public areas, such as libraries and faculties, at the University of Granada to ask volunteers for participation in this study. Before proceeding with the paper questionnaire, participants provided their consent for participation through informed written consent. They were given information about the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

Measures

² In the preregistration, agency was firstly called “masculinity” as we used BSRI (Bem, 1974).

However, agency is a more appropriate label given it reflects better our construct of interest (see Abele et al., 2020).

Priming of Agency and Communion Self-Perception. Participants were randomly assigned to either an agency-priming ($n = 101$; 44.2% men and 55.8% women) or a communion-priming ($n = 103$; 33.1% men and 68.3% women) condition. Two tasks were employed to prime participants for agency and communion. First, we developed a scenario based on various agency or communion traits drawn from the BSRI traits (Bem, 1974; Páez & Fernández, 2004). Participants assigned to the agency priming condition were presented with the following scenario (the scenario for participants assigned to the communion priming condition is provided in parentheses):

“To begin, we ask you to think of a situation in which you showed yourself as a person who stands up for your own beliefs and thoughts (who is sensitive to the needs of others), quite confident (affectionate) and assertive (understanding). You could say you showed yourself as self-sufficient (tender) and independent (cheerful) person, as well as decisive (gentle) because you made decisions with ease (tried to calm down the people who needed it). You showed yourself in a strong and dominant way (warm and tender way).

Take a moment to recall a situation in which you had to behave the way we have defined in the text. If there has not been a situation, please think of a situation where you were required or might be required to behave this way, or roughly. You can read the text again to think about the situation. Then, briefly describe in writing that situation.”

The scenarios are available in the Supplementary Materials. We implemented several manipulation checks to assess the effectiveness of our priming manipulation. Firstly, participants were asked to evaluate the content of the scenario they read on the first page using the following item: “Regarding the text about the situation you read on

the first page, you could say that it has content characterized by ...” (1 = *Interest in social relationships*, 7 = *Self-interest*). Additionally, we used the same BSRI agency ($\alpha = .72$) and communal ($\alpha = .76$) trait items as in Study 1 to assess participants’ agency and communion, after thinking and writing about a situation that primed agency or communion.

Ideal Economic Inequality. We used the same procedure and measure as in Study 1 to measure participants’ ideal economic inequality.

Sociodemographic Variables. Participants responded to sociodemographic questions consistent with those in Study 1. Additionally, political orientation and subjective socioeconomic status (SES) were measured using the same approach as in Study 1. Participants also provided information regarding their educational attainment and family income level, as in Study 1.

Results

Like Study 1, we ensured that the assumptions for the analyses were met; however, it is important to note that a normal distribution could not be assumed. Consequently, parametric analyses were conducted for the reasons described above (see Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012; Lumley et al., 2002; Sainani, 2012). The correlations between all the variables and descriptive statistics are available in Table 3.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations between Variables in Study 2. Means and Standard Deviations are Presented in the Diagonal Line*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Agency	3.82 (0.89)							
2. Communion	-.19**	4.67 (0.90)						

3. Ideal EI	.22**	-.11	1.63 (1.67)					
4. Gender	-.33***	-.20**	-.36***	-				
5. Age	.01	.03	.07	-.16*	21.62 (4.09)			
6. PO	.26***	-.04	.15*	-.16*	-.06	4.77 (2.37)		
7. SES	.23**	.03	.03	-.11	-.20**	.33***	5.78 (1.53)	
8. CP	.26***	-.15*	-.16*	-.13	-.03	.05	.15	-

Note. EP = Experimental manipulation (0 = Communion-priming, 1 = Agency-priming); EI = Economic inequality; PO = Political orientation, SES = Socioeconomic status; CP = Counterbalanced presentation; Gender (0 = man, 1 = woman). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Manipulation Check

We conducted a Student's t -test (between-subjects) to check the effect of our experimental manipulation. As expected, participants assigned to the agency priming condition considered the text to be more focused on self-interest ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.60$) than those assigned to the communion priming condition ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(202) = 9.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.36$.

Subsequently, two additional t -tests were conducted using participants' scores on agency and communion from the BSRI as dependent variables. Results indicated that participants assigned to the agency priming condition rated themselves as higher on agency ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.78$) than those assigned to the communion priming condition ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.94$), $t(202) = 3.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.52$. Conversely, participants assigned to the communion priming condition evaluated themselves higher on communion ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.85$) than those assigned to agency-priming condition ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.94$), $t(202) = -2.09$, $p = .038$, $d = 0.29$. These outcomes indicate the successful manipulation of agency and communion priming.

Preregistered Analysis: Testing the Main Hypothesis

Regarding our main hypothesis, we found that participants assigned to the agency priming condition scored higher on ideal economic inequality ($M=1.90$, $SD = 2.03$) than those assigned to the communion priming condition ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(202) = 2.26$, $p = .025$, $d = 0.32$, supporting our main hypothesis.

Non-preregistered Analysis: Exploring the Interaction Between the Priming and Gender

Because participants' gender may play a role, we decided to explore the effects of agency/communion priming and gender. To do so, we conducted a two-way ANCOVA, with priming (Agency vs. Communion) and participants' gender as fixed factors, and ideal economic inequality as the dependent variable. We controlled for participants' political orientation and SES.

We observed a main effect of gender, $F(1, 193) = 25.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$ ($d = 0.70$), suggesting that men scored higher on ideal economic inequality ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 2.17$) than women did ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 1.07$). Additionally, we observed a main effect of agency/communion priming, $F(1, 193) = 4.27$, $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ($d = 0.28$), consistent with the results from the t-test. More importantly, we found a significant priming condition x gender interaction effect, $F(1,193)= 4.82$, $p = .029$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ($d = 0.28$)³. Pairwise comparison revealed that men assigned to the agency-priming condition scored higher on ideal economic inequality ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 2.48$) than men assigned to the communion-priming condition ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.47$), $M_D = 0.99$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ($d =$

³ We conducted a Kruskal-Wallis test as a robustness check for the interaction effect of prior conditioning and gender of participants. The results did not differ from those obtained from the ANCOVA.

0.41). We did not find a significant effect of priming for women ($M_{\text{Priming-Agency}} = 1.17$, $SD = 1.17$; $M_{\text{Priming-Communion}} = 1.20$, $SD = 0.99$), $M_D = -0.03$, $p = .903$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$ ($d < 0.20$).

Discussion

The results from Study 2 evidenced that priming agency affects individuals' ideal level of economic inequality. As expected, participants primed with agency tended to prefer higher levels of economic inequality compared to those primed with communion. Building upon the findings of Study 1, Study 2 provides additional support for the impact of agency (vs. communion) on individuals' preferences regarding economic inequality.

Exploring our data in more detail, the interaction between agency/communion priming and participants' gender suggested that the priming effect was present for men but not for women. We should be cautious when interpreting this interaction effect because (a) it resulted from an exploratory analysis and was not hypothesized, (b) this study may not have enough statistical power to detect the effect in subgroups, (c) this interaction effect only emerged in the experimental, but not in the correlational study, and (d) yet importantly, the standard deviations differed between experimental conditions for the group of men, which may bias the interpretation of the observed differences.

General Discussion

The literature on the psychological processes that maintain inequality has primarily focused on the role of ideologies (e.g., Bernardo, 2021; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, other factors related to how people define themselves have not yet been considered. To address this gap, we conducted two studies—one correlational study and one preregistered experiment—in which we tested the association between agency (vs. communion) and the ideal size of economic inequality.

In Study 1, we found that participants who perceived themselves as more agentic preferred greater economic inequality. By contrast, communion did not emerge as a predictor of ideal economic inequality. Notably, these findings held irrespective of participants' gender. These findings imply initial evidence of a relationship between agency and ideal economic inequality. Moreover, our results are in line with previous research showing an association between agency and economic inequality (e.g., Moreno-Bella et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, to corroborate that agency leads to greater ideal economic inequality, we conducted an experiment to establish a causal relationship between our main variables. In Study 2, we employed an experimental approach, wherein we primed either an agency or a communion orientation. Consistent with our expectations, agency priming led to higher scores on the ideal economic inequality than communion priming. Although this does not rule out the causality of economic inequality on agency norms and other related variables, it does show the existence of a reverse and complementary pattern: agency predicts people's ideal levels of economic inequality.

Our claim is that agency leads one to prefer higher levels of economic inequality aligns with existing research showing that agency implies individuals' self-motivation to maintain and justify their social privilege (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016), and with research showing the association between agency and high status (Fiske et al., 2002). Consequently, powerful and privileged people tend to desire a less equal redistribution of resources than those who needed it (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017). Furthermore, our findings are consistent with research characterizing agency as a form of power, status, and dominance (Rucker et al., 2018), attributes that are more prevalent in unequal societies (e.g., Melita et al., 2021; Sommet et al., 2019). This is also in line with Weber's (2006) claim about agency's relevant roles in other power relationships (e.g., social

classes) and the study of inequality. Moreover, our results support prior research suggesting that men tend to prefer greater economic disparities between individuals (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014), as evidenced by their higher preference for economic inequality compared to women.

Interestingly, our second study revealed that men in the agency priming condition preferred higher levels of economic inequality than those in the communion priming condition. While this interaction was not hypothesized, one possible interpretation of this result is that for individuals belonging to a relatively advantaged group (i.e., here: men), self-perceptions are more relevant for how much inequality they prefer. This would not be the case for the disadvantaged group (i.e., here: women). Further research could test this notion with several advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

Importantly, both of our samples comprised similar numbers of women and men; that is, the associations found were not due to a higher number of men — traditionally related to agency — in our sample. Our findings show that even male participants considered themselves as more communal than agentic, in line with the results of other research (Hentschel et al., 2019). However, research about changes in gender stereotypes has shown that women's self-perceived agency has increased over the years (Bosak et al., 2018; Duehr & Bono, 2006; Eagly et al., 2020; Twenge, 1997). Hence, if agency predicts higher ideal economic inequality, could this mean that the levels of ideal economic inequality have also increased over time among women? Further research should explore the possible changes to the ideal levels of economic inequality supported by women.

Being aware of our research limitations, we acknowledge a potential age-related bias in both studies. Although age was not related to our main variables, it is important to note that there was limited variability in the age of our participants, with over 50% of participants being between 18 and 21 years old. Therefore, we recognise the need for

future studies to ensure a more diverse age distribution to enhance the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, we should note that the results from Study 2 might also be interpreted as communion decreasing — rather than agency increasing — the desire for ideal economic inequality. Nonetheless, our observations from Study 1 revealed that communion did not significantly predict the ideal levels of economic inequality. This observation aligns with our contention that agency predominantly influences our results. Nevertheless, whether agency increases ideal economic inequality and communion simultaneously decreases it should be tested in future studies. Additionally, another limitation of our study is the failure to have access to a culturally diverse sample. Cross-cultural research has observed that variables related to egalitarianism (e.g., Power Distance Index and Global Gender Gap Index), in which societies differ, predict agentic and communal self-perception of women and men (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2022). Based on our results, it is conceivable that the observed relationship may vary depending on the societal context under study. Moreover, the historical backdrop of a country influences the level of economic inequality its citizens desire (Easterbrook, 2021). Hence, undoubtedly it is worthy to carry out cross-cultural research on the relation between the variables we are discussing.

In addition, while our study delved into the ideal level of economic inequality to deepen our understanding of attitudes toward economic disparities, recent scholarship underscores the importance of exploring intolerance toward inequality (García-Castro, Jimenez-Moya, et al., 2022) and preferences for redistribution of economic resources (García-Castro, García-Sánchez, et al., 2022). Notably, correlational findings suggest that the perceived ideal economic gap influences support for redistribution efforts (García-Sánchez et al., 2018). It would be intriguing to examine whether individuals' self-perceptions correlate with preferences for redistribution through their desired level of

inequality. This avenue of investigation could shed further light on the factors contributing to divergent preferences regarding the perpetuation of inequality.

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