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TARGET ARTICLE



People Who Need People (and Some Who Think They Don't): On Compensatory Personal and Social Means of Goal Pursuit

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ABSTRACT

We propose a new theoretical model depicting the *compensatory relations* between personal agency and social assistance. It suggests two general hypotheses, namely that (1) the stronger the individuals' sense of personal agency, the weaker their motivation to utilize social assistance and the greater their consequent tendency to develop anti-social attitudes. Conversely, (2) the stronger the individuals' reliance on social assistance, the weaker their motivation to be agentic, and the lesser their tendency to develop a strong sense of self. These relations are assumed to apply across levels of generality, that is, concerning agency and assistance within a single goal domain, as well as across domains where the source of agency (e.g., money, power) or assistance facilitates the attainment of multiple goals.

At the time of this writing, the world finds itself in the grip of an unprecedented calamity: the COVID 19 pandemic, the worst such outbreak in living memory. Starting at the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, the virus spread quickly across the planet. Over 37 million persons, globally, have been infected so far and the worst may be yet to come. Over 7.6 million Americans were infected, and over 214,000 died as a consequence. Millions are expected to succumb to the plague, the world economy is taking a historic hit. People are losing jobs, some to be never recovered. Factories and small business are shuttered, many to never reopen. Health systems of the world's nations are stretched to their limits, social services and functions (transportation, education, entertainment, leisure) are near paralysis. Millions are cooped up in their homes: lonely and disoriented, the structures of their daily routines in shambles. Nobody is exempt. All are vulnerable.

These somber circumstances induce a sense of fragility and helplessness in millions of individuals. Their sense of personal agency is severely threatened, their need for assistance and support is much magnified. And a fundamental question to psychological science is what impact this has on people's social relations, their attachment to others, their interpersonal orientations, and their attitudes. In the present article, we address such questions by reviewing an extensive body of relevant empirical findings in the social psychological literature and proposing an integrative model that offers new perspectives on the phenomena at stake.

KEYWORDS

Goal pursuit; agency; social assistance

In a Gist

Essentially, this article views personal agency and social assistance as two substitutable means of goal(s) attainment. Because they are equifinal, the relation between them is hydraulic in that the reliance on one reduces the need to utilize the other. These notions are specifically elaborated in the goal systems theory (GST, Kruglanski et al., 2002) and are depicted in Figure 1.

The hydraulic relations between agency and assistance are assumed to hold for the numerous cases where agency and assistance are geared toward the attainment of *the same goal(s)* and where no alternative goals attainable by only one of the two contrasting means, are active (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Reliance on one's own agency or others' assistance has widely ramifying consequences for attitudes toward self and others and profoundly affect individuals' relations to

society. In what follows, we elaborate the rationale for our model, highlight its unique features, and discuss its differences from related conceptions.

The Agentic Journey

Life Span Trajectory

From birth to death, people rely on two types of means for goal attainment: their individual competencies and the help of others. The newborn baby is at the complete mercy of its adult care takers. The most that he or she can do is signal a state of need, thus capturing the caretakers' attention and entreating their assistance. In the course of development, children's sense of personal agency grows as they gain resources and capabilities (Gecas, 1989). They become physically stronger and cognitively astute, accumulate world



Figure 1. Personal agency and social assistance in an equifinality configuration.

knowledge, and master various skills. In parallel, their dependence on others diminishes. They learn to feed themselves on their own, attend to their personal hygiene, move about freely, and communicate effectively with others. By the age of 30–35, most persons (in Western cultures) are largely self-reliant (Levinson, 1986; Robinson, 2013). Physically, cognitively, and emotionally “grown up,” they prove capable of achieving numerous goals on their own. They work for a living, provide for their families, assist others, and contribute to society.

Eventually, people’s agentic trajectory trends downward. As individuals age, their prowess and skills diminish. Their physical strength declines (Doherty, 2003; Kallman, Plato, & Tobin, 1990; Mitchell et al., 2012), their energy pool shrinks, and their cognitive capabilities diminish (Hertzog & Schaie, 1986). They retire from the workforce, lose power and status, become physically fragile and suffer many ailments. At some point, no longer able to fend for themselves, they require assistance in such basic functions as moving and eating. Their agentic journey comes a full circle. Much like in infancy, they are now highly dependent on others.

Over the life span, the psychological importance of personal means of goal attainment is inversely proportionate to that of social means. As the perceived potency of the former grows, the need for the latter wanes and, as it declines, the need for the latter waxes. These vicissitudes in self-reliance and the dependence on others’ assistance profoundly influence people’s social attitudes and behavioral orientations. All else being equal, the greater their sense of personal agency, the lesser their dependence on others, and consequently the lesser their attention to and appreciation of others. In like fashion, the lesser their sense of agency, the greater their dependence on and appreciation of others (Brim, 1974; Dowd, 1975; Gecas, 1989; Gurin & Brim, 1984; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Woodward & Wallston, 1987).

Personal Vicissitudes

The dynamic interplay between agentic and social means is hardly restricted to life span phases. At nearly any phase,

persons may acquire new knowledge or master new skills; they may make money, develop competence, amass power, gain status, or build physical strength; all these contribute to their sense of agency. At any phase, too, people may confront challenges that undermine their self-confidence and the sense of effectiveness. Introduction of new technologies and consequent organizational reshuffling may turn an expert into a novice overnight. An economic crisis, a market crash, or corporate downsizing may bring the relatively prosperous to the brink of poverty. War and political violence may wrest away people’s station in life and transform complacent citizens into anxious refugees. Disease, as poignantly attested by the current pandemic, can sap people’s physical energies and erode their cognitive capabilities. Apart from life span phases then, our personal destiny and circumstances may cause our sense of agency to fluctuate.

Social Assistance

The *social assistance* one can count on may also wax and wane. Some individuals are born into wealth and enjoy consistent comfort and luxury by dint of their familial resources. Others confront humble circumstances and have only themselves to rely on. Some persons dwell in social welfare states that offer their denizens substantial assistance; others are members of capitalist societies that eschew significant social nets. Strengths of one’s relationship partner in some domains (e.g., finances, handy work) may relieve them of worry about these particular concerns; weaknesses may encourage one to step in and take charge of matters. For religious persons, a widely available source of assistance is God; indeed, praying for God’s help in times of trouble (i.e., under lowered sense of agency) is commonplace and recommended in the Bible (<https://www.ibelieve.com/faith/a-prayer-for-god-s-help-in-times-of-trouble.html>).

The Hydraulic Relation

We assume that people typically treat personal and social means as compensatory routes to goal attainment.¹ Because perceived efficacy of means may fluctuate over time, oscillations in agentic or social means should evoke compensatory resonance in their counterpart: Where the sense of personal agency increases, the perceived value of social means is downplayed, and where it declines, perceived worth of available social means looms larger. It is a two-way street, however. So, where the perceived effectiveness of social means declines, the emphasis shifts to agentic means, enhancing its perceived value; conversely, where the perceived importance

¹We assume that the foregoing dynamic applies across the plethora of goals that people have whether these be concrete or abstract. Thus, the compensatory relation between perceived agency and assistance is assumed to pertain equally to such abstract ends as those of achieving *relatedness* or *significance* (c.f., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019), and to such concrete goals as *having dinner* or *getting the car fixed*. For instance, one may seek a relationship partner by trying to meet people on one’s own or by having a marriage arranged by one’s parents. One may attain one’s sense of significance through one’s own track record of achievement or through marrying a scion of a prestigious family. A person may cook one’s own dinner, or have one delivered, fix one’s car by oneself, or call a garage, etc.

of social means rises, the salience and perceived value of agentic means diminishes.

Attitudes

We assume further that dependency imbues one's attitudes toward self and others.² For instance, a sense of low agency increases one's dependency on others' assistance. This focuses one's attention on others, boosts the interest in others and fuels the desire to be liked by others; it disposes one to perceive their relations with them as cordial and their disposition as generous and friendly. Through mechanisms of motivated cognition (e.g., Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1990; Sinclair & Kunda, 1999), one may interpret the others' reactions to oneself in ways that justify such positive portrayal. In contrast, a sense of high agency reduces one's felt dependency on others, hence reducing the need to pay them attention or elicit from them liking and appreciation. As a consequence of these processes, the positivity of attitudes toward others should vary inversely with one's sense of agency. These notions are summarized in our Agency-Assistance Model presented next.

The Agency-Assistance Model (AAM)

Postulate 1: Individuals engaged in purposive action recruit means deemed adequate³ to the desired ends.

Postulate 2: Two major equifinal means for individuals' goal pursuit are their personal agency and available social assistance.

Derivation 1 (from Postulates 1, 2): Assuming that personal agency, social assistance, or their combination yields a reasonable subjective likelihood of goal attainment, *where individuals' felt agency is more effective than their anticipated social assistance or vice versa, individuals will rely more on the more effective of these means, in proportion to the perceived effectiveness differential between the two.*

Postulate 3: The greater the individuals' reliance on their personal agency versus social assistance the less positive are their attitudes toward the sources of potential social assistance, the lower is their reliance on these sources and the commitment to them.

Postulate 4: The greater the individuals' reliance on social assistance versus personal agency, the weaker their tendency to exert own efforts and develop a sense of personal agency expressed in ways such as self-enhancement, internal locus of control, and creative thinking.

The above statements afford the formulation of specific hypotheses as follows.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Increased (decreased) sense of agency (1) increases (decreases) valuation of the self and decreases (increases) valuation of others, (2) increases (decreases) self-reliance and decreases (increases) reliance on others, and (3) decreases (increases) commitment to others.

Hypothesis 2: Increased (decreased) perceived effectiveness of social assistance (1) increases (decreases) valuation of others and decreases valuation of the self, and (2) decreases (increases) self-reliance.⁴

Agency and Communion

The present notions of agency and assistance recall the concepts of agency and communion (Bakan, 1966) that have received considerable attention in recent years (for reviews and analysis see Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Rucker, Galinsky, & Magee, 2018). Indeed, findings in support of the agency-communion distinction (e.g., Rucker et al., 2018) are relevant to and consistent with the present model. These data are discussed later. Nonetheless, our contrast between agency vs. (social) assistance is quite distinct from the juxtaposition of *agency* and *communion*.

To begin with, agency and communion were defined as "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" (Bakan, 1966, pp. 14–15). In motivational terms, this conception suggests that agency and communion represent two different sets of *strivings*. Abele and Wojciszke (2007, p. 751) write in this vein: "Agency is basically related to goal-pursuit of the self, (whereas) communion arises from strivings to integrate the self in a larger social unit." From this perspective then, agency and communion refer to different categories of goals. In contrast, we view agency and assistance as different *means* to the same goal(s), that is, as various ways of satisfying the very same motives. Thus, we assume that when individuals seek social assistance they do it out of *self-interest* as it were, that is, in order to satisfy *own motives* (however altruistic these might be). Indeed, we assume that *all strivings* stem from individual's own goals including the strivings to integrate oneself "in a larger social unit," a motive to belong as it were. In contrast, the concept of "communion" in contrast to "goal pursuit of the self" implies a kind of selflessness in which one's behavior is determined by other people's goals/needs rather than by one's own goals and needs.

Along the latter lines, too, Rucker's et al. (2018, p. 72) Agent-Communal model treats agency and communion as dependent variables, namely as "modalities of being" or types of striving (see above), and proposes that they are induced, respectively, by a sense of *advantage* or *disadvantage*. These authors' interest is thus in the *antecedents* of agency and communion. By comparison, we presently treat

²The degree to which the relation between one's own sense of agency and attitude toward others is general versus specific, should depend on the stability of one's sense of agency. The more enduring and trans-situational is one's sense of agency and self-sufficiency, the more enduring and general should be the deprecation of others.

³Operationally defined as having an above threshold perceived likelihood of goal attainment.

⁴Hypotheses 1 and 2 assume that agency and assistance are perceived as separate and distinctive and that their combination is perceived as yielding an above threshold likelihood of goal attainment.

the relative effectiveness of agency and social assistance as *independent variables* that determine individuals' perspectives on self and others. Thus, our interest is in the *consequences* of relative perceived effectiveness of agency and assistance as these may determine socially relevant attitudes.

Importantly, too, the present model uniquely explains why is it that disadvantage fosters communion, in the sense of pro-sociality, and advantage promotes selfishness (Rucker et al., 2018). Specifically, because advantage signals an increased agency, it reduces the need for others' assistance and consequently the *motivation* to accord them worth as discussed earlier. Similarly, disadvantage signals a decreased agency and hence induces the motivation to regard others positively and adopt pro-social attitudes more generally (i.e., exhibiting "communion").

Most importantly, however, our view of agency and assistance as means to the same goals suggests their *mutual* substitutability and compensation. Thus, according to our theory, fluctuations in social assistance should influence the sense of personal agency. Namely, abundance of social assistance should decrease one's reliance on one's own agency whereas a deficit in social assistance should increase it. These notions implied by the present model offer unique insights into the causes and consequences of reliance on self vs. others.

Diverse Personal and Social Means of Goal Pursuit

A sense of personal agency may issue from a variety of sources including such heterogeneous factors as one's sense of physical strength, competence, availability of economic resources, social power, social status, and one's perception of personal control. Moreover, anticipated social sources of assistance may comprise a variety of entities including advisors, team members, relationship partners, relatives, social institutions, bystanders, imagined others, and even quasi-social agents, such as God (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). A major claim of the present model is the generality of the processes involved spanning a broad range of perceived agency sources and diverse types of assistance providers. In that sense, our conceptual framework constitutes a theory with rich empirical content (Popper, 1959) capable of explaining multiple findings that have not been integrated heretofore.

The Empirical Evidence

A scientific theory is useful to the extent that it (a) accounts for prior evidence and (b) transcends it by affording new implications. Empirical findings reviewed in what follows bear on these objectives. We now review this body of evidence in accordance with the two major hypotheses of our theory.

Hypothesis 1

According to Hypothesis 1, perceived effectiveness of individuals' personal agency is (1) positively related to their

valuation of the self and negatively related to valuation of others, (2) positively related to self-reliance and negatively related to reliance on others' assistance and opinions, and (3) negatively related to their commitment to others. Evidence consistent with these assertions extends across diverse sources of agency, such as physical strength, competence, power, money, status and feelings of personal control.

Physical Strength and Weakness

Valuation of Self and Others. Physical weakness importantly affects one's sense of agency and effectiveness. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, physical weakness stemming from declining health (e.g., in the elderly or individuals diagnosed as HIV positive) was found to be associated with the assignment of greater importance to one's relations with close others (Carstensen & Fredrickson, 1998), presumed sources of social assistance. As Carstensen and Fredrickson (1998) note, it is the perception of proximity to the end of life, that is a sense of frailty and vulnerability in HIV-positive individuals, rather than chronological age as such that determines individuals' feelings of interdependency with others. Research by Heckhausen (2011) and by Schieman and Campbell (2001) further suggest that declining health and physical ability in general contributes to a reduced sense of agency that increases their sense of dependency on others.

Reliance on Others. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the same factors that affect the evaluation of others should determine also the reliance on others for help. Findings relevant to this assertion are reviewed next. In this vein, sleep deprivation, assumed to induce physical weakness, led participants to follow the experimenter's advice to deceive their game partner (Welsh, Ellis, Christian, & Mai, 2014). Of interest, sleep-deprived participants did not deceive more when deception was not advised by the experimenter ruling out the alternative interpretation that unethical behavior was caused here by a weakness-induced failure of self-regulation (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011; Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011).

The sense of lower agency stemming from physical frailty, e.g., as caused by aging and illness, prompts a reliance on others. Indeed, tending to the old and sick, who lack the agency to take care of their needs, is an imperative in many cultures and religions, and is exemplified by the popular concept of "assisted living" (Baltes, 1995; Doherty, 2003; Woodward & Wallston, 1987).

Commitment. Investment in Others. Increased liking for others brought about by physical weakness should augment people's tendency to make social commitments. Consistent with this prediction, women, on average less physically strong than men, tend to be more psychologically invested in their social interactions (Cross & Madson, 1997). For example, following an interaction with another person, women reported more feelings about that individual and more thoughts formulated from their partners' perspective than did men (Ickes, Robertson, Tooke, & Teng, 1986). Moreover, women remembered socially significant stimuli,

such as faces (Hall, 1984) and details of social interactions (Bahrick, Bahrick, & Wittlinger, 1975; Buczek, 1981; Ross & Holmberg, 1992; Yarmey, 1993) better than men. Women are found to be more empathic than men (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Knickmeyer, Baron-Cohen, Raggatt, Taylor, & Hackett, 2006; Mehrabian, Young, & Sato, 1988; Rueckert & Naybar, 2008; Singer et al., 2006) and they exhibit less social loafing than men (Karau & Williams, 1993; Kugihara, 1999).

Donating and Volunteering. In a recent article, Motsenok and Ritov (2020) have shown that a sense of physical vulnerability increases the likelihood of one's prosocial behavior. In particular, they found that participants' subjective likelihood of being physically injured during a military conflict was positively associated with their willingness to volunteer and the number of reported volunteering activities aimed at helping the victims of the conflict. Similarly, in a different study examining the link between physical vulnerability and prosocial behavior in peace time, the authors found a positive correlation between participants' perceived likelihood of getting hurt or sick and their willingness to donate or volunteer for a local charity organization. Moreover, when participants' sense of physical vulnerability was experimentally induced by asking them to imagine themselves in the shoes of someone who has a high (vs. low) risk of developing skin cancer, they reported a higher willingness to donate to health organizations.

Rule Observance. Rule observance constitutes another form of social commitment. If so, people who perceive themselves as physically stronger should comply with *rules* less than those who feel physically weaker. Consistent with this prediction, in the vast majority of prisons around the world, female prisoners amount to only 2–9% of the total prison population; the median percentage of female prisoners around the world is a mere 4.4% (Walmsley, 2015). This suggests that men, who are presumably physically stronger than women, are also much more likely to violate the law, constituting a classic example of anti-social behavior (Walmsley, 2015).

Competence

Valuation of Self and Others. Another source of agency, feeling of competence, was also shown to negatively affect the perception of others' competence. Specifically, experimentally induced feeling of high competence *lowered* the perception of others' competence whereas induced feeling of low competence *elevated* the perception of others' competence even though their performance was *identical* across the experimental conditions (Milyavsky, 2019). Apparently, one's own sense of competence served as a standard in reference to which others' "objective" competence was judged, so that individuals with a strong sense of own competence had lower evaluation of others' competence.

A lowered sense of competence should induce people to feel more dependent on others' assistance. Consequently, they should tend more to endorse pro-social values that hail assistance as a major virtue. In this vein, a recent series of experimental studies demonstrated that failure at various tasks prompted people to construe themselves as more

interdependent with others and to endorse collectivistic values more strongly (Orehek & Kruglanski, 2018). The varied experimental inductions of the feelings of competence validate the notion that it was the sense of agency rather than any theoretically irrelevant specifics that accounts for the observed effects.

Reliance on Others. Unsurprisingly, when feeling competent, people often shun help and put less weight on others' advice (Harvey & Fischer, 1997; Sniezek & Van Swol, 2001; Yaniv, 2004; Yaniv & Kleinberger, 2000; Yaniv & Milyavsky, 2007); conversely, when feeling incompetent, individuals are more likely to seek help. In this vein, Yaniv (2004) showed that more knowledgeable decision-makers discounted advice from others more readily than did less knowledgeable decision-makers (see also Gino & Moore, 2007; Harvey & Fischer, 1997; Kruger, 1999; see Morrison, Rothman, & Soll 2011; Yaniv & Milyavsky, 2007). And Schultze, Gerlach, and Rittich (2018) found that trait agency was associated with less advice taking, an effect mediated by individuals' perceptions of own competence.

Commitment. One manifestation of communal commitment is individuals' contribution to a collective task. Accordingly, it was found that participants who viewed themselves as more competent at an academic ability loafed more on a collective (but not on a co-active) creativity task (Charbonnier, Huguet, Brauer, Monteil, & Monteil, 1998).

As mentioned above, *rule observance* is another form of social commitment. If so, people who perceive themselves as less competent should comply with *rules* more than those who feel highly competent. These predictions were borne out in recent studies that manipulated competence and measured rule following (Hadar, Tannenbaum, & Fox, 2017; Lucas, Huey, Posard, & Lovaglia, 2014). Relatedly, cheating constitutes a deviation from social norms, hence, it signifies a lack of commitment to others. Our theory thus makes the ironic prediction that people who feel more competent will in fact cheat more often, a hypothesis recently supported in research by Schurr and Ritov (2016).

Power

Valuation of Self and Others. Social power represents a major source of felt agency. Powerful people perceive themselves as having more control (Bacharach & Lawler, 1976; Fiske, Morling, & Stevens, 1996; Hosman, 1997; Porter, Allen, & Angle, 1981), as more able to effect change (Henley, 1973; Schminke, 1993), to influence others (Eagly & Wood, 1982; Lee & Ofshe, 1981; Ridgeway, Johnson, & Diekema, 1994), perform well (Langer & Benevento, 1978) and express greater confidence in their judgments (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012).

Anticipating our Hypothesis 1, Lammers et al. (2012, p. 283) stated that "power creates a sense that one does not need others and can *independently* pursue and reach one's own goals." Conversely, lack of power induces feelings of dependency and hence appreciation of others (or, pro-sociality).

Typically, ingroup members are perceived as more helpful to each other than outgroup members. According to Hypothesis 1 then, decreased power should increase one's appreciation of the ingroup and promote ingroup favoritism. Evidence consistent with this prediction was reported by Fritzsche et al. (2013). In one of their studies, participants took the perspective of a protagonist who was fired from a job (powerless condition) or decided to quit on their own (control condition). Consistent with the present theory, participants in the powerless (vs. control) condition rated the ingroup members more positively than the outgroup members.

There is ample evidence that low vs. high power induces (respectively) interdependent vs. independent self-construal (for a review, see Lee & Tiedens, 2001). People assigned low (vs. high) power positions were shown to be more concerned about making a good impression on their high-power partners, tried harder to get along with them (Copeland, 1994), and used more polite phrases in seeking their help (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lee, 1999). In short, reduced sense of personal agency (induced via a power deficit) promotes more pro-social attitudes expressed in sensitivity (reflected in politeness) and attempts at getting along with others.

Reliance on Others. Power was found to be related negatively to trusting others and the utilization of others' advice (See et al., 2011; Tost, Gino, and Larrick, 2012). The powerful conform less to social norms, exhibit greater personal idiosyncrasy, a wider latitude of behavior (Hollander, 1958), and greater creativity (Galinsky et al., 2008). As Guinote, Judd, and Brauer (2002, p. 718) concluded, "individuals who are in more powerful positions actually act and present themselves in more idiosyncratic and variable ways" (ibid., p. 718). In short, the powerful take their cue less from what other people say or do and instead are more independent and self-directed.

Commitment. According to a popular adage, *power corrupts*. In present terms, the agency boost from enhanced power prompts individuals to flout social rules and regulations designed to safeguard the common good. In this vein, Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky (2010) found that a sense of power increases people's cheating behavior, attesting to a lesser commitment to societal norms. Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, and Keltner (2012) even found that people who felt more powerful were also more likely to take away candy from children!

Intriguingly, when participants judged others' (vs. their own) cheating behavior, the opposite pattern obtained: To the authors' surprise, but consistent with the present theory, low power participants judged others' immoral behavior less strictly than their own (Lammers et al., 2010).⁵

⁵This finding may appear inconsistent with Harrington's (2017) result that working class children were more upset by norm violations by a puppet than were middle class children. Conceivably, the "inverse hypocrisy" observed by Lammers et al., (2010) pertains to the forgiveness of low power individuals toward high power individuals, where in Harrington's study the lower class children may have viewed the puppet as of lower status than themselves.

Such "inverse hypocrisy," as the authors dubbed it, is consistent with the present notion that a deficit in personal agency (instantiated here by low power) fosters an increased need for others and, as a result, instills a more positive attitude toward them that begets greater *forgiveness*, which is extended even to people who abuse others and behave unethically (!).

Heightened commitment may manifest itself by greater allocation to others of one's mental and affective resources. Indeed, individuals who experience a lack of power pay more attention to others that are their more powerful counterparts, are more compassionate, empathic, and concerned about others (Adler, 1983; Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976; Dépret & Fiske, 1999; Ellyson, Dovidio, Corson, and Vinicur, 1980; Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Fiske, Morling, & Stevens, 1996; Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Messe, Kerr, & Sattler, 1992; Pfeffer & Cialdini, 1998; Samuelson & Allison, 1994; Snodgrass, 1985). Furthermore, social dominance (i.e., power) orientation is negatively correlated with empathy, tolerance, communality, and altruism (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, and Gruenfeld (2006) found that priming research participants with the power concept decreased their perspective taking and emotion recognition. Too, individuals granted more power in a dictator game made more pro-self and antisocial decisions (Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong, & Antonakis, 2015).

Money

Valuation of Self and Others. Money enables people to achieve various goals; its possession should thus boost their sense of agency. Indeed, having or even thinking of money appears to make people feel *stronger* (Pain, Zhou, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2009), more *self-confident* and *self-efficacious* (Mukherjee, Manjaly, & Nargundkar, 2013), and *self-sufficient* (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006; but see Caruso, Shapira, & Landy, 2017). Prior research has shown also that individuals from higher (vs. lower) social classes who typically are wealthier have higher opinions of their self-efficacy (Gecas, 1989) and a higher sense of control (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009), hence, harboring a generally more positive opinion of themselves.

Perhaps of greater interest, orientation toward money has been shown to induce a deprecation of others, suggesting anti-sociality of sorts: Participants primed with money reported a lower need to belong (Piers, Krus, Dooley, & Wallace, 2014), took a seat further from other participants, and chose more individually-oriented leisure activities (Vohs et al., 2006). Money priming also reduced people's intentions to socialize, engage in intimate relations (Mogilner, 2010), reduced the concern for others (Vohs, 2015) as well as compassion and empathy for others (Vohs et al., 2006; see also Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Schwartz, 2007; Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012). In summary then, it is the feeling of having money, irrespective of actual wealth and largely independent of other sociodemographic characteristics related to objective power, that appears to have increased individuals' sense of agency and reduced their

willingness to help others (Caruso, Shapira, & Landy, 2017; Vohs et al., 2006).

Reliance on Others. If the concept of money boosts individuals' sense of personal agency, it should decrease their assistance seeking behavior. Indeed, Vohs et al. (2006) found that individuals primed with the idea of money were more reluctant to *ask help* of others. Specifically, they worked longer on a difficult task before asking the experimenter (Study 1) or another participant for help (Study 2).

Commitment. According to our theory, plentitude of money should lower individuals' *commitment* to others, increase the likelihood of deviance from social norms, and decrease attention and help extended to others; a shortage of money should produce the opposite effects. Indeed, studies have shown that individuals from a higher socio-economic, wealthier, class are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors, such as breaking the law while driving, taking valued goods from others, cheating, and endorsing unethical behavior at work (Gino & Mogilner, 2014; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Kouchaki, Smith-Crowe, Brief, & Sousa, 2013; Lyons et al., 2012; Piff et al., 2012). In this vein too, Harrington (2017) found that working class children (representing a poorer social group relative to the middle class) were particularly concerned with upholding situational norms and were visibly upset by norm violations, significantly more so than middle class children. In studies by Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, and Keltner (2010), participants from a higher socio-economic class allocated less money and offered less help to another participant, as well as donated less money to charity.

Of course, social class is correlated with status as well as wealth, so social class findings do not uniquely speak to the effect of money on social commitment. More directly relevant to this issue is that money priming was found to reduce people's readiness to donate for a social cause and were less likely to offer help to others (Guéguen & Jacob, 2013; Vohs et al., 2006).

Status

Valuation of Self and Others. Social status pertains to an individual's standing relative to others on some socially valued dimension. High status individuals are generally sought after in society. As a consequence, they typically wield power and influence, boosting their sense of personal agency. Historically, women have had a lower status in society than men (e.g., the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote wasn't ratified until 1920, after a struggle that lasted from 1832). Accordingly, men tend to have an independent/agentive self-construal (Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp, & Redersdorff, 2006), whereas women profess an interdependent, relational, self-construal (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). Notably, gender differences in perceptions of agency and interdependence have been tied to cultural and socialization factors that have perpetuated the lower social status of women (Biocca, 1987; Guimond et al., 2006; Schwartz &

Rubel, 2005).⁶ In the US, lower status (and the attendant denial of civil rights) has been also traditionally assigned to ethnic minorities, such as African Americans and Hispanics. This may have contributed to their self-perception as more interdependent and less individualistic as compared to Caucasians (Triandis, 1994).

Our Hypothesis 1 suggests that low (vs. high) status individuals are more likely to subscribe to prosocial values and behave in prosocial ways. For instance, women endorse self-transcending values more than men (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005). It is of interest, however, that status conferred by dint of one's social role *overrides* gender differences in agency. As Moskowitz, Suh, and Desaulniers (1994, p. 758) summarize it: "Gender was not found to influence agentic behavior at work. Instead, social role influenced agentic behaviors. Individuals were more dominant when they were in a supervisory role than when they were with coworkers or in the role of supervisee." In other words, women aren't inevitably low on agency and the found agency differences between the genders may be attributed to vestiges of women's dependent status in traditional societies (Eagly & Wood, 2016).

Finally, in experimental studies, participants primed with low (vs. high) status offered more unsolicited help, showed more communal and prosocial signaling during self-presentations and interactions with same-status individuals, and endorsed self-transcendent values and goals related to the welfare of others (Guinote, Cotzia, Sandhu, & Siwa, 2015).⁷

In summary, gender, race, and age have all been considered as "status characteristics" (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Webster & Driskell, 1978). And they all seem related to the perception of interdependence with others and the evaluation of others such that the higher one's status on any of these dimensions the lower the value assigned to others.

Reliance on Others. Much evidence, generated mainly under the guidance of the Expectation States Theory attests that elevated status is associated with lowered conformity, that is, lesser acceptance of social influence in forming own opinions (Hollander, 1958; Jetten, Hornsey, & Adarves-Yorno, 2006; Montgomery, 1971; for reviews see Berger, 2014; Webster & Driskell, 1978): Furthermore, women that are often stereotyped (and self-stereotyped) as the less agentive gender, conform to social influence more than men (Eagly & Chvala, 1986; Foschi, 1996; Ridgeway, Backor, Li,

⁶Eagly and Wood (1999) conclude that men's musculature and physical strength made them better suited for occupations that yielded higher wealth and power, such as warfare and herding.

⁷In a seeming exception to the above body of findings, Willer (2009), using the Public Goods paradigm found that individuals who received high (vs. low) ratings from other members of the group, namely that they are prestigious, honorable, and respected (which operationally defined "status" in this research) made greater subsequent contributions to the common good. This finding was mediated by greater perceived group solidarity, group cohesion and identification with the group. Note, however that in this study "status" is confounded with individuals' likely attraction to the group, a variable that defines *group cohesion* (Back, 1950; Festinger, 1950). Indeed, Willer's findings suggest that it was the latter variable that accounts for the more "pro-social" contributions made by high (vs. low) status members. Similar interpretation pertains to the findings of Blader, Shirako, and Chen (2016).

Tinkler, & Erickson, 2009), people with lower levels of education – more than more educated persons (Lovaglia & Houser, 1996; Moore, 1968; Troyer & Younts, 1997), children more than adolescents (Walker & Andrade, 1996), younger adults more than older adults (Pasupathi, 1999) and less respected group members more than more respected group members (Willer, 2009).

Early studies by Sherif and Sherif (1964) showed that in adolescent gangs, the range of acceptable behavior was greater for gang leaders than for lower status members. Moreover, Ridgeway and Johnson (1990) showed that high-status members are freer to express negative emotion (i.e., less bound by a social norm that discourages negativity) than are low-status members. In addition, lower (vs. higher) status individuals were more likely to strategically portray themselves as more conformant to the group norms (Jetten, Hornsey, & Adarves-Yorno, 2006).

In summary, there is ample evidence that individuals' sense of personal agency is negatively related to their taking others into account, relying on their help and advice, and, in that sense, to their (pro) sociality. Individuals with lower (vs. higher) sense of personal agency are people "who need people;" they seek others' assistance, are more coordinated with others, and conform more to their opinions, rules, and norms. In what follows, we consider evidence relating the sense of personal agency to yet another aspect of sociality: the readiness to *commit* to others and care about their welfare over time.

Commitment. Because high status inspires a sense of empowerment and agency, its possessors may be less concerned about norm/rule following and the possible withdrawal of social assistance in the consequence of so doing. Indeed, research has shown that high (vs. low) status individuals are more likely to violate the conversational norm of turn-taking and to interrupt their lower status interlocutors: men interrupt women, adults interrupt children, doctors interrupt patients, more powerful spouses interrupt less powerful ones, and individuals with masculine identities interrupt more than those with more feminine self-images (see, e.g., Drass, 1986; Eakins & Eakins, 1978; West, 1984; Zimmerman & West, 1975).

A study of workplace deviance found that the experience of higher social status was related to greater tolerance of norm violations among other high status actors (Bowles & Gelfand, 2010) but more harsh judgment of deviant behaviors of lower-status individuals. Too, as mentioned earlier, high (vs. low) status people are more likely to behave unethically (Lyons et al., 2012; Piff et al., 2012).

Commitment should manifest itself in a psychological investment in others. Accordingly, it is found that people from a higher (vs. lower) class spend less time looking at others (Dietze & Knowles, 2016). Men invest less attention and effort in social interactions than do women (Cross & Madson, 1997). They smile less and remember social stimuli less (LaFrance, Hecht, & Paluck, 2003), as noted earlier. Finally, higher class individuals demonstrate lower empathic

accuracy than lower class individuals (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010).

Looking at pro- and anti-social decisions, Eckel and Grossman (1998) had participants play a double-blind dictator game with a \$10 pie. They find that, in conditions of anonymity, women give almost twice as much as men to their paired recipient. Finally, four sets of studies report that women are more inequality averse in the dictator giving role (Andreoni & Vesterlund, 2001; Dickinson & Tiefenthaler, 2002; Dufwenberg & Muren, 2006; Selten & Ockenfels, 1998).

In the ultimatum game, Eckel and Grossman (2001) found that women's proposals are on average more generous than men's regardless of the partner's gender.⁸ In an investigation of ultimatum play by children, girls from kindergarten to ninth grade tended to make more generous offers than boys (Murnighan & Saxon, 1998). Güth, Schmidt, and Sutter (2007) found that female participants in a three-party ultimatum game are significantly more likely to propose a three-way equal split than are men and suggested it is due to altruism or inequality aversion.

In the same vein, two recent articles show that, when status is momentarily activated, those who perceive their status to be relatively low (vs. high) donate more to charity (Motsenok, Pittarello, Dickert, & Ritov, 2020), and express greater willingness to volunteer and higher prosocial motivation to participate in other-oriented activities (Motsenok & Ritov, 2020).

Feelings of Personal Control

Valuation of Self and Others. A sense of control over one's outcomes is nearly synonymous with experienced agency. Correlational studies show that people who chronically experience lower sense of control over important outcomes are more likely to endorse quasi-social means of control, such as God. In other words, religiosity can be seen as a form of interdependence, or reliance on external sources of assistance. In this vein, it is of interest that women, historically stereotyped as the lower agency gender, tend to score higher on measures of religiosity than men (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Francis, 1997; Furseth, 2009; Hayes, 2000; Miller & Hoffmann, 1995; Miller & Stark, 2002; Walter & Davie, 1998).

Experimental studies corroborate these findings by showing that priming people with a momentary sense of loss of control makes them endorse God as *controller* (but not God as creator; Kay et al., 2008). In this work too, lowered sense of control was found to induce greater perceived potency of socio-political institutions, representing social assistance offered by the government.

In summary then, the weakening of personal agency, however determined, prompts people to assign more positive

⁸As Croson and Gneezy (2009) note, however, unlike the dictator game ultimatum game does not allow to tease apart the pro-social explanation of player 1's behavior from the risk aversion one.

value to social and quasi-social means of control over their outcomes.

Reliance on Others. Unsurprisingly, given the relationship between a strong sense of control and self-reliance (Gecas, 1989), there is a great deal of research on the limits of self-reliance. Whereas a sense of personal control has been shown to have many benefits for health and well being, there are limitations to those advantages. Indeed, in older adults, a strong sense of personal control and associated self-reliance may lead to shorter lifespans due to a resistance to help-seeking and adaptation to decreased functional independence (Hamm, Chipperfield, Perry, Parker, & Heckhausen, 2017). Chipperfield et al. (2016) identified “invincible” older adults who had a high sense of personal control over their health but a low health value. This group of people were more likely than other older adults to deny health risks and to not visit their doctors when necessary (Chipperfield et al., 2016). Outside of health behaviors, other research has found that a lower sense of self-efficacy among international students at an American university predicted higher levels of help-seeking from the university’s writing center (Williams & Takaku, 2011).

Commitment. Experienced lack of control over one’s outcomes may arise from varied sources of ambient stress that obstruct goal attainment. Our theory predicts, therefore, that these would increase people’s commitment to social means of outcome control and to their tendency to develop tight norms and regulations intended to increase synchrony and coordination, required for effective control.

On a macro-level, research by Gelfand et al. (e.g., Gelfand, Harrington, & Jackson, 2017) yields data consistent with this prediction: cultures with fewer natural resources, higher disease prevalence, greater threat from territorial invasions, and more natural disasters tend to be *normatively tighter*. In contrast, cultures that lack exposure to serious historical and ecological threats tend to be *normatively looser*. This pattern was replicated in the US, where state-level tightness was found to be associated with increased historical and ecological threat (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014). On the individual level, priming participants with threats (e.g., of terrorist attacks) led them to exhibit increased desire for stronger norms (Lun, Gelfand, & Mohr, 2012). Intriguingly, neuroscientific studies have demonstrated that participants show increased brain synchronization and greater behavioral coordination among themselves when facing threat (Mu, Han, & Gelfand, 2017).

Summary

Across diverse sources of personal agency (physical strength, competence, money, power, status, and personal control), studies have shown that a low (*vs.* high) sense of agency induces more positive attitudes toward social means to varied goals, a more pronounced tendency to use them (i.e., seek and accept social assistance), and a stronger commitment to social entities providing those means.

Admittedly, the different sources of agency we have examined are partially overlapping. For instance, social class confounds status, with money and with social power. Similarly, gender confounds physical strength, status, and power. From the present theoretical perspective, however, the specific source of agency underlying the observed effects is not very important. Rather, what matters is the convergence of findings from widely dispersed research literatures, whereby the weakening of personal agency (however accomplished) increases one’s need for, and dependence on, social assistance, which in turn, fosters pro social attitudes and commitments whereas the strengthening of personal agency reduces such need dependence, and consequently weakens pro-social attitudes and commitments.

Note, however, that the findings so far tell only a part of the story: If personal and social means are truly compensatory, then reciprocal effects should be manifest on the social side as well. That is, strengthening social support should lessen one’s focus on personal agency, whereas weakening social support should augment that focus. This claim advanced in our Hypothesis 2, is examined next.

Whereas in discussing Hypothesis 1, we addressed different *sources* of personal agency (e.g., physical strength, competence, money, power, status, etc.), evidence for Hypothesis 2 lends itself better to sorting by different *types* of social entity on which support an individual may rely (e.g., parents, teammates, partners, the government, etc.). Of course, each such social entity may derive its effectiveness from varied sources, similar to those that affect one’s sense of personal agency (i.e., power, money, status, physical strength, etc.); these should be functionally equivalent, that is, exert similar impact on individuals’ self-reliance.

Hypothesis 2: Social Assistance and Agentic Focus

Perceived effectiveness of anticipated assistance may affect two interrelated aspects of one’s personal agency orientation, namely, one’s (1) agentic self-perception and (2) agentic engagement.⁹ We discuss both across different sources of assistance variously available to individuals.

Agentic Self Perception

According to our theory, perceived effectiveness of expected social assistance should ultimately reduce people’s perception of own effectiveness. Conversely, perceived ineffectiveness of social assistance should increase the perception of own effectiveness.

Evidence relevant to this proposition comes from research on the impact of perceived efficacy of government on people’s felt agency. Kay et al. (2008, Study 5) first presented participants with a video that portrayed the government as either capable or incapable of restoring order

⁹Again, these effects are assumed to apply within a domain as well as across domains. In other words, assistance within a given domain of endeavor would ultimately reduce one’s sense of agency and engagement in that particular domain, and similarly, assistance across multiple domains would reduce one’s sense of agency in the domains affected.

following an injustice, and then measured participants' perceptions of their personal control. When the government was described as *ineffective*, people perceived themselves as *more capable* of controlling their environment than when it was described as effective.

Agentic Engagement

Team Members. By agentic engagement we mean channeling energy and effort into an activity. Consider teamwork. In what is often considered social psychology's first experiment, Ringelmann, measured the force that people exerted in pulling a rope while working either individually or in a group. He found that, on average, people exerted less effort in pulling the rope when working collectively rather than individually (Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974; Kravitz & Martin, 1986; Ringelmann, 1913).

Latané, Williams, and Harkins (1979) extended Ringelmann's effect to different tasks (i.e., cheering and clapping; Study 1) and found evidence for the motivational nature of the effect by showing that people put in less effort when they merely imagined working in a group (vs. working individually; Latané et al., 1979, Study 2). Since then, social loafing effects have been found in multiple studies that employed both physical and cognitive tasks (Petty, Harkins, Williams, & Latané, 1977), and with both ad-hoc and preexisting groups (Liden, Wayne, Jaworski, & Bennett, 2004; Simms & Nichols, 2014).

One metric of the group's effectiveness in attaining members' collective goal is simply the group's size. The higher the number of people working on a task, the more likely they will be to succeed without any given member's contribution. Thus, social loafing may be expected to increase in parallel to increases in group size—as confirmed in numerous studies (Alnuaimi, Robert, & Maruping, 2010; Kravitz & Martin, 1986; Latané et al., 1979; Liden et al., 2004; Mefoh & Nwanosike, 2012; Petty et al., 1977; Simms & Nichols, 2014).

Our Hypothesis 2 suggests that social assistance and personal agency are perceived as compensatory means of goal attainment; accordingly, where the source of social assistance is seen as more effective, people should feel that their invested effort in the team task could be less. According to an alternative explanation, however, people engaged in group tasks feel they can “get away” with lesser effort investment because no one could exactly determine the magnitude of their personal contribution; this might be especially so where the group is large, obfuscating one's extent of personal contribution even more. The latter hypothesis suggests that people do not really care much about the collective goal and are primarily driven by face-maintenance considerations (i.e., about not being “found out”). If so, they should not be affected by perceived effectiveness of the social assistance or by difficulty of reaching the common goal. Presumably, the latter factors are unrelated to the transparency of one's efforts or to the difficulty of concealing one's loafing. There is evidence, however, that these matters do count. Thus, social loafing increases with perceived effectiveness of the social assistance and decreases with perceived difficulty of

reaching the goal (Hart, Bridgett, & Karau, 2001; Harkins & Petty, 1982; Jackson & Williams, 1985; Karau & Williams, 1997; Todd, Seok, Kerr, & Messé, 2006; Williams & Karau, 1991). These findings are consistent with our Hypothesis 2 whereby personal engagement and social assistance are compensatory. Note, finally, that the latter may be viewed as such only if they serve the *same* goal. That is, we expect individuals to put less effort into a task when other group members are pursuing the *same* goal, but not different goals. Indeed, two studies yielded results consistent with this prediction (Harkins & Petty, 1982).

In summary, evidence from the social loafing research literature shows that, when other group members are expected to exert more effort toward a collective task, or appear to contribute superior ability, individuals exert less effort,¹⁰ and vice versa—when other group members are expected to exert less effort or seem less capable, individuals put in more effort. These effects are consistent with our Hypothesis 2.

Bystanders. Echoing the research on social loafing, the “bystander effect,” individuals' reluctance to offer assistance when other potential helpers are present, is also sensitive to the number of co-present others (Darley & Latané, 1968, Fischer et al., 2011), their perceived ability to extend effective help (Bickman, 1971; Latané & Nida, 1981; Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972; Piliavin, Piliavin, & Rodin, 1975; Ross & Braband, 1973; Schwartz & Clausen, 1970), and one's own ability to do so (Bickman, 1971; Schwartz & Clausen, 1970). Presumably, one estimates the probability of the victim being helped is higher as the number of bystanders or their relative¹¹ ability to offer help increases. In turn, this reduces the person's perceived need to initiate help by themselves.

Imagined Others. When oneself and others are seen as mutually compensatory means to goal attainment, *mere activation* of the concept of others might reduce individuals' own task engagement. In this vein, Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, and Darley (2002) found that mere priming of the “group” construct produced the “bystander effect” (Garcia et al., 2002): After imagining being in the company of many people (vs. one person), participants expressed less willingness to donate money for charity and volunteered less to help an experimenter.

Quasi-Social Others. Research reviewed earlier suggested that, when individuals' sense of personal agency is lowered, they often turn for help to supernatural agents, such as God (Kay et al., 2008). Our Hypothesis 2 asserts that the reverse should also hold: That is, people's sense of agency and their agentic engagement should decline the more they trusted God as a source of assistance.

¹⁰We do not mean to imply that a single instance in which the individual reduces their effort because of others' compensatory work suffices to reduce her or his sense of agency in the domain at issue. Such degradation in perceived agency probably requires a long-term effort withdrawal and a history of goal attainment through others' assistance.

¹¹As compared to one's own ability.

In a recent set of studies, Laurin, Kay, and Fitzsimons (2012) obtained evidence supportive of this prediction (Laurin et al., 2012). In one of their experiments, the researchers used a priming procedure to remind participants of God (vs. other neutral or positive concepts), then had them perform an anagram task that was allegedly predictive of their career success. It was found that the God-primed participants generated fewer words than did their counterparts in the remaining conditions. An additional study showed that only participants who believed that external factors could influence (that is, assist in advancing) their career performed worse on the anagrams task after the God prime. Yet another study demonstrated that participants reported lower willingness to pursue their career goals when primed with God the *controller* but not God the *creator*, or to a control condition where the notion of God was not mentioned. These findings too are consistent with our Hypothesis 2, whereby perceived assistance from a quasi-social agent (i.e., God) reduces one's own effort investment in goal pursuit.

Chronic Effects on Agency Development

Being chronically surrounded by helpful others may have a long-term demotivating impact on individuals' sense of agency. As a consequence of effective and enduring assistance, individuals may develop a low (vs. high) sense of personal agency (Presson & Benassi, 1996; Seligman, 1975, 1976; Skinner, 1995; White, 1959), low core self-evaluation (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002), low feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982, 2006; Schunk & Pajares, 2009), and an external (internal) locus of control (Rotter, 1954, 1966, 1975). A stable environment of abundant assistance should also appropriately lower agentic motivations, such as need for achievement (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1976; Murray, 1938) and the self-enhancement motivation. Evidence for these implications is discussed below.

Close (Parent–Child and Romantic) Relationships

Literature on close relationships suggests that significant others (e.g., parents, spouses) have a substantial impact on various aspects of an individuals' pursuit of their goals (Chartrand, Dalton, & Fitzsimons, 2007; Feeney, 2004, 2007; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010; Fitzsimons, Finkel, & Vandellen, 2015; Hirsch & Clark, 2019; Leander, Shah, & Sanders, 2014; Shah, 2003).

Much of this literature is rooted in the attachment theory tradition. It emphasizes infants' need for an attachment figure for optimal functioning (Bowlby, 1982[1969], 1973, 1980, 1988). An attachment figure (e.g., a parent) serves as a secure base, to which a child can always turn to if necessary. Bowlby (1988) described the function of the attachment figure as follows:

"In essence this role is one of being available, ready to respond when called upon to encourage and perhaps assist, but to intervene actively only when clearly necessary."

(p. 11). The presence of such a figure allows the child to independently explore the world. If a child feels that he has no one to rely on, he may become reluctant to act independently and to explore hitherto unknown areas (Ainsworth, 1982; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988). Similarly, studies with adults show that the availability of one's romantic partner's support encourages an individual to exhibit exploratory behavior, as well as exhibit higher self-efficacy and stronger perseverance in goal pursuit (Feeney, 2004, 2007; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

At first glance, these studies may seem to contradict our theory as they suggest that a significant other's support increases rather than decreases people's self-reliance. A more detailed examination of this literature reveals complementarity, however.

Consider what is meant by attachment figure's support. As can be seen in Bowlby's quote above, parental support consists of two elements: moral and instrumental. The first element is distinct from the notion of social assistance discussed in our model. We agree that as goal striving often can be hard and frustrating, moral (e.g., emotional, motivational) support from other people that offers encouragement and expresses faith in the individual should be agency enhancing. But what about instrumental assistance? Attachment theorists argue that a good parent should offer help *only when clearly necessary*. Outside of those unique situations, parents' moral support does not include the parents' stepping in and completing the child's task for them. It is only where the child's own capabilities do not suffice to accomplish the task that the parent may add their effort to the child's so that jointly they may get the job done. In such cases, availability of a parent's assistance leads the child to perceive the goal as attainable and worth pursuing whereas, without parental assistance, it may abandon the goal altogether and just give up.

But what happens when a parent provides assistance even where the child has adequate capability to attain the goal on their own? Evidence for effects of such overprotective assistance comes from literature on the locus of control. Rotter defined internal (vs. external) locus of control as the "degree to which persons expect that a reinforcement or an outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristics vs. the degree to which persons expect the reinforcement is a function of chance, luck or fate, is under the control of powerful others, or is simply unpredictable" (Rotter, 1990, p. 489).

Anticipating our Hypothesis 2, Rotter predicted that overprotective parents may inhibit their children's autonomy. Numerous studies have yielded results consistent with this suggestion (c.f., Carton & Nowicki, 1994). For instance, children with an external (vs. internal) locus of control reported that their parents were more protective (Biocca, 1985; Cromwell, Rosenthal, Shakow, & Zahn, 1961; MacDonald, 1971; Scheck, Emerick, & El-Assal, 1973). Similarly, mothers of children with an external (vs. internal) locus of control described themselves as more protective (Barling, 1982). And an observational study (Davis &

Phares, 1969) reported an association between excessive parental control and the generalized external control expectancies of their children.

Overprotective style has been shown to lead to similar results in romantic relationships. For instance, Feeney and Thrush (2010) found that, when spouses were offering unsolicited help during an exploration activity of their partners, the partners expressed less enthusiasm for the activity, persisted less at the activity, and performed more poorly (see also Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011; but see Briskin, Kopetz, Fitzsimons, & Slatcher, 2019). In summary, it is important to distinguish between *social support* and *social assistance*. Whereas support involves encouragement and provides a “safety net” that may enhance one’s self-confidence and sense of agency, assistance, doing other’s tasks in their stead, may reduce it.

Cultural Effects

Our theory suggests that in collectivistic cultures where ample social assistance to one’s goal pursuits is available, people should develop lower levels of self-oriented motivations, such as the needs for achievement and self-enhancement. Cross-cultural research supports this idea (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In this vein, too, Bond and Hwang (1986) found that Chinese participants (i.e., members of a collectivistic culture) showed relatively low levels of individually oriented achievement. People from Eastern (collectivistic) cultures seem also to have lower self-enhancement motivation as compared to Western (individualistic) cultures. In particular, Japanese students demonstrated lesser tendency to see themselves as different from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Moreover, while American students show a robust self-enhancing bias when evaluating themselves compared to their peers (e.g., Goethals, 1989; Marks, 1984; Schwartz & Smith, 1976; Wylie, 1974), Japanese students show no self-enhancing bias (Takata, 1987; Wada, 1988) and, in fact, they manifest a strong *self-effacing* bias in social comparison situations (Gelfand et al., 2002). Self-enhancement reflects the desire to see oneself as competent and effective, that is, as endowed with considerable personal agency. Absence of enhancement effects among members of collectivistic cultures is thus consistent with an implication of our Hypothesis 2, that one’s need of (desire for) personal agency is lower in cultural milieus where social assistance is abundant and generally relied upon.

Our theory implies that chronic reliance on social support should lower one’s tendency to fend for oneself and come up with nonstandard, unconventional solutions to various problems. In the cross-cultural context, we should expect members of societies that offer higher degrees of social assistance to be less creative. Consistent with this prediction, Chinese (vs. American) students scored lower on creativity tests (Zha, Walczyk, Griffith-Ross, Tobacyk, & Walczyk, 2006). In another study (Goncalo & Staw, 2006), researchers experimentally primed either a collectivistic or an individualistic mindset and found that the former generated less creative ideas. This finding is consistent with the notion that reliance on social means of goal attainment may

suppress the development of personal agency (for discussion, see Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011).

Socialism vs. Capitalism

Whereas the socialist ideology recommends that governments help people reach their ends, according to our theory, overabundant governmental assistance (such as implemented in communist countries) can actually suppress people’s initiative. When people get used to being patronized by the authorities, their abilities to take care of themselves may atrophy. Then, if the governmental assistance suddenly ceases, people may feel relatively helpless in the face of real-world challenges. The cascading collapse of communistic regimes in the last decade of the 20th century supports this possibility. For example, one study found that levels of personal helplessness were higher in Bulgarian students after the transition from communism, compared to a group of Swedish students who did not experience such transition (Ådnanes, 2007). Another study found that older (vs. younger) adolescents in post-communist countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) were less likely to believe that anyone who worked hard could make a good living, presumably because the older youth had spent more time under the communist regime (Macek et al., 2010).

Summary

In summary, evidence attests that reliance upon social assistance may diminish individuals’ tendency to originate goal-directed behavior, suppress their *motivation* to acquire personal agency in a domain, as well as retard the actual development of such agency. These findings are consistent with our Hypothesis 2, and offer additional support for our theory about the compensatory relation between personal agency and social assistance as *substitutable* categories of means to goal pursuit.

Seeming Exceptions to Our “Rules”: On Centrality of the Equifinality “Assumption”

In contemplating the relations between personal agency and social assistance, it is easy to think of seeming exceptions to our theory. These could be cases in which an individuals’ exertion of effort and the sense of personal agency is positively rather than negatively related to the effort expended by others in pursuit of the same goal. It could also be that cases in which an individual with a high sense of agency that in our model is negatively related to empathy and the consideration of others, exhibited high degrees of empathy and consideration, etc.

The first case is illustrated, for instance, by recent research on individuals’ “fusion” with the group (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009). It was found that increasing a fused individual’s sense of personal agency actually enhanced their pro-group behavior, while priming personal agency in non-used people reduced pro-group

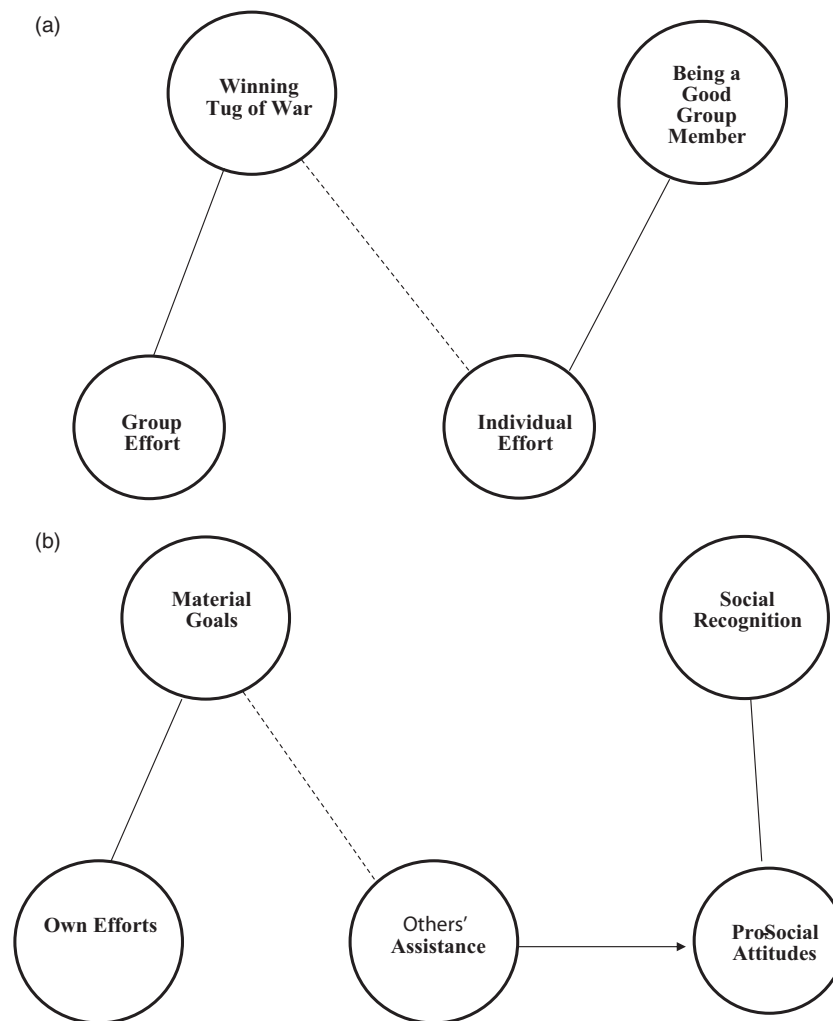


Figure 2. (a) Fused members' effort exertion on a collective task. (b) Conditions for high agency person's pro-social attitudes.

behavior (Swann et al., 2014; Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, Hart, & Jetten, 2010).

In a similar vein, Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh (2001) found that *power* related concepts activated responses related to narrow self-interests in people with an *exchange* orientation (i.e., those who see own and others' means as *compensatory*), but it evoked socially responsible responses from individuals with a *communal* orientation (i.e., those whose goal, beyond that of task performance, is supporting others. In research by Gordon and Chen (2013), individuals with a *self-focus* tended to exhibit reduced perspective taking when recalling a power they had over a romantic partner. This effect did not appear for individuals with *other-focus*, who presumably have the goal to take care of others. Several studies found that social loafing was eliminated in highly cohesive groups (Karau & Hart, 1998; Karau & Williams, 1997; Williams & Sommer, 1997). Moreover, Earley (1989) found that social loafing was moderated by collectivistic beliefs and even reversed when the collectivists worked in concert with their in-group members (vs. alone or with out-group members; Earley, 1993).

The second case is exemplified by a powerful billionaire with political ambitions, whose wealth lends her or him a considerable sense of agency, yet who pays considerable

attention to others' needs in the context of her or his philanthropic pursuits. Or by the example of a powerful politician who pays exorbitant attention to attitudes and needs of potential voters. In what follows, we clarify how all such instances fall *outside the scope* of our theory, hence may not be considered inconsistent with it. Let us explain.

According to Goal Systems Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), a given means is selected based on considerations of value and expectancy. In the equifinality configuration (see Figure 1), there is one goal only, that is, one source of value, hence the means, personal agency, and social assistance are given weight in proportion to their instrumentality, that is, the expectancy of their promoting goal attainment. As stated at the outset, our theory is applicable to the equifinality configuration exclusively, where the personal agency and social assistance serve as two alternative means to pursuit of the same goal.

Now, in all the seeming exceptions to our theory listed above, an additional goal is introduced, that is, an additional source of value. And it may be the case that a means that was *less instrumental* with respect to the original goal, is *more instrumental* with respect to the additional goal, so ultimately it delivers more value and is, therefore, selected. These notions are illustrated in the goal systemic configurations depicted in Figures 2a,b. Figure 2a depicts effort

exertion by members of a fused group. As can be seen, the group effort is seen as more instrumental to winning the competition which, if considered alone, should lead the individual member to reduce their effort and engage in social loafing. However, a member who is fused with the group has an additional goal, that of being a “good” group member, which gives her or him a sense of self-respect and significance. That additional goal cannot be served by the group, of course; it can only be served by the individual’s exertion of maximal effort in helping their group, exactly what fused or collectivistically minded members exhibit (Earley, 1989; Swann et al., 2010, 2014).

Figure 2b depicts appreciation of others by a wealthy/powerful/high status individual who can accomplish material goals without others’ assistance. If that were the only goal to which the individual aspired, he/she may feel no need of those others, hence fail to treat them with much respect and appreciation (that needing them would imply). However, this individual may have another goal, say gaining recognition as a generous philanthropist; this would require displaying empathy to others and treating them with respect. Given such goal constellation, the high agency individual may nonetheless be quite attuned to others and attentive to their needs. In summary, seeming exceptions to our theory all introduce additional goals, hence distorting the equifinality configuration and falling beyond the theory’s intended scope.

General Discussion

Individuals typically treat their (sense of) personal agency and anticipated social assistance as mutually compensatory means of goal attainment. Variation in either typically induces a compensatory adjustment in the other. Ample evidence from widely ranging research domains supports these notions. Across diverse sources of perceived sense of personal agency (e.g., physical strength, money, status, power, control) and across different assistance providers (e.g., advisors, parents, teammates, bystanders, the government, or God), it is found that (1) increases in one’s sense of agency reduce the tendencies to value the sources of social assistance, rely on and commit to them; in like manner, decreases in one’s sense of agency augment such tendencies (Hypothesis 1). Reciprocally, (2) increases in the perceived effectiveness of social assistance produce a decrease in individuals’ self-reliance and sense of agency, whereas decreases in the perceived effectiveness of assistance augment self-reliance and sense of agency (Hypothesis 2). These effects manifest themselves in multiple ways, including perceptions and attitudes toward self and others, seeking and receiving help, investment of energies in goal striving, and adherence to societal rules and conventions, among others.

Theoretical Contributions

To make a worthwhile contribution, a theory should: (1) account in a novel way for existing data, (2) exhibit parsimony by explaining the largest amount of data with the

fewest possible assumptions (Occam’s razor), and (3) afford the generation of novel predictions. We now briefly examine the present theory in the light of these criteria.

Explaining Prior Data

As per point (1), our theory accounts in a novel way for a wide body of prior data reviewed earlier. Our two principal hypotheses use the hydraulic compensation principle, to explain manifold research findings across multiple domains. Despite considerable variation in the ways in which personal agency and social assistance were operationalized in the numerous studies we addressed, the predicted relations between them hold fast, attesting to the present theory’s explanatory power.

Parsimony

Concerning point (2), our theory features merely three general constructs: *personal agency*, *social assistance*, and *compensatory relation*. These are demonstrably capable of explaining findings heretofore accounted for by a plethora of more specific constructs (e.g., money, power, status, loafing, by-standing, rule following, religiosity, gender, or aging). To be clear, we do not mean to suggest that the latter constructs are not useful. Still, they may be productively considered as specific manifestations of broader underlying factors. Take the everyday concept of money and its effects on people’s social attitudes (cf. Vohs et al., 2006). Far from questioning the validity of its demonstrated effects, our analysis simply points out that similar results could be expected with variables, such as status, power, gender, etc. What all these factors share in common is their representing *disparate sources of personal agency* which, we claim, is the “deep-structure” factor responsible for the observed effects.

In like fashion, the present theory integrates the many specific social entities that impact one’s sense of personal agency similarly, e.g., bystanders, teammates, relationship partners, parents, even God. All these are deemed to represent the underlying factor of social assistance and in this sense to be functionally equivalent in their impact on individuals’ sense of personal effectiveness.

Our theory synthesizes diverse phenomena all shown to be influenced by the postulated discrepancy in perceived effectiveness between one’s personal vs. social means of goal attainment. What could be common to such seemingly strange “bedfellows” as others’ perceived competence, interdependent self-construal, help seeking, advice taking, conformity, rule following, unethical behavior, other-directed attention, empathy, and compassion? As the present theory suggests and the data confirm, they are all impacted by individuals’ reliance on self vs. others, thus sharing a deep functional commonality beyond their surface differences. In short, the present theory uses a sparse set of concepts to account for a vast corpus of data previously explained via much larger array of variables; this attests to its integrative power and its parsimony.

Generative Potential

A theory's generative potential is implicit in its novelty: If its claims transcend prior conceptions, they should afford new derivations testable via further research. The present theory affords numerous such derivations considered briefly below.

Alternative Source of Personal/Social Effectiveness

Even though numerous sources of agency (power, status, etc.) were already addressed in prior research literature, other sources, such as physical attractiveness, or self-control, could be further identified and empirically studied. Similarly, all possible types of social entities capable of facilitating individuals' goal achievement (e.g., politicians, wealthy patrons, relief agencies, etc.), beyond those previously investigated, should have the same effects on individuals' agentic perceptions and goal striving.

Sources of Others' Effectiveness

In the same way that individuals' sense of personal agency and effectiveness was demonstrably affected by various sources (i.e., power, money, status, etc.), so should be the perceived effectiveness of social assistance. Regardless of the source of assistance, its *effectiveness* should have similar effects on varied manifestations of individuals' proclivity toward self-reliance *vs.* dependence on assistance from others.

New Combinations of Variables

Any relation between general categories should hold for the specific manifestations of those categories. This means that any observed relation between, say, a given source of personal agency (say, money, or power) and a specific manifestation of reliance on an assistance provider (say the attitude or empathy toward it) should replicate across all other sources of personal agency (e.g., status, physical strength, perceived control) and all other manifestations of reliance. Similarly, any observed relation between perceived effectiveness of a social assistance source (say of one's teammates, relationship partners, or the government) and one's self-reliance (e.g., one's agentic perception or agentic engagement) should replicate across other anticipated social assistance providers (e.g., bystanders, one's group, or God).

Domain Specificity and Division of Labor

Reduced self-reliance prompted by assistance from others may offer individuals the opportunity to exercise/develop their own agency in an alternative domain. For instance, a spouse who is particularly effective in a given area (e.g., finances, handiwork) may reduce their counterpart's motivation to address that realm and prompt them to channel their resources in a different direction (e.g., toward social relations, child rearing). Vice versa, an individual who is inept in some sphere may prompt their spouse to step in and acquire skills in that realm. Thus, reduced self-reliance in the presence of effective others need not mean a *general*

dwindling of one's personal agency. Instead it could result in a division of labor and a functional differentiation of social groups. The circumstances under which one or the other outcome may occur could constitute a fruitful topic for further research.

Concluding Remarks

Individuality and Sociality

In a 2017 film titled "Phantom Thread," the protagonist, a London couturier, Reynolds Woodcock, is an ego-maniacal, and tyrannical artist who is highly dismissive of his wife, Alma, and about to leave her altogether. This dynamic quickly changes, however, when she comes up with a winning, albeit a wacky, idea: to weaken his invincible sense of agency by poisoning him (nonfatally) and rendering him temporarily helpless. The ruse works wonders. Woodcock's flagging love for Alma is quickly reignited and he regains a full appreciation for her indispensability.

This entertaining premise is not as outlandish as it might appear. In fact, it is psychologically sound and grounded in acute psychological insight. As we have seen throughout, personal strength may induce a dismissiveness of others whereas weakness may inspire veneration. We view these tendencies as reflecting the fundamental duality of the human nature, comprising its individuality and its sociality. Convergent data from multiple domains and data sources suggest that these twin aspects of our psyche are "joined at the hip," vicissitudes in the one inevitably impacting the other. Moreover, our individual and social aspects exhibit a perennial state of tension, a tacit "tug of war," as it were: The more settled we are on our individuality, feeling effective and agentic, the less we stress our sociality and vice versa. This quintessential antinomy between individual *vs.* social means to goal attainment has far-reaching impact on nearly all facets of the human psychology; it pervasively influences our states of mind and determines the behavior we enact.

When we feel resourceful, competent, and agentic, we need others less, pay them less attention, are less empathic to their psychic states, like them less, and disparage them more. These tendencies are exactly reversed when we feel weak, resource deprived, and down on our luck. Intriguingly, in the presence of supportive others who are both capable and eager to take care of our needs, we slacken our efforts, are content to "coast" along, and let our aspirations and desires be fulfilled by social others inclined to lend us a helping hand. Conversely, these ubiquitous reciprocities are substantially arrested or reversed where individuals feel fused with their society and experience being an integral part and parcel of their group. In these conditions, social assistance is taken to signify others' investment of effort toward a common goal, spurring the recipient's own endeavors in that same direction.

The body of empirical findings consistent with our analysis attest that, when viewed as separate and independent of each other, our personal sense of prowess and available social assistance constitute universally substitutable means

whereby humans carry out the pursuit of their objectives. The waxing and waning of individuals' own agency, whether for developmental or cultural reasons or prompted by situational circumstances, is mirrored by opposite waning and waxing of the tendency to lean on and seek assistance from others who may be counted on.

The compensatory relation between individual agency and social assistance constitute a truly universal phenomenon spanning life phases, situations, and cultures. Its implications for people's social behavior are appreciable and worthy of consideration in designing systems that regulate the functioning of societies.

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