

The Relationship between Unmitigated Communion and Depression: The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem

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Abstract: This article investigated the relationship between unmitigated communion and depression, as well as the mediating role of self-esteem. A sample of 288 adults was assessed with Unmitigated Communion Scale (UCS), Self-Esteem Scale (SES) and Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS). Results showed that unmitigated communion was positively correlated with depression and self-esteem played a mediating role between unmitigated communion and depression. We infer that the individuals with higher unmitigated communion level have lower level of self-esteem, which further leads to their higher tendency towards depression.

Key words: Unmitigated Communion • Depression • Self-Esteem

INTRODUCTION

In life, we often encounter some "goody-goodies" who tend to neglect themselves in order to meet the needs of others. Helgeson and Fritz's research [1] showed the effect and put forward the concept of unmitigated communion. Unmitigated communion as one kind of personality characteristic involves a focus on others and the neglect of the self. Individuals with such traits will place the needs of others above their own, paying too much attention to others and neglecting themselves [1]. Empirical studies have shown that unmitigated communion can affect individuals' physiology, cognition and behavior in an extensive way. In terms of physiology, unmitigated communion individuals are prone to suffer from various chronic diseases including coronary heart disease and rheumatoid arthritis [2]. On the other hand, unmitigated communion individuals exhibit features such as externalized self-evaluation, fear of negative evaluation and low self-esteem [3] and in terms of behavior, unmitigated communion individuals display a series of interpersonal problem behaviors such as over-dependency, over-protection and self-sacrifice and in the meanwhile, also have intrusive ideas, e.g. when they know that a friend is in trouble, they will think repeatedly about the issue and feel that it's their responsibility to help the friend [4-7].

In emotional terms, the higher the individuals' unmitigated communion levels, the more likely they are to manifest depressive symptoms [6, 8-12]. According to Aubé's study [13], the unmitigated communion traits of participants were significantly positively correlated with the depression level in both self- and peer-reports; moreover, the level of unmitigated communion was predictive of the individuals' depressive symptoms 10 years later. In addition, the unmitigated communion-based prediction of depressive tendencies not only shows stability over time, but also has stability across groups. Studies have examined the effects of unmitigated communion on depression in different groups and found that the individuals' level of unmitigated communion had a significant predictive effect on depression regardless of whether they were college students [6, 14] healthy adults [6] or breast cancer patients [3, 15].

Individuals with high unmitigated communion traits are found to have externalized self-evaluation and low self-esteem [7]. Unmitigated communion individuals' self-evaluation is more subject to external influences. They are highly sensitive to negative evaluations by others. Once they perceive that others evaluate them negatively, they will directly turn the negative evaluations into self-disidentification [1]. Moreover, the unmitigated communion individuals themselves have negative self-evaluation and pessimistically believe that others do not like them [16].

In addition, self-esteem is an important index for assessing mental health [17]. Substantial studies have shown that there is a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and depression. Abramson *et al.* [18] suggested that low self-esteem was a risk factor leading to depression in individuals, who also constructed a vulnerability model for the relationship between self-esteem and depression. Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to develop depressive moods when faced with negative life events and elevation of self-esteem can effectively buffer negative emotions such as depression [19-23].

In the context of Chinese collectivist culture, the needs of others are placed above oneself and the social environment may be easier to breed individuals' unmitigated communion traits. Moreover, self-evaluation under the collectivistic culture is derived partly from the external evaluation. That is to say, the unmitigated communion individuals under Chinese culture may be affected by the pressure of outside evaluation, which may lead to more psychological problems. To this end, this study aimed to explore the relationship between unmitigated communion traits and individual depression levels in the context of Chinese culture, as well as the mediating role of self-esteem in the above relationship.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: A total of 297 subjects were recruited via Questionnaire Star web platform (<https://www.wjx.cn/jq/9621432.aspx>). After deleting 9 regular questionnaires, 288 valid questionnaires remained, with an effective rate of 97%. The subjects were aged between 17-54 years, with a mean age of 30.88 years ($SD = 8.56$), 145 of whom were males.

Materials: Unmitigated Communion Scale: The Unmitigated Communion Scale (UCS) compiled by Fritz and Helgeson [6] was used to assess unmitigated communion. It consists of 9 questions, including "I always put others' needs above mine". The questions were scored on a 5-point scale from 1 "Strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". The higher the score the higher the level of unmitigated communion among individuals. The internal consistency coefficient of UCS in this study was 0.69.

Self-esteem Scale: The Self-Esteem Scale (SES) by Rosenberg [24] was used to assess self-esteem. It consists of 10 questions, such as "I feel I am a valuable

person, at least on par with others". These questions were scored on a 4-point scale from 1 "Completely disagree" to 4 "Completely agree". The higher the score, the higher the self-esteem level of individuals. The internal consistency coefficient of SES was 0.88 herein.

Self-rating Depression Scale: The Self-rating Depression Scale (SDS) was developed by Zung [25]. It consists of 4 questions, including "I feel depressed and gloomy". These questions were scored on a 5-point scale from 1 "Never" to 5 "Always". The higher the score the higher the depressive tendency of individuals. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the model fits the data well, $\chi^2 = 285.04$, $df = 6$, CFI = 0.995, TLI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.018. The internal consistency coefficient of SDS was 0.68 herein.

RESULTS

Common Method Biases Test: Harman's single factor test was employed to check the common method biases and the results revealed the absence of significant common method biases. There were 7 common factors with eigenvalue greater than 1, of which the variation (23.4%) explainable by the first common factor was less than the critical value (40%).

The correlation analysis results (Table 1) showed that the unmitigated communion was significantly negatively correlated with the self-esteem ($r = -.19, p < .01$), indicating that the higher the level of unmitigated communion, the lower the level of self-esteem. A significant positive correlation between unmitigated communion and depression was found ($r = .12, p < .05$), indicating that the higher the level of unmitigated communion, the higher the level of depression. There was a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and depression ($r = -.39, p < .01$), suggesting that the higher the level of self-esteem, the lower the level of depression.

In addition, age was positively correlated with the unmitigated communion ($r = .16, p < 0.01$), indicating that the level of unmitigated communion was elevated with increases age. No significant correlation was found between gender and unmitigated communion ($r = -.02, ns$).

Mediating Role of Self-esteem Between Unmitigated Communion and Depression: To explore the mediating effect of self-esteem between unmitigated communion and depression, the model 4 in the PROCESS program was used for validation. The results showed that after controlling for age, the unmitigated communion could

Table 1: Correlation analysis between the variables ($N = 288$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	—	—					
2. Age	30.88	8.56	.09	—			
3. Unmitigated communion	2.72	.49	-.02	.16**	—		
4. Self-esteem	3.04	.43	.01	-.02	-.19**	—	
5. Depression	2.43	.73	.11	-.15**	.12*	-.39**	—

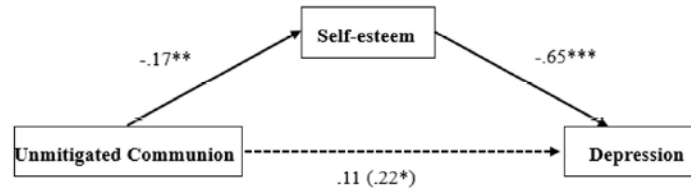
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Fig. 1: Analysis chart of the mediating role of self-esteem

positively predict the level of depression ($\beta = .22, t = 2.49, p < .05$) and negatively predict the level of self-esteem ($\beta = -.17, t = -3.19, p < .01$). When unmitigated communion and self-esteem entered the regression equation simultaneously, the direct predictive effect of unmitigated communion on the depression was insignificant ($\beta = .1, t = 1.34, p = .18$), while the self-esteem could negatively predict the depression ($\beta = -.65, t = -7.01, p < .001$). Bootstrap was used to further test the mediating effect and the 95% confidence intervals for the mediating effect were estimated by sampling 1,000 times. The results showed that the 95% confidence intervals for mediating effect excluded 0, Estimate = .22, SE = .09, $p < .05$, 95%CI = [.05, .39]. This indicated that the self-esteem played a mediating role between unmitigated communion and depression (Fig. 1). In other words, the higher the individuals' levels of unmitigated communion, the lower their self-esteem, thus resulting in higher levels of depression.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between unmitigated communion and depression in the context of Chinese culture and explored the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship. We found that individuals with high unmitigated communion traits had a higher tendency towards depression, which was consistent with previous studies [6, 8-11]. Unmitigated communion individuals tend to neglect their own needs in interpersonal relationships in order to meet the needs of others. Even when others offer help, they are unable to accept the caring well, thereby causing excessive psychological stress and are prone to develop depression [5-7, 21]. Moreover, Chinese

culture has always been advocating the concerns for the needs of others, such as "being empathic" and "being altruistic". Even in the face of interpersonal problems, individuals are required to make concession and compromise, in order to avoid conflicts. All of these qualities further emphasize the unmitigated communion individuals' behavioral characteristics of concern for others and ignorance of self-perception, which in turn lead to their higher tendency towards depression.

This study confirmed the mediating role of self-esteem between unmitigated communion and depression. Individuals with unmitigated communion traits have low levels of self-esteem and are prone to depression. According to Helgeson and Fritz [1] people with higher unmitigated communion traits are more likely to feel that they lack value and this low self-esteem is likely to lead to depressive tendency among them. Individuals with high unmitigated communion traits are overly dependent on others' evaluations, while external unstable evaluations can hardly satisfy their internal psychological needs. Therefore, excessive attention to outside evaluations has a negative impact on individuals' self-perceptions. Meanwhile, China has a collectivist culture, which is also a typical "face culture". The "face culture" tends to give priority to understanding oneself from the information of external environment [26]. That is, Chinese people evaluate themselves more from the perspective of others. Therefore, the self-evaluations of unmitigated communion individuals are easily affected by others and the environment, which further affects their level of self-esteem. On the other hand, unmitigated communion individuals yearn for improvement of others' positive evaluations of themselves, so low self-esteem may be used as a motivation to stimulate individuals to gain self-

esteem and self-identity through self-negligence and over-involvement behaviors [4]. The unmitigated communion individuals focus more on caring for others and less on self-exposure, who neglect their own needs and bear the consequences alone, thereby building more psychological pressure on themselves and leading to aggravated depressive tendency.

In addition, previous research has found that although both men and women exhibit unmitigated communion traits, women's scores on unmitigated communion are significantly higher than men's. That is, unmitigated communion is a personality trait more relevant to female gender roles [9]. However, the present study did not find inter-gender difference in the unmitigated communion traits in the context of Chinese culture. The reason may be that in the Chinese cultural context, the behavioral pattern of concern for others, being considerate of others and ignoring self-needs is praised by the society.

In this study, a questionnaire survey was conducted to investigate the relationship between unmitigated communion and depression. In the future, the research on the unmitigated communion trait of individuals can be initiated in the laboratory context to verify its relationship with depression. Besides, future studies can also focus on the cross-cultural comparison of unmitigated communion to examine the impacts of collectivist and individualist cultures on the unmitigated communion individuals. In addition, this study targeted the general population. Future researchers can pay attention to the service industry population, i.e. social workers, nurses, etc. The people in this industry are mainly emotional laborers. The occupation itself requires them to pay attention to others' needs, which may cause excessive psychological stress on themselves and thus trigger psychological problems among the population.

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