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## Agency and Communion as Fundamental Dimensions of Social Judgment – and Bogdan Wojciszke’s Brilliant Idea on Perspective

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**Related:** This article is part of the SPB Special Topic "A Festschrift in Honour of Bogdan Wojciszke", Guest Editors: Katarzyna Myślińska-Szarek, Konrad Bocian, & Michał Parzuchowski, Social Psychological Bulletin, 17, <https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.v17>

### Abstract

The fundamental dimensions of social judgment and social evaluation, called agency and communion, are overarching constructs in many fields of psychology. Agency is related to goal-striving and “getting ahead”, communion is related to forming bonds and “getting along”. These dimensions are used both to interpret behaviors, and to evaluate targets. Bogdan Wojciszke was the first to relate these dimensions to perspective, and to show that the perspective of an actor is more closely related to agency, whereas the perspective of an observer is more closely related to communion. The “Dual Perspective Model” combines the fundamental dimensions of social judgment and evaluation with perspective and leads to a number of far-reaching hypotheses on social interactions. The model has inspired research in diverse areas of psychology, such as evaluation of brands, stereotypes of groups, evaluation of political leaders, gender research, social desirability research, self-evaluation, bodily posture in social interaction, to name just a few. It has been further developed to a broad-ranging theory applicable to many phenomena in (social) psychology. Bogdan Wojciszke lives his ideals and it is a pleasure and an honor to cooperate with him.



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## Keywords

fundamental dimensions of social judgment, agency and communion, actor versus observer perspective, dual perspective model, application and extension of the model

What are the ultimate motives that instigate individuals' behaviours? Is it the search for excellence, wealth, influence, power? Is it the search for love, connectedness, understanding, trust? Similarly: what are the aims of social perception? Does social perception specifically identify likeable or lovable others who make us feel comfortable and who fulfil our desire for affiliation? Or does social perception specifically identify dangerous others who make us feel uncomfortable and insecure and whom we want to avoid? How do these considerations apply to larger entities like the perception and behaviours of different social groups?

These are fundamental questions and modern psychology has differentiated them into more narrow ones, for instance, power versus affiliation motivation, dominance versus nurturance personality traits, in impression formation and in intergroup evaluations, etc. More narrow-ranged research questions allow an empirical investigation and, hence, more reliable answers. Scientific advantage, however, results from a shift from broad-scale theorizing and more specific hypotheses testing. It is therefore useful to have constructs that are broad enough to cover a large range of topics like the ones outlined above.

The constructs of “agency” and communion” (and related terms like warmth/competence; or morality/competence; or instrumentality/expressiveness, to name just a few; see more detailed [Abele & Wojciszke, 2014](#)) have adopted the status of such overarching constructs and have been nominated “fundamental dimensions” or “Big Two” ([Judd et al., 2005](#); [Paulhus & John, 1998](#)). One of the first to introduce these constructs was [Bakan \(1966\)](#), although they already had a long history in philosophy (see [Markey, 2002](#)). He described them as the basic modalities of human existence.

I have adopted the terms “agency” and “communion” to characterize two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms, agency for the existence of an organism as an individual, and communion for the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is part. Agency manifests itself in the formation of separations; communion in the lack of separation. Agency manifests itself in isolation, alienation and aloneness; communion in contact, openness, and union. Agency manifests itself in the urge to master; communion in non-contractual cooperation. Agency manifests itself in the repression of thought, feeling, and impulse; communion in the lack and removal of repression. ([Bakan, 1966](#), pp. 14–15)

Bogdan Wojciszke was one of the pioneers of agency-communion research in social psychology. In an early study from 1994 he already showed that identical actions are construable both in moral and competence-related categories and that actors tend to interpret their own behavior in competence terms, whereas observers interpret it in moral categories. Other research published in 1998 revealed that others' morality (as part of the communion dimension) was a more important predictor of overall impression than others' competence (as part of agency; Wojciszke, 1994; Wojciszke et al., 1998). In later work he showed that interpersonal attitudes can be distinguished into liking versus respect, and that liking is better predicted by perceived communion, whereas respect is better predicted by perceived agency (Wojciszke, Abele & Baryła, 2009). He also demonstrated that success versus failure influence self-ascription of agency, but not of communion (Baryła & Wojciszke, 2019).

In the present author's point of view the most brilliant idea of Bogdan Wojciszke in this field of research was, to combine the "Big Two" with another fundamental category of social life, which is perspective or—more precisely—the agent versus the recipient point of view in social interaction.

According to Bogdan Wojciszke's reasoning we are always either agents or recipients in a social interaction, which means that in a certain situation we either monitor and evaluate own behavior or we form impressions of others' behavior. Perspective can change rapidly in a social interaction, for instance, turn-taking in a conversation. However, at a certain point of time an individual's perspective is either on the self (the agent perspective) or on others (the recipient perspective). Although this distinction is at least as basic as the one between agency and communion it had been neglected in Big Two research.<sup>1</sup>

Bogdan Wojciszke developed his ideas on agency/communion from an agent versus recipient perspective first in his 1994 paper on multiple interpretations of behavior and then more fully in his 2005 account on morality and competence in person and self-perception. The abstract reads: "Morality and competence are posited to constitute two basic kinds of content in person- and self-perception. Moral content dominates person-perception because it typically has a direct and unconditional bearing on the well-being of other people surrounding the person who is described by the trait (including the perceiver). Competence dominates self-perception because it has a direct bearing on the well-being of the perceiver" (Wojciszke, 2005, p. 16).

The present author is happy and proud to have had the chance to work together with Bogdan Wojciszke in further developing these ideas. In 2007 the "Dual perspective mod-

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1) Perspective was also an issue in attribution research. Jones and Nisbett (1971) were among the first to argue that different perspectives influence behavior interpretations. They suggested that actors interpret their behavior more externally in terms of the situation, whereas observers interpret the same behavior more internally in terms of the actor's personality. This hypothesis differs from Wojciszke's reasoning as it is concerned with the internal-external distinction, but not with the content distinction of agency-communion.

el” was outlined (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Whereas the Wojciszke (2005) paper related the fundamental dimensions to perspective and well-being, we have now enlarged the approach and considered “profitability” of traits (Peeters, 2008) and specifically of agency and communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Among others, we could show that agency is more relevant and desired for the self, and communion is more relevant and desired for others.

A more complete account of the dual perspective model was given in 2014 (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). The Big Two were integrated into evolutionary reasoning of getting ahead and getting along (Ybarra et al., 2008). We thus related directly to Bakan (1966) and his definitions of agency and communion: Agents want to pursue their goals and therefore interpret and monitor their behavior with respect to goal-achievement. Recipients want to be treated respectfully and interpret an actor’s behavior with respect to getting along with each other. The model comprises two main hypotheses: First, in the observer/recipient perspective (perception of others), communal content receives more weight than agentic content. Second, in the actor/agent perspective (self-perception), agentic content receives more weight than communal content. An additional third hypothesis states that communal content is primary among the fundamental dimensions. “Primary” here means that communal content is generally more pronounced in social cognition, and is recognized more quickly than agentic content. Ample evidence supports the model and its hypotheses (for overviews see Abele & Wojciszke, 2014, 2018).

Of course, things are more complicated in actual situations and the dual perspective model can be enriched by mediators and moderators. For instance, the kind of relationship between agent and recipient matters, be it a relationship of power versus submission, be it a relationship of mutual interdependence, or be it a relationship with status differences. Nonetheless, the basic hypotheses help to account for quite a few phenomena in social perception, judgment, and evaluation. The model instigated further studies in many labs from different countries (see, for instance, contributions in Abele & Wojciszke, 2018).

Bogdan Wojciszke, however, was tireless in further developing these ideas. He, for instance, showed that even though communal traits (particularly morality traits) are usually evaluated more positively than agentic traits, agentic traits are more important for self-esteem (Wojciszke et al., 2011). This is completely in line with the dual perspective model, but poses some problems to other models of self-esteem. He could also show that the association of agency and self-esteem is robust across countries (Wojciszke & Bialobrzaska, 2014).

A recent example for the advancement of the dual perspective model is the research by Piotrowski and Wojciszke (2015). They reasoned that based on the well-supported idea that people typically think about themselves and close others in agentic rather than communal terms, agentic (but not communal) thinking about unknown others would make them subjectively closer. In four priming studies they found that the hypothesis

was supported in conditions with cognitive load, but not in conditions without cognitive load. This result, on one hand, supports the general reasoning of the dual perspective model, and on the other hand allows building a bridge to other fields of social cognition, e.g., cognitive heuristics: Thinking about unknown others in an agentic way results only then in feelings of higher closeness when people follow an intuitive, but not a reflexive way of thinking (cf. [Strack & Deutsch, 2004](#)).

As a final example a scale construction may be mentioned. Taking the context of the dual perspective model it seems worthwhile to have a measure of individual propensities to take the viewpoint of agent versus recipient. Are there individual differences in ability for perspective change? How are such differences related to further constructs relevant here? [Baryla et al. \(2019\)](#) present such a scale and show its convergent and discriminant validity. As a matter of course, the scale was not only validated in one language, but rather in two (Polish and English). This is an example of advancing the dual perspective model towards personality psychology and individual differences.

The dual perspective model has inspired research in diverse areas of psychology like, for instance, evaluation of brands (overview see [Wojciszke & Abele, 2018](#)), evaluation of political leaders ([Bruckmüller & Mether, 2018](#)), gender research ([Szczeny et al., 2018](#)), social desirability research ([Paulhus, 2018](#)), power research ([Cislak & Cichočka, 2018](#)), or self-evaluation of pupils following performance feedback ([Helm & Möller, 2018](#)), to name just a few.

Many more examples of Bogdan Wojciszke's creativity and brilliant ideas in the context of the dual perspective model, but also in other contexts could be given. Looking at his record of references it seems that he will not retire completely after having reached his seventies. However, finally, the person and colleague behind this research and theorizing will be briefly looked at.

I came to know Bogdan a long time ago, when we were both teachers in an EASP summer school in 1994. He had a group on theories on love and participants of the summer school were very interested in joining this group – not only because of the topic, but also because of Bogdan. As I worked in different fields at that time, we did not cooperate but we kept in contact. In 2003 I published a paper on agency and communion related to the career success of women and men, after which Bogdan contacted me. This was the beginning of a very fruitful cooperation both in Germany with Bogdan being the guest in my department and me being the guest in his department in Poland. The exchange did not only function between the two of us, but also between our collaborators and the “next generation of researchers” who profited from Bogdan's ideas as well.

When Bogdan first came to my department, we had long discussions about his basic idea of combining the Big Two with the agent versus recipient perspective. These “discussions” were often such that Bogdan talked about his ideas and I tried to follow and understand what he meant. By asking many questions, I got a better understanding and – hopefully – Bogdan clarified his thinking. I then elaborated on what I thought to be

important and Bogdan agreed or was already following a novel idea. We often developed our joint ideas in writing and rewriting our papers again and again. This was never frustrating, but rather inspiring.

Working with Bogdan means working with a researcher who is committed to his work not only by brain, but also by heart. He is highly knowledgeable, and his preferred topic to talk about is science. I never experienced Bogdan as negatively communal, e.g., unfriendly, smart-alecky, or unreliable. I also never experienced him as low in agency. He knows his goals and works towards fulfilling them. However, he pursues his goals in a friendly way, never being too determined.

Bogdan Wojciszke's work remains highly influential not only in terms of scientific content, but also in the way in which he disseminated his ideas by collaborating with many research partners all over the world in an agentic manner, but also with a warm, communal heart.

Happy birthday, Bogdan – and “ad multos annos” with many good ideas and a good mixture of communion and agency for you and your beloved ones!!

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