Themes of Agency and Communion in Significant Autobiographical Scenes

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ABSTRACT In three studies employing over 350 community adults and college students, participants wrote or told narratives of personally important scenes in their lives. The autobiographical accounts were coded for themes of agency and communion, the two general content dimensions in lives and life stories that have been identified by many theorists and researchers. The four agentic themes of self-mastery, status, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment were positively associated with Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) measures of achievement and power motivation, self-report scales of dominance and achievement, and personal strivings concerning being success-

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ful and feeling strong. Similarly, the four communal themes of love/friendship, dialogue, care/help, and community were positively associated with intimacy motivation, needs for affiliation and nurturance, and personal strivings concerned with warm and close relationships. The results suggest a thematic coherence in personality across the arenas of key autobiographical memories, social motives, and daily goals.

One of the most influential ideas in personality psychology today is David Bakan's distinction between agency and communion. In *The Duality of Human Existence*, Bakan (1966) described agency and communion as "two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms" (pp. 14–15). In simple terms, agency refers to the "existence of the organism as an individual," manifesting itself in self-protection, self-expansion, and mastery of the environment (p. 15). By contrast, communion refers to "the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is a part," as manifested in union, love, and intimacy (p. 15). This article reports data from three studies in which personally significant autobiographical recollections are coded for eight themes concerning the general concepts of agency and communion that were derived from Bakan's writings and from a substantial literature on human motivation (e.g., McClelland, 1985; Murray, 1938) and interpersonal behavior (Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1991). The eight themes provide a standardized and validated content-analysis system for coding autobiographical scenes for agency and communion, as evidenced in their empirical association with (a) social motives assessed on the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT); (b) accounts of personal strivings (Emmons, 1986); and (c) self-report needs on the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1984).

**Agency and Communion**

That human lives are animated by two broad and contrasting tendencies resembling Bakan's concepts of agency and communion is an idea that is at least 2,000 years old (McAdams, 1988; Wiggins, 1991). The pre-Socratic philosopher, Empedocles, argued that strife and love were the two great organizing principles of the universe (Russell, 1945). Earth, air, fire, and water were forced apart by strife and drawn together through love. Love and strife, therefore, corresponded to the forces of separation and union in realms as diverse as the movements of clouds and human relationships, and as the great cosmic motivators, they ac-
counted for all motion and change. While the ancient Greek conception may seem quaint today, a strikingly similar dichotomy appears in the conceptions of human motivation offered by a number of 20th-century personality theorists, beginning with Freud's (1920/1955) distinction between the death (aggressive) and the life (erotic) instincts.

For example, Rank (1936; Becker, 1973) argued that the prime internal movers in human behavior are the fear of life (which motivates one to separate from others) and the fear of death (which motivates one to unite with others). Angyal (1941) divided human motives into the needs for autonomy and surrender. Adler (1927) distinguished between the striving for superiority and social interest. In more recent years, Hermans (1988; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992) and McAdams (1985, 1990, 1993) have articulated "narrative" theories of personality and identity that construe people's self-defining life stories in terms of agency and communion. For Hermans, agentic S-motives (self-oriented motives) compete with communal O-motives (other-oriented motives) to determine the shape of life narratives. For McAdams, agency and communion are the central thematic lines in the self-defining stories that adults construct to provide their lives with unity and purpose. Hogan's (1982, 1987) socioanalytic theory of personality distinguishes between the adaptive tendencies of gaining status and acceptance in social groups. Throughout human evolution, Hogan and colleagues write, "getting along [communion] and getting ahead [agency] are the two great problems that each person must solve" (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985, p. 178).

The concepts of agency and communion have guided efforts to quantify significant aspects of interpersonal behavior for almost 40 years (Wiggins, 1991; Wiggins & Broughton, 1985). Early researchers organized interpersonal processes and corresponding interpersonal traits into a circular arrangement bisected by the two orthogonal dimensions of dominance versus submissiveness (agency) and affiliation versus hostility (communion). Beginning with Leary (1957), many variations on this system have been proposed (e.g., Gurtman, 1992; Kiesler, 1983), "all of which were guided by the concepts of agency and communion, and most of which were based on the circular order that came to be known as the circumplex" (Wiggins, 1991, p. 107). From a functionalist perspective, Patterson (1984) has argued that interpersonal relations are primarily aimed at promoting social control (agency) or intimacy (communion). McAdams, Healy, and Krause (1984) have distinguished between agentic and communal friendship patterns. A number of in-
vestigators have noted the correspondence between agency and communion, on the one hand, and the sex-role orientations of masculinity and femininity, on the other (e.g., Bem, 1974; Ickes, 1981), a connection that Bakan (1966) explored in some depth.

It would appear, therefore, that agency and communion are exceedingly broad and multidimensional tendencies in human lives and social relations. Cutting across behavior, cognition, and motivation, agency and communion encompass, among other things, certain personality traits (those concerned primarily with interpersonal relating); personal values, beliefs, and self-schemas; and social needs and motives. For instance, the concept of agency would seem to include personality traits such as Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970) and surgency (Norman, 1963), personal and societal beliefs and values concerning courage and a strong national defense (Rokeach, 1973), and assertive social motives such as the need for achievement (McClelland, 1961) and the power motive (Winter, 1973). Communion encompasses traits such as agreeableness, belief and value clusters such as those centered around equality and peace on earth, and social motives such as the need for affiliation (Atkinson, Hemys, & Veroff, 1954) and the intimacy motive (McAdams, 1980). Given their impressive historical and personological pedigree, themes of agency and communion should prove to be important content dimensions in persons’ storied accounts of their own lives.

**Autobiographical Narratives**

Beginning with Robinson (1976), cognitive psychologists have become increasingly interested in recent years in the phenomenon of autobiographical memory (Conway, 1990; Neisser & Winograd, 1988; Rubin, 1986). Of particular interest are memories of specific episodes or scenes from an individual’s past, or what Brewer (1986) calls “personal memories.” Personal memories are narratives of specific events in a person’s life, complete with a visual image of the event and attendant thoughts and feelings that the person remembers experiencing at the time of the event (Brewer, 1986). Research has examined how people organize personal memories within their autobiographical store and how such memories are retrieved (Reiser, Black, & Abelson, 1985). With a few exceptions (e.g., Brown & Kulik, 1977), cognitive psychologists have not focused their inquiries on what kinds of events get remembered—that is, the content of personal memories.
Content, however, appears to be a central concern for some personality and social psychologists examining autobiographical recollections, especially recollections of events that are deemed by the participant as particularly important or meaningful. For example, Mackavey, Malley, and Stewart (1991) coded written autobiographies of eminent psychologists for "autobiographically consequential experiences" (ACEs), finding that such memories tend to cluster in the participants' college and early adulthood years. Ross and Holmberg (1990) found that women's recollections of significant interpersonal memories (such as first date and last argument with romantic partner) are more detailed and vivid than men's. Thorne and Klohnien (1993) focused on personal memories of "ungratified wishes" and "unfinished business" in a longitudinal investigation and found that such negative autobiographical recollections are associated with consistency in depression and undercontrol over a 5-year span, from age 18 to 23. Guided in part by Adler's (1927) belief that earliest memories reflect the person's current style of life, investigators have coded personal accounts of earliest memories for a number of different content themes. In recent studies, the content quality of earliest memories has been associated with independent assessments of harmavoidance (Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982), locus of control (Bruhn & Schiffman, 1982), depression (Acklin, Sauer, Alexander, & Dugoni, 1989), delinquency (Bruhn & Davidow, 1983), identity status (Orlofsky & Frank, 1986), and internal representations of interpersonal relationships (Acklin, Bibb, Boyer, & Jain, 1991).

In their recent book, The Remembered Self, Singer and Salovey (1993) provide an integrative conceptual framework for autobiographical memory and personality. At the center of their conceptualization is the "self-defining memory," which they describe as an especially vivid, affectively intense, and familiar personal memory that expresses an enduring concern or unresolved conflict in the person's life. Singer and Salovey argue that what people feel in the present about events long after they have occurred is a function of how relevant those remembered events are to the attainment of long-term future goals. Furthermore, self-defining memories serve to motivate goal-directed behavior in the future—to encourage people to pursue desired ends and discourage them from activities that would lead to outcomes they would rather avoid. In demonstrating links among one's personal past, current affect, and future goals, Singer and Salovey argue for a thematic coherence and continuity in personality across the life span. Thematic coherence is evidenced, then, in the extent to which the motivational themes evident
in self-defining memories from the past match the motivational themes of future goals. In keeping with a growing literature examining the relevance of narrative in the making of the self (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Bruner, 1990; Fitzgerald, 1988; Gregg, 1991; Hermans et al., 1992; Howard, 1991; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Sarbin, 1986), thematic coherence is expressed in the person's narrative account of the personal past, present, and future—in the self-defining life story (McAdams, 1985, 1993) or life script (Tomkins, 1987) that a person constructs to provide his or her life with meaning, unity, and purpose.

Motivational Themes in Life Stories

In that (a) several theories of human motivation converge on the two general classes of agency and communion and (b) thematic coherence in personality may be expressed in the recurrent motivational themes that animate people's narrative accounts of their lives, one would expect that the concepts of agency and communion should provide a useful thematic scheme for organizing the motivational content of autobiographically consequential experiences—discrete and vivid "scenes" (Tomkins, 1987) or "nuclear episodes" (McAdams, 1982, 1985) that stand out in bold print in the person's self-defining life story. In three earlier studies, McAdams (1982, 1984; McAdams et al., 1981) considered agency and communion from the perspectives of power (Winter, 1973) and intimacy (McAdams, 1980) motivation, respectively. Among college students highly involved in religious activities and groups on campus, those high in TAT-assessed power motivation tended to describe (a) a "particularly meaningful religious experience" from their past in terms of a heightened feeling of their own or God's "power" and "impact" and (b) an experience of "personal guilt" in terms of a misuse of their own power, compared to students low in power motivation (McAdams et al., 1981). TAT-based intimacy motivation was, in turn, associated with reports of heightened love and a sense of community, as well as perceiving God as a companion, in meaningful religious experiences, and with reports of failing to show love or intimacy in autobiographical recollections of guilt. McAdams (1984) asked students to recall a particular moment in the history of their "best friendship" in which they came to feel especially close to their friend. Students high in power motivation recalled experiences in which they and their friend worked together to solve a problem or take control of a situation or in
which they offered strong advice or help for their friend. Students high in intimacy motivation recalled experiences in which they and their friend shared highly personal information, attaining intimacy through communication or dialogue.

In the most direct antecedent to the current research, McAdams (1982) coded a number of different types of personal memories for agentic themes of "physical and psychological strength," "impact," "action," and "prestige" and communal themes of "interpersonalness," "communication," "friendship or love," "helping," and "tender touch," correlating scores with power and intimacy motivation on the TAT. Correlations between power motivation and agency scores and between intimacy motivation and communion scores were significantly positive for especially salient and highly emotional personal memories (such as accounts of "peak experiences" and "great learning experiences") but were nonsignificant for memories that appeared to be less autobiographically consequential (e.g., "neutral experiences" and "unsatisfying experiences"). A similar connection between power and intimacy motivation on the one hand and agentic and communal themes in accounts of "most memorable daily experiences" on the other has been demonstrated by Woike (1993).

The current research builds on McAdams's (1982, 1984; McAdams et al., 1981) and Woike's (1993) previous work in an effort to delineate and validate a standard set of thematic categories that captures the motivational essence of agency and communion as expressed in narratives of consequential autobiographical scenes. The current work focuses exclusively on scenes that are affectively positive. Past research suggests that accounts of affectively negative scenes (such as life-story "nadir" experiences; McAdams, 1985) are not readily coded in a manner analogous to positive events (such as life-story "peak" experiences). Like past research, the current work draws on the TAT-based motivational literature, but it expands the inquiry to accommodate the agentically toned achievement motive, as well as the power motive, and communal needs for affiliation and nurturance, as well as the intimacy motive. Based on previous research and a fresh reading of Bakan (1966), the literatures on human motivation (e.g., McClelland, 1985; Murray, 1938; Smith, 1992), and interpersonal behavior (e.g., Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1991), we propose eight central themes of agency and communion that are codable in accounts of affectively positive autobiographical scenes. The four agency themes are (a) self-mastery, (b) status, (c) achievement/responsibility, and (d) empowerment. The four com-
munion themes are (e) love/friendship, (f) dialogue, (g) care/help, and (h) community.

Themes of agency

Agency encompasses a wide range of motivational ideas, including the concepts of strength, power, expansion, mastery, control, dominance, achievement, autonomy, separation, and independence. Most accounts of important autobiographical experiences are couched in agentic terms to one degree or another. In most accounts, the participant is telling the researcher about an important experience of the self, so one should not be surprised if the account entails at least a modicum of self-celebration, self-focus, self-expansion, and so on. The necessary focus on the self, therefore, encourages a rhetoric of agency in many autobiographical narratives, especially among contemporary Americans imbued with an ethic of individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). For example, many accounts of life-story “turning points” will tell how a person moved from dependence to autonomy. The attainment of autonomy in human development is a very common theme among Westerners, especially those in the middle class. The four agentic themes articulated below, however, go above and beyond the typical agentic rhetoric of autobiographical expression. They express highly agentic ideas that, even by the agentic cultural standards of contemporary rhetoric, stand out as especially indicative of Bakan’s concept of agency in human lives.

Self-mastery. In a wide-ranging discussion of the Christian projection of “unmitigated agency” onto the mythical figure of Satan, Bakan (1966) delineates a sequence in which separation from others leads to mastery of self and world. The prototypically agentic figure first attains autonomy vis-à-vis the environment and then seeks to control that environment and perfect the self. As noted above, because the theme of autonomy/separation occurs so frequently in personal accounts, it is difficult to assess individual differences on this theme. Less common and more discriminating, however, is Bakan’s second agentic idea of mastery, especially as applied to the autonomous self. In self-mastery the individual strives successfully to master, control, enlarge, or perfect a self that has already attained some measure of autonomy. Through forceful and effective action, thought, or experience, the person is able to strengthen the self and become a larger, wiser, or more powerful
agent in the world. The concept of self-mastery also bears resemblance to what McClelland (1975) describes as “stage two power motivation,” in which “I strengthen myself” (p. 15). On this form of power motivation, he writes:

Freudians have associated this willfulness, or assertion of the self, with the anal stage of development, with learning to control defecation, which provides a major opportunity for learning self-assertiveness and self-control. . . . The focus of attention may at first be on controlling one’s own body and mind. . . . [The person acts] to make himself feel stronger. . . . [T]he individual may now engage in body-building exercises, yoga, or dieting in order to feel that he has better control over himself. . . . [B]y understanding what makes people tick, they [persons high in stage-two power motivation] will have better control over themselves. (1975, pp. 15-16)

Status. The autonomous agentic figure may also strive to attain heightened status, position, or prestige. Expressing what Murray (1938) called a need for dominance, the agentic person may seek recognition or honors from others, especially in competitive situations. The idea of competition is central to the achievement motive (McClelland, 1961), as measured in TAT stories revealing themes about competition against a standard of excellence. It is also part of the power motivation coding system, as shown in stories wherein characters seek status and prestige in order to show that they have won or earned an exalted position compared to others (Winter, 1973). Winning the competition, attaining victory, being “number one”—these are common expressions of the agentic theme of status. The theme embodies part of what Wiggins and Broughton (1985) call the “ambitious-dominant factor” on the interpersonal circumplex. Expressions of this factor are “strongly active and emphasize taking (charge, responsibility, lead), making (decisions) and winning (arguments)” (Wiggins & Broughton, 1985, p. 21).

Achievement/responsibility. Following Weber (1920/1958), Bakan (1966) documents a strong tradition of agency in Western society from the Protestant Reformation through the rise of capitalism and the inculcation of a Protestant work ethic with its emphasis on industry, thrift, efficiency, persistence, productivity, and entrepreneurship. Bakan agrees with McClelland (1961) in contending that this strain of agency is psychologically represented, in part, in the concept of the achievement motive. The person high in achievement motivation seeks to do well, be
successful, and move steadily onward and upward into the future as an effective and competent agent, meeting successive challenges, accomplishing successive goals, and building on successive achievements to create a bigger and better legacy of the self. Similar conceptual ground is covered in White's (1959) concept of competence, Bandura's (1971) concept of efficacy, and the ambitious-dominant factor in Wiggins and Broughton's (1985) interpersonal circumplex. As reflected in autobiographical recollections, the theme of achievement/responsibility manifests itself in reports of substantial success in the achievement of tasks, jobs, or instrumental goals or in the assumption of important responsibilities. The person feels proud, confident, masterful, accomplished, or successful in (a) meeting significant challenges or overcoming important obstacles concerning instrumental achievement in life or (b) taking on major responsibilities for other people and assuming roles that require the person to be in charge of things or people.

*Empowerment.* McClelland (1975) points out that power motivation can be expressed and experienced in situations in which the source of power is not necessarily the self but rather some larger or more potent outside force. As captured in what McClelland (1975) calls "stage one power" ("It strengthens me," p. 13) and "stage four power" ("It moves me to do my duty," p. 20), a person may come to feel empowered by the environment. More generally, one's agency may be enhanced by an association with the agency of others, especially others who are stronger, larger, wiser, or more powerful than the self. In autobiographical recollections, the theme of empowerment is manifested in accounts in which the individual is enlarged, enhanced, empowered, ennobled, built up, or made better through his or her association with an especially powerful source, such as God, nature, the universe, or some highly charismatic or inspiring figure. While highly agentic persons may strive to attain autonomy from their peers, they may also respect and seek to benefit from the power of especially agentic sources toward which or for whom they feel awe rather than competition.

*Themes of communion*

Communion encompasses motivational ideas concerning interpersonal connections such as love, friendship, intimacy, sharing, belonging, affiliation, merger, union, care, and nurturance. At its heart, communion involves different people coming together in warm, close, caring, and
communicative relationships (McAdams, 1988). McAdams’s (1980, 1989) thematic coding system for the intimacy motive, employed with TAT stories, is explicitly modeled after Bakan’s conception of communion, as well as the related ideas of “being love” (Maslow, 1968), “I-Thou” relating (Buber, 1970), and Sullivan’s (1953) “need for interpersonal intimacy.” The 4 communion categories below represent a distillation and sharpening of the 10 categories employed by McAdams in the TAT coding system for intimacy motivation. In addition, the 4 categories for communion also draw from Murray’s (1938) communal concepts of the needs for affiliation and nurturance and from McKay’s (1992) construct of “affiliative trust.”

Love/friendship. Communion encompasses the forms of positive interpersonal sentiment designated by Aristotle as eros and philia (Lewis, 1960). Both passionate love and close friendship suggest positive emotional bonds between peers. Erotic love relationships, and to a lesser extent friendships, typically have a more or less exclusive quality about them, emphasizing the particularity of each partner and the uniqueness of the bond. While a person may “have” many friends, each friendship is likely to be characterized in terms of a relationship with a particular other person, or with a very small group of others as when, say, two married couples “have a friendship” that encompasses the four of them. Bonds to larger groups or with nonpeers (e.g., parent-child) may be occasionally described with the words “love” or “friendship,” but these experiences seem phenomenologically different from eros and philia (Josselson, 1993; McAdams, 1989) and thus may be viewed as different forms of communion (encoded in the themes of community and care/help below). Love/friendship between peers is a central concept in both the intimacy motivation (McAdams, 1980) and the affiliation motivation (Atkinson et al., 1954) systems for coding TAT stories, and it appears in virtually all characterizations of Bakan’s communal mode.

Dialogue. The core meaning of the word “intimacy” is to share that which is inside the self with another who is outside the self (McAdams, 1989). The desire for intimacy is fundamentally the desire to share that which is innermost with another person. Buber (1970) describes an especially intense form of such sharing in terms of an encounter between the “I” and the “Thou.” In the I-Thou encounter, two separate individuals focus unwaveringly on each other, offering and receiving mutual gifts of self-disclosure in an intimate and intensely satisfying
dialogue. In a more casual manner, communion is expressed when people simply engage each other in reciprocal and noninstrumental dialogue of various kinds, even in chatting about the weather. The communal theme of dialogue comes directly from McAdams's (1980) coding system for assessing intimacy motivation on the TAT. It is theoretically rooted, furthermore, in Bakan's (1966) characterization of communion as entailing "contact and openness" as well as "noncontractual cooperation" (p. 15).

Care/help. Orthogonal to the ambitious-dominant (agentic) factor of the interpersonal circumplex is the prototypically communal factor of "warmth-agreeableness" (Wiggins & Broughton, 1985). Characterizations that load heavily on this factor encompass expressions of altruism, sympathy, care, and helping others in need, connecting to Murray's (1938) need for nurturance as well as aspects of McAdams's (1980) intimacy motivation. Wiggins and Broughton (1985) write:

The personality inventory items that load this factor [warmth-agreeableness] describe nurturant acts performed for a variety of targets requiring help. The targets and the acts performed are as follows: (a) persons in trouble: go to the aid of, do everything I can for, show interest in, become involved with, show great concern for; (b) persons who need help: put aside my own work for, choose as friends, provide companionship and care for; (c) persons who are ill: nurse, take care of, sympathize with; (d) young persons: take under wing, discuss their feelings with them, take care of; (e) unhappy persons: comfort, talk over personal problems with; (f) poor persons: collect money for, help; (g) charitable organizations: contribute to, do volunteer work for; and (h) persons in general: take interest in personal lives, treat with kindness and sympathy. (p. 25)

In care/help, then, the individual provides or receives care, assistance, nurturance, help, aid, support, or therapy. One's physical, material, social, or emotional welfare or well-being is enhanced by another's care.

Community. With their intensive focus on the quality of personal relationships and attachments (e.g., Duck, 1986; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), personality and social psychologists have sometimes been guilty of overlooking the importance of a person's integration into larger groups and communities, an aspect of communion that is not fully cap-
tured in the rhetoric of friendship, love, sharing, and care. Among psychologists, Fromm (1973) has written eloquently of the human needs for relatedness and rootedness, suggesting that feeling close to particular other people is not enough for psychological well-being and fulfillment. One must also feel that one belongs to something larger than the self, that one is rooted in society and tied to a network of enduring social relationships and cultural institutions. Sociologists and social critics have lamented the difficulties modern people face in forging ties to communities, observing that many Westerners feel alienated from their neighbors, their nations, and their world (Bellah et al., 1985, 1992; Durkheim, 1951; Lasch, 1979). Yet accounts of highly positive autobiographical events frequently highlight the good feelings and warm interactions of people in groups, as when people take part in shared cultural rituals (McAdams, 1984, 1985; McAdams et al., 1981; McAdams, Lensky, Daple, & Allen, 1988). The theme of community, therefore, captures the communal idea of being part of a larger community, experiencing a sense of oneness, unity, harmony, synchrony, togetherness, belongingness, allegiance, or solidarity with a group of people, a community, or even all of humankind together.

Study 1

Study 1 examines themes of agency and communion in the written autobiographical accounts of peak experiences and earliest memories of college students. In addition, scores are obtained on power, achievement, and intimacy motivation as assessed on the TAT.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 130 undergraduate students (67 women, 63 men) enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a midwestern university. Students received course credit in exchange for their participation. Participants were administered an autobiographical exercise, the TAT, and a series of questionnaires in small groups (15–20 students per group), in sessions that lasted about 1 and 3/4 hours. Data from the questionnaires were not employed in the current study. With respect to the autobiographical exercise and the TATs, a small number of participants did not complete all of the tasks required. For example, only 120 participants (92%) provided a full response for both autobiographical recollections (a peak experience and an earliest memory) solicited in the study.
Similarly, 8 participants did not complete the TAT. Because of incomplete data, therefore, different analyses in Study 1 show slightly different Ns.

**The TAT: Motives**

The participants were administered the TAT according to the standard group administration format (Atkinson, 1958). For each of six successive pictures, participants were given 5 minutes to write an imaginative story that depicted what is going on in the picture now, what led up to the current situation, what may happen in the future, what the characters want, and what the characters are thinking and feeling. In sequence, the six pictures showed (a) two people sitting on a park bench, (b) a man sitting at a desk upon which sits a picture of a family, (c) a ship's captain talking with another man, (d) a man and a woman on a trapeze, (e) two female scientists working in a laboratory, and (f) an older man and younger woman walking through a field with horses and a dog. These six pictures have been widely employed in research on power, achievement, and intimacy motivation (McAdams, 1985; McClelland, 1985).

TAT stories were scored for power, achievement, and intimacy motivation according to the standard scoring manuals, all of which appear in Smith (1992). Each motive was scored by a different scorer who worked through the corresponding training manual and extensive practice materials. On practice stories in the manuals, all three scorers achieved adequate scoring reliability for research purposes, both in terms of correlations between their scores and expert scoring in the manual ($r > .85$) and exact category agreement with the manual on motive imagery (85% and better). These scoring conventions are explained in Smith (1992).

**The Autobiographical Exercise: Agency and Communion Themes**

Participants were asked to describe in writing (a) a peak experience and (b) an earliest memory. Adopted from the writings of Maslow (1968) and McAdams (1982, 1985), a peak experience was defined as a life-story high point, a particular scene that stands out in one's life for its positive emotional tone (in which one "feels a sense of transcendence, uplifting, inner joy or peace, excitement, or some other highly positive emotional experience"). The participants were asked to describe the scene in detail, to tell exactly what happened in the scene, when it happened, who was involved, and what they were thinking and feeling in the scene. In addition, participants were asked to comment on what the event "says about who you are, were, or might be as a person." Similar instructions were given for the earliest memory, except that the memory was defined as an opening scene in one's life story (rather than a high point) that
can be recalled clearly and in terms of a discrete event with a setting and characters. Participants were given a page on which to write their accounts, and no time limit was imposed.

The accounts of peak experiences and earliest memories were each coded for the eight themes of agency and communion introduced above. The four agency themes were (a) self-mastery, (b) status, (c) achievement/responsibility, and (d) empowerment. The four communion themes were (e) love/friendship, (f) dialogue, (g) care/help, and (h) community. The detailed description of the scoring system employed, with numerous examples for each theme, is available from the first author. In the system, the scorer determines the presence (score +1) or absence (score 0) of each of the eight themes in each memory account. The scoring system is very conservative, such that only explicit examples of a particular theme's presence in an account can be scored +1. Thus, most themes in most scenes receive the score of 0. A total agency score for a particular memory is the sum of the four agency themes in that memory, ranging hypothetically from a minimum of 0 (no agency themes present in the memory) to a maximum score of 4 (in the case of a memory's containing self-mastery, status, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment). A total communion score is the sum of all four communion themes, ranging hypothetically from 0 to 4. Scores may also be summed across the two memories.

Two independent coders, blind to all identifying information on the participants, coded the peak experiences and earliest memories for the eight themes of agency and communion. Scoring reliability was calculated in two ways (category agreement and total score correlations), modeled after the procedure employed with TAT scoring systems. In TAT systems, the scorer must first decide if the story contains evidence for motive imagery. In the majority of cases, the story does not, and it thus receives a score of 0 on that particular motive. The same kind of decision is made for each of the eight coding categories for agency and communion. TAT researchers employ a category agreement score to determine reliability on motive imagery, and therefore the same procedure may be followed for each of the eight agency and communion themes. For two scorers (Scorers A and B) who are coding a series of accounts (say, 30 or more accounts), the category agreement score is calculated as: \[2 \times (\text{the number of agreements between scorers on the presence of category})\] divided by \[((\text{number of times Scorer A scores presence of category}) + (\text{number of times Scorer B scores presence of category}))\]. For TAT motive systems, category agreements for trained scorers are typically greater than 85%. In the current study, category agreements for peak experiences ranged from 81% (community) to 95% (status) for peak experiences, with a mean of 88.6%. For earliest memories, category agreements ranged from 71% (self-mastery) to 90% (status), with a mean of 82.1%.

A second metric for scoring reliability with TAT motive systems is the
correlation between scorers’ codes of total motive scores (summed across all categories for a given motive) per story. Typically, trained coders are able to attain a correlation of .85 or higher. Using this method, the two scorers showed reliabilities of .81 for total agency (sum of self-mastery, status, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment) and .87 for total communion (sum of love/friendship, dialogue, care/help, and community) in peak experiences. For earliest memories, they showed reliability of .77 for agency and .83 for communion. Though these reliability figures are slightly below those obtained for TAT motive systems, they were deemed adequate for research purposes. The coding systems for agency and communion themes in autobiographical scenes are not as detailed as the corresponding motive systems, and they do not contain extensive practice materials. Furthermore, the thematic content in autobiographical recollections is quite different from that encountered in TAT stories, showing a great deal of variety in personal concerns and issues.

Finally, in order to assess the extent to which agency and communion scores are a function of the length of autobiographical accounts, one coder counted the number of words in each memory.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides ranges, means, and standard deviations for summary scores on agency and communion themes in autobiographical accounts of peak experiences and earliest memories. As can be seen, the conservative nature of the coding system results in rather “low” scores on agency and communion overall, especially as manifest in early memories. To test for sex differences in agency and communion, two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were performed, one for the four themes of agency and a second for the four themes of communion, grouping participants by sex. In both cases, no overall sex difference was observed: \( F(1, 118) = 1.30, p = .27 \), for agency themes; \( F(1, 118) = 1.86, p = .12 \), for communion themes.

Total agency and total communion scores, summed across the four corresponding themes and both memory accounts, were negatively correlated with each other, \( r = -.29, p < .01 \). Table 2 shows intercorrelations among the scores on each of the eight agency and communion themes, summed across the two memories. In general, the intercorrelations were quite low, suggesting that the themes are relatively independent of each other empirically, despite the fact that four are conceptually keyed to agency and four to communion. The same pattern of correlations appeared for both male and female subsamples. For
### Table 1
Ranges, Means, and Standard Deviations for Themes of Agency and Communion in Peak Experiences and Early Memories: Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agency</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-mastery</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement/responsibility</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>0 to 1</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total agency</td>
<td>0 to 4</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in peak experience</td>
<td>0 to 3</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in early memory</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/friendship</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care/help</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total communion</td>
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<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communion in peak experience</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in early memory</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (Agency + Communion)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0 to 5</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in peak experience</td>
<td>0 to 3</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in early memory</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 120 (includes only participants who provided both a peak experience and an early memory).

The entire sample, the communal theme of dialogue was significantly negatively correlated with the agentic themes of status ($r = -0.29$, $p < .01$) and achievement/responsibility ($r = -0.23$, $p < .05$), but positively correlated with love/friendship ($r = 0.25$, $p < .01$). Communal love/friendship was negatively associated with agentic achievement/responsibility ($r = -0.22$, $p < .05$). All other correlations were nonsignificant.

Themes in peak experiences were not significantly correlated with themes in early memories. Agency scores on peak experiences were uncorrelated with agency scores on early memories ($r = .04$, $ns$), and the same held for communion ($r = .00$, $ns$). Only two of the eight themes showed a significant cross-memory association: Self-mastery in
Table 2
Intercorrelations of Scores on Eight Themes of Agency and Communion: Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-mastery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Achievement/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibility</td>
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<td>.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Empowerment</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Love/friendship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Dialogue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Care/help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( N = 120 \).

* \( p < .05 \)

** \( p < .01 \)

peak experiences was correlated with self-mastery in early memories \( (r = .20, p < .05) \) and a similar association was found for care/help \( (r = .20, p < .05) \).

Despite the low intercorrelations among the themes and across the memories, associations between the agency and communion themes and motive scores assessed on the TAT were high and in the expected directions. As can be seen in Table 3, agency themes tended to correlate with achievement and power motivation but not with intimacy motivation, whereas communal themes correlated with intimacy motivation but not with achievement and power motivation on the TAT. These patterns of correlations were reflected in both the male and female subsamples analyzed separately.

Total agency summed across themes and memories was strongly positively associated with achievement motivation \( (r = .40, p < .001) \) and less strongly but still significantly associated with power motivation \( (r = .27, p < .01) \). Achievement motive scores were significantly correlated with agency scores in both peak experiences and early memories considered separately, and power motivation correlated significantly with agency in peak experiences. Among individual themes, achievement/responsibility and self-mastery were significantly positively cor-
Table 3
Correlations of Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) Motives and Autobiographical Themes: Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Intimacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-mastery</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement/responsibility</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total agency</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in peak experience</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in early memory</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/friendship</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care/help</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.32***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total communion</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.47***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in peak experience</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.40***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in early memory</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.25*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 113.

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001.

related with achievement motivation on the TAT, whereas empowerment and self-mastery were significantly associated with the power motive. Power and achievement motivation were generally unrelated to the four communion themes, with the one exception of love/friendship, which showed a significant positive association ($r = .24, p < .05$) with the power motive. Agency scores were not significantly related to the length (number of words) of the memory accounts.

Total communion summed across themes and memories was strongly positively associated with intimacy motivation ($r = .47, p < .001$). The significant association was observed both in peak experiences and in early memories, considered separately. Looking at the four communion themes separately, three were significantly associated with intimacy motivation, the exception being love/friendship, which showed
a positive but nonsignificant association. No agency themes correlated significantly with intimacy motivation. Length of memory was modestly but significantly associated with total communion scores in peak experiences ($r = .20, p < .05$) and early memories ($r = .23, p < .05$).

As in most past studies, the three TAT motives were not significantly correlated with each other. Further, no sex differences in motives appeared. Whereas past research has tended to show a sex difference favoring women on intimacy motivation (McAdams, Lester, Brand, McNamara, & Lensky, 1988), women's scores on intimacy motivation in the present study were not significantly higher than those of men.

**DISCUSSION**

Narrative accounts of peak experiences and early memories may be reliably coded for eight content themes of agency and communion. In the overall, agency and communion themes correlated in theoretically expected ways with motives of achievement, power, and intimacy, assessed on the TAT. Achievement motivation was strongly correlated with total agency scores and with the individual themes of achievement/responsibility and self-mastery. Power motivation was less strongly but still significantly associated with agency in general and with the individual themes of empowerment and self-mastery. The agentic theme of status was not significantly related to either motive. For communion, intimacy motivation was strongly correlated with total communion scores and with individual themes of dialogue, care/help, and community. The communal theme of love/friendship was not significantly correlated with intimacy motivation. No significant sex differences emerged.

Conceptually, agency and communion are orthogonal domains. In the current study, however, total scores on agency and communion were modestly but significantly associated with each other in a negative direction. Moreover, intercorrelations among the eight theme scores did not paint a picture of two distinct and internally consistent thematic domains, one corresponding to agency and one to communion. One might expect that the four agentic themes would cluster together with relatively high intercorrelations and that they would be uncorrelated with the intercorrelated cluster of four communion themes. Instead, the eight themes appeared to be relatively independent of each other, with particular communion themes typically no more strongly associated with other communion themes than with particular agency themes. Excep-
tions to this rule were the significant positive association between the communal themes of love/friendship and dialogue and the significant negative associations between dialogue and the agentic themes of status and achievement/responsibility.

There are at least two possible explanations for the pattern of intercorrelations of the eight themes. The first is that the individual theme scores in the current study are relatively unreliable in that each is a sum of merely two observations—a peak experience and an early memory. In this sense, each theme score is roughly analogous to a two-item scale on a self-report measure. Such short scales can be very unreliable; aggregation across many items and observations often makes for a substantial increase in reliability (Epstein, 1979). To make matters somewhat worse, each of two items, as it were, hypothetically yields a score of either "0" (theme is absent) or "1" (theme is present), but the vast majority of scores are 0, given the conservative nature of the scoring system. Put another way, the base rate for any given theme in any given memory is relatively low. Sampling across a greater number of memories, therefore, might yield more reliable theme scores, which might in turn reveal a more theoretically consistent pattern of intercorrelations in the domains of agency and communion. This possibility is examined in Study 2.

A second possible explanation is that the themes reveal alternative manifestations of agency and communion. Treating each theme as if it were a microcosm of the whole domain (as is conceptually the case in constructing self-report questionnaires of a unitary trait domain) may be inappropriate in some cases of thematic analysis. Rather than seeing each theme as a semiredundant snapshot of agency as a whole, it may be more appropriate to see agency as revealing itself differentially in each of four very different themes, much as the attachment researchers have argued that different attachment behaviors (typically uncorrelated with each other) reveal alternative manifestations of a coherent attachment system (see Sroufe, 1983). Thus, each theme manifests a different aspect of agency. (Indeed, the construction of the coding system was guided by the goal of covering as large a domain as possible with the fewest number of nonredundant themes.) The same argument has been made for over 30 years in the motivational literature employing the TAT, when researchers have been faced with relatively low intercorrelations among thematic categories in scoring systems and among motive scores obtained in different picture stimuli (Atkinson, 1957, 1981; Atkinson, Bongort, & Price, 1977; McAdams & Powers, 1981; McClelland, 1980;
McAdams et al.

McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Reuman, Alwin, & Veroff, 1984). As in the present study, the failure of TAT coding systems to show the neat patterns of intercorrelations expected for self-report trait questionnaires has not traditionally precluded the demonstration of impressive predictive efficacy of TAT scores. In that thematic measures have often been shown to have substantial predictive validity even though internal consistency (e.g., split-half coefficients, alphas) is usually low, one should question the automatic application of the psychometric criterion of internal consistency among “items” (themes) to the thematic domain of content analysis.

**Study 2**

Study 2 reports data from a broad age range of adults who completed the TAT and were interviewed at length, wherein they described seven autobiographically consequential scenes. As in Study 1, narrative accounts of scenes are coded for themes of agency and communion, and these scores are correlated with TAT scores on achievement, power, and intimacy motivation. This second study extends the inquiry from college students to older adults, from rather circumscribed written accounts of autobiographical scenes to lengthy life-story interviews wherein accounts of scenes are collected, and from two memories to seven.

**METHOD**

A total of 86 participants (50 women and 36 men) were administered a series of written measures and individually interviewed as part of a larger study of generativity, life stories, and adult personality (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1995). All were volunteers whose participation was obtained through newspaper advertisements and through contacts with schools and community organizations. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 72, \( M = 43.89 \) years, \( SD = 11.41 \) years. The sample was predominantly professional and well-educated, with 87% having completed a bachelor’s degree. Each participant was paid $50 for participating in the study. As in Study 1, slightly different \( Ns \) in different analyses reflect incomplete data for some cases.

In a first meeting, the participants completed a series of written measures, including the TAT. The TAT employed the same pictures as those used in Study 1, and the TAT responses were scored for achievement, power, and intimacy motivation by trained scorers, whose reliability exceeded the conventional standards employed in motivational research (category agreement > .85 for motive imagery; \( r > .85 \) for total scores with expert coding in the manual).
In a second meeting, each participant was interviewed by a research assistant according to McAdams's (1985, 1993) life-story interview. The interviewer asks the participant to provide a narrative account of his or her life as if it were a story or book, complete with chapters, setting, scenes, and characters. For the purposes of the current study, the key part of the interview is the participants' description of seven particular autobiographical scenes: (a) peak experience (same as Study 1), (b) earliest recollection (same as Study 1), (c) "turning-point" experience (an event in which the participant believes he or she underwent a significant life transition or personality change), and a significant and memorable event from (d) childhood, (e) adolescence, and (f) adulthood. Finally, the participant was asked to provide an account of (g) one "other significant scene" from anywhere in his or her life. (An eighth scene called a "nadir experience," or "low point" in one's life story, was not used in the current study because the agency and communion categories are not well-suited for coding highly negative emotional experiences.)

Each of the interviews was tape-recorded and transcribed. Two coders scored transcribed accounts of each of the seven scenes described above for themes of agency and communion, as in Study 1. Because the interview is an interactive experience involving a conversation between two people, the interview transcripts were somewhat more difficult to code for agency and communion than were the written accounts in Study 1. Occasionally, coders would have to decide where in the transcript the description of a particular scene ended and a digression began. Correlating the two coders' total scores on overall agency and communion summed across the seven accounts, coding reliability for agency was $r = .83$, and for communion, $r = .81$. Reliability coefficients for each of the eight individual themes tended to be lower, ranging from $r = .58$ for self-mastery to $r = .83$ for dialogue. The mean of the reliability coefficients for each of the eight themes was $r = .73$. Finally, one coder determined the length of response by calculating the average number of words per memory.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Intercorrelations were calculated for the eight themes of agency and communion, summed across the seven memory accounts. The pattern of intercorrelations differed from that obtained in Study 1, with the communal themes of dialogue and care/help showing a strong positive association ($r = .44, p < .001$) and the agentic themes of self-mastery and empowerment showing a significant positive association as well ($r = .27, p < .05$). A positive association was also obtained between agentic achievement/responsibility and communal care/help ($r = .29, p < .01$). Nonetheless, the overall pattern suggested, as in Study 1, that scores on the eight themes were fairly independent of each other. A
principal components factor analysis on the eight theme scores reflected the relative independence of the themes. Employing a varimax rotation, the analysis yielded six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The first factor, with a very high loading of dialogue and a modest loading for care/help, accounted for only 12.6% of the variance.

As in Study 1, therefore, the intercorrelations among the themes do not support a simple two-factor model, which would be indicated by a first cluster of high intercorrelations among the four agency themes and a second cluster of high intercorrelations among the four communal themes. For agency, self-mastery and empowerment correlate with each other but are uncorrelated with the other two agentic themes; all other intercorrelations are low and nonsignificant. On the communion side, summary scores on dialogue and care/help are positively and very significantly associated, but these two themes are not significantly correlated with the communal themes of love/friendship and community. All other intercorrelations among communion themes, furthermore, are low and nonsignificant. From the standpoint of traditional psychometric expectations, therefore, it would appear that linkages among the four agentic themes and among the four communal themes are more conceptual than empirical, at least as far as the intercorrelations of the theme scores are concerned. As we suggested in Study 1, however, motivational researchers employing the TAT have faced the same predicament for many years, and their arguments for the viability of motive scores in the face of low internal consistency across scoring categories for a given motive are relevant for interpreting the current results with thematic coding of autobiographical accounts. In this regard, it is noteworthy that while the agentic and communal themes do not correlate with each other in a theoretically elegant manner, they successfully predict very different “external” indices (TAT scores on achievement, power, and intimacy) in ways highly consistent with theory.

To examine the consistency of agency and communion scores across the seven memory accounts, Cronbach’s alphas were calculated for total agency and communion scores and for each of the eight themes. The alpha coefficient for agency was .481, and for communion it was .562. While these appear rather low compared to those expected for self-report scales assessing unitary traits, the alpha coefficients do suggest at least a modicum of internal consistency in total agency and communion scores as obtained in each of the seven memories. In other words, agency and communion scores are modestly predictable from one memory to the next in the seven-memory sequence. Note, furthermore, that
these coefficients compare favorably to the alpha coefficient of .317 reported by McAdams and Powers (1981) for TAT intimacy motivation assessed across six picture cues. Alpha coefficients for each of the eight themes in agency and communion were generally low, however, and comparable to the intimacy motivation index, ranging from a high of .515 for dialogue and .474 for self-mastery to a low of .027 for status and −.117 for community. The mean of the eight alpha coefficients for the individual themes was only .242.

Table 4 shows correlations between themes of agency and communion on the one hand and TAT motives of achievement, power, and intimacy on the other. As in Study 1, agentic themes were positively associated with power and achievement motivation, and communion themes were positively associated with intimacy motivation. In the case of communion, the aggregation of scores across seven memories (compared to only two memories in Study 1) made for stronger associations between intimacy motivation and the communion themes. All four themes were significantly associated with the intimacy motive, and the overall correlation between communion and intimacy motivation was very high ($r = .53, p < .001$). In the case of the four agency themes summed across memories, the patterns of results from Studies 1 and 2 were similar. As in Study 1, the agentic theme of status appeared to be problematic; it failed to correlate with power or achievement motivation. In general, the patterns of correlations were similar within male and female subsamples.

Examining each of the seven memory narratives, motive scores appeared to be most strongly associated with corresponding agency and communion themes as manifested in peak experiences, turning points, and “other” memories (these memories tended to be from adulthood rather than from the childhood years). By contrast, no significant associations were observed between motive scores and the themes in early memories and childhood memories. In addition, early memories and childhood memories showed relatively low frequencies of agency and communion themes altogether, and thus very restricted ranges on scores. Although early memories and childhood scenes were readily recalled and deemed important or representative in some sense, they tended to be emotionally flat or neutral. It would appear, therefore, that the autobiographical scenes most amenable to thematic analysis on agency and communion are those invested with the most emotion or dramatic significance and those that tend to come from more recent times (adolescence and adulthood). By contrast, memories from child-
Table 4  
Correlations of Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) Motives and Autobiographical Themes: Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Motives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-mastery</td>
<td>.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement/responsibility</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in peak experience</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in early memory</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in turning point</td>
<td>.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in childhood memory</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in adolescent memory</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in adult memory</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency in other memory</td>
<td>.39***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total agency</td>
<td>.39***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/friendship</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care/help</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in peak experience</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in early memory</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in turning point</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in childhood memory</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in adolescent memory</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in adult memory</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion in other memory</td>
<td>.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total communion</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ns range from 77 to 79.  
*p < .05  
**p < .01  
***p < .001.
hood do not tend to reflect clear themes of agency and communion, and correspondingly their content is not usually strongly associated with motivational scores on the TAT.

MANOVAs for agency and communion themes and t tests for motives revealed no significant sex differences. Age and education level were also unrelated to themes of agency and communion. Whereas Study 1 revealed a significant negative association between total agency and total communion, Study 2 found that the two summary scores were unrelated to each other (r = .12, ns). Finally, agency and communion scores in Study 2 were unrelated to length of memory protocols.

Study 3

The first two studies demonstrate that themes of agency and communion in significant autobiographical scenes are associated in theoretically predictable ways with the motives of achievement, power, and intimacy, as assessed on the TAT. As such, the first two studies demonstrate a thematic continuity between autobiographical narratives and the fantasy narratives elicited by TAT cards. In McClelland's (1980) terminology, the TAT and the autobiographical scenes are operant measures of personality, in that they give the participant a great deal of freedom to craft his or her own characteristic response. Another technique for personality assessment that has operant qualities and that has gained currency in recent years is Emmons's (1986) method of assessing personal strivings. Emmons defines personal strivings as idiographic goal-directed units that represent what the individual is typically or characteristically trying to do in his or her daily life. By asking people simply to list and describe briefly a number of different things that they are currently trying to do or accomplish, the researcher can tap into some of the same kind of motivational concerns that are obtained from the TAT (Emmons & King, 1992). Indeed, Emmons and McAdams (1991) have documented significant positive associations between TAT motives of achievement, power, and intimacy on the one hand and personal strivings coded for achievement, power, and intimacy content, respectively, on the other. Study 3, therefore, examines the relation between themes of agency and communion in autobiographical recollections and the content quality of adults' personal strivings.

In contrast to operant measures of personality, respondent measures afford less response freedom, in that the participant must typically choose from fixed response alternatives or shape the response in a
way that is strongly determined by the stimulus situation (McClelland, 1980). Most self-report questionnaires of personality are respondent measures. On a self-report personality scale, the participant is typically given a fixed set of response alternatives, as provided in a true/false format or Likert-type rating scale. In general, past research has shown that, with some exceptions (e.g., Emmons & McAdams, 1991), operant and respondent measures of motivation do not correlate very highly with each other, even when they purport to measure the same construct (McClelland, 1980; McClelland et al., 1989). For example, correlations between TAT achievement motivation and self-report scales measuring the need for achievement are typically low and nonsignificant (McClelland, 1980). Study 3 employs a well-regarded respondent measure of personality needs—the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1984)—which includes the agentic scales of achievement and dominance and the communal scales of affiliation and nurturance. Conceptually, one would expect that themes of agency would be predicted by PRF scores on needs for achievement and dominance and that themes of communion likewise would be associated with the PRF needs for affiliation and nurturance. But empirical precedent suggests that cross-method associations such as these are surprisingly difficult to obtain.

**METHOD**

Data from 152 adults (80 women, 72 men) living in a small midwestern city were used in Study 3. The participants were obtained for a study of age/cohort differences in generativity, described in McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993). (The participants in Study 3 are a different sample from those in Study 2, even though both studies focused on generativity among adults.) Because the original purpose of the research was to examine age/cohort differences, the sample consisted of three distinct age groups: 51 “young adults” between the ages of 22 and 27 years; 53 “mid-life” adults between the ages of 37 and 42 years; and 48 “older” adults between the ages of 67 and 72 years. The sample represented a wide demographic range on such variables as income, education level, and occupational status. Demographic details and other information concerning sampling procedures are described in McAdams et al. (1993).

Participants completed a series of written measures, including (a) written accounts of a peak experience, turning-point experience, and earliest memory; (b) a list of 10 personal strivings; and (c) the four PRF scales (16 true/false items each) of achievement, dominance, affiliation, and nurturance. Participants were paid $25 each for taking part in the study.
As in Studies 1 and 2, two independent coders scored the three autobiographical recollections for themes of agency and communion. Reliability coefficients (correlations) were $r = .80$ for agency and $r = .86$ for communion. With respect to individual theme scores, the category agreement statistic (see Study 1) ranged from 81% (community) to 92% (status), mean = 87% for peak experiences; 68% (self-mastery) to 95% (empowerment), mean = 79% for turning points; and 72% (self-mastery) to 100% (community), mean = 85% for earliest memories.

For the strivings, participants were asked to write a sentence describing each of 10 personal strivings. Personal strivings were described as "the things that you typically or characteristically are trying to do in your everyday life" and "the objectives or goals that you are trying to accomplish or attain." For each striving, the participant was instructed to complete a sentence beginning with "I typically try to..." Two blank lines were provided for each striving. In McAdams et al. (1993) the strivings accounts were coded for themes of generativity. In the current study, the accounts were recoded for achievement, power, and intimacy concerns according to guidelines from Emmons and King (1992). Two independent coders scored all strivings for the three motivational areas. Interscorer reliability was determined by correlations between the coders' respective total scores on each of the three motivational areas for each participant (summing across the 10 strivings). Reliability coefficients were $r = .81$ for achievement, $r = .79$ for power, and $r = .90$ for intimacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 5 shows the intercorrelations of summary scores for agency and communion in autobiographical scenes, the three indices of personal strivings, and the four PRF scales. Agentic themes in autobiographical scenes were positively correlated with achievement strivings ($r = .49$, $p < .001$) and power strivings ($r = .20$, $p < .05$) and with the PRF scales for achievement ($r = .17$, $p < .05$) and dominance ($r = .29$, $p < .01$). PRF dominance was also associated with power strivings, replicating a finding from Emmons and McAdams (1991). Communal themes were strongly positively associated with intimacy strivings ($r = .39$, $p < .001$) and positively associated with the PRF scales for affiliation ($r = .21$, $p < .05$) and nurturance ($r = .27$, $p < .05$). Intimacy strivings, furthermore, were positively associated with PRF affiliation and nurturance. Examination of individual agency and communion themes showed generally positive and sometimes significant associations between individual theme scores on the one hand and cor-
**Table 5**

Agency and Communion: Intercorrelations among Autobiographical Themes, Personal Strivings, and Personality Research Form (PRF) Scores: Study 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Communion</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Autobiographical themes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Achievement strivings</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Power strivings</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. PRF Achievement</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. PRF Dominance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>.42***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communion

| 6. Autobiographical themes | -.17* | -.24** | .10 | .08 | .04 |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7. Intimacy strivings | -.15 | -.07 | -.09 | -.03 | -.06 | .39*** |   |   |   |   |
| 8. PRF Affiliation | .09 | -.03 | .09 | .01 | .18* |   | .21* | .25** |   |   |
| 9. PRF Nurturance | .01 | -.04 | -.13 | .12 | .06 | .27** | .33*** | .42*** |   |   |

Note. Ns range from 134 to 139.

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001.
responding strivings and PRF indices on the other. The one exception to this rule, however, was the agentic theme of status, which, as in Studies 1 and 2, failed to show significant associations with any other measures of agency-related constructs. As in the first two studies, correlational patterns were similar among men and women. For all of the variables, one significant sex difference was observed. Women scored significantly higher than men on PRF nurturance: $F(1, 134) = 12.99$, $p < .001$.

It would appear, therefore, that autobiographical themes of agency and communion are associated in theoretically predictable ways with both operant measures of personal strivings and respondent measures of needs for achievement, dominance, affiliation, and nurturance. While the correlations are not always robust, they are statistically significant in most instances. Adults' narrative accounts of significant scenes from their past are thematically consistent, therefore, with their daily goals and their conscious understanding of their main social needs.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The three studies provide empirical support for a thematic coherence in personality across the arenas of autobiographical memories, social motives, and daily goals. College students and community adults wrote or told narrative accounts of key autobiographical scenes that were subsequently coded for four themes of agency and four themes of communion, derived from the writings of Bakan (1966) and an extensive empirical literature in human motivation (McClelland, Murray) and interpersonal behavior (Leary, Wiggins). The results of the thematic analysis revealed that agency scores are positively correlated with corresponding indices of achievement motivation, power motivation, and dominance, assessed in projective (the TAT) and objective (the PRF) measures, and with operant reports of personal strivings having to do with feeling strong (power) and being successful (achievement). Similarly, communion scores are highly correlated with intimacy motivation on the TAT, the needs for affiliation and nurturance on the PRF, and personal strivings concerning warm and close interpersonal relationships (intimacy). Relationships between themes and other operant indices (TATs and strivings) are somewhat stronger than those between themes and the respondent PRF scores. In general, low intercorrelations are observed among both agency and communion themes, suggesting that the themes are relatively independent of each other, even within each of the domains of agency and communion. However, a modicum of internal
consistency in overall agency and communion scores is demonstrated across the seven discrete memory accounts in Study 2.

The results of the research are in accord with recent arguments for and demonstrations of thematic coherence in personality as manifested in autobiographical accounts of the past, reports of current motivations and concerns, and projections of future plans and goals (Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne & Klohn, 1993). Along with the work of Woike (1993) and Hanson (1992), the findings of the current investigation suggest that agency and communion are powerful conceptual categories for organizing the motivational content of autobiographical memories. In the agentic realm, themes of self-mastery, status, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment are readily recognized in narrative accounts of significant scenes. For communion, themes of love/friendship, dialogue, care/help, and community are prominent in autobiographical recollections. Thematic analysis of agency and communion appears to be most valuable and appropriate for autobiographical accounts of emotionally very positive scenes (e.g., peak experiences) and episodes of dramatic change (e.g., life-story turning points) and for memories from adolescence and adulthood (see also McAdams, 1982, 1984, 1985; McAdams et al., 1981). By contrast, accounts of earliest recollections or representative scenes from childhood tend to show low levels of agency and communion themes, and the theme scores from these accounts do not tend to be associated with outside measures of motives and goals. Employing agency and communion categories and obtaining written and spoken accounts of earliest recollections, the current project does not support Adler's (1927) well-known claim that one's earliest memories reveal a person's style of life. Instead, the rather bland accounts of early memories obtained in the current investigation are more reminiscent of Freud's (1900/1953) characterization of early recollections as "screen memories."

In the past 15 years, personality psychologists have enjoyed considerable success in demonstrating personality consistency in the realm of self-report traits, especially with regard to the Big Five trait dimensions (John, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1990). During this same period, however, some investigators have sought to move beyond nonconditional, self-report trait dimensions to explore in greater detail the contingent and highly contextualized goals, plans, scripts, and stories of everyday life (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990)—aspects of personality that are typically couched in developmental or motivational terms, specifying purposive human behavior extended in time from past, to present, to
future (McAdams, 1994, 1995). Rather than working within the domi-
nant paradigm of self-report trait questionnaires, these researchers have
often employed qualitative, idiographic, or other nontraditional meth-
ods of personality assessment that provide data rich in nuance but
difficult to code. In the face of such complexity, some investigators
have given up on quantitative coding altogether (e.g., Rosenwald &
Ochberg, 1992) while others have endeavored to develop consensual
scoring systems that can be reliably employed (e.g., Luborsky & Crits-
Christoph, 1991; Smith, 1992; Stewart, Franz, & Layton, 1988). The
current investigation is clearly in the latter camp. A standardized coding
scheme for themes of agency and communion should prove useful in
organizing some of the wide-ranging, motivationally relevant content
that is revealed in autobiography. The application of such a system
to autobiographical materials may be no substitute for the in-depth,
psychodynamic exegesis of the single life text, but it offers the ad-
vantage of affording quantitative comparisons of different lives or of
different narrative accounts within the same life.

In recent years, narrative accounts of lives have become a subject
of great interest among a growing number of personality and social
psychologists. Two theoretical frameworks that reflect this interest are
Tomkin's (1987; Carlson, 1981) script theory and McAdams's (1985,
1993) life-story model of adult identity. Adopting a dramaturgical per-
spective on personality, Tomkins views the person as an implicit play-
wright who fashions his or her own personal drama from the first weeks
of life onward. The basic component of the drama is the scene, the
memory of a specific happening or event in one's life, containing at
least one basic affect (e.g., joy, excitement, fear, anger) and one ob-
ject of that affect. Scenes become organized into families or groupings
according to scripts, which are rules for interpreting, creating, enhanc-
ing, or defending an organization of scenes. McAdams argues that such
scenes comprise high points, low points, turning points, beginnings,
and endings in an evolving and psychosocially crafted life story, a
story complete with setting, characters, plots, and themes. The story
is one's identity. In modern societies, adults define themselves in time,
space, and society through narratives. The central motivational themes
in stories—the lines of purposive action that move the plot forward—
are agency and communion. The coding system presented in this article,
therefore, may be viewed as a quantitative tool for assessing the central
motivational dimensions inherent in narrative identity.

Both Tomkins and McAdams adopt a moderate constructivist view
of autobiographical recollection. Scenes are the personal reconstructions of the past, cast in narrative form. They are not perfectly veridical recordings of what happened in a person's life, though it is assumed that in most cases some or much of their content is based in fact. While autobiographical recollections may provide clues to what "really happened" long ago, they are no substitute for prospective, longitudinal investigations of personality (e.g., Block, 1993). The greatest value in autobiographical studies lies instead in their illumination of current life meanings. In Tomkins's view, one's current personality is the organization of reconstructed past scenes and scripts. In McAdams's view, one's current identity is the story of the reconstructed past, perceived present, and envisioned future that provides a person's life today with unity, purpose, and meaning. To know and understand a person today is to know that person's story—that self-defining narrative that the person has generated and continues to generate over time to explain to the self and to others how his or her life is indeed coherent and purposeful, how it makes sense today in the context of what it has been in the past and what it might be in the future.

Themes of agency and communion in autobiographical scenes, therefore, illuminate how the person today chooses to narrate the personal past. They provide a way of characterizing in motivational terms what kinds of scenes are selected for narration and how they are indeed narrated. As the data from all three studies discussed here show, the narrations are by no means perfectly consistent from one memory to the next. An agentic peak experience may be followed by a highly communal turning-point event, which in turn may be followed by an early memory that seems to have little to do with agency or communion. Nonetheless, some predictability from one memory to the next may be discerned. And when the agentic and communal themes are summed across narrations, significant and sometimes substantial associations may be discovered between autobiographical themes from the reconstructed past on the one hand and the person's motives and goals for the present and near future on the other.

REFERENCES


