Why is my Asian friend always trying to run my life?

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Abstract

Most research on friendship has been conducted in Western, individualist cultures. As such, friendship has been conceived as a relationship between autonomous individuals who value closeness and intimacy, but not intervention in each other's lives. Actively trying to influence the personal affairs of a close friend might be seen as too invasive or controlling. In this study, 430 university students from France, Spain, China, Cuba and the U.S. read a brief vignette describing a friendship between two students where one appears to be trying to influence the other to be a better student. Students' ratings of the vignette suggested that some saw the relationship as close and caring while others saw it as too invasive. Seeing it as close and caring was positively associated with measures of collectivism and inversely associated with measures of individualism. Results were interpreted as cultural variations in the perception of what constitutes closeness and social support in a friendship.

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Research comparing friendship patterns in different cultures has produced conflicting findings. Summarizing current thinking on the issue, Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), Triandis (1995) and others have asserted that friendships in collectivist cultures tend to be fewer in number, more interdependent and of greater duration compared to friendships in collectivist cultures. Under this view, people in Western cultures see themselves as friendly to a broad number of acquaintances but these relationships are not particularly interdependent or intimate. By contrast, people in collectivist cultures are thought to focus their social energies on a small in-group of very close friends, where the ties are stronger and more interdependent. Lending support to these ideas, Wheeler, Reis and Bond (1989) found that students in Hong Kong had fewer but longer interactions with fewer people compared to students in the U.S. However, direct tests of these hypotheses have found that students in collectivist cultures do not report smaller numbers of "best" friends, nor do they report that their friendships are of longer duration (Baumgarte, Lee & Kulich, 2001). Moreover, this research found that students in individualist cultures reported more contact, and greater self-disclosure and expressiveness with their closest friends compared to students in collectivist cultures.

I suggest that these seemingly contradictory findings represent differing notions about the nature of closeness and friendship. Most research on friendship has been conducted in Western, individualist cultures. As such, friendship has been conceived as a relationship between autonomous individuals who value closeness and intimacy, while limiting active intervention in each other's lives. Even though there is extensive research on social support among friends in Western cultures, the concept of taking responsibility for a friend as an indicator of closeness and caring is not common in this literature. To distinguish these two concepts, social support among friends is typically operationalized as verbal expressions of affection, liking, encouragement and approval, or offering information and assistance. By contrast, "taking responsibility and caring for a friend" implies a more proactive or involved version of social support, perhaps even attempting to control aspects of the friend's life, ultimately for his or her own benefit. Our earlier exploratory research suggested that caring and taking responsibility for one's friend may be characteristic of friendships in some Asian cultures, and perhaps in collectivist cultures in general (Baumgarte, Lee & Kulich, 2001). Research reported here attempts to test this hypothesis directly.

Method

Respondents: The sample consisted of 398 University students in Cuba, the People's Republic of China, France, Spain and the U.S., and 32 additional students from a variety of countries who were studying in the U.S. Most (91%) were between the ages of 18 and 26. There were 161 men and 269 women.

Materials: All students read the following vignette in their own languages, with the names of the characters altered to reflect common names in each language.

Megan and Cheryl attend the same university and are the best of friends. While they often have fun together and care a lot about each other, schoolwork is one area where they differ. Megan is less interested in school and is only an average student, while Cheryl does well in nearly every course she takes. Cheryl tries to influence Megan to be a better student so that she will be successful in life. Sometimes, Cheryl reads over Megan's class notes making corrections and adding specific information for her to study. Cheryl often insists that Megan study when she doesn't really feel like it. Cheryl thinks that Megan is too interested in having fun and not sufficiently serious about her work. They are best friends but they clearly have different ideas about school.

Students then rated the relationship in this vignette on closeness and caring versus invasiveness and being too controlling. Of the six items, examples include the following. "In my opinion, Cheryl is trying to control Megan too much." "In my opinion, they seem to have a healthy friendship." Students rated each item on a seven-point scale with higher numbers indicating greater agreement. This scale demonstrated reasonable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .80. The items were summed in a fashion such that higher numbers indicated that the respondent saw the friendship as close and caring, and low numbers, invasive and too controlling.
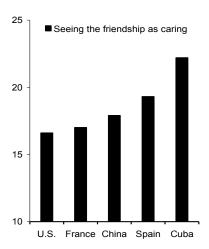
The students then responded to 18 items drawn from several individual-level measures of individualism/collectivism (Chan, 1994; Hui, 1988; Singelis, 1994; Triandis, 1995; Yamaguchi, 1994). Some of these items were focused on individualism/collectivism within the family, while others were focused on friends. The scales included items measuring vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995). Items focused on friends included ones like "I like to live close to my good friends" and "I often act as my friends would prefer." Items focused on family included ones like "One should live one's life independently of other family members" (reversed scored) and "Aging parents should live at home with their children." Cronbach's alpha for the items focused on friends was .50, and for those focused on family, .42. Such low internal consistency is not uncommon for measures of individualism/collectivism (Goodwin, et. al, 1999; Singelis, 1994).

The students also responded to 13 of Schwartz's (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987) cultural values along with descriptors provided by Triandis, McCusker, and Hui (1990). These values have been used to measure individualism/collectivism. They included "politeness" and "obedience" for the collectivist side and "independence" and "freedom" for the individualist side. For this part of the survey, students were asked to select seven out of the 13 values that "you feel are the **most** important **guiding principles in your life**." Requiring students to chose a limited number of values was intended to enhance the one-dimensional characteristics of this scale. This strategy succeeded since the correlation between the number of individualist items and collectivist items selected by the respondents was -.69.

Results and Discussion

The results[1] of this study are rather straightforward. Recall that ratings of the vignette were configured such that higher numbers indicated that respondents saw the friendship as close and caring, while low numbers reflected invasiveness and too much control. This measure of seeing the friendship as caring was positively correlated with all measures of collectivism, including the measure directed toward the family, the measure directed toward friends, Triandis' items measuring vertical and horizontal collectivism, and Schwartz's values for collectivism. Seeing the friendship as caring was negatively correlated with horizontal and vertical individualism and Schwartz's values for individualism. The correlations ranged from .12 to .28, and were statistically significant at the .01 level. Stepwise multiple regressions were performed to determine which combination of measures would best predict seeing the friendship as caring. The measure of collectivism focused on family combined with the measure of collectivism focused on friends produced the best equation, with R = .36.

Thus, across all measures, the results consistently indicated that those scoring high on collectivism tended to rate the friendship as close and caring, while those scoring low (the individualist pole) saw it as invasive and controlling. Given this outcome, I compared the five principle cultures in this sample on the measure of caring versus invasiveness and found what would be expected given the existing literature on the relative levels of collectivism in these countries. As can be seen in the graph, students in the U.S. and France scored lowest and students in Cuba the highest. Gender differences were not significant.

These data suggest that what constitutes closeness and appropriate expressions of social support in a friendship differ over cultures. The same gestures from a friend that one person might appreciate as warm and caring, someone from another culture might interpret as invasive and too controlling. Our earlier study showed that, contrary to the stereotype, students in individualist cultures think of their friends in very exclusive terms.

Respondents in the U.S., for example, reported a relatively small number of "best" friends and their closeness was defined in terms of expressiveness and self-disclosing behaviors. Findings in the current study suggest that these same respondents, while they think of friends as important elements in their lives, would be uncomfortable with a friend who expressed caring in the form of intervening and taking responsibility in their lives.

Implications from this study might also help explain the paradoxical finding that people in collectivist cultures score lower on measures of relationship maintenance (Ting-Toomey, 1991; Yum & Canary, 1997). If we assume, as most theorists do, that people in collectivist cultures have stronger relationship ties compared to people in individualist cultures, then the finding of lower relationship maintenance in collectivist cultures is puzzling. However, measures of relationship maintenance have been derived from individualist notions of closeness, and have focused primarily on verbal expressions of affection, support and commitment. These notions might also be associated with closeness in collectivist cultures; but a close friend might go further, taking more responsibility by commenting on one's behavior and asserting that one should behave in a different fashion. Such attempts to actively intervene in one's life are more likely to be experienced as warm and caring in a collectivist culture. It would signal that the friend holds one's best interests in mind or wants to protect one from harm. In an individualist culture, such expressions might be experienced as rejection or at least a lack of acceptance. Friendships in individualist cultures seem to follow the maxim that "If you like me, you will accept me the way I am." Thus, if a friend actively attempts to take responsibility for one's affairs, it would indicate disrespect for one's individuality, suggesting that one is not capable of managing one's own life. By contrast, a parallel maxim in a collectivist culture might be "I like you so I will push you and help you to be a better person." For example, the Korean word for closeness or loving is *choeng* which carries strong connotations of "taking responsibility" for the one who is loved (Lee, 1994). *Choeng* is a term often used in the context of friendship in Korea.

A secondary, but unexpected finding in this study, was that seeing the friendship as caring was closely associated with measures of collectivism focused on family members as well as measures focused specifically on friends. Many have argued persuasively that collectivism should be measured independently for family, friends, co-workers, etc. since tendencies toward collectivism may not generalize to all contexts. However, the findings of this study suggest that strong feelings of collectivism regarding one's family might influence how one sees the intervening behaviors of one's friends.

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[1]All ratings were standardized at the individual level to control for response biases in the use of the Likert scales. This scale transformation did not alter the pattern of results or their statistical significance, although the correlations and mean differences were attenuated slightly. The results reported here are based on the original data.