

## Coding Autobiographical Episodes for Themes of Agency and Communion

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David Bakan (1966) introduced the concepts of *agency* and *communion* in the following passage:

I have adopted the terms "agency" and "communion" to characterize two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms, agency for the existence of an organism as an individual, and communion for the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is a part. Agency manifests itself in self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion; communion manifests itself in the sense of being at one with other organisms. Agency manifests itself in the formation of separations; communion in the lack of separations. Agency manifests itself in isolation, alienation, and aloneness; communion in contact, openness, and union. Agency manifests itself in the urge to master; communion in noncontractual cooperation. (pp. 14-15).

These two generic "modalities in the existence of living forms" may also be viewed as two thematic clusterings in life narratives, each articulating important life goals, strivings, needs, and desires. Following the work of Bakan and many others, McAdams (1985; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996) has suggested that agency and communion are the two central superordinate thematic clusterings in life narratives. People's life stories differ with respect to the salience of agency and communion themes, and those differences are measurable. This manual is designed to enable the researcher to capture some of those individual differences in the thematic coding of particular life narrative episodes. It describes a simple and reliable method for coding the salience of agency and communion themes in written or verbal accounts of especially significant autobiographical events, or what McAdams (1985) calls "nuclear episodes" in life stories.

The coding system is designed to detect the salience of agency and communion themes in accounts of discrete life-story episodes, such as life story "high points," "low points," "turning points," and "earliest memories." Such accounts may be collected through life-narrative open-ended questionnaires or through interviews. In general, the coding scheme works best when subjects describe particular events in their lives that they find to be especially personally meaningful -- events that the subjects themselves may see as having had an important impact on their identity. For each event, subjects are typically asked to describe (verbally or in writing) what happened in the event itself, who was involved, what the subject was thinking and feeling during the event, and what (if anything) the event means in the context of the subject's own self-defining life story. Subjects may describe events that are either positive or negative in emotional tone. In general, however, the categories described below refer to positively-valenced themes in life narrative.

In coding an account for themes of agency and communion, the scoring unit is the episode itself. Each episode is coded for the presence (score +1) or absence (score 0) of eight different themes, four under the heading of agency and four under the heading of communion. The four agency themes are: (1) *Self-Mastery* (SM), (2) *Status/Victory* (SV), (3) *Achievement/Responsibility* (AR), and (4) *Empowerment* (EM). The four communion themes are: (5) *Love/Friendship*, (6) *Dialogue* (DG), (7) *Caring/Help* (CH), and (8) *Unity/Togetherness* (UT). The coder must determine whether or not the story contains evidence of each of the eight themes. If evidence exists for the theme in the episode, then the theme receives a score of +1 for the corresponding episode. If no evidence exists, the theme receives a score of 0 for that episode. A theme is scored only once per episode. Theme scores may then be summed across agency and across communion categories within an episode, to provide summary scores for agency and communion respectively. Thus, the highest possible score for agency or communion for a given episode would be "4." The lowest score would be "0."

The coding system for agency and communion is a conservative scheme. The scorer should not give a point (+1) for a given theme in a given episode unless there is clear and explicit proof of the theme's existence in the episode. The scorer should be careful not to read anything into the literal description of the account. The scorer should avoid clinical inferences and extensions beyond the written or spoken word.

Two independent coders should score episodes, and then correlation coefficients should be calculated to determine interscorer reliability. Reliabilities may be calculated for each theme score, summed across however many episodes a subject describes, and for the total agency and total communion scores, summed across episodes. Scorers may need to work together in early phases of coding in order to build up a common understanding, so that eventually their independent codings will show acceptable reliability.

### *Themes of Agency*

Agency encompasses a wide range of psychological and motivational ideas, including the concepts of strength, power, expansion, mastery, control, dominance, autonomy, separation, and independence. Most accounts of important autobiographical experiences are couched in agentic terms to one degree or another. After all, the subject is telling the researcher about an importance experience *for the self*, so we 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 most autobiographical accounts, especially among contemporary citizens of Western societies, imbued with an ethic of individualism. For example, many turning point episodes 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 classes. 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 cultural standards of contemporary self rhetoric, stand out as especially indicative of Bakan's concept of agency in human lives.

## 1. SELF-MASTERY (SM).

The story protagonist strives successfully to master, control, enlarge, or perfect the self. Through forceful or effective action, thought, or experience, the protagonist is able to strengthen the self, to become a larger, wiser, or more powerful agent in the world. A relatively common expression of the theme involves the protagonist's attaining a dramatic *insight* into the meaning of his or her life. The insight may be seen as a transformation in self-awareness or a leap forward in self-understanding that entails the realization of new goals, plans, or missions in life -- a significant insight into one's *identity*. Another relatively common expression of SM involves the protagonist's experiencing a greatly enhanced sense of *control* over his or her destiny in the wake of an important event (e.g., divorce, death of a loved one, reaching a life milestone). Other examples of SM typically show up in accounts in which the individual reports that he or she felt "strengthened" by an important event, or in which a person explicitly says that the experience provided him or her with a feeling of *power*.

Examples of SM through "insight":

A man comes into contact with the spiritual dimensions of his life at a weekend retreat designed to stimulate psychological growth.

A man accepts the awful truth that he is indeed an alcoholic.

A subject responds that her most important goal in life is the attainment of wisdom, which she describes as "the re-creation of myself as a better person."

A woman comes to see her life's mission as being an artist. She quits her job, sets up a studio, and strives to actualize her dream.

A young man experiences a religious conversion which provides him with new insight into his own life.

A middle-aged man realizes that he is being exploited by his current employer. He breaks away from the firm and embarks upon a new line of work, more in keeping with his life goals.

A woman comes to the conclusion that she has wasted 20 years of her life in a desperate drive for material well-being. She decides to dedicate her life to helping others.

Inspired by reading Freud, a young man comes to the realization that he wants to be a psychotherapist.

After a near-death experience, a man comes to a new understanding of the quality of life. He pledges to slow down, enjoy his family more, take everything one day at a time.

After the death of his son, a man changes his "philosophy of life."

Examples of SM through "control":

A woman reports feelings of deep satisfaction in being able to manage the pain of labor during childbirth. She is able to master the self by controlling her own pain.

A divorce frees up a woman to take control of her own life and the life of her son.

A man feels SM by sticking to a regimen of weight-lifting and dieting; SM is experienced by controlling (and perfecting) the body.

A drug addict kicks the habit; takes control of his life.

A woman argues with her doctor about the method by which she will give birth to her first child. She wins the argument and is able to have the child "naturally," with minimal assistance from medical technologies. She is thus able to control the situation and control her own bodily processes in accord with her image of herself as a powerful agent.

A young White woman defies her family's objections and marries a black man.

A student is able to control his raging emotions in confronting a professor about a perceived injustice in class. The student prevails in convincing the instructor of his point of view, showing that controlling the self can reap significant external benefits.

Though a highly disciplined regimen of reading and study, a professor continues to improve her mind and enlarge her understanding of her chosen field of study.

Other examples of SM:

A married couple go through tremendous hardships in their first year of marriage, experiencing the death of both sets of parents. They emerge from this period strengthened and better able to cope with life's problems.

A musician experiences a sense of power or mastery during a performance.

An army recruit feels "strong" after finishing basic training.

## 2. STATUS/VICTORY (SV).

The protagonist attains a heightened status or prestige among his or her peers, through receiving a special recognition or honor or winning a contest or competition. The implication in SV is that status or victory is achieved via a vis others. There is always an interpersonal and implicitly competitive context in SV. Typically, the person "wins." There is victory or triumph. SV refers to significant recognition, especially prestigious honors, and various kinds of victories over others. Simply "doing a good

job," getting good grades, or successfully achieving a goal is not enough to score for SV. Some examples:

A young woman is elected homecoming queen.

An actor wins a coveted lead part in an upcoming play.

A student graduates from college with special honors (e.g., magna cum laude).

A person receives an award for outstanding achievement.

The quarterback completes a crucial pass, which gives his team the victory in the football game.

A musician receives a standing ovation.

A professor is honored at a party for receiving tenure at the university.

An aspiring writer is granted admission to a prestigious graduate program.

A swimmer wins a race.

A lawyer wins a case.

A person is granted an important position or awarded a prestigious job.

A high school student gains admission to a good university.

A student wins a scholarship or grant.

### **3. ACHIEVEMENT/RESPONSIBILITY (AR).**

The person reports substantial success in the achievement of tasks, jobs, instrumental goals, or in the assumption of important responsibilities. The protagonist of the story feels proud, confident, masterful, accomplished, or successful in (1) meeting significant challenges or overcoming important obstacles concerning instrumental achievement in life or (2) taking on major responsibilities for other people and assuming roles that require the person to be in charge of things or people. Most often these accomplishments and responsibilities would occur in achievement settings, such as school or work, rather than in more personal settings, such as with reference to spiritual or romantic goals. Rather than "winning" (as under SV), this category requires that the protagonist strive to do things, produce things, or assume responsibilities in such a way as to meet an implicit or explicit standard of excellence. In this sense, AR bears resemblance to the "achievement motivation" scoring categories in McClelland and Atkinson's coding system for TAT stories (McClelland et al., 1953). (By contrast, SM and SV appear to connect thematically to Winter's (1973) "power

motivation" scoring categories for TAT stories. Power motivation and achievement motivation are two different manifestations of agency.)

Examples of AR:

A student works hard to perfect a short story for a class assignment. He spends hours polishing word choice, getting the imagery right, and so on.

An executive meets his annual goals for the company.

A young boy builds a tree house, and he is very proud of his accomplishment.

A student masters a class on computer programming.

A secretary takes over an office and turns it into a model of efficiency and productivity.

After having their first child, a couple now realizes the significant financial responsibilities they have assumed.

A woman endeavors to interact with her colleagues in a "healthy and productive manner." Here the explicit reference to being productive in the workplace qualifies the response for AR.

A woman describes her movement from college to graduate school: "I was able to settle down and become focused and to become productive in a much more real way than up until then. I had always produced a lot of stuff academically; I'm also the kind of person who is constantly productive with something, or at least I used to be that way. I would have six projects going on at once." But now she was able to become more focused on one project at a time, which enhanced her productivity.

A father reflects: "You're the head of the family and you're responsible for a lot more than you were before. It's a real maturing experience."

A group of young adults builds a community in the wilderness: "We were building a community. We were really working with our muscles, you know, passing buckets of cement."

A man is accustomed to failing, but he achieves success in an important business venture, building his confidence.

An author publishes her first short story.

A middle-aged mother reflects on her children, who have recently left for college. She decides that she has done an "excellent job" as a caregiver. Even through this is an interpersonal rather than instrumental task, the writer explicitly couches it in achievement terms -- as a job well done.

A pilot completes his first solo flight.

Studying a foreign culture for many years, an anthropologist comes up with a new way of seeing the culture, solving an intellectual problem which she had puzzled over for a long time.

First day on the job, a nurse confronts a difficult assignment, but she is successful in completing the task.

At the age of 65, a man runs in his first marathon.

A young man is kicked out of his house by his parents. He struggles to survive, but eventually he becomes "a successful and responsible adult."

A woman is proud of her college achievements -- in academics as well as in clubs and associations on campus.

A man reports after his divorce: "I challenge myself to the limit academically, physically, and on my job. Since that time I have accomplished virtually any goal I set for myself. I have never been happier."

A woman reports after her divorce: "In order to survive financially and support these children, I decided to enroll in a graduate program in counseling psychology at a major university. I was accepted and began the program with great determination . . . I felt the failure of marriage was reversed by the success of completing a graduate degree through years of difficult and intellectually stimulating study."

#### 4. EMPOWERMENT (EM).

The subject is enlarged, enhanced, empowered, ennobled, built up, or made better through his or her association with *someone or something larger and more powerful than the self*. The self is made even more agentic by virtue of its involvement with an even more powerful agent of some sort. In EM, the empowering force is usually either (1) God, nature, the cosmos, or some other manifestation of a larger power in the universe; or (2) a highly influential teacher, mentor, minister, therapist, parent, grandparent, or authority figure who provides critical assistance or guidance for the individual. Some examples of EM:

*Many religious experiences qualify, as when a person reports that God or some larger force was made manifest to him or her, putting the individual in touch with a larger power of some kind: "Never in my life had I seen such beauty and glory as I did in that moment. Truly it was the Lord's greatness that gave us that brief mystical beauty of nature."*

Certain experiences of empowerment in nature may qualify: On a camping trip in Wisconsin, "we decided to walk around the lake one afternoon. The paths were busy, but not so much as to keep us from noticing the small details of nature. The path was challenging, very rocky. The pine smelled so beautiful. The lake seemed powerful but

not frightening. We drank from a fresh water spring. The water was so clear. I was filled with a combination of joy, excitement, self-confidence, and peacefulness about the future. The feeling swelled throughout my body. I felt as if I was about to fly or spin with joy."

A psychotherapist helps a person gain insight into life. (May also score for SM.)

A person feels empowered by contact with a guru or spiritual guide.

After the birth of her niece, a woman experiences a feeling "that life is a force that will go beyond our time on this earth." (Here the empowering force is some kind of life force itself.)

A young Jewish girl feels empowered -- given an adult status -- by her Bat Mitzvah.

A man believes he has communicated with his dead sister, in a shadowy, mystical experience. Paranormal experiences like these -- rarely reported in our data -- suggest a kind of empowerment, in that the protagonist is given special access to unusual or supernatural powers.

### *Themes of Communion*

Communion encompasses psychological and motivational ideas concerning love, friendship, intimacy, sharing, belonging, affiliation, merger, union, nurturance, and so on. At its heart, communion involves different people coming together in warm, close, caring, and communicative relationships. McAdams's (1980) thematic coding system for "intimacy motivation," employed with TAT stories, is explicitly modeled after Bakan's conception of communion, as well as related ideas in the writings of Maslow (being-love), Buber (the I-Thou relation), and Sullivan (the need for interpersonal intimacy). The four communion categories below represent a distillation and sharpening of the ten categories employed by McAdams in the TAT coding system for intimacy motivation. In addition, the four categories for communion draw more generally from Murray's (1938) communal concepts of "need for affiliation" and "need for nurturance."

#### **5. LOVE/FRIENDSHIP (LF).**

A protagonist experiences an enhancement of erotic love or friendship toward another person. LF refers primarily to love and friendship between peers, as in heterosexual or homosexual relationships and same-sex as well as opposite-sex platonic friendships. It does *not* include tender feelings of nurturance or caring as experienced in parent/child relationships. In terms of such dimensions as age and status, therefore, lovers and friends are typically relative equals. In order to score for LF, the experience must be centrally about the development of love or friendship in a particular relationship. This holds even if the relationship eventually declines or ends. What is

key is that the protagonist experiences love or friendship in the event described. Consequently, an account in which a man says he was in love with a woman but the relationship eventually terminated would still count for LF, because the love was mentioned. However, an account in which a husband focuses on how his marriage was ending would not score for LF because he has not talked about the love he felt for his wife at one time. Simply having fun or enjoying oneself in the presence of a lover or friend does *not* qualify for LF. Examples of LF:

Two friends feel that they grow emotionally closer to each other after spending time together on a vacation.

A man proposes to a woman. (Or vice versa.)

A woman describes her marriage to a wonderful man as the high point of her life.

A man marvels at the love and commitment his wife has given him over the past 40 years.

A young couple enjoy lovemaking on a Saturday afternoon.

An older woman teaches a young man about sex and love.

A woman is strongly attracted to a man in her class. He finally asks her out.

A couple reflects on their happy honeymoon.

A college student takes a friend to a formal dance: "I went to the formal with my friend, Melissa, even though she had a boyfriend. I felt incredibly happy during the slow dance with her. As I held her close and tight, I felt her acceptance and happiness with me. We felt truly comfortable and happy with each other, as friends. Even though there was no direct romantic relationship between us, I sense a mutual true love."

A person remarks on a good friendship he has experienced.

## 6. DIALOGUE (DG).

A person experiences a reciprocal and noninstrumental form of communication or dialogue with another person or group of others. DG usually takes the form of a conversation between people. The conversation is viewed as an end in itself (justified for its own sake) rather than as a means to another end. Thus, such instrumental conversations as "interviews" or "planning sessions" do *not* qualify for DG because they are undertaken for noncommunal reasons (e.g., to obtain information or make plans). Furthermore, highly contentious or unpleasant conversations -- such as hostile arguments or exchanges in which people do not seem to be listening to each other -- do *not* qualify for DG. In order to score for DG, a conversation need not be about especially intimate topics, though of course it may be. A friendly chat about the weather, for example, would qualify for DG. What is important to note is that the communication

between the protagonist and other characters in the story is reciprocal (mutual), nonhostile, and viewed as an end in itself rather than a means to an instrumental end. Note also, that conversations for the express purpose of helping another person (e.g., providing advice, therapy) do qualify for this theme.

Examples of DG:

"We sat across from each other and tossed ideas back and forth, ideas of what we thought the plays were about."

"Sara and I had been writing letters to each other all summer."

"We drank a carafe of wine and had a memorable conversation about love and parents."

"My peak experience was both a time of sadness and joy. Sadness because my friend told me she had cancer. Joy because we had opened up to each other and it was a beautiful experience."

"My mother and I talked in depth about the problems my brother was having. I felt like so much of who I have become is like my mother. I felt warmth and closeness when we said good-bye." (also scores for LF).

Sometimes a communication can be nonverbal, as in this example of DG: "She did not have to say a word. I knew instinctively what she meant."

## 7. CARING/HELP (CH).

The individual reports that he or she provides care, assistance, nurturance, help, aid, support, or therapy for another, providing for the physical, material, social, or emotional welfare or well-being of the other. Examples of *being helped* (being cared for, being the object of nurturance) do *not* score for CH. Some of these, indeed, would qualify for EM under Agency, in that a strong outside force (e.g., a therapist) may serve to empower the subject. Examples of CH:

Many accounts of childbirth score for CH, as well as accounts of adoption. In order to score, the subject must express a strong emotional reactions of love, tenderness, care, nurturance, joy, warmth, or the like in response to the event.

Accounts of taking care of children as they grow up, meeting their needs and looking after them during difficult times, typically score for CH. Also included here are accounts of providing needed financial support, as in the role of the family breadwinner.

Providing assistance or care for spouses, siblings, parents, friends, co-workers, and colleagues may be included, as well. Mere technical assistance, however, does not qualify for CH. An emotional quality of caring must accompany the assistance,

which is usually associated with providing counseling or therapy concerning life problems or interpersonal difficulties.

Developing empathy for other people, even if it is not acted upon in a given event, scores for CH. In one example, a woman describes reading a particular novel when she was a girl and developing an empathic attitude toward impoverished and oppressed people as a result.

## 8. UNITY/TOGETHERNESS (UT).

Whereas the communal themes of LF, DG, and CH tend to specific particular relationships between the protagonist and one or a few other people, the theme of Unity/Togetherness captures the communal idea of being part of a larger community. In UT, the protagonist experiences a sense of oneness, unity, harmony, synchrony, togetherness, allegiance, belongingness, or solidarity with a group of people, a community, or even all of humankind. A common manifestation of this theme involves the protagonist's being surrounded by friends and family at an important event (e.g., a wedding, graduation), experiencing strong positive emotion because a community of important others have joined him or her at this time. However, there are many other manifestations of UT, as well. Some examples:

"I was warm, surrounded by friends and positive regard that night. I felt unconditionally loved." This scores for UT, but not for LF in that no particular friendship or love affair is specified.

A young woman describes a camping experience with a number of friends and acquaintances. The emphasis is on the closeness to the group rather than the development of any particular love affair or friendship.

Some accounts of weddings may qualify for both LF and UT. The developing love relationship between spouses provides evidence for LF while the wedding's bringing together of many friends and family members may provide evidence for UT.

Examples of being accepted, cherished, or affirmed by friendship, family, or other social groups qualify for UT.

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