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Communion and Agency Judgments of Women and Men as a Function of Role
Information and Response Format

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Abstract

In past research, the presentation of men and women in the same social role has eliminated gender stereotypical ratings of greater agency and lesser communion in men compared with women (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984). The social-role interpretation of such findings is challenged from the shifting-standards perspective, which suggests that the application of within-sex judgmental standards to men and women in roles may have masked underlying gender stereotypes (Biernat, 2003). To clarify this issue, 256 participants judged an average man or woman portrayed as an employee, homemaker, or without role information on agentic and communal traits. These judgments were given on subjective scales that were vulnerable to shifting standards (trait ratings) or on common rule measures that restrain shifting standards (estimates of test scores). As predicted from the shifting-standards perspective, judgments of greater agency in men than women disappeared in the presence of role information only on the subjective scales, which enabled shifts to within-sex standards. As predicted from the social-role perspective, judgments of greater communion in women than men disappeared in the presence of the homemaker role on both the subjective and common rule measures. We discuss the implications of these results for understanding judgments of role occupants' agency and communion.

Key words: Social Perception, Social Roles, Shifting Standards, Gender Stereotypes, Judgment

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Agency and communion, the psychological dimensions that Bakan (1966) maintained are the two fundamental modalities of human nature, became popular among gender researchers (e.g., Abele, 2003; Athenstaedt, 2003; Twenge, 1997). In stereotype research, social perceivers ascribe communal qualities such as affectionate and supportive to women more than men and agentic qualities such as dominant and self-confident more to men than women (e.g., Newport, 2001; Williams & Best, 1990). This article explores the adequacy of existing evidence that the division of labor between the sexes underlies such stereotypical judgments (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Specifically, we examine whether the erosion of participants' stereotypical judgments of men and women in the presence of information about their social roles (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984) occurs only for judgments on subjective rating scales, which allow shifts to within-sex standards (e.g., Biernat, 2003).

From the perspective of social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), the division of labor is the fundamental cause of gender stereotypes. Men's longer history of participation in the paid labor force and their greater occupancy of leadership roles give rise to the view that men possess particularly agentic characteristics. Similarly, women's domestic responsibilities and their greater occupancy of employment roles requiring service to others and social skills (Cejka & Eagly, 1999) give rise to the view that women possess particularly communal characteristics. These stereotypical beliefs are assumed to follow from recurrent observations of women and men in roles that require different types of activities. Correspondent inference from behaviors to traits then underlies gender stereotypes (for

the correspondent inference principle, see Gawronski, 2003, 2004; Gilbert, 1998). By this logic, even though social perceivers apply gender stereotypes to the social categories of women and men, they do so to a lesser extent for women and men who occupy the same social role. For example, Eagly and Steffen's (e.g., 1984, 1986) participants rated men and women very similarly in the same role (e.g., homemaker role, employee role) and gender stereotypically only in the absence of role information.

A common explanation of such findings is that roles function as individuating information that restrains the application of a stereotype (see also Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Social role theory extends this type of reasoning about individuating information by assuming that it is the specific content of homemaking and employment roles that underlies gender stereotypes. Consistent with this assumption, gender-stereotypical agency-communion differences between women and men parallel the perceived differences between the roles of homemaker and employee (Eagly & Steffen, 1984).

The alternative explanation that we are testing, the shifting standards model (Biernat, 2003), challenges interpretations in terms of individuating information or social role theory. Consistent with this model, the convergence of ratings of men and women in the presence of role information does not indicate that the more individuating role information took precedence over the gender information. On the contrary, in the presence of a perceived sex difference, participants given subjective rating scales (e.g., 1 = *not at all assertive* to 7 = *very assertive*) spontaneously think about individual men and women relative to their own sex—a man relative to other men and a woman to other women. Therefore, participants judge a man relative to a higher male standard of assertiveness and a woman relative to a lower female standard of assertiveness. Consequently, a woman may be judged “very assertive,” given a lower level of assertive

behaviors than a man judged “very assertive” (e.g., “For a woman, she is very assertive”). Subjective ratings of men and women in roles thereby converge, but only because participants abandon the universal human standard that they use to judge men and women in general and shift to the within-group standard that they use to judge individuals portrayed in roles.

Within-sex judgment standards tend to produce null effects on subjective scales assessing gender-stereotypical traits or even counterstereotypical (or contrast) effects. Paradoxically, gender stereotypes would still be operating and could be revealed by requiring participants to make their judgments on rating scales that invoke a common (or “objective”) standard. From this shifting standards perspective, role information does not overwhelm gender stereotypes at all but merely fosters a shift to within-sex standards on researchers’ (typical) subjective rating scales, thereby creating the appearance that participants no longer perceive a sex difference. In fact, they do perceive a sex difference, which leads them into making within-sex comparisons.

To circumvent the judgmental effects that follow from shifts to within-group standards, Biernat (1995) has recommended that researchers use measuring instruments that constrain respondents to use a common standard. The units of these *objective*, or *common rule*, *measures* retain a constant meaning, regardless of the group membership of the individual whose attributes are judged. Examples of common rule measures include estimates of standardized test scores and grades to assess competence and of monetary judgments to assess financial success. Other common-rule measures consist of counts of behavioral acts or comparative ratings that force all target individuals onto the same judgment scale (e.g., Biernat, 2003; 2005). In support of the shifting standards

model, judgments of individuals on common rule measures have shown greater stereotyping than judgments on subjective measures (see review by Biernat, 2003).

Research Question and Hypotheses

The shifting standards logic implies that, given a perceived sex difference, role information about a group member causes respondents to apply within-sex standards in their subjective judgments of gender-stereotypical traits. This standard shift might have produced the convergence in judgments of male and female role occupants' traits in earlier social role experiments (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984). For example, a female full-time employee would be judged relative to women in general and judged to be relatively assertive. In contrast, in the absence of role information—that is, when judging female and male groups overall or an average woman or man—shifts to within-sex standards would not be feasible. For example, the assertiveness of an average woman would be judged relative to the assertiveness of men.

To date, only two studies have applied common rule measures in judgments of men and women in social roles. An experiment by Bosak, Sczesny, and Eagly (2007) supported social role theory by showing that information about social roles reduced judged stereotypical communal and agentic sex differences on a common-rule measure that eliminated standard shifts. In contrast, an experiment by Bridges, Etaugh, and Barnes-Farrell (2002) supported shifting standards theory by showing that information about social roles reduced judged stereotypical communal sex differences on a subjective measure but not on a common-rule measure. Although the findings of these two studies appear to be in conflict, both experiments have limitations. In particular, the Bosak et al. study did not include a subjective measure; the Bridges et al. study examined only communion and did not include a no-role condition that established the

stereotypicality of the communal traits.

The present research is therefore designed to investigate whether the tendency of social role information to reduce gender stereotyping can be accounted for by judges' shift to within-sex standards in the presence of role information. As in previous studies (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984, 1986), participants rated male and female targets described as full-time employees or homemakers or without role information. However, in contrast to these earlier studies, participants responded on subjective measures or on common rule measures. This use of both types of measures allows a comparative test of the social role and the shifting standards explanations of the earlier findings.

Specifically, the predictions are the following: (a) Social-role hypothesis: From the social role perspective, men, compared with women, are judged as more agentic and less communal in the absence of role information than they are in the presence of information that they occupy the same role, regardless of the type of measure, (b) Shifting-standards hypothesis: From the shifting standards perspective, this pattern of larger male-female differences in the absence than the presence of role information is more pronounced on subjective measures than common rule measures. The rationale for this hypothesis is that subjective measures allow judgmental standards to shift to within-sex comparisons but only for a man or woman described as a role occupant.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Among the 124 male, 130 female, and 2 participants who failed to indicate their sex, 53% were European American, 23% African American, 7% Hispanic American, 7% Asian American, and 10% other or unknown ethnicity, and they ranged in age from 18 to 75 with a mean of 35 years. One female surveyor recruited these participants in

public places in Chicago (e.g., public library, museums, coffee shops) by asking every fifth person encountered to participate in a study on "impressions of other people." Of those approached, 76% participated. The surveyor handed each participant a questionnaire and collected it approximately 10 minutes later. Finally, the surveyor thanked the participant and provided a written debriefing statement.

Independent Variables

Following Eagly and Steffen's (1984) design, the target person was described as an average man or an average woman. Each target man or woman was portrayed as either a full-time employee (e.g., "an average woman who is employed full-time") or as a caretaker (e.g., "an average male homemaker who cares for his home and children and is not employed outside of the home") or without role information (e.g., "an average woman in our society"). Furthermore, we varied the measure type by providing either subjective rating scales or common rule scales. The resulting factorial design was Target Sex (male, female) \times Target Role (none, employee, homemaker) \times Participant Sex (male, female) \times Measure Type (subjective, common rule).

Dependent Variables

Participants judged a target person on subjective or common rule scales that represented four agentic traits (dominant, aggressive, competitive, adventurous) and four communal traits (affectionate, supportive, sympathetic, gentle).

Subjective measures. Participants responded on 7-point scales ranging from *not at all* to *extremely* (e.g., "How dominant do you think the [target person] is?"). The ratings were averaged across the agentic items ($\alpha = .72$) and the communal items ($\alpha = .85$).

Common rule measures. Participants estimated how the target person would score on a personality test of each gender-stereotypical trait (e.g., aggressiveness, sympathy). Specifically, the participants were asked the following question: ‘Compared to the rest of the population, what score would the average [target person] receive in tests on the following traits?’ Participants responded on a 101-point scale ranging from 0 to 100, with 50 defined as average. The instructions explained that higher scores indicate that the relevant personality trait (e.g., aggressiveness) is more pronounced in a person and that lower scores indicate that the trait is less pronounced. The ratings were separately averaged across the agentic traits ($\alpha = .84$) and the communal traits ($\alpha = .93$).

Because the subjective and the common rule measures used different scales (7-point vs. 101-point), the data were *Z*-standardized within each measure and transformed to have a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10.ⁱ

Results

The analyses of variance (ANOVAs) implemented a 3 (target role) \times 2 (target sex) \times 2 (measure type) between-subjects design.ⁱⁱ To streamline the presentation, agency and communion are reported separately rather than in a single mixed model ANOVA. The means and standard deviations appear in Table 1. Throughout this article, *p*-values of .05 or less are considered significant, and all predicted contrasts are one-tailed.

Agency

The main effect for target role was significant, $F(2, 243) = 14.48, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$: Participants judged employees and targets without role information as equivalent, $p = .46$, but as more agentic than homemakers, $ps < .001$.

The main effect for target sex was also significant, $F(1, 243) = 8.23, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$, whereby participants judged men as more agentic than women. This effect was qualified by a Target Sex \times Measure Type interaction, $F(1, 243) = 6.35, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$. On the common rule measure participants judged men as more agentic than women ($M_{\text{Men}} = 53.11$ vs. $M_{\text{Women}} = 46.94$), $F(1, 243) = 13.64, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$, but on the subjective measure they judged men and women as equally agentic ($M_{\text{Men}} = 50.19$ vs. $M_{\text{Women}} = 49.79$), $F(1, 243) = 0.07, p = .80$. This interaction was qualified by a significant Target Role \times Target Sex \times Measure Type interaction, $F(2, 243) = 8.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ (see Figure 1). When this interaction was decomposed within each measure, the conditions with the common rule measure yielded only a significant simple main effect of target sex, $F(2, 243) = 13.64, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$, whereby participants judged men as more agentic than women. The conditions with the subjective measure yielded a significant Target Role \times Target Sex simple interaction, $F(2, 243) = 10.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$, whereby participants judged men as more agentic than women in the absence of role information, $p < .001$, but as less agentic than women in the homemaker role, $p = .01$, and not different from women in the employee role, $p = .10$.

Communion

The main effect for target role was significant, $F(2, 243) = 19.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$: Participants judged homemakers as more communal than targets without role information, $p < .001$, and homemakers and targets without role information as more communal than employees, $ps < .001$ and $= .001$, respectively.

The main effect for target sex was also significant, $F(1, 243) = 39.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$, whereby participants judged women as more communal than men. This effect was qualified by a Target Sex \times Measure Type interaction, $F(1, 243) = 4.21, p = .04, \eta^2$

= .02. Judgments of women as more communal than men were more pronounced on the common rule measure ($M_{\text{Women}} = 54.54$ vs. $M_{\text{Men}} = 45.38$), $F(1, 243) = 32.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, than the subjective measure ($M_{\text{Women}} = 52.28$ vs. $M_{\text{Men}} = 47.92$), $F(1, 243) = 9.58$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

The Target Role \times Target Sex interaction was also significant, $F(2, 243) = 5.31$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Without role information, participants judged women as more communal than men ($M_{\text{Women}} = 54.68$ vs. $M_{\text{Men}} = 45.84$), $p < .001$, whereas with role information, they judged female and male homemakers as equivalent ($M_{\text{Women}} = 54.91$ vs. $M_{\text{Men}} = 53.21$), $p = .18$, but female employees as more communal than male employees ($M_{\text{Women}} = 50.31$ vs. $M_{\text{Men}} = 40.86$), $p < .001$. Contrary to the findings for agency, these findings for communion were not qualified by the type of measure.

Discussion

The present study examined the influence of role occupancy by women and men on judgments of their agency and communion on a subjective measure that allowed participants to shift to within-sex standards and on a common rule measure that restrained such standard shifts. In general, consistent with gender stereotypes, men were judged as more agentic and less communal than women. In addition, employees were judged more agentic and less communal than homemakers, demonstrating the parallelism between the gender division of labor and stereotypical sex differences.

The comparative test of social role theory and the shifting standards model requires examining the effects of role and measure type on agency and communion judgments. The findings on agency provide evidence in favor of the shifting standards model (see shifting-standards hypothesis), whereas the findings on communion are more consistent with social role theory (see social-role hypothesis).

On agency, with the common rule measure, which restrains standard shifts, participants judged men as more agentic than women, regardless of whether role information was presented. In contrast, replicating previous results (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984), with the subjective measure roles restrained gender-stereotypical judgments: Participants subjectively judged men as more agentic than women in the absence of role information but as less agentic than women in the homemaker role and as similarly agentic in the employee role. These different effects obtained with subjective and common-rule measures are congenial to a shifting standards explanation and uncongenial to social role theory (and the individuating information principle). Presumably the subjective measure enabled participants to shift to a within-sex standard for the male and female role occupants, producing effects of the target individual's sex that were either counterstereotypical (in homemaker role) or null (in employee role).

On communion, the homemaker role restrained gender-stereotypical judgments, even with the common rule measure. Although participants judged women as more communal than men in the absence of role information, they judged male and female homemakers as similarly communal, regardless of the measure type. These results are congenial to a social role explanation. However, in contrast to previous results (Eagly & Steffen, 1984), participants judged female employees as more communal than male employees, also regardless of the measure type. The fact that measure type did not influence these communal findings is uncongenial to the shifting standards model.

One possible explanation for the greater perceived communion of female than male employees derives from the increase in women's employment since the 1980s, especially in full-time, full-year employment (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Therefore, the full-time employee role may no longer connote a specific role that

reflects the traits and behaviors of stereotypical men (e.g., Sczesny, Bosak, Diekmann, & Twenge, 2007). Instead, given considerable sex segregation of employment (Tomaskovic-Devey, Zimmer, Stainback, Robinson, Taylor, & McTague, 2006), participants might have assumed that male and female employees have different types of occupations (Koenig & Eagly, 2008), with female-dominated occupations demanding more communal behavior than male-dominated occupations (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Participants' inference of lower earnings for female than male employees is consistent with this segregation, which places many women in poorly paid service and clerical occupations. Yet, causation may be more complex than this assumed link from roles to stereotypes. Given the concentration of women in communally demanding occupations and the homemaker role, it is not surprising that self-reported communion has remained higher in women than men (e.g., Twenge, 1997). This perpetuation of communal demands would foster not only the cultural stereotype of women as the more communal sex but also a corresponding sex difference at the level of personality, which could in turn foster the placement of women in communally demanding roles (see Abele, 2003) and underlie judgments of the relatively high perceived communion of women in all of the role conditions, including the employee condition. In general, social perceivers' observations of women mainly in communally demanding roles, both paid occupations and the homemaker role, and of men mainly in more agentically demanding paid occupations continues to foster overall gender stereotypes of communal women and agentic men.

Most intriguing are the differing effects of the type of measure that we obtained for agency versus communion judgments. With the common rule measures, which reduced standard shifts, our participants' judgments of women showed little variability

across the experimental conditions. However, their judgments of men were more variable, with homemaker men regarded as particularly communal ($ps < .01$ for comparisons of the male homemaker with the male employee and man with no role). Given the clear communal demands of the homemaker role, participants believed that such men are truly communal. Given the nonsignificance of the interaction between target role and measure type, the overall elevation of the male homemaker's communion is not attributable to shifting standards whereby he is especially communal only in relation to other men. We suspect that it is the atypicality of such men without paid employment within the larger group of men as well as the clear-cut role constraints that induce the perception that these men are just as communal as female homemakers. In any event, this finding is consistent with social role theory.

On a more general level the present findings have important implications for the assessment of agency and communion judgments. Most of the research on these dimensions relies on subjective ratings of traits. Our inclusion of common rule measures of agency and communion in addition to typical subjective measures has demonstrated that the ascription of agency and communion to members of stereotyped groups can differ, depending on the type of judgment scale (see Biernat, 2003). Researchers are thus best advised to use both subjective and common rule measures for assessing perceptions of individuals' agency and communion. It is essential to take the type of judgment into account in their conclusions about whether stereotypes have affected these judgments.

In conclusion, our research tested the assumptions of social role theory and the shifting standards model by comparing judgments on subjective scales and on common rule scales, which restrain shifts to within-sex standards. The results more strongly

support social role theory for communion and the shifting standards model for agency. These intriguing findings suggest that whether people shift to within-sex judgmental standards for men and women in social roles depends on the particular role and the dimension of social judgment (for other differences in judgments on communion versus agency, see Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Willis & Todorov, 2006; Wojciszke, Dowhlyluk, & Jaworski, 1998). Further comparative investigations of subjective and common rule measures are advisable, possibly encompassing within-subjects manipulations of measure type and the inclusion of different versions of common rule measures. Such replications and extensions should clarify whether judgments of communion elicit different processes than judgments of agency.

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Author's Note

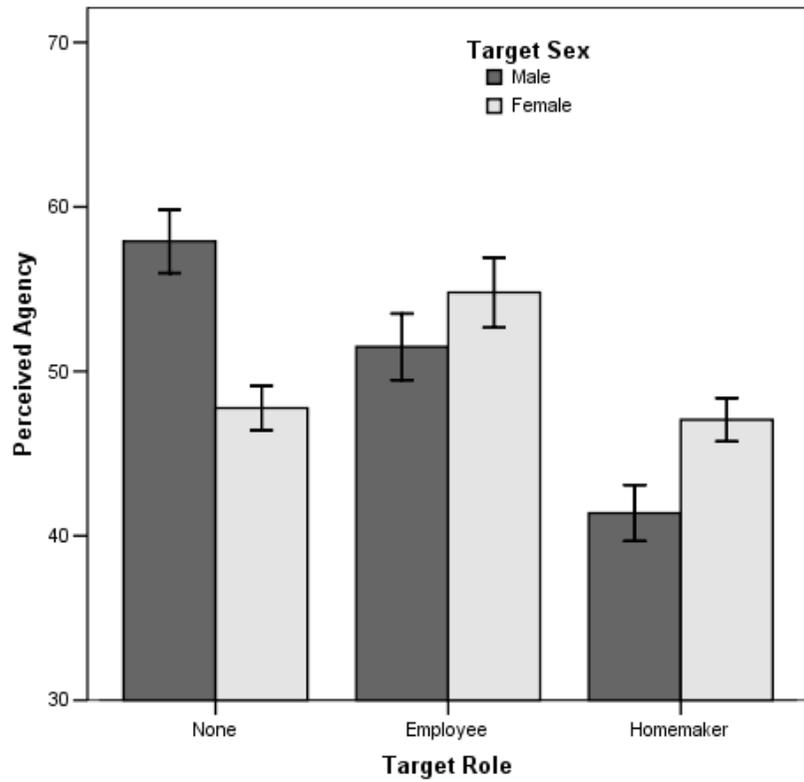
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Table 1

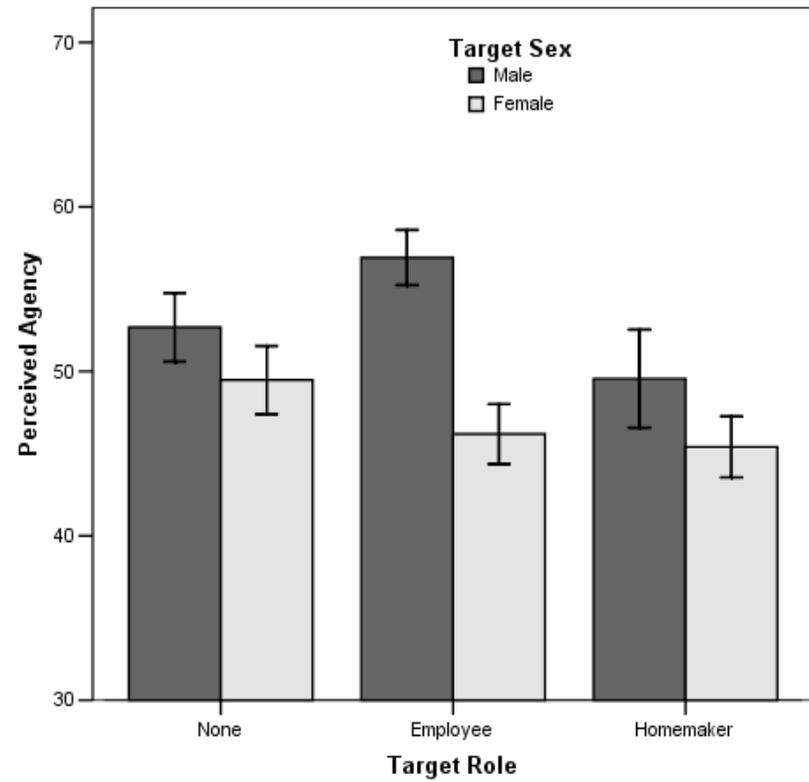
Means (Standard Deviations) on Agency and Communion by Measure Type, Target Role, and Target Sex

Measure Type	Target Sex	Target Role		
		None	Employee	Homemaker
		Agency		
Subjective	Male	57.91 (9.63)	51.50 (9.23)	41.38 (8.56)
	Female	47.77 (6.19)	54.80 (9.78)	47.06 (6.32)
	Total	53.28 (9.62)	53.15 (9.54)	44.10 (8.02)
Common Rule	Male	52.68 (9.38)	56.91 (7.50)	49.55 (12.99)
	Female	49.48 (9.04)	46.19 (7.87)	45.40 (8.69)
	Total	51.12 (9.24)	51.69 (9.33)	47.33 (10.95)
		Communion		
Subjective	Male	46.72 (11.50)	41.56 (8.24)	54.46 (7.83)
	Female	53.51 (6.88)	47.70 (9.60)	55.33 (8.02)
	Total	49.82 (10.17)	44.63 (9.37)	54.87 (7.85)
Common Rule	Male	44.74 (6.32)	40.14 (8.55)	51.57 (10.93)
	Female	55.98 (8.68)	53.19 (7.62)	54.47 (7.69)
	Total	50.22 (9.39)	46.49 (10.38)	53.13 (9.33)

Note. These measures were standardized to produce an average of 50 and a standard deviation of 10 for each measure, with higher numbers indicating greater agency and communion. Cell *ns* ranged from 20 to 25 participants.



A



B

Figure 1

Mean (+SE) Perceived Agency as a Function of Target Role (none vs. employee vs. homemaker) and Target Sex (male vs. female); (A)

Subjective Measures; (B) Common Rule Measures

ⁱ In addition to responding on these dependent variables, participants indicated the likelihood of employment for targets presented without role information as well as the annual salary of targets presented as employees. Participants who rated targets without role information estimated that men and women were equally likely to be employed full time, $p = .63$, but ascribed lower salaries to the women than the men, $p < .01$.

ⁱⁱ Participant sex is omitted from the reported ANOVA because the men and the women did not differ in their judgments.