

What does it mean to have a close friend? Comparing cultures

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Abstract: Current literature provides contradictory notions about close friendships in individualist versus collectivist cultures. This presentation proposes three dimensions to arrive at a deeper understanding of cultural variation in close friendships. *Interveners* versus *Independents* differentiate the extent to which cultures find it acceptable for friends to intervene in each other's lives. *Interveners and Independents* also differ in the cultural role that talk plays in their close friendships. *Includers* versus *Excluders* focus on distinctions between friends and acquaintances. *Idealists* versus *Realists* refer to how we think about our closest friends. These dimensions help explain the complexities and potential difficulties of friendships which cross cultures.

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Reviews of the literature on cultural variations in close friendship often assert that people in individualist cultures tend to cultivate a larger number of close friends and these friendships are characterized as being less intimate, less interdependent and less durable than those of people in collectivist cultures, who are thought to have a smaller number of more intimate and lasting friendships (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988, p. 41; Triandis, 1995, pp. 58-59, 75, 110). People in the U.S., a highly individualistic culture for example, are thought to cultivate a large number of superficial relationships. This notion can be found in the writings of intercultural communication theorists (e.g., Hall & Hall, 1990; Stewart & Bennett, 1991), anthropologists (e.g., Kluckhohn, 1954), and social historians (e.g., Bellah, et al., 1985). Guides aimed at international students or business personnel intending to study or work in the U.S. (e.g., Althen, 1988; Wallach & Metcalf, 1995) typically assert that people in the U.S. tend to be open and affable upon first meeting, but that close and caring friendships are relatively difficult to achieve.

For people who study cultures, these distinctions in the nature of close friendships seem rather self-evident. However, despite the pervasiveness of these assertions and their intuitive appeal, empirical cross-cultural examinations of them have been relatively rare. When they do occur, they often produce results that call them into question. In studies that I have conducted, I asked respondents directly, "how many close friends do you have," and in each case U.S. respondents reported the smallest number. Furthermore, contact with these friends was more frequent in individualist compared to collectivist cultures. Similarly, studies have found evidence that friendships in individualist cultures tend to be closer and more intimate than those in collectivist cultures, (French, Bae, & Leo, 1996; Ryback & McAndrew, 2006; You, 2000). This presentation attempts to sort out these paradoxes by dividing the individualism-collectivism dimension into three sub-dimensions as they apply to close friendships. This allows for a more refined examination of close friendships and helps explain why friendships in collectivist cultures have been assessed as

less close than those in individualist cultures. Bear in mind that each of the following dimensions reflects an aspect of the more global individualism-collectivism dimension.

First dimension: Independents versus Interveners: Cultures differ in the extent to which it is considered normal for close friends to actively intervene in each other's lives. On the *Interveners* end of this dimension, friends feel responsible or even obligated to advise, aid, protect, take care of, instruct, or influence their friends in a positive way. One expects to be taken care of by close friends, even when one feels more competent on the issues at hand. Such interventions by a friend are usually perceived as warm and caring, and are a critical aspect of feeling close to a friend. On the other end, *Independents* expect that even close friends feel a strong sense of independence from one another. Closeness is derived from feeling comfortable to talk about any topic, even personal problems, which may be followed by verbal expressions of support. However, active intervention into a friend's life would feel much too invasive, smothering or disrespectful of one's individuality. If a friend tried to tell another what to do or how to live, it would feel threatening to one's personal freedom, even denigrating and potentially detrimental to the friendship.

Empirical evidence that intervention into the life of a best friend can be perceived as an indicator of closeness in collectivist cultures can be found in a vignette study comparing university students of five cultures (Baumgarte, 2001). They rated a brief vignette describing a student who actively and assertively intervened in the life of a close friend to help her perform better on exams. Respondents scoring high on collectivism tended to rate these interventions as warm and caring, while those seeing them as invasive and inappropriate scored higher on individualism. Searle-White (1996) reported a similar finding comparing Russian and U.S. students. Such interventions can become quite lopsided, with one friend doing most of the giving and the other, the receiving. Such imbalances have been shown to be more acceptable in collectivist cultures (Goodwin, 1999; Kim, 1997; Koh, Mendelson, & Rhee, 2003; Yum, 1987). By contrast, *Independents* tend to "keep score" of services provided by friends attempting to avoid such imbalances.

Communication patterns of Independents versus Interveners: When a friend does something that is hurtful, such as not following through on a promise, how does he or she deal with the transgression? Giving a clear, detailed explanation, with a sincere apology would be more characteristic of an *Independent*. The apology would be long and believable, perhaps even dramatic as the promise breaker explains all that happened. An *Intervener* would explain things only very briefly if at all. It is assumed the friends will understand—after all, they know each other well. A detailed apology would seem insincere and may even indicate distrust. The promise breaker may make an extra effort, if it is felt necessary, to reinforce the relationship by saying or doing things that let the other know how valued their friendship is. This is not a tit-for-tat compensation, but rather, a generalized attempt to ensure that the friendship is on good terms, that no harm was done by the broken promise.

This distinction is directly related to Hall and Hall's (1990) concept of high and low context styles of communication. *Independents* reflect lower context cultures, where putting things into words, explaining the events that led to the broken promise would be expected and appropriate. Both parties will feel better once everything is understood. *Interveners* use their knowledge of the friend, their long history together, to put the broken

promise in context. There is no need to explain. Perhaps the friend habitually breaks promises, in which case, an apology would seem insincere. Or perhaps the friend rarely breaks a promise, in which case the overwhelming sentiment would be the reassurance that they are still close friends. If there is an explanation it would generally be quite brief.

Second dimension: Includers versus Excluders: *Includers* are open and friendly to nearly everyone, even relative strangers. They have a small number of people they think of as “close friends,” but when actual behavior is examined, only weak distinctions can be seen between the interactions of close friends versus acquaintances. They appear open and friendly to everyone. *Excluders*, by contrast, tend to make sharper distinctions between friends and non-friends. They feel and behave differently when in the presence of a close friend compared to acquaintances. There may even be noticeable personality shifts, from a relaxed playfulness with friends to an unsmiling, even antagonistic approach to others. In these cultures, close friends are thought of as a very exclusive in-group, not unlike family members, and often family labels are used to refer to them, such as “older brother.”

Because of their approach to daily social situations, *Includers* tend to develop social skills for superficial interactions. They are comfortable carrying on conversations with relative strangers while waiting in a grocery store queue, for example. Their ready smiles, warm eye contact and open manner facilitate these interactions. These mannerisms may trigger in others a sense of ease at reciprocating their advances. They know how to bring out agreeable exchanges with others, and everyone feels at ease. By contrast, while they are skilled at most social situations, they are much less comfortable spending extended periods of time with a friend. They have difficulty dealing with the closeness that stems from prolonged contact. They often find, for example, that best friends don't make for good college roommates. *Excluders*, by contrast, tend to have the social skills required for these kinds of situations. They have social skills geared toward closeness. They can take a two-week vacation with a friend and remain friends at the end of it. They are able to negotiate the daily compromises and conflicts that arise from spending lots of time together. They have an approach to friendship that allows them to overcome such problems. By contrast, *Excluders* feel much less at ease in dealing with superficial relationships, managing them in a fashion that renders the other party at ease.

Includers also tend to have a high need for social approval from others, even those with whom they are not well acquainted. They want everyone to like them. Their social skills for the superficial are at work throughout the day as they interact with people who are both well known or strangers. Their identities and self-esteem are based in part on exercising these skills successfully, rendering all of their social interactions opportunities for positive feedback. A cross word, for example, from a checkout clerk at a grocery store can be upsetting. *Excluders*, by contrast, focus their energies and caring on a select few, who meet their social needs. It is irrelevant whether strangers like them or not. They don't expect strangers to be friendly and thus are not bothered by the lack of positive social feedback.

The empirical basis for this dimension stems from the in-group versus out-group distinctions established in several of the classic works comparing large numbers of cultures such as Hofstede (1980), Triandis (1995) and Hall and Hall (1990). It is relevant to reiterate that *Includers* do think of themselves as having a small number of close friends. However, there is little behavioral evidence regarding the exclusivity of this small group.

When observing their behavior, they appear to be friends with everyone. This distinction between their thoughts and their behaviors leads directly to the next dimension.

Third dimension: Idealists versus Realists: This dimension focuses on how we think about our close friends. *Idealists* tend to respond to surveys about their friends in glowing terms. They rate their closest friends as intelligent, charming, interesting, and willing “to do anything for me.” In cross-cultural surveys, they rate their friendships as closer than do those from other cultures. However, they rarely exhibit behavior reflecting direct involvement in the friend’s life. They distinguish sharply between close friends and others, but these distinctions are mostly sentimental and cognitive idealizations. *Realists* tend to see their close friends in more realistic terms, both the good and the not-so-good. Like siblings who are close in age, their friendships contain jealousies and disappointments in addition to fun, love, caring and loyalty. On surveys, they may rate the friend in both positive and negative terms. Yet they are more likely than the *Idealists* to become directly and actively involved in the friend’s life when needed.

The bases for this dimension are the studies in the U.S. suggesting that romantic relationships are characterized by positive illusions about one’s partner (e.g., Hall & Taylor, 1976; Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 1996). Accordingly, we tend to idealize our romantic partners, and such idealizations, rather than creating false expectations, are seen as healthy for the relationship since they are correlated with relationship longevity and satisfaction. These positive illusions are seen as a cognitive strategy aimed at enhancing the relationship, and by reflection, one’s own ego. It is like saying, “my partner is really great, and she loves me, so I must be great too!” Thus, the end result is self enhancement. Preliminary evidence (Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000) suggests that these processes do not function in the same way across cultures. My own survey research suggests that idealization also occurs in friendships, but that it varies markedly across cultures and is more representative of individualist cultures (Baumgarte, Lee & Kulich, 2001).

Also relevant to this dimension, it has been found that *Idealists* tend to show a higher degree of what social researchers refer to as *relationship maintenance* (Yum & Canary, 2003). There is an extensive literature on *relationship maintenance* (Canary & Dainton, 2003) and when we examine the measures used to assess this construct, we find that the primary emphasis is on communication issues. These measures focus almost exclusively on talk, the kind of talk that tends to reinforce the relationship. The assumption is that one can’t have a good relationship without good communication. In marital relationships, where the construct is studied most often, it refers to expressions of love and affection. In friendship, it tends toward ego-boosting talk. *Realists*, by contrast, see less need for frequent ego building of their friends. They tend to see their friendships as givens, something over which they have little control (Goodwin & Finlay, 1997). Indeed, they may have a somewhat fatalistic notion of friendship—“these are the friends I have to learn to live with.” However, they are more likely than *Idealists* to intervene in the life of a close friend—taking care of the friend is part of one’s role of being a good friend. “After all, my friend would do the same for me!”

Conclusions:

Recall that classic notions on cultural differences in close friendships hold that people in collectivist cultures have fewer and closer friendships. Direct, empirical tests of these

assertions often fail to support them. The resolution of this paradox lies in an examination of these three dimensions and their implications for what it means to have a close friend. These dimensions have strong implications, for example, for the communication patterns of close friends, not only with respect to how they deal with conflicts and apologies, but also how closeness develops. In the U.S. psychological literature, closeness has always been inferred from mutual self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Friends become closer by revealing increasingly personal things about themselves, resulting in social penetration or increasing closeness. Relationship maintenance, a concept also stemming from the U.S. psychological literature, is based almost entirely on verbal expressions of support. Self disclosure and verbal expressions of support may not be the most critical facilitators or indicators of closeness in cultures outside the U.S., especially collectivist, high-context cultures (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Sheets & Lugar, 2005; see also Nicotera, 1993).

While self disclosure and expressions of social support do enhance friendships in these cultures, there may be other equally critical elements for closeness, such as a shared, common history, having experienced critical or memorable moments in their lives together. Closeness may also be indicated by the extent to which friends feel comfortable intervening in each other's lives. Gradually augmented and mutual interventions over time serve to solidify the relationship and each friend's commitment to it. Since common measures of closeness and relationship maintenance emphasize self-disclosure and verbal expression of support, friendships in individualist cultures are frequently assessed as closer than those in collectivist cultures. Caring and actively intervening in a friend's life are not represented in the Western psychological literature on friendship, if one excludes studies focused on verbal expressions of support. People in individualist cultures also score higher on measures of close friendships because of their tendency to "idealize" close relationships. This idealization reflects how they think about and feel about close friends. While these thoughts and feelings are very real to them, they represent a complex set of psychological phenomena that attempt to reinforce their own self-concepts, a critical need among people in individualist cultures.

Perhaps most importantly, the three dimensions provide a way of deconstructing the individualism-collectivism dimension as it applies to close relationships. At a practical level, one can gain insights into the interactions with one's closest friends, especially when these friendships cross cultural lines. Closeness and caring in one culture are expressed verbally, by expressions of support, which may seem very lame or even insincere to people in another culture. Others might express closeness and caring by actively intervening in the affairs of the friend, taking some control over aspects of the friend's life, a move that might appear condescending or invasive to someone in another culture. It is all a matter of what it means to be a close friend.

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This page contains examples of stimulus materials I used in my cross-cultural research on close friendships: The first is from a vignette study aimed at exploring perceptions of a student intervening in the life of a close friend.

Please read the following vignette and respond to the questions that follow:

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.

Give your opinion about Megan and Cheryl by indicating your level of agreement with the following statements:

| | Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree | | |
|---|-------------------|---|---|---|----------------|---|---|
| In my opinion, Cheryl is trying to control Megan too much. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| In my opinion, they seem to have a very healthy friendship. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| In my opinion, Cheryl doesn't respect Megan's privacy sufficiently. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In my opinion, Cheryl nags Megan too much. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| In my opinion, they must have an extremely close relationship. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| In my opinion, each should mind her own business more. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Here are the instructions, followed by sample items from a cross-cultural survey I conducted requesting students to rate a close friendship.

The following questions ask you to focus on one specific friendship. You may choose anyone you would consider to be a "best friend." Please do not choose someone with whom you currently have romantic interests. As you respond to each question, please keep the image of this person before you, so that your responses reflect the nature of your relationship with this individual.

| | Strongly disagree | | | Strongly agree | | | |
|--|-------------------|---|---|----------------|---|---|---|
| I think that ___ is very intelligent. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| ___ tells me when I am making a mistake or behaving badly. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| There are some things I would change about ___ if I could. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| We deal with conflicts or disagreements by not talking about them. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I can talk about anything with ___ even very taboo topics. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| ___ tries to help me out when I haven't asked for help. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

What follows are questions aimed at eliciting one's self-placement on the three dimensions I have outlined describing cultural difference in approaches to close friendships. Read these questions as descriptive of a close friendship, not a romantic relationship. The first two pairs of questions relate to the *Intervener-Independent* dimension, the next pair to *Includer-Excluder* dimension, and the last one, to the *Idealist-Realist* dimension.

Two types of friendships: Which fits you best?

Type A: When it comes to my closest friend, times arrive where I have to protect him (her), help him (her) out, give advice, or take care of him (her). I do these things willingly, because we are close friends. He (She) has done the same for me many times in the past. We have a history of taking care of each other, just pitching in and doing things for each other when the situation calls for it.

Type B: When it comes to my closest friend, I would do anything for him (her). We have a great friendship. But, in reality, it is rather rare that I have to help him (her) out or actually take care of him (her) in some fashion. We are both rather independent-minded, self-sufficient individuals and we respect each other's freedom. I generally don't intervene in the lives of others, even close friends.

Type A ←-----→ Type B

Two types of friendships: Which fits you best?

When you do something that could be hurtful to a friend, how do you deal with it? For example, if you promised to do something important for a friend, but you completely forgot it, how would you excuse yourself?

Type A: I would explain the reasons I forgot. Perhaps I had a lot going on that week with several unexpected problems. I would explain everything clearly. A good relationship is based on good communication. It is important that he (she) understand that it wasn't intentional. If he understands my situation all that happened this week, he (she) will accept the reason I forgot to do what I had promised.

Type B: I really regret when I do something hurtful to a friend. I would apologize, of course. But with my close friends, it really isn't necessary to explain everything. We have been friends for years and our friendship is solid. Problems arise occasionally—it's no big deal. My friend will understand that there were important reasons I forgot to do what I had promised. There isn't much need to explain.

Type A ←-----→ **Type B**

Two types of friendships: Which fits you best?

Type C: I'm friendly toward most people I deal with, toward friends of course, but toward people in general as well. I have a few good friends that I enjoy. But on a day to day basis, I interact with a variety of people, at work, in the neighborhood, at the gym, or when I'm out with friends. It doesn't bother me if someone I don't know at all strikes up a conversation, while waiting in line at the grocery store, for example. I'm very open to most people.

Type D: I have a couple of close friends, my family and a few work friends whom I enjoy enormously. But, in general, I don't like spending time with people I don't know. I find it a bit bizarre, for example, when someone I don't know at all strikes up a conversation while I am waiting in line at the grocery store. I don't have a desire to carry on a conversation with just anybody. For my social life, I prefer spending time with the people I am close to.

Type C ←-----→ **Type D**

Two types of friendships: Which fits you best?

Type E: I have been quite lucky in my life when it comes to friendships. I truly have some great friends who would do anything for me. I love spending time with them. I find them interesting, intelligent, funny and they have always been very good to me. I feel really lucky when it comes to my friends!

Type F: I love my friends and enjoy spending time with them. At the same time, I know them well, their good points and bad. Occasionally, they can get on my nerves or cause me to worry. But we remain friends, through thick and thin, always there for each other. That is what friendship is all about!

Type E ←-----→ **Type F**