Cultural Conception of Friendship:
What do Ecuadorians and Poles Expect from a Friend?

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The present study investigates similarities and differences in perception of emotional support and conversational intimacy between friends. Burleson's (1994) typology of emotional support and analysis of Polish vs. Latin American cultures served as the theoretical framework for this study. Participants (Ecuadorians=87, Poles=60) completed a questionnaire consisting of five episodes-dialogues between two women whose behaviors reflected two variables: (i) Type of emotional support: Low versus High person-centered; and (ii) Success versus Failure story. Both partners, in dyads, where emotional support was high person-centered, enjoyed more positive evaluation than friends in low person-centered support dyads. Poles were more sensitive to how the needs of the self-disclosing partner were served by her friend, while Ecuadorians paid more attention to the quality of interaction. Also, personal matters attracted more interest of Poles, unlike Ecuadorians, for whom a casual small talk was more enjoyable.

Some researchers claim that friendship constitutes a culture-free phenomenon in interpersonal relations (Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Cantarello, 1986), while others suggest that culture plays essential role in what people consider as friendship (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, & Masaaki, 1988). In traditional societies, relationships taking place within age groups undergoing shared adolescence initiation (*rites de passage)* can be regarded as "a proto-friendship". Other processes accompanying adolescence such as joint school attendance or active military service may also constitute foundations of friendship. All of them are based on early periods of "making friends" and loyal life-long friendships. The importance of such external requirements seems to decrease over time.

For psychologists, emotional support appears as the central theme around which the bond of friendship is being built (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries, 2000). This dimension relates to expressing such values as concern, commitment or mutual closeness aimed at attention to the partner's emotional well-being (Jaworowska-Obłój & Skuza, 1986). This is the most desirable kind of support in close interpersonal relationships (Moreno, 2004), critical for the maintenance of friendship (Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005).

In view of studies on behavioral aspects of the emotional support, it is worth focusing on Burleson's (1994) hierarchical analysis of messages aimed at providing support for an interaction partner. Burleson systematized "supporting" messages on a nine degree scale. The basis of that hierarchy was a degree of adjustment between the message contents and actions; the latter, is featured by the author as "person-centered", i.e., based on empathy, understanding, as well as acceptance of feelings and situation of the support needing person. Messages of low degree of person centeredness can be distinguished by keeping distance and challenging or contradicting appropriateness of emotions felt by the partner. They also include advice and guidelines relating to what an interaction partner should feel or do in the given situation. Messages moderate in person centeredness are aimed at analysis of the particular situation in order to rationalize the experienced feelings, and also they include messages characterized by compassion. Persons whose behaviors are identified with high degree of person-centered approach are aimed at supporting the partner with understanding of his/her feelings, alongside with signals indicating that these feelings are accepted. Thus, at one end of the emotional

support scale, behaviors relating to a high degree of person-centered approach can be found, –while at the opposite end– are these relating to its low degree of person-centered approach.

Research findings on close relations suggest cultural differences in the preferred emotional support (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Burleson, 2003; Ryan et al., 2005; Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997). As Jacobson (1987) has pointed out, "analysis of cultural context is critical to understanding social support and support networks. It influences the perception of what constitutes support, who should provide it, to whom, and under what circumstances" (p. 49).

In individualistic cultures, "being a friend" may indicate someone whom we have recently met, enjoying good time together, or someone we have mutual dealings with. Kitayama and Markus (2000) discuss friendship in cultures of independent and interdependent self. According to these authors, having, expressing, and sharing with partner high self-esteem, is the main psychological principle characterizing friendship in North American culture of independent self. Friendship serves as an external source to reinforce these good intra-psychic feelings with mutual approval, praise and admiration. In Japanese culture, on the other hand, typical for an individual is having and expressing self-critical attitudes. In such circumstances the bond of friendship is founded on mutual sympathy, compassion and support in the dyad (Kitayama & Markus, 2000).

Friendship and cultural context of this study

Humanism is the construct proposed by Boski to depict central characteristics of Polish culture of interpersonal life (Boski, 1999, 2006, 2008). The scale of humanism is a measuring instrument consisting of items which reflect the importance of close intimacy and mutually caring relationships with individuals who enter one's interpersonal space. Humanism runs against instrumental ("business-like") treatment of other people. One of the items on that scale refers to friendship explicitly: "*I maintain and deeply care for my long-lasting friendships*". Also, Wierzbicka explains the meaning of friendship in Polish language as a relationship marked by its unique depth, binding people more closely than the expression of 'best friend' in English (1998). Independently, Niebrzydowski & Płaszczyński (1989) made a conceptual distinction between "deep" vs. "shallow" friendships; they confirmed the importance of friendship in personal lives of young Poles. According to these authors, "deep friendship" is a highly valued and exceptional bond with another person, whose well-being becomes a driving force in actor's daily life activities. In "shallow friendships" by contrast, young Poles are striving for mutual satisfaction and cheerfulness emerging from shared life experiences and time spent together.

The shallow friendship, as described by Niebrzydowski & Płażyński (1989), resembles *simpatía* –the Latin-American cultural script emphasizing great significance ascribed to harmony of interpersonal relations (Triandis, Marín, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1989)[1]. According to Triandis and his colleagues, person defined as *simpático* is nice and "easy-going"[2]. Being in close relations, such a person shows "an adequate" degree of conformism, treating the harmony of interaction as a superior value. In case of Latin-Americans, the above script carries a preference to avoid conflicts and a desire to accentuate positive ("nice") behaviors and situations, as well as to avoid controversial behaviors and situations that are not conducive to good interaction's ambience. Avoiding actions that would upset the harmony of interaction is equivalent with expression of respect for the partner, and also a desire to maintain a sense of dignity of that partner (Triandis et al., 1989). For Poles, respect to a friend and emphasis of his/her value are primarily accomplished through focusing on his/her needs and problems.

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[1] "συμπάθεια" in Greek.
[2] "συμπαθής" in Greek. The Greek terms though emphasize 'how much' one likes someone else, not the attribution of personality traits to this person.

Connecting Burleson's theory (1994; 2003) of person centeredness (high vs. low support) with cultural analysis of the meaning of friendship, we formulated the following hypothesis: Compared to Latin Americans, Poles would consider friendship as a relationship demanding relatively more of personal involvement in friend's life. This is why Poles might be expected to react more negatively than Latin Americans to situations where person's needs and expectations would be met with a low person-centered support from his/her friend.

Method

Participants

Participants were students from University of Warsaw in Poland, and from the Central University of Ecuador, Quito. In total, 143 persons (68 females and 75 males) aged from 18 to 27 were tested (*Mn* = 22; *SD* = 2.96). The Polish sample size was N_P=58 persons; 29 females and 29 males, aged from 18 to 27 (*Mn* = 23.2; *SD* = 2.94). There were N_E=85 participants in the Ecuadorian sample: 39 females and 46 males, aged from 18 to 27 (*Mn* = 21.1; *SD* = 2.67).

Materials

The questionnaire consisted of five conversation vignettes between two young women[3]. In four of these dialogues, one woman was disclosing to the other a personal event which has just occurred to her. These vignettes differed in: (a) the kind of feelings revealed by the self-disclosing person (negative, failure-related experience vs. positive, following an experience of success); and (b) the quality of emotional support offered by the second woman (high vs. low in person centeredness). This distinction was also based on the Burleson's theory (1994). In addition to the four vignettes resulting from these two criteria crossing each other, the fifth was a "small talk", oriented to daily routines and free from intensive emotions on either side.

A Polish set of vignettes' was created; it was based on a pilot study conducted among Polish students. The episodes were built around the following themes: *failing a driving test, father's laid off and falling in depression actor's getting a job, and boyfriend's engagement proposal.* They were back translated into Spanish, covering Ecuadorian language regionalisms. Yet, some problems of cultural inadequacy appeared with the "original" Polish dialogues, especially with an experience of *failing a driving test*, which was not considered by Ecuadorian students as a valid issue on the list of their life events. Therefore new dialogues were created, exploiting themes considered as appropriate in the Ecuadorian context. They exploited the themes of boyfriend's betrayal, loosing money, lottery win, and again a boyfriend's proposal.

Sample vignette (The boyfriend's betrayal) and measures.

"I think Jan is cheating on me… You know Magdalena? Yesterday we went to my cousin's party. Everyone was there, you know, as usual. Magdalena too, off course… From the very beginning he was into her, but we were all dancing so I wasn't upset about it that much. But then they disappeared, and I found them… kissing each other! In that moment I didn't know what to do… I joint the others… Jan even didn't notice that I saw him… he was so involved"

In high person-centered condition her partner responded this way:

"Ann… I'm so sorry… But you know, Jan is the last person you should be worried about. You're great and valuable girl and you deserve someone much better than he is. He lost you and I'm sure he'll regret it."

In the low person-centered condition the partner responded differently:

"Oh, I think you are too much concerned about this. Guys come and go; Jan is not the first and not the last one. And none of them is worth your tears. You better get changed –we're

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[3] The reason of gender limitation was to create a large gap between high- and low person-centered support. We believed that this would be easier to accomplish with female dyads, where the assumption of close intimacy, characteristic for high person centeredness, would be more warranted.

going to the party! You have to get some fun! I'll do your make up and you're going to look great! Well... the life's waiting!

Following each conversation, participants were requested to fill out questions concerning: (a) definition of the relationship between the two protagonists in terms of "acquaintanceship", "colleagues" or "friendship"; (b) appropriateness of their behavior on a five point Likert type scale; (c) personal emotional attitude to each of them, also on a five point Likert type scale.

Thus, we had a mixed research design with Ecuadorian and Polish, female and male participants responding to our questionnaire wherein two repeated measures factors were built: two levels of emotional support (low vs. high person-centered) and two interaction roles (self-disclosing vs. support provider)[4]. Partner evaluation was the dependent variable (it consisted of two item-scales in each case: actor's behavioral appropriateness and actor's emotional evaluation).

Procedure

The Ecuadorian part of the study was carried out at Central University of Ecuador in Quito. Students were approached at the university campus and requested to fill out the questionnaire in Spanish. The questionnaires were distributed, instructions provided, and data collected by the first author. This procedure was then repeated in Poland with University of Warsaw students. The order of five vignettes was counterbalanced.

Results

Two types of measures were recorded for self-disclosing and responding actor-friends in each vignette: approval ratings for their conduct and emotional attitude. Since these measurements were highly inter-correlated (from lowest r=.57 to highest r=.77), they were aggregated into single scores.

A repeated measures analysis of variance of 2 (nationality) by 2 (high/low person centered support) by 2 (self-disclosing *vs.* recipient actor) design, with the latter two as within-factors, was carried out to test the hypothesized effects. Figure 1 illustrates the means for this analysis. To start with, we found a significant effect of the type of support [$F_{(1, 133)}$ = 44.30, p<.001, η^2=.25], such that partners in dyads high in
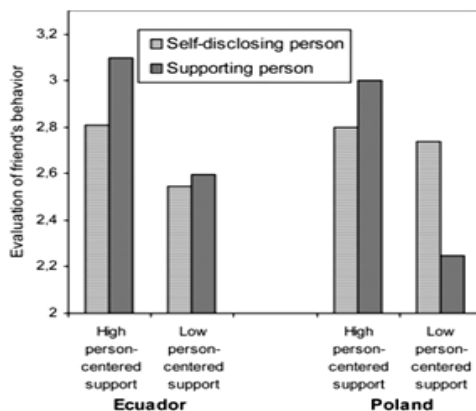

Figure 1. Evaluation of friend's behavior: emotional support seeker and provider in Ecuadorian and Polish sample. Depending on the context of the conversation (type of emotional provided).

person-centered orientation were evaluated more positively than those low in person centeredness (Mn_H=2.88 > Mn_L=2.48). Next, an interaction between the quality of support and the target person in a dyad fashion [$F_{(1,133)}$ = 24.71, p<.001, η^2=.16]; simple effects showed that this difference was more pronounced for the supporting [$F_{(1, 133)}$ = 49.39, p<.001, η^2=.27] than for the self-disclosing actor [$F_{(1, 133)}$ = 10.82, p<.001, η^2=.08], respectively. Since the self-disclosing actor remained fixed across the two conditions, these findings confirm expectations that our measures would more affect the provider of emotional support. Finally, a

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[4] We also controlled the cultural content of the vignettes, which originated from Ecuadorian and Polish contexts respectively, and also positivity/negativity outcomes of events reported to the friend. Together with participant's sex, they did not contribute to any significant results and have been discarded from our presentation in this chapter. From the fact that Ecuadorian and Polish research materials contributed to similar statistical effects in our analyses we infer that construct equivalence of our measures was adequate.

three-way interaction [$F_{(1, 133)} = 7.24$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .055$] indicates, that this last effect is qualified by participants' nationality. In Ecuador, the interaction between actor and support type reached only marginal significance ($F_{(1, 75)} = 3.76$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .05$); both actors are given more preference, at almost the same rate, in high than in low person-centered support. In Poland, the interaction of these variables was highly significant ($F_{(1, 56)} = 24.32$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .30$). Here, was the only case, that the self-disclosing partner was more liked to his low person-centered friend (for simple effect, $F_{(1, 56)} = 13.44$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .19$). Thus, we may say that Poles were more sensitive to the quality of actor's intervention in response of friend's self-disclosure. For Ecuadorians, it was rather the whole interaction which deteriorated in low emotional support.
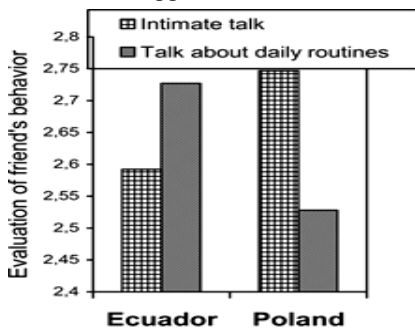

Figure 2. Evaluation of behavior of friends talking intimately of about daily routines.

To verify the impact of culture on evaluation of intimate and casual messages, another two (Nationality) by two (Intimate/Casual talk) analysis of variance was carried out. Since these measures were more stable across the support conditions, only the ratings for self-disclosing partners have been aggregated to create a new variable "Intimate talk". A statistically significant interaction of nationality and degree of message intimacy was revealed [$F_{(1, 123)} = 6.35$, $p<.05$; $\eta^2 = .05$]. Poles evaluated the small talk lower than conversations on important personal events [$F_{(1, 56)} = 7.4$, $p<.01$] with Ecuadorians manifesting an opposite tendency (Figure 2).

Discussion

This study was designed to explore cultural conditions for emotional support in friendship. In this regard, both similarities and differences between Polish and Ecuadorian cultures were observed. It might be the case that preference for dyads with high level of interpersonal support –as found in our research, reflects a universal phenomenon beyond the two cultures under investigation. This can be easily explained in terms of interpersonal reinforcements: high person-centered support is rewarding and people like those individuals who are providers of such rewards (Byrne, 1971). Also, the warm glow of high person-centered support is generalized to the self-disclosing partner. Yet, and in line with the law of generalization, the effects of person centeredness had stronger impact on evaluation of supporting partners than on ratings of their self-disclosing counterparts. These classical mechanisms prevailed over cultural differences, but were limited to situations where interpersonal support (reinforcement level) was high.

Cultural differences appeared when personal problems disclosed to the partner were met with "deficits" of empathy concern or care. Polish participants showed not only high disapproval for actors who were inept to act as dedicated friends but also cast against them, the self-disclosing partners relatively gained in their approval ratings. In line with our theoretical expectations, Poles show substantially higher negative attitude towards low person-centered forms of treating personal problems by their friends. It should be added, that Poles were more likely that Ecuadorians to attribute friendship (rather than acquaintanceship) to the relations depicted in the vignettes [$Mn_P=3.46 > Mn_E=2.30$; $F_{(1, 133)} = 29.86$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .17$]. Thus Poles may be setting higher standards for interpersonal intimacy in such dyads, and because of that they evaluated actors not conforming to these standards more critically.

Polish-Ecuadorian differences in evaluation of the self-disclosing partner depend on the context a talk was held. Ecuadorians evaluated the confiding friend less favorably under condition when she received a low person-centered emotional support than in case she was offered a high person-centered support; these results affected both members of the dyad.

Among Ecuadorians, the evaluation depends on the person who is listening to confessions. If an interaction partner responding to intimate contents keeps herself at distance, the Ecuadorians perceive the whole dyad in worse terms than in case a listener's response is full of attention and concern to her friend's problems. Unlike with Poles who took the self-disclosing person's side when she experienced a somewhat "lukewarm" support. In other words, they gave high evaluations to a friend in need (no matter whether it was a desire to share one's sorrow or joy).

As we have already suggested, friend's needs stand –for Polish participants– as an independent standard of reference for her partner's evaluation. To be a friend means to fulfill high requirements and expectations. Here the English proverb: "a friend in need is a friend indeed", finds its full cultural illustration. Treating a friend off-hand would be discrediting. Who fails to meet these standards does not deserve to be awarded an honorable name of "a friend of mine". Such understanding of friendship finds its confirmation in several studies conducted by Boski (1999, 2006, 2008) concerning humanism's dimensions within Polish culture.

As for Ecuadorians, it is rather the ambience of interaction which matters for the quality of relationship. In the low person centeredness conditions, both partners of the dyad suffer equal decline of evaluation. This last suggestion is further supported by evidence concerning comparison of small-talk vs. personal disclosure. Poles evaluated intimate talks higher than a trivial causal talk. Ecuadorians displayed the opposite tendency: compared to intimate confessions, their preferences were in favor of mutual "small talk". Therefore, we can repeat after Triandis, et al. (1989), that the Ecuadorian friend is *simpático*, striving to maintain nice and concerted ambience of the relation, and –to this end– tends to maintain the conformist approach. From the works by Wierzbicka and common experience, it is well evidenced that Poles are culturally not endowed for carrying and appreciating such small talks interactions (Wierzbicka, 1999).

For many reasons, taking up issues of friendship, and particularly in comparative research context, should be considered as important. First of all, data show that having friends is one of major predictors of individual's subjective well-being (Argyle, 1999; Myers, 2000). However, paraphrasing the statement concerning love ("love has many names"), also "friendship has many names". Some cultural misunderstandings can thus appear in relation to what we consider as friendship or "true friendship". This is why a simple prescription such as "make friends" or "have more friends" can turn out insufficient or plainly ineffective to increase level of someone's sense of happiness. Therefore, we always need to ask what kind of friendship we have to do with.

Occurrence of cultural differences in the scope of emotional support in friendship can be considered as a justification for further intercultural researches concerning its other aspects. It would allow to explore the heart of the matter and to better understand its true nature.

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