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Social Autonomy \neq Social Empowerment: The Social Self-restriction Model

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Abstract

This paper introduces the social self-restriction (SSR) model, which highlights a drawback associated with the increasingly accessible privilege of social autonomy. Social autonomy enables individuals to connect with preferred social partners and avoid undesirable others. The benefits of social autonomy are undeniable; however, the SSR model makes the novel assertion that people tend to exercise social autonomy in ways that ultimately constrain their potential for social empowerment—a higher-order form of personal freedom. Attaining the ideal of high social empowerment requires both high social autonomy and high social adaptability. People with high social adaptability can feel reasonably comfortable and act competently in social environments they did not choose to inhabit. Unfortunately, people with high social autonomy are unlikely to possess high social adaptability. We propose that social autonomy undermines social adaptability by tempting people to avoid social challenges and socialize selectively with similar others in familiar contexts, a habit that limits social skill development, promotes social intolerance, and distorts social perceptions. In essence, we argue that social autonomy allows people to live in their social comfort zones, at the cost of restricting their social range. Our discussion of the SSR model incorporates evidence and perspectives from a broad range of academic disciplines, and includes consideration of opportunities for future research.

Key words: empowerment, autonomy, adaptability, choice, well-being

Social Autonomy ≠ Social Empowerment: The Social Self-restriction Model

Social interactions surely comprise a substantial percentage of the most enjoyable and meaningful experiences in people's lives. Unfortunately, social interactions are also the root of many of people's most unpleasant life experiences. If individuals were given more autonomy to control the circumstances of their social encounters, hedonic motivations should usually lead them to increase the frequency of their pleasant social experiences and reduce the likelihood of uncomfortable social experiences (see review by Denrell, 2005). In this paper, we provide evidence suggesting that social autonomy has indeed become more accessible, and people are predictably using their social autonomy to locate and connect with appealing others while reducing their exposure to unwanted interactions. This historically unprecedented privilege of social choice is enviable, as possessing autonomy of one form or another has repeatedly been shown to predict various positive outcomes for health and happiness (see Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2012). Still, the freedom individuals have to control their social situations is not inevitably and unconditionally beneficial for well-being (e.g., Hsee & Hastie, 2006; Markus & Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz, 2000). This paper highlights a critical drawback of autonomy in a social context that has largely escaped attention in the psychological literature. We introduce the concept of social self-restriction (SSR), the paradoxical process by which people use their social autonomy in ways that ultimately restrict their perceived and real ability to explore, appreciate, and benefit from the full range of viable social environments available to them.

The SSR model integrates evidence and perspectives from a broad range of academic disciplines, including social and personality psychology, developmental and health psychology, sociology, urban studies, and communication. It proposes that social empowerment can be constrained, paradoxically, by the exercise of social autonomy. In particular, when people

succeed in limiting their social experience to interactions with similar and familiar others, the rare experience or even the prospect of interacting with less familiar or dissimilar others becomes less comfortable and more threatening—an outcome that strengthens people’s inclination to find their kind and wall off all others. The result of this sequence is a tradeoff: People get to spend a higher proportion of their social time with appealing people in unthreatening contexts, but they sacrifice some of their ability to function optimally in situations they do not control. In short, we propose that social empowerment gained through enhanced social autonomy is at least partially offset by social empowerment lost through reduced social adaptability caused by the social choices people make.

SSR Model Components and Predictions

The SSR model boils down to an examination of factors and processes that affect social empowerment. We introduce the construct of social empowerment to describe an individual’s self-perceived and objective ability to feel reasonably comfortable and operate competently in a broad array of social environments. High social empowerment includes social self-efficacy derived from social competencies developed through prior exposure to a diversity of social contexts. People who attain high levels of social empowerment are free to explore and benefit from the full range of potentially worthwhile social habitats, because they possess the experience, skills, and mindset necessary to accurately assess and respond appropriately to different social circumstances. In contrast, people with low social empowerment are constrained to social interactions within comparatively narrow boundaries. Within these boundaries, people with low social empowerment might be able to socialize efficaciously and could even have a thriving social life; however, they do not feel free to roam beyond their social comfort zones. According to the SSR model, the level of a person’s social empowerment depends on the status

of two subcomponents: social autonomy and social adaptability. High social empowerment cannot be achieved without high social autonomy *and* high social adaptability. The SSR model builds upon the foundation of this premise.

In our use of the term, social autonomy describes individuals' capacity to personally manage their exposure to other people. In other words, social autonomy allows people to selectively choose and avoid social partners and contexts. Social autonomy describes the objective realities of social opportunity and control; it varies according to the presence or absence of social options and constraints in a particular place at a particular time. Social autonomy is not defined by a state of mind; having social autonomy may or may not imbue a corresponding subjective sense of personal freedom or self-determination. Some people have more social autonomy than others, but social autonomy is not a skill or a feature of people's temperament or disposition. Instead, social autonomy requires access to a sufficiently large and diverse population of potential social partners, and to the tools that enable selective control over one's exposure to potential social partners.

The second subcomponent of social empowerment, social adaptability, describes an individual's real and perceived ability to operate comfortably and competently in a range of social environments not selected or otherwise controlled by that individual. Social adaptability involves tolerance for less-than-ideal social circumstances and willingness and ability to make appropriate self-adjustments in response to those circumstances. Thus, social adaptability encompasses the capacity of individuals to function reasonably well in challenging social environments they cannot easily regulate. Social adaptability is an expression of social competence, but a person could be said to have social competence without social adaptability if their competence was confined to a particular social habitat. Social adaptability can be

characterized as an index of social comfort and competence portability. A person's social adaptability depends somewhat on the situational context, but it relies even more on skill-like qualities of the person that can gradually grow or wither through life experiences.

Social autonomy and social adaptability could hypothetically be independent, orthogonal elements of social empowerment. However, as we will show, the evidence suggests that social autonomy leads people to avoid social challenges through selective socializing—behavior that ultimately harms their social adaptability.¹ Because social empowerment depends upon both social autonomy and social adaptability, an increase in an individual's capacity to wield social autonomy may not translate into an increase in that individual's social empowerment. Given that high social autonomy and high social adaptability are unlikely to coexist, sacrificing some social adaptability in exchange for an increase in social autonomy may or may not be a worthwhile tradeoff.

To clarify, our message that social autonomy undercuts a dimension of social empowerment should be interpreted as an observation of behavioral reality, not as a prescription for behavior change. It would be difficult to refute the perspective that more social empowerment is better than less, but the ideal ratio of autonomy to adaptability is open to debate. The SSR model makes no claims about the relative importance of social autonomy versus social adaptability. We argue that rising social autonomy is causing a decline in social adaptability, but do not claim this is a problem that requires fixing. Our advocacy is limited to raising awareness of psychological phenomena that have previously escaped attention.

In summary, the whole of the SSR model includes a philosophical proposition (our assertion that social empowerment derives from the combination of social autonomy and social adaptability) and a set of concrete, testable hypotheses specifying the relationship between social

autonomy and social adaptability. Figure 1 displays the testable predictions of the SSR model. We predict a negative relationship between the predictor variable of social autonomy and the dependent variable of social adaptability: Individuals who consistently exercise social autonomy should be more prone to exhibiting underdeveloped or eroded social adaptability. This relationship can be explained by social challenge avoidance: Social autonomy predicts social challenge avoidance, which predicts diminished social adaptability. These predictions are qualified by trait and state determinants of social challenge avoidance, which could strengthen or weaken the predicted relationship between social autonomy and social challenge avoidance.²

The paragraphs that follow elaborate on the nuances of the model and the evidence on which it is based. We start with a review of the technological innovations that have given more people more social autonomy. Then we describe the details of how and why social autonomy decreases social adaptability. Finally, we differentiate the SSR model from prior research and consider opportunities for new research derived from the SSR model.

Innovations Enabling Social Autonomy

Throughout history, relationships have been highly constrained by geography. In the past, a person's social autonomy was strongly dependent on the quantity and diversity of people in close physical proximity. People living in places packed with people had different social options to choose from, but they could not easily avoid undesirable social contact. People living in sparsely populated places could avoid undesirable social contact more easily, but they did not have many options for social partners.

Today, physical proximity (i.e., propinquity) remains a major predictor of relationship initiation and maintenance (e.g., Hipp & Perrin, 2009; Liben-Nowell, Novak, Kumar, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2005; Reagans, 2011), but the relevance of physical proximity for social autonomy

has been diminished, first by the emergence of the telephone and motor vehicles, and more recently by the revolution of internet-based communication and social media platforms (Cairncross, 2001; Chua, Madej, & Wellman, 2011; Rice, Shepherd, Dutton, & Katz, 2007). The availability of new tools for communication and transportation has given people unprecedented power to find and connect with desirable social partners while avoiding undesirable social contact.

Many people can now routinely access social bridging tools that allow them to transcend physical distance in selectively establishing and maintaining desirable social connections.³ For example, social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram, and eHarmony help individuals find and filter prospective social partners regardless of where these other people might happen to be. If face-to-face interaction is a priority, people today can still make this happen despite living many miles away from the people they want to visit, thanks to the invention of cars, trains, airplanes, and the infrastructure that supports these space-shrinking travel options. People can now viably choose to live in relative isolation from the physical presence of others without surrendering their ability to have substantive social interactions in person or otherwise (Glaeser & Kahn, 2004; Jackson, 1985).

As options for self-directed social bridging have proliferated, a parallel trend benefitting social autonomy has emerged: People today can often avoid unintentional social exposure whether they are at home or traveling, even if they are not extremely wealthy or do not live in sparsely populated places (Atkinson & Flint, 2004; Goldberger, 1996; Graham & Marvin, 2001). People have always had some access to “involvement shields” (Goffman, 1966) that allow a degree of detachment from the surrounding social environment, but the arsenal of available shields has been significantly bolstered. Part of the increase in people’s ability to avoid

accidental social exposure can be traced to international trends in the design of the built environment over the past 50 years that have made urban and suburban spaces more private (e.g., Bagaeen & Uduku, 2010; Graham & Marvin, 2001). But the most prominent new options for avoiding unwanted social contact emerged from the same communication and transportation advancements that spawned new options for connecting with others not physically present.

People in public now routinely attach themselves to portable personal electronic devices that make them inattentive and inaccessible to the people in sight (Gergen, 2002; Hampton, Livio, & Sessions, 2010; Katz, Lever, & Chen, 2008; Turkle, 2008). Much attention has been paid to the ways that electronic devices harm privacy by reducing people's ability to block their personal information from being accessed by remote others, but these devices have also bolstered the type of privacy defined by one's ability to ignore and deflect others physically present in one's immediate surrounding environment. As Sunstein (2015) observed, information network structures in modern society have shifted from an "architecture of serendipity" toward a self-selecting "architecture of control."

Cars and equivalent forms of automotive transportation provide another formidable involvement shield. In addition to giving people the option of putting more distance between themselves and others, cars also serve as personal cocoons that protect occupants from unappealing social encounters in transit (Ito, Okabe, & Anderson, 2009; Lofland, 1973). Together, communication and transportation innovations have increased people's social autonomy by enhancing their capacity for social interactions with desired partners, and by facilitating their ability to ignore, barricade, and distance themselves from undesirable partners.

Of course, the availability of social autonomy-enhancing communication and transportation technologies varies across people and places. In general, these technologies are

most accessible to people of relatively high socioeconomic status within regions of the world with advanced communication and transportation infrastructures. However, although it is reasonable to conclude that economic wealth is a strong and perhaps the strongest predictor of social autonomy across cultures, it is not clear that communication and transportation advances have magnified the relevance of wealth for social autonomy. Wealthy people have always had more ability to wall themselves off from undesirable others (e.g., Graham & Marvin, 2001; Lofland, 1973) and more opportunity to connect with people beyond their immediate physical environment (e.g., Chen & Miller, 2012). Restriction by others has always been more of a problem than restriction by self for people of low wealth and status. Nonetheless, increased access to the modern tools of social autonomy has elevated the social autonomy of some low-income individuals (see Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004 for compatible evidence of technology advances benefitting people of low socioeconomic status). Wealthy people still have more reliable access to these social autonomy tools (e.g., see evidence of the “digital divide”; Pearce & Rice, 2013; Zickuhr, 2013), but in some places, smartphones and cars could be construed as baseline necessities even for people living in relative poverty. In sum, it is fair to view social autonomy as most consistently accessible to relatively wealthy people, but the relevance of socioeconomic status for social autonomy should decline if new communication and transportation options continue to proliferate beyond the wealthy. Next, we explore the behavior that social autonomy promotes.

How People Use Their Social Autonomy

Communication and transportation advances have increased people’s social autonomy, and we argue that people are likely to use it to reduce their exposure to unappealing interpersonal encounters in favor of spending time with individuals who make them feel comfortable. It is not

much of a leap to conclude that people generally feel most comfortable in the presence of kindred spirits—a term depicting collective membership in a cluster of certain ingroup categories that we use to describe people who share similar attitudes, passions, experience, and worldviews.⁴ The concept of homophily (“birds of a feather flock together”) is a cornerstone principle of social psychology (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Mackinnon, Jordan, & Wilson, 2011; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2011). In line with this contention, prior research has repeatedly confirmed that the more social autonomy people have, the more likely they are to gravitate toward kindred spirits and away from dissimilar, unfamiliar people (e.g., Bahns, Pickett, & Crandall, 2012; Fischer, 1982; Jackson et al., 1991; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Motyl, Iyer, Oishi, Trawalter, & Nosek, 2014; Oishi, Miao, Koo, Kisling, & Ratliff, 2012; Rosenbaum, 1986). Such behavior is entirely rational, considering that when people interact with dissimilar others the initial consequences sometimes include communication problems (Greenaway, Wright, Willingham, Reynolds, & Haslam, 2015) and elevated levels of general dissatisfaction and anxiety (e.g., Plant & Devine, 2003; Seder & Oishi, 2009; Shook & Fazio, 2008a; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009).

Figure 2 provides an abstract representation of the difference between the social networks of people with lower social autonomy (the historical norm) and people with higher social autonomy. Equipped with tools for social bridging and blocking, people with higher social autonomy mostly interact with kindred spirits who may or may not be geographically proximal, whereas people with lower social autonomy tend to interact with people in their immediate physical environment who may or may not be kindred spirits. The claim that people with more social autonomy spend a greater proportion of their social interactions with kindred spirits might seem to contradict research indicating that social networking via internet promotes more

exposure to diversity than traditional forms of networking (e.g., Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011; Hergovich & Ortega, 2018; Rice, Shepherd, Dutton, & Katz, 2007), but these perspectives are not necessarily in conflict. Exposure to online information makes people aware of a wider range of possibilities, but access to more information also gives people more capacity to zero in on their preferred options without having to settle for something less ideal. To wit: The internet seems to be increasing people's exposure to diverse ideological opinions (e.g., Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014) but claiming that ideological polarization has waned as a result would be a hard sell in the current international political climate.

We agree that the internet should reduce the relevance of certain traditional markers of social segregation such as those based on geography or on physical appearance cues—at least to the extent that these cues are not relevant or evident online. For example, Hutson, Taft, Barocas, and Levy (2018) proposed that unconscious forms of racial bias reflected in online dating patterns could be reduced by intentionally eliminating racial cues from matchmaking services' online profiles. Nonetheless, the internet clearly helps people identify and interact with others who share their experience, interests, and values (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). Online forms of social networking give people more ability to select social connections on the basis of personal characteristics that rationally *should* affect relationship compatibility. In other words, the internet facilitates social discrimination of a form that aligns more closely with the values and priorities of the person making the judgment and less closely with factors not viewed as important by the person making the judgment. This point should be considered when reviewing evidence of internet effects on social network homogeneity—superficial, easy-to-measure markers of heterogeneity may disguise underlying bonds based on shared features.

The selective socializing that social autonomy enables does not necessarily reflect conscious decision-making; people automatically gravitate toward people they resemble (e.g., Bailenson, Iyengar, Yee, & Collins, 2008; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Jones, Pelham, Carvalho, & Mirenberg, 2004). To a degree, people want to think of themselves as unique individuals (see review by Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010), especially in individualistic Western cultures (e.g., Kim & Markus, 1999), but people are capable of feeling unique in the company of social companions who share much in common (e.g., Mullen & Hu, 1989; Suls & Wan, 1987). It is true that people often acknowledge and celebrate the educational and experiential value of encounters with people with different viewpoints and backgrounds, but when people are given a choice between a comfortable interaction with a kindred spirit or a less predictable encounter with a dissimilar, unfamiliar person, most take the more comfortable option in most situations (e.g., Paolini, Wright, Dys-Steenbergen, & Favara, 2016). People's preference for interacting with those to whom they can easily relate can be viewed as an impulse that is now less constrained by environmental reality. Even for people who appreciate the benefits of exposure to social diversity, *choosing* such exposure in moment-to-moment daily living would likely require swimming upstream against their natural inclinations.

To be sure, similarity-seeking is not an inevitable consequence of social autonomy; the homophily norm has exceptions and qualifications (e.g., Heine, Foster, & Spina, 2009; Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). For example, people privileged with social autonomy may choose to visit foreign countries to intentionally embrace the experience of sharing space with unfamiliar people in an exotic culture, though the attraction of such experiences should depend upon the limited duration of the social exposure and the assurance of maintained social autonomy. Cultural tourists who merely dip their toes in an unfamiliar social environment will not likely encounter

challenges substantial enough to require real adaptation (e.g., Winkelman, 1994). Nonetheless, people are sometimes drawn to novel social experiences even when they expect the experience will be less enjoyable than familiar alternatives (e.g., Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999).

People are especially likely to seek or at least not run from social challenges if they are extraverted, sensation-seeking, and approach-oriented (e.g., Aron, Norman, & Aron, 1998; Mattingly, McIntyre, & Lewandowski, 2012; Paolini et al., 2016; Stürmer et al., 2013), desperately seeking social connection to satisfy their unmet need to belong (e.g., Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), in situations that give them reason to expect that initially threatening social encounters will develop into desirable relationships (e.g., Aron, Steele, Kashdan, & Perez, 2006), or considering abstract, psychologically distant social possibilities (e.g., Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Kross & Grossmann, 2012). However, though certain people may seek out social challenges under certain circumstances, we propose that similarity-seeking steers the social choices of the majority of people in the majority of contexts. Novel experiences are inviting when the risk of psychological discomfort is small—smaller than the risk most people associate with unfamiliar social adventures. As such, we suggest those who use their social autonomy to pursue social challenges would constitute a minority subset of the general population.

How Social Autonomy Harms Social Adaptability

We have explained our contentions that social autonomy has become more accessible and that people use their social autonomy to seek comfortable social interactions. Now we turn our attention to the consequences. The SSR model highlights antagonism between social autonomy and social adaptability. As individuals use their social autonomy to select easy, familiar, and unchallenging experiences, they undermine their ability to adapt to difficult, novel, and

challenging situations. As Figure 1 conveys, the SSR model proposes that the inverse relationship between social autonomy and social adaptability is mediated by social challenge avoidance.

The SSR model could be framed as a variant of the what-doesn't-kill-you-makes-you-stronger axiom. Historically, models of adaptability have emphasized how challenging prior life experiences can harm individuals' ability to respond to current life challenges (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), but difficult experiences can clearly benefit people as well (see reviews by Dienstbier, 1989; Joseph & Linley, 2006; MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000). In fact, those who experience moderately stressful experiences from time to time have been found to be healthier than those who live highly stressful lives *and* those who somehow manage to escape noteworthy stressors altogether (e.g., Neff & Broady, 2011; see reviews by Liu, 2015; Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010). The SSR model extends this point by proposing that social autonomy leads people to limit their exposure to unplanned, unwanted, and unpredictable interactions, which renders them less capable of coping when forced to face such social challenges.

To be clear, some social contexts pose challenges that are too profound to overcome—worthwhile outcomes are essentially unattainable within these contexts, regardless of one's social skills or experience. For example, in a particular culture, it might be futile for a member of a stigmatized social group to strive for assimilation with others whose beliefs justify denigrating, exploiting, or physically assaulting that person. Conflicts between personal habits or intractable ideologies could be severe enough to prevent social adaptation. Social empowerment entails openness to pushing past perceived social boundaries that may prove arbitrary or irrelevant, but it does not preclude appropriate social avoidance or withdrawal.

Social adaptability development in the SSR model corresponds with how people respond to contact with outgroup members. MacInnis and Page-Gould (2015) observed that different outcomes are expected at different points in time during the extended experience of contact with outgroup members. Research that focuses on people's initial engagement with outgroup members tends to document anxiety and other forms of psychological discomfort people experience—outcomes that can interfere with cognitive capacities, strengthen intergroup prejudice, and justify outgroup avoidance (e.g., Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, & Hunter, 2002; Plant & Devine, 2003; Trawalter et al., 2009; Wilder, 1993). This research reinforces the SSR model's message that people with social autonomy are unlikely to voluntarily embrace or extend social encounters with another individual presumed to be very different or unfamiliar. In contrast, research focusing on the long-term outcomes of intergroup relationships usually finds that sustained contact between members of historically separated social groups gradually diminishes anxiety and intergroup prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; see review by Brown & Hewstone, 2005), partly because features viewed as outgroup identifiers gradually become assimilated into the set of features associated with the ingroup (e.g., Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, Alegre, & Siy, 2010). These positive long-term effects of outgroup contact reflect symptoms of successful adaptation to social challenges in the context of the SSR model. Social challenges are uncomfortable at first, but if exposure to the challenge is sustained, comfort levels should rise over time and the benefits of exposure may eventually outweigh the costs.

The practice of selective socializing should reinforce people's sense that they *need* to avoid social challenges. Because social adaptability is subject to strong self-reinforcement effects, people with low social adaptability are likely to remain in that condition as long as they

maintain social autonomy. People should be especially likely to seek or at least not shrink from social challenges if they already possess the relevant social skills, tolerance, and knowledge required for social adaptability. In parallel, people who lack social adaptability are naturally more inclined to hide from the social challenges that benefit social adaptability.⁵

We will now explain how social challenge avoidance decreases individuals' social adaptability by restricting the development and maintenance of social skills, by heightening sensitivity to aversive social situations, and by fostering formation of distorted or paranoid views of the people beyond the boundaries of one's selected social habitat.

Social challenge avoidance limits social skill development. The SSR model proposes that people with social autonomy typically seek to inhabit social environments they can navigate confidently while avoiding challenging social circumstances that might push them to widen their range of social skills. The idea that social skill development requires exposure to challenges that push people beyond the boundaries of their social comfort zone resembles the attachment theory perspective that children benefit (i.e., develop "secure" attachment) when their caregiver provides a safe and comfortable base, yet also encourages exploration of unfamiliar territory beyond this base (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982). Insecure "ambivalent/resistant" children who cling to their caretakers and avoid experiences outside of their social comfort zone tend to display lower well-being later in life (see review by Mikulincer & Florian, 1998).

Confidence in one's ability to adapt appropriately to different contexts is an important element of social empowerment. Such confidence is earned through skill-building life experiences (e.g., Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008), though it may also emerge without justification. People who perpetually occupy protected social cocoons may not recognize their social skill

deficits if they never confront the types of social challenges that expose their deficiencies. To the extent that selective socializers are unaware of the extent to which their social skills are underdeveloped, their ignorance might allow them to feel open to the hypothetical possibility of exploring worlds beyond their social cocoons; however, this unwarranted confidence would only be empowering to the extent that it encouraged social exploration that confronted people with the inadequacy of their social skills—an uncomfortable experience that should lead to immediate retreat for people with choice. Experiencing social challenges does not guarantee development of useful social skills, but it should improve the odds by teaching people to identify relevant social cues, consider various options, engage in problem solving, and evaluate the efficacy of their responses. The research literature on social skill erosion is thin (see Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010), but it seems reasonable to speculate that the use-it-or-lose-it principle applies to social skill maintenance, at least to a degree. Unfortunately, social autonomy tempts people to avoid the types of experiences that would help them develop and maintain a diverse and well-honed set of social skills, an outcome that further reinforces motivation to avoid people's desire to avoid social challenges.

Social challenge avoidance promotes intolerance of social discomfort. To reap the potential benefits of social diversity exposure, people must endure inevitable discomfort in the process. Even if one's social skills are insufficient to improve the social dynamics of an unpleasant situation, the ability to merely tolerate undesirable social realities is an important part of social empowerment. Whereas social skills help people to actively cope by changing their situation through personal behavior, tolerance of social discomfort constitutes passive coping. The value of capacity for passive discomfort tolerance is supported by research related to the principles of hedonic adaptation (e.g., Helson, 1964; Lyubomirsky, 2011), inoculation and

exposure therapy (e.g., Meichenbaum & Deffenbacher, 1988), hardiness (e.g., Bartone, Kelly, & Matthews, 2013; Kobasa, 1979), and resilience (e.g., Seery, Leo, Lupien, Kondrak, & Almonte, 2013). People typically adapt and become emotionally desensitized after extended exposure to a situation that initially induced moderate pain or distress (e.g., Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996), in part because the experience gradually becomes more predictable (e.g., Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel, & Jost, 2007; Page-Gould, Mendes, & Major, 2010). This form of adaptation is a problem in that it reduces people's motivation to escape or improve a bad situation (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2009; Seligman, 1972). However, desensitization is also a fundamentally desirable, if not crucial, process to the extent that individuals lack the resources to change the situation and they cannot or should not avoid exposure to that situation.

Social challenge avoidance promotes distorted social perceptions. The adaptability problem that social autonomy can foster extends beyond discomfort with realities experienced upon leaving one's zone of personal control. Selective socializing increases the odds that people will have unjustifiably negative appraisals of the social situations they avoid. Successful social adaptability should benefit from ability, honed through exposure to not-so-attractive social environments, to recognize the subtle norms of unique social and cultural contexts and to develop empathy for the people in those contexts. Over time, as people develop social skills, tolerance, and understanding of the people and events within a specific context, they should come to view moderately challenging social situations as relatively routine, manageable, and unthreatening (e.g., Florack, Rohmann, Palcu, & Mazziotta, 2014; Stephens, Hamedani, & Townsend, in press). This outcome does not represent distorted thinking; instead, it reflects the reality of the match between people's coping capacities and the actual circumstances they face.

In contrast, chronic avoidance of social challenges cultivates appraisals of social challenges that have less connection to reality. Moreover, when people rarely leave the comfort of their social cocoon, the experience of doing so is likely to violate their naïve expectancies, which should increase feelings of threat (e.g., Mendes et al., 2007) and may push them to retreat to their social safety zone before they have sufficient opportunity to adapt to the unfamiliar social environment.

A consequence of habitually restricting one's social experiences to certain categories of people and social environments is predicted by the habituation principle of perceptual adaptation: Decreasing frequency of exposure to a particular stimulus increases the subsequent intensity of response to that stimulus. Hence, the event of encountering people one has avoided in the past is likely to produce a relatively strong psychological response. Social psychology research clarifies that this strong response is likely to entail cognitive processing biased toward focusing on differences rather than similarities between oneself and the others—an outcome that reinforces the avoidance that led to the outcome (Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002; Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2004), causing people to hold more pessimistic views of the unfamiliar people they are separated from (e.g., Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Hamilton & Gifford, 1976; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011; Shelton & Richeson, 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Sustained social segregation should further magnify people's tendency to overestimate the extent to which outgroups are dissimilar to them (e.g., Mallett, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008; Shelton & Richeson, 2005), homogeneous (Judd, Ryan, & Park, 1991; Park & Rothbart, 1982), untrustworthy (Cao, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2014; Fetchenhauer & Dunning, 2010), and disinterested in making new acquaintances (Shelton & Richeson, 2005). People who can satisfy their need to belong exclusively through their relationships with kindred spirits may even be more prone to dehumanize dissimilar others (Waytz & Epley, 2011).

When people use their social autonomy to build a comfortable social cocoon, they risk developing paranoid us-versus-them views of the people outside their cocoon. Status quo-justification thought processes can easily lead people to develop reasons for not leaving their cocoons (e.g., Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; see review by Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), just as the mere presence of a privacy fence could cause neighborhood residents to feel more threatened by those on other side of the fence (Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Ellin, 1997; Low, 2003). The result is a loss of social adaptability, expressed by the inability to distinguish legitimately scary people and places from those that seem threatening but are essentially benign.

In addition to introducing unnecessary negative emotions, the paranoia that social avoidance can breed may also cause people to miss out on compelling and enjoyable experiences. When outgroup cultures start to become more familiar, people tend to show more interest in them (Brannon & Walton, 2013). Epley and Schroeder (2014) found that people generally experienced more positive emotion when using public transportation (e.g., trains, buses, and taxis) when they were induced to engage in brief conversations with strangers, instead of remaining quiet and socially detached. Unfortunately, people did not anticipate this outcome, which is one reason why they avoided initiating conversations with strangers in public when they had an alternative option to choose social detachment.

Integrating the SSR Model with Self-determination and Self-expansion Research

The SSR model adds needed balance to the autonomy literature in psychology, which has traditionally highlighted the virtues of autonomy while neglecting the virtues of adaptability (see conclusions drawn by Chen & Miller, 2012; Kashdan, 2010; McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Morling & Evered, 2006; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). Adaptability neglect in psychological scholarship probably partly reflects the reality that most research takes place in the

context of individualistic Western cultures that value personal autonomy more than adaptability (Boiger, Mesquita, Tsai, & Markus, 2012; Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984). It may also reflect the control-and-predict orientation of the research culture itself or the relatively privileged backgrounds of the most scholars and their prototypical student research participants (e.g., Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

As we have noted, although the SSR model focuses on a problem associated with social autonomy, we do not claim the disadvantages of social autonomy outweigh the advantages. If the disadvantages were profoundly problematic, they would presumably be highly salient to the people engaging in social self-restriction and perhaps to observers of those individuals. The lack of attention paid to social autonomy disadvantages in the psychology research literature suggests that these disadvantages are not glaringly obvious. To a large extent, individuals' increased ability to find their kind and reduce their exposure to unappealing others is a development worth celebrating. Personal autonomy in any form is a widely cherished human value, and for good reason. Empirical evidence of strong positive associations between personal autonomy and markers of psychological and physical well-being is easy to locate (see research on locus of control [e.g., Lefcourt, 1966], learned helplessness [e.g., Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993], and psychological reactance [e.g., Brehm & Brehm, 1981]). Moreover, when contemplating the consequences of personal autonomy in social contexts, it is hard to challenge the outlook that life is short and therefore people should try to spend their social time with people they understand and enjoy, and avoid settling for less comfortable interactions with less familiar people.

Social autonomy also allows people to adopt a conservative, better-safe-than-sorry social orientation to reduce unintentional exposure to the people in their society who are truly dangerous or merely annoying. Inability to escape such unwanted social exposure has often been

linked with negative psychological and physical health outcomes (e.g., Baum, Aiello, & Calesnick, 1978; Halpern, 1995). For example, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Charles & Carstensen, 2009) proposes that younger adults report more negative emotions than older adults because their social encounters are relatively more likely to involve unpredictable, stressful interactions with unfamiliar people.

The benefits of autonomy in general have been thoroughly established over two decades of research inspired by self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which proposes that people are fundamentally driven to satisfy three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others. SDT defines autonomy as one's capacity to exercise self-directed volition without influence from external pressures (Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2012; Knee & Uysal, 2010). SDT emphasizes that people who view their lives as self-directed have better mental health and achieve more than people who lack autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2006). In comparison, SSR can be viewed as an extension of and a caveat to the SDT message that autonomy is a human need. Specifically, the SSR model adds the qualification that gaining autonomy does not represent the end-game achievement of empowerment. People cannot attain social empowerment without sufficient social autonomy, but we argue that social autonomy leads people to make choices that restrict their perceived and real freedom to explore the full range of their social opportunities.

SDT further complements the SSR model in proposing that attaining satisfactory levels of all three needs is critical for individuals to function optimally, and that striving to satisfy one of the three basic needs can interfere with the achievement of another need (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2014). For example, parents may offer their children conditional regard such that they withhold love and support when their children act inappropriately. In this way, children must sacrifice

some autonomy to act in accordance with their parents' wishes in order to satisfy their relatedness needs that comes from parental affection (Deci & Ryan, 2014). The SSR model describes an additional and important way in which these basic psychological needs may conflict: People's desire to seek and use autonomy to establish meaningful connections with others in the social environments where they feel most competent ultimately can interfere with their ability to develop social skills and competencies that will help them in other, less controllable, social contexts. In other words, our model highlights how autonomous striving for relatedness and competence can restrict people's exposure to the types of challenging experiences that help people develop capacity to feel competent across a wide variety of social situations. In summary, the SSR model affirms the advantages of autonomy highlighted by SDT, but it focuses on an underappreciated disadvantage. SDT captures the advantages people enjoy within the boundaries of their chosen social habitats, whereas SSR highlights opportunities missed when people restrict their social explorations.

The unique elements of the SSR model are also clarified through comparison with the self-expansion model (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001; Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013), which argues that people have a strong motivation to seek new relationships and novel experiences, social or otherwise. Self-expansion refers to the growth and cognitive restructuring of the self-concept (e.g., through including-the-other-in-the-self processes) that occurs when individuals obtain traits, resources, perspectives, and skills through new experiences (e.g., Aron et al., 2004; McIntyre, Mattingly, Lewandowski, & Simpson, 2014). The self-expansion model emphasizes that people experience positive emotions (Strong & Aron, 2006), gain self-efficacy (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013), and increase their self-esteem (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995) when they self-expand—a point similar to the SSR

model's emphasis that social exposure helps people feel comfortable and confident in a wider range of social circumstances.

Yet, whereas the self-expansion model proposes that individuals seek out self-expansion opportunities, the SSR model asserts that, in moment-to-moment daily living, people's desire to avoid discomfort should override their willingness to seek self-expansion (see also Harasymchuk, Cloutier, Peetz, & Lebreton, 2017). This position is difficult to square with strong articulations of the self-expansion model suggesting that desire to self-expand is a fundamental human motivation, perhaps powerful enough to compete with motivations to seek food and safety (e.g., Aron et al., 1998). Nonetheless, as a whole, the self-expansion literature appears to align with our perspective. Specifically, the self-expansion literature clarifies that people seek self-expansion opportunities that can be had without enduring substantial social challenges. For example, Aron and colleagues (e.g., Aron et al., 2001, 2006) have proposed that self-expansion motivation leads people to seek social partners who do *not* seem radically different, because relationships rooted in shared commonality are more likely to survive and deepen over time, thereby increasing the opportunity to expand one's self-concept through absorption of a partner's traits. This implies that motivation for social self-expansion normally involves interest in exposure to novel but comfortable social experiences that would probably not serve as useful rehearsal for confronting unfamiliar social situations beyond one's comfort zone. In other words, the types of self-expanding social experiences that test and build social adaptability are unlikely to result from the intentional exercise of social autonomy.

Distinguishing SSR from Other Outcomes of Selective Socializing

The SSR model puts a spotlight on a potential self-limiting downside of selective socializing that deserves more attention, but our focus on SSR and its implications does not

imply that the importance of the SSR problem approaches the importance of other documented problems associated with forms of social balkanization that can spread from the selective socializing that social autonomy enables. Furthermore, our argument that people may harm themselves by exercising ability to limit their social exposure is not unprecedented. When people make decisions that promote social balkanization, as reflected in residential segregation and in polarized attitudes, they may hurt themselves by eroding the stabilizing connections between different communities and cultures that benefit the progress, prosperity, and safety of their society as a whole (e.g., Atkinson & Flint, 2004; Bishop & Cushing, 2008; Jacobs, 1961; Stroud, 2010; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 2005).

The message of the SSR model regarding outcomes of enhanced social autonomy should not be confused with the incompatible claim that people in recent decades have become more isolated, paranoid, and lonely because they have more capacity to wall themselves off from others (e.g., Bugeja, 2005; Olds & Schwartz, 2009). First, we contest the validity of the claim of rising loneliness in the modern world because some evidence suggests that loneliness may actually be declining (Clark, Loxton, & Tobin, 2015) and other evidence indicates that powerful people (who presumably possess more social autonomy) are less likely to report feeling lonely and more likely to report a feeling of belonging (Waytz, Chou, Magee, & Galinsky, 2015). Second, the SSR model emphasizes that people can satisfy their social needs through networks of substantial size despite walling themselves off from certain people or social environments. Instead of feeling lonely, people with social autonomy should be more likely to experience satiation—a feeling that should discourage people from leaving their comfort zone to seek challenging social experiences that could benefit their social adaptability (for evidence that social satiation may be easily achieved, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall, Baumeister, & Vohs,

2008). Attaining social relationship contentment is surely an ideal worth striving for, but the SSR model highlights a secondary problem: Achieving contentment may narrow people's social comfort zone.

Future Research Potential

The SSR model's novel perspectives and testable hypotheses have high potential to influence ideas and inspire new research. By bringing attention to social psychological concepts and processes that have not previously received direct research attention, the model can inform and shape relevant social dialogue going forward. Beyond changing the conversation, the model also provides a template for conducting studies to test its straightforward predictions regarding why and how social autonomy threatens social adaptability. Testing these predictions requires a research design that can account for each of the four boxes represented in Figure 1. This design would include measurement of social autonomy (the predictor variable), dimensions of social adaptability (the dependent variable), social challenge avoidance (the mediator), and personal traits and situational states that could affect social challenge orientation (moderator variables). To provide an example of how the SSR model's components and hypothesized effects could be defined and measured, we will describe a sketch of a hypothetical study designed to test the effects of roommate selection autonomy on college students' social behavior and attitudes.

Measuring social autonomy. In our sample study, students' level of social autonomy would depend on the manipulated method of their college dormitory roommate assignment. Students would be labeled as having high autonomy if they chose their roommates on the basis of profiles that might contain information about physical appearance, personal background, personality traits, interests, attitudes, and values. These students would be compared with

students labeled as having low autonomy because they were randomly assigned to their roommates.

Ideally, the power and internal validity of the social autonomy group comparison would be maximized by randomly assigning students to one of the two roommate selection conditions rather than comparing students from colleges with different roommate assignment policies. Unfortunately, this experimental approach might not be feasible because college students and college administrations would probably object to the risk of random assignment to undesirable roommates. College students want to live comfortably, and they have leverage because college administrators are loath to repel prospective students (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Wheeler, 2014).

Measuring social challenge avoidance. We predict high autonomy students would avoid social challenge and seek comfort by choosing roommates with features resembling participants' characteristics. In comparison, low autonomy students would be more likely to be paired with roommates who pose challenges for comfortable coexistence. The extent to which roommates feel comfortable or challenged would be assessed through self-report and other-report measures.

Measuring social adaptability. We predict high autonomy students would display lower social adaptability than low autonomy students because the low autonomy students would be more likely to have improved their social skills, tolerance, and understanding by confronting roommate-related social challenges they could not avoid. The social adaptability of these students should grow from living with roommates they did not choose, and through the larger social consequences of random roommate exposure—relationships developed through coincidental contact with their roommates' friends, and through other forms of social contact diversification resulting from the gradual expansion of their social comfort zones. Assessment of the skills, tolerance, and understanding comprising social adaptability could take the form of

self-report and other-report measures and behavioral observation within social contexts constructed for that purpose. Of all the elements of the SSR model, social adaptability outcomes present the greatest challenge for investigators to assess because adaptability change in either direction should occur slowly over time. Social adaptability change resulting from social challenge avoidance would be difficult to detect conclusively without using a longitudinal design.

Measuring moderators of social challenge avoidance. We predict individual difference variables and situational factors would influence the effect of the social autonomy manipulation. Students with high scores on self-report measures of personality traits associated with high social competence and low social interaction anxiety should be less prone to using social autonomy to make self-restricting social choices; thus we predict these students would be less affected by their roommate selection condition than students oriented toward socializing more selectively. In the context of the random roommate study, an example of a situational state moderator of social challenge avoidance could take the form of instructions given to students in the social autonomy condition. Students prompted to reflect upon the downsides of selective socializing and the benefits of social adaptability could conceivably be less prone to choosing roommates who most closely resemble themselves, although such instructions would probably have more impact if the study involved a social choice with less consequential implications than college roommate selection.

The hypothetical study we have proposed to test the SSR model builds upon prior investigations of the effects of random college roommate assignment on social behavior and attitudes (e.g., Carrell, Hoekstra, & West, 2015; Gaither & Sommers, 2013; Mark & Harris, 2012; Shook & Fazio, 2008b). Instead of comparing differences between roommates chosen and

roommates randomly assigned as our sample study recommends, these prior studies have typically tested differences between same-race and cross-race roommates within colleges that randomly assign roommates. The results of these previous studies align with the predictions of the SSR model. Cross-race roommate pairings should theoretically present a higher social challenge than same-race roommate pairings, and the research confirms that cross-race roommates are comparatively more dissatisfied and uncomfortable with their living arrangements. However, random assignment to cross-race roommates also predicts symptoms of social adaptability growth, exemplified by cross-race roommates' comparatively low prejudice toward the race of their roommates and greater likelihood of establishing additional cross-race relationships.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper opens a new window for examining social empowerment and the variables on which it depends. Our SSR model introduces novel concepts and highlights understudied connections in challenging the perspective that autonomy and empowerment are one in the same. Grant and Schwartz (2011) called for heightened recognition of too-much-of-a-good-thing effects in psychology; we have followed their directive in identifying maladaptive aspects of social autonomy. Making the best use of one's social autonomy requires recognizing its potential pitfalls. The SSR model should raise awareness and prompt empirical investigation of the historically undervalued status of social adaptability and the empowerment it provides.

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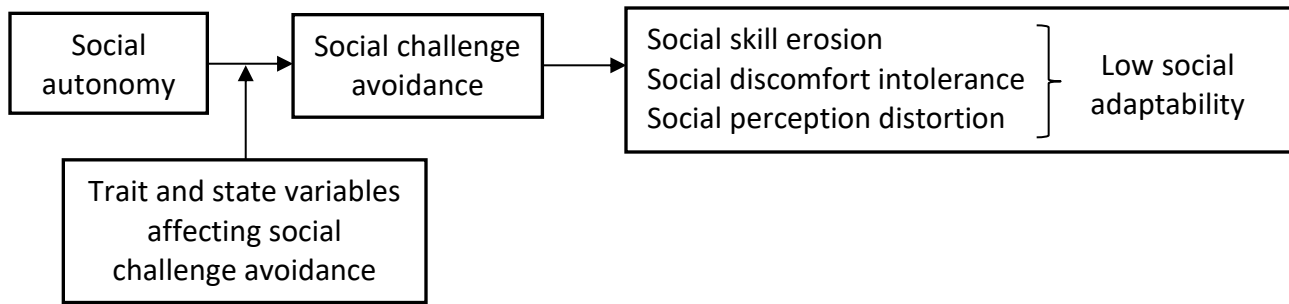


Figure 1: Predictions of the social self-restriction model.

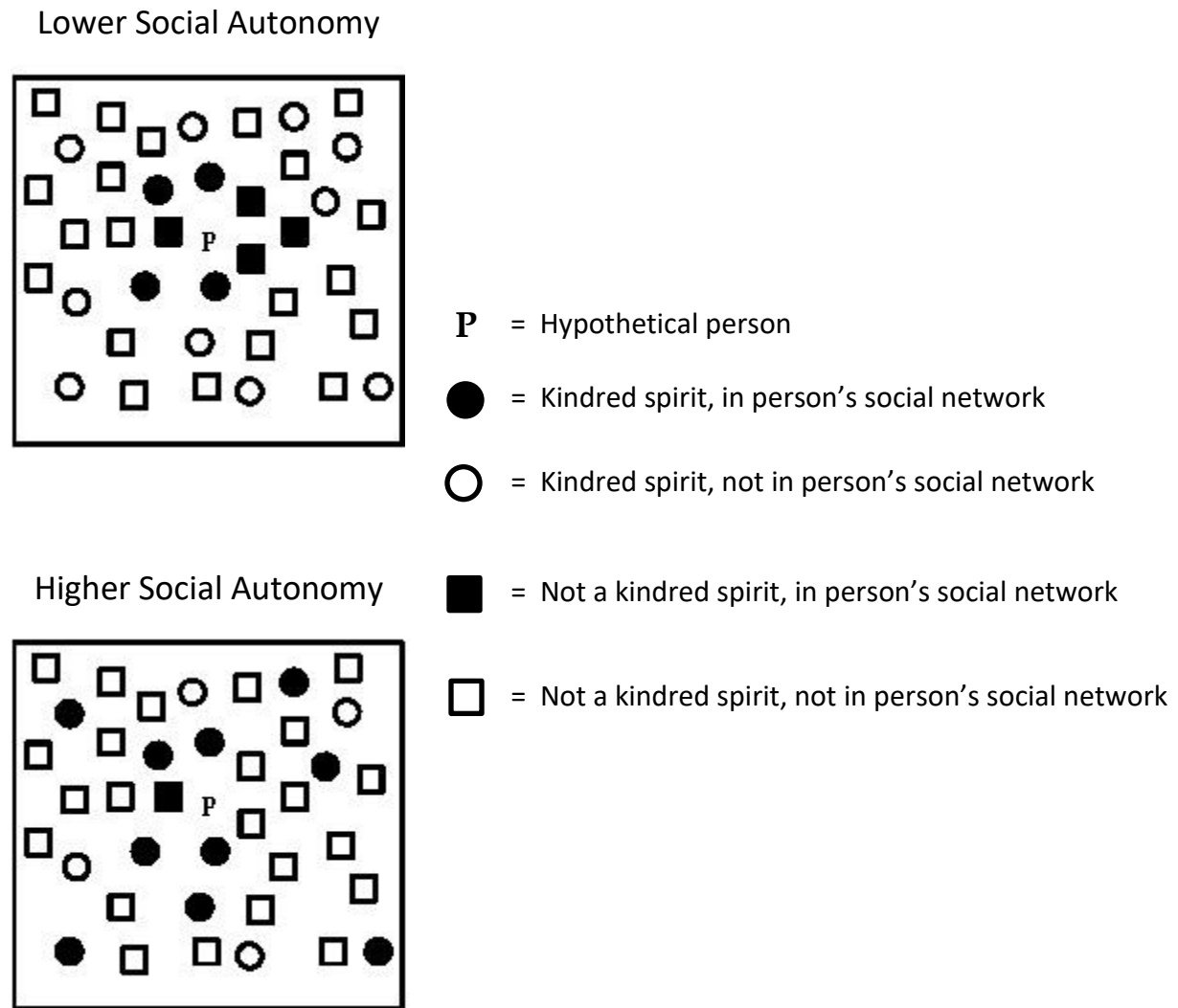


Figure 2. Representation of the social networks of hypothetical people with lower or higher social autonomy. Spatial distance between symbols represents geographic proximity.

Footnotes

¹ Our definitions of social autonomy and social adaptability bear some resemblance to the concepts of primary control and secondary control, respectively (e.g., Rothbaum et al., 1982; see review by Morling & Evered, 2006). Elements of social adaptability also overlap partially with the constructs of self-monitoring (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974) and cultural intelligence (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ang, Van Dyne, & Rockstuhl, 2016). However, the central theme of the SSR model—that exercising control over one’s own social habitat tends to reduce one’s ability to adapt when they lack this control—has no parallel in the research literature.

² The SSR model focuses narrowly on the causal relationship between social autonomy and social adaptability, in the direction of social autonomy causing change in social adaptability. The model does not address the possibility of a reverse causal effect (social adaptability causing change in social autonomy), but we acknowledge this possibility. For example, high adaptability may benefit social autonomy to the extent that adaptability helps people build social connections that are particularly difficult to establish.

³ Putnam (2000) used the term “bridging” to refer to an extension of one’s social network to new and different contacts—a relatively bold and desirable form of socializing he framed as the opposite of “bonding,” a less-adventurous form socializing that involves interacting with people one already knows. In contrast, we use the bridging term to describe a mechanism *for* bonding. The bridge metaphor fits the SSR model well in the sense that people with social autonomy can use social bridges to pass *over* the people they find unappealing.

⁴ Our use of the kindred spirits concept conflates similarity and familiarity, an approach justified by evidence that perceived similarity begets perceived familiarity and vice versa (e.g.,

Moreland & Zajonc, 1982). We acknowledge that the social magnetism of similarity and familiarity may not be equivalent in strength or primacy (e.g., Alves, Koch, & Unkelbach, 2016).

⁵ Although social adaptability is framed as the outcome of social autonomy in the SSR model, some representation of social adaptability also merits inclusion in the list of individual difference variables that should moderate the predicted relationship between social autonomy and social challenge avoidance.