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The experience and effects of emotional support: What the study of cultural and gender differences can tell us about close relationships, emotion, and interpersonal communication

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Abstract

Theorists claim that emotional support is one of the most significant provisions of close relationships, and studies suggest that the receipt of sensitive emotional support is associated with diverse indices of well-being. Research highlighting the beneficial outcomes of emotional support raises several important questions: Does emotional

support play a similar role in the personal relationships of both men and women and those representing different ethnicities and nationalities? Is what counts as effective, sensitive, emotional support the same for everyone? And when seeking to provide emotional support, do members of distinct social groups pursue similar or different goals? This article reviews and synthesizes empirical research assessing gender, ethnic, and cultural differences in emotional support in the effort to ascertain the extent and import of these differences. Particular attention is given to demographic differences in (a) the value placed on the emotional support skills of relationship partners, (b) the intentions or goals viewed as especially relevant in emotional support situations, and (c) the evaluation of distinct approaches to providing emotional support. Theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of the findings are explored.

Emotional support occupies a central position in most contemporary theories of close relationships (e.g., Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Reis, 2001). Varied definitions have been proposed for the emotional support construct and, although there are some differences among these, most theorists have conceptualized emotional support as expressions of care, concern, love, and interest, especially during times of stress or upset (see Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Emotional support also encompasses helping distressed others work through their upset by listening to, empathizing with, legitimizing, and actively exploring their feelings (e.g., Burleson, 1984). Additionally, because stress and emotional hurt often stem from the invalidation of the self, either directly (e.g., rejection by a valued other) or indirectly (e.g., failing at something connected to one's self-concept), expressions of encouragement, appreciation, reassurance, and respect—often regarded as appraisal, ego, or esteem support—can be conceptualized as forms of emotional support (Rook & Underwood, 2000).

Emotional support thus addresses matters residing at the core of our being: our sense of self, the things we aspire to, our hopes, our fears, and our deepest feelings. For this reason, among others, numerous theorists have viewed emotional support as a key process in close relationships. Indeed, emotional support has often been treated as a basic provision of close personal relationships (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Weiss, 1974), as well as an important determinant of satisfaction with these relationships (Acitelli, 1996; Samter, 1994). Consistent with this, some research has found that people report emotional support to be one of the most, if not the most, desired types of support provided by close relationship partners (Cutrona & Russell, 1987; Xu & Burleson, 2001). Other research has found that deficiencies in the quantity or quality of emotional support received from a partner are particularly predictive of relationship dissatisfaction (Baxter, 1986).

The support provided by close relationships often has salutary effects, helping those in need to cope more effectively with problems, manage upset, and maintain a positive sense of self and outlook on life (Burleson, 1994; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996). Abundant research indicates that those with supportive social networks enjoy better physical health than those with unsupportive networks (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 1997). Moreover, the recipients of sensitive emotional support can recover more quickly from various illnesses and injuries and may even live longer when battling afflictions such as heart disease and breast cancer (Seeman, 2001; Spiegel & Kimerling, 2001). In sum, there is considerable evidence that the receipt of sensitive emotional support contributes substantially to multiple indices of personal and relational well-being.

Although impressive, research highlighting outcomes of emotional support raises several important questions: Is the provision of emotional support by relationship partners valued equally by members of diverse ethnic and national groups, or is this a provision of relationships chiefly valued by Western Whites? Is what counts as effective, sensitive, emotional support the same for everyone, or are there differences due to factors such as gender and nationality? When providing emotional support to relational partners, do helpers' goals vary as a function of gender, ethnicity, and nationality? More generally,

are all close relationships centrally concerned with the affective states of their individual members? Although much research on the role of emotional support processes in close relationships supports a theoretical understanding of these relationships as a venue in which the experience, expression, and exploration of affect occupy a central place, is such an understanding universally warranted? Might this preoccupation with affect describe only one orientation to closeness in relationships—one most characteristic of Western, white, middle-class females?

The last of these questions expresses a thesis articulated with growing frequency in both popular and scholarly sources. Over the past decade, an increasing number of writers have asserted that there are profound culture-based differences in relationships, communication, and emotion. Thus, questions have been raised about whether members of different genders and cultures have the same kinds of emotional experiences, view communication similarly as a resource for managing social situations, seek similar sorts of things from their close relationships, and mean the same thing by terms such *intimacy*, *closeness*, and *care* (e.g., Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1993).

One way to address these questions, as well as the assumptions that usually underlie them, is to examine carefully aspects of the emotional support process in close relationships, assessing whether, and to what extent, these vary as a function of cultural factors such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality. As Jacobson (1987) observed, the "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). Thus, exploring the role of emotional support in close relationships, and whether what counts as quality emotional support differs across social groups, should have considerable conceptual value, especially for theories of close relationships, emotion, and communication. More specifically, because emotional support typically occurs in the context of *close relationships*, study of it can

enhance our understanding of these relationships, their functions, their provisions, and their roles in peoples' lives. Because emotional support focuses on *emotions*, study of it can help us understand the nature of emotional experiences, the circumstances that provoke various emotions, and the factors that lead to change in emotional states. And because emotional support is typically a *communicative activity*, study of it can help us understand how people conceptualize communication as a relational resource, what they see as possible to achieve through communication, and the specific interactional goals they seek to realize when providing support. The study of cultural differences in emotional support processes should thus provide considerable insight into close relationships, human feeling, and communication processes, especially the extent to which these are universal or culturally variable.

Exploring cultural differences in emotional support processes should also have considerable pragmatic relevance. If the import accorded emotional support, as well as what counts as quality support, differs for distinct social groups, then practice, pedagogy, and therapy all need to reflect this fact (Kunkel & Burleson, 1998; Wood, 1993). Clearly, if the role of emotional support in close relationships varies with culture, and if men and women (or Blacks and Whites, or Americans and Chinese) are best supported by different types of messages, then we need to be aware of these facts and accommodate to them—as actors providing support to others in the everyday life, as educators fostering the development of support skills in our students, as therapists or clinicians working to assist others in our professional practice, and as researchers seeking to explain why supportive messages work as they do.

This article reviews and synthesizes selected empirical research assessing gender, ethnic, and cultural differences in emotional support in the effort to ascertain the extent and import of these differences. Particular attention is given to demographic differences in (a) the value placed on the

emotional support skills of relationship partners, (b) the intentions or goals viewed as especially relevant in emotional support situations, and (c) the evaluation of distinct approaches to providing emotional support. By carefully reviewing and synthesizing empirical findings in each of these three areas, I seek to detail ways in which the implicit theories of relationships, communication, and emotion employed by members of distinct social groups are both similar and different. The aim of these explorations is to develop deeper understandings of close relationships, especially the role of emotion and communication in these relationships.

Differences in the Value Placed on Emotional Support Skills in Personal Relationships: Implications for Conceptions of Relationships and Their Functions

Communication values and conceptions of relationships

Relationships exhibit both form and function. *Form* refers to the recognized types of relationships acknowledged within particular cultural milieus (e.g., acquaintances, co-workers, friends), and *function* refers to the personal, social, and cultural tasks that relationships perform—the things they do or provide for their members and the broader social order (Cutrona & Russell, 1987; Weiss, 1974). Relationship forms and functions are deeply intertwined, with particular types of relationships associated with the performance of certain functions (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). But it remains an open, empirical question as to whether relationships of a given type (e.g., close friendships) perform uniform functions for the variety of participants who engage in that relationship.

Put succinctly, are all relationships of a given form (e.g., friendship) largely similar in their functions, or do they differ due to social characteristics of their participants? Because people learn the rules of relationships (Argyle & Henderson, 1985) and prescribed (if implicit) functions of relationships (Weiss,

1974) in their families, communities, and cultural groups, it is reasonable to inquire how cultural variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, nationality) influence cognitive representations of relationships and their functions. To date, however, few studies have examined whether, and to what extent, there are culture-based differences in the conceptions, implicit theories, prototypes, or schemata people develop for their relationships (for a recent exception, see Fehr & Broughton, 2001).

My colleagues and I have sought to explore actors' conceptions of personal relationships, especially the perceived provisions of those relationships, by examining the value they place on various aspects of communication occurring in a relationship, especially the functional communication skills of relationship partners. *Functional communication skills* represent abilities to accomplish social goals in interaction such as informing, persuading, comforting, entertaining, managing conflict, and so forth (Burleson et al., 2000). Given the central role of communication in most personal relationships, we believe that how people conceptualize their relationships can be understood, in part, by assessing the value placed on diverse communication skills of partners (Burleson & Samter, 1990; Samter & Burleson, 1990). Thus, comparing the skill evaluations supplied by men and women and members of different cultures should help clarify whether, and to what extent, factors such as gender and culture influence the ways in which people think about personal relationships.

Our research has focused particularly on evaluations of communication skills associated with providing emotional support. Differences in the value placed on skills such as comforting and ego support by members of distinct social groups suggest underlying differences in conceptions of the relationship, expectations for partners, and functions served or provisions obtained, whereas similarities in the value placed on these skills imply important uniformities in conceptions of and expectations for these relationships.

The Communication Functions Questionnaire

To tap these skill evaluations or "communication values," my colleagues and I have used an instrument Wendy Samter and I developed (Burleson & Samter, 1990), the Communication Functions Questionnaire (CFQ). The CFQ has undergone development and refinement over the past dozen years, but similar versions have been used in most research. Participants read descriptions of communication behaviors typically performed in a particular relationship (e.g., same-sex friendship, opposite-sex romance) and are asked to indicate how important that behavior is in the relationship. The behaviors describe the enactment of several different communication skills, including affectively oriented skills and instrumental or interactional skills. All versions of the CFQ have included four affectively oriented communication skills (comforting, conflict management, ego support, and behavioral regulation) and four interactional/instrumental skills (conversing, informing, persuading, and narrative skill). Recent versions of the CFQ include two other affectively oriented skills, expressiveness (i.e., self-disclosure) and listening. Participants complete the CFQ with respect to a particular relationship (e.g., best friend, cross-sex friend, work acquaintance, romantic partner, spouse).

The major source of variance in communication skill evaluations is type of skill. In virtually every study reported to date (e.g., Burleson, Kunkel, Samter, & Werking, 1996; Burleson & Samter, 1990; MacGeorge, 1998), affectively oriented skills, especially ego support, comforting, and conflict management, have been rated as more important than the instrumental/interactional skills of conversing, informing, persuading, and narrative (i.e., storytelling). This finding is almost certainly a function of most research having focused on close relationships wherein concerns with emotion and relational issues assume prominence. Moreover, some research indicates that relationship type moderates the effect of skill type with respect to the evaluation of skill importance.

For example, Burleson et al. (1996) found affectively oriented skills (ego support, comforting, conflict management) were seen as substantially more important in romantic partners than in friends, whereas the interactional skills (conversational and narrative skills) of romantic partners were seen as only somewhat more important than those of friends. These results appear consistent with the notions that romance is a more intimate relationship than friendship (e.g., Rubin, 1970), and that affectively oriented communication skills are especially relevant in highly intimate relationships.

Gender differences in communication values

A popular thesis for at least the past 20 years has been that men and women think about relationships—especially close relationships like friendships, romance, and marriage—in fundamentally different ways. In particular, proponents of the gender-as-culture, separate cultures, and different cultures theses (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1993) maintain that women value close relationships for their emotional and expressive qualities and men chiefly conceptualize close relationships in terms of their instrumental features. According to this perspective, females are taught that talk is the primary vehicle through which intimacy and connectedness are created and maintained (Maltz & Borker, 1982), and thus should highly value communication skills associated with the provision of emotional support. Males, on the other hand, are socialized to view talk as a mechanism for getting things done, for accomplishing instrumental tasks, for conveying information, and for maintaining one's autonomy (Wood & Inman, 1993), and should thus highly value instrumental communication skills such as informing, persuading, and entertaining.[1]

An alternative view is that both sexes largely conceptualize close relationships

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1. In more recent publications, Wood (2002) has softened her position regarding gender differences, acknowledging that the similarities exhibited by men and women often outweigh the differences.

similarly, and thus should have largely similar communication values (e.g., Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1998). Although there may be some small differences in what men and women value in their close relationships, and thus in the communication skills they value in their partners, we believe that the different cultures thesis overstates the degree of sex differences in the character of socialization experiences and resulting patterns of value and behavior (for detailed development of this view, see the comments by Dindia in Wood & Dindia, 1998). More specifically, research indicates that both men and women seek intimacy from their close relationships (Wright, 1998), see empathy and trust as core features of such relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996), and follow similar implicit rules in enacting these relationships (Argyle & Henderson, 1985). In this view, the expression and management of affect lies at the heart of close relationships for both sexes, and so both men and women should regard the expressive skills of their relationship partners as much more important than their partners' instrumental skills.

My colleagues and I evaluated this hypothesis in a pair of studies that compared men's and women's skill evaluations for both same-sex friendships and romantic relationships (Burleson et al., 1996). In our first study, participants completed the CFQ with respect to a same-sex friendship. As anticipated, expressive or affectively oriented skills (ego support, conflict management, comforting) were viewed as substantially more important by both sexes with respect to friendship than were instrumental or interactional skills. There were also some small sex differences, with women rating ego support, conflict management, comforting, and regulative skills as significantly more important than did men, and men rating narrative and persuasive skills as significantly more important than did women. In our second study, participants completed the CFQ with respect to either a same-sex friendship or an opposite-sex romantic relationship. Closely replicating the results of the first study, type of communication skill was found to explain much more variance in skill ratings than any other factor. Some small sex differences were also detected: females rated ego support skill, conflict management skill, and comforting skill as significantly more important than did males, whereas males rated narrative and persuasion skills as significantly more important than did females.

Subsequent studies have replicated this pattern of findings with populations such as mature adults (MacGeorge, 1998) and with several other personal relationships, including cross-sex friendship (Griffiths & Burleson, 1995), sibling relationships (Myers & Knox, 1998), and friendships of varying degrees of intimacy (Westmyer & Myers, 1996). In all of these studies, both men and women indicated that the expressive (affectively oriented) skills of their partners were more important than the interactional or instrumental skills. Small sex differences do exist, with women rating most expressive skills as slightly more important than do men, and men rating some interactional and instrumental skills as slightly more important than do women, but these small differences generally exist within much larger patterns of similarity.

Reed and her colleagues (Henry, Reed, & McAllister, 1995; Reed, McLeod, & McAllister, 1999) developed a rather different approach to assessing communication skill evaluations, focusing on 14 more "atomistic" communication skills. These researchers grouped the skills they examined into two broad classes, empathic or addressee-focused skills (e.g., perspective taking, vocal tone interpretation, tact) and discourse management skills (e.g., narrative skill, topic maintenance). Henry et al. (1995) had a sample of Australian adolescents rate the importance of these skills with respect to the communication of their peers. Addressee-focused skills were evaluated as much more important than discourse management skills, and no sex differences were evident. Reed et al. (1999) had a sample of Australian adolescents evaluate the importance of these skills for communication with both peers and teachers. Addressee-focused skills were evaluated as more important in the context

of peer relations than were discourse management skills, the latter of which were viewed as more important in regard to communication with teachers. Although there were some sex differences in skill evaluations, with males rating discourse management skills as more important than did females, these differences were largely limited to the context of communicating with teachers. Overall, the results reported by Reed and her colleagues appear quite consistent with those obtained in studies using the CFQ, with expressive or addressee-focused skills being viewed as substantially more important in the context of close relationships by members of both sexes.

In sum, the results of studies assessing communication skill evaluations in close relationships suggest that men and women have substantially similar conceptions of these relationships and similar expectations about their provisions. Both men and women largely see these relationships centered on the exploration, validation, and support of selves, with expressive communication skills such as ego support, comforting, and conflict management being particularly important. Although close relational partners are also seen as sources of companionship and instrumental assistance, the lower importance accorded to interaction management skills (e.g., conversational and narrative skills) and instrumental skills (e.g., informing and persuading) suggest that these provisions of close relationships are not as central for either men or women as are more affective provisions.

The results obtained with the CFQ and similar instruments are consistent with studies examining sex differences and similarities in the meaning of concepts such as intimacy and closeness. These studies, most of which have content-analyzed essays describing the experience of intimacy, closeness, and related terms, have found that men and women have quite similar conceptions of these constructs (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996). Somewhat similarly, Reis (1990) found no sex differences beyond chance in ratings of the importance of diverse goals in the context of friendship. Comparable patterns

of results have been reported in several other studies (e.g., Vangelisti & Daly, 1997; see the review by Reis, 1998). In sum, research has examined the meanings and provisions people associate with key aspects of relationships and, although some small sex differences are regularly found, the functions men and women see these relationships performing are much more similar than different, with emotional support occupying a prominent, if not preeminent, place.

Ethnic and national differences in communication values

The studies summarized in the preceding section strongly suggest that emotional support in various forms (comforting, ego support) is perceived as a core provision of close personal relationships. However, all the studies informing this conclusion were conducted with samples of Americans or Australians who largely were White and from middle-class backgrounds. Do members of other groups, especially other ethnicities and nationalities, conceptualize close relationships similarly, particularly with regard to the centrality of emotional support processes?

There is some basis for thinking that certain cultural groups do not accord emotional support processes the same status as do most Americans and Europeans, and thus may have a significantly different perspective on the character of close personal relationships. Research exploring cultural differences in the experience and expression of emotion suggests that people from different cultural backgrounds may diverge, perhaps substantially, in the extent to which close relationships are organized around the expression, exploration, and management of emotion. In particular, there are important cultural differences in emotional experience and expression as a function of the value system dimension that Hofstede (1980) termed *individualism-collectivism*. As is well known, in more collectivist societies (such as traditional China) the individual's situation and projects are deeply enmeshed with the situation and projects of in-group others such as family members and close friends. In contrast, in

more individualist societies (such as the United States), people see their situations and projects as more independent of others, and tend to focus on the pursuit of their own defined goals (Triandis, 1994). Collectivism manifests itself in communication that is subtle, indirect, highly contextual, and relatively nonexpressive (Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Contarello, 1986). Members of collectivist cultures, and Eastern cultures in particular, expect communicators to understand and interpret unarticulated feelings, subtle nonverbal gestures, and environmental cues. In contrast, the communicative forms used in individualist, Western cultures are more reliant on explicit and elaborated verbal utterances than are the communicative strategies employed by members of collectivist, Eastern cultures (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996).

These cultural value systems have profound implications for the ways in which emotions are experienced, expressed, and managed (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Mesquita, 2001). For example, in individualist cultures, a person's emotional state is commonly viewed as something to be examined, analyzed, and explicitly explored in discourse. Solidarity with others is less likely to be assumed than in collectivist cultures, and therefore must be fabricated through overt expressions of interest, care, and empathy. In collectivist cultures, focus on an individual's ego needs and emotional state is often viewed as disrupting the harmony of the social group (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Wellenkamp, 1995). Preoccupation with the wants and feelings of a particular individual may call inappropriate attention to the individuality and distinctness of one person at the expense of the group. Thus, members of collectivist cultures (e.g., Chinese) are likely to be less comfortable dealing with the personal ego needs and emotional states of others, and this may lead members of such cultures to place a lower value on expressive skills than do members of more individualist cultures (e.g., Americans).

Research also suggests there may be ethnic differences in the role emotional support processes play in close relationships. Several lines of study suggest that African Americans manifest higher degrees of collectivism than do European Americans (see Gaines, 1997); if this is so, then members of this ethnicity may, on average, place less emphasis on emotional support skills than do European Americans. Other research also suggests that verbal emotional support processes may occupy a less central role in the close relationships of African Americans than in those of European Americans. For example, in a cross-cultural examination of social penetration processes in friendship, Hammer and Gudykunst (1987) found that African Americans reported greater disclosure than European Americans on most conversational topics, but European Americans reported greater disclosure than African Americans with respect to the discussion of emotions and feelings. Similarly, Hecht and Ribeau (1984) found that whereas ''being with the other person'' characterized satisfying conversations for African Americans, ''releasing bottled up feelings'' typified satisfying interactions for European Americans, a finding leading these researchers to conclude that European Americans emphasize the emotional aspects of friendship to a greater extent than do African Americans.

We have conducted several studies assessing ethnic and national differences in communication skill evaluations as a way of exploring cultural differences in conceptions and perceived provisions of close relationships. In one study (Samter & Burleson, 1998), samples of African American, Asian American, and European American college students completed a version of the CFQ with respect to same-sex friendships. The results obtained in this study were complex and can be summarized only briefly here. Consistent with other CFQ studies, a strong main effect for skill type was observed, with expressive skills being viewed as more important than interactional or instrumental skills. However, there were significant differences in skill ratings due to ethnicity, sex, and the interaction of these two demographic factors. In general, African Americans placed lower value than either Asian Americans or

European Americans on most skills, especially expressive skills, and this was particularly true for African American women. These findings suggest that theoretical models of friendship as a relationship rooted in talk, especially talk about feelings and selves, may apply primarily to European Americans, somewhat less to Asian Americans, and even less to African Americans.

In an unpublished study, Steve Mortenson and I (Mortenson & Burleson, 2002) examined the communication skill evaluations of Chinese and American college students with respect to same-sex friends. The Chinese were international students attending an American university, and had been in the United States three years or less. A strong effect was observed for skill type, with the expressive skills of ego support, comforting, and conflict management being valued more than either interactional or instrumental skills. There were some interesting interactions, however, involving nationality (none of which were further qualified by sex). First, nationality did not qualify the importance assigned to expressive skills; Chinese and Americans did not differ in the value they placed on friends' comforting, ego-support, and conflict management skills. Second, Americans valued the interaction skills (conversational and narrative skills) of their friends more than did Chinese. Third, Chinese valued the instrumental skills (informing, persuading, regulating) of their friends more than did Americans. Although these findings suggest there are some cultural differences in the provisions and conceptions associated with friendship, the pattern of differences is inconsistent with the notion that collectivist Chinese view emotional support skills as less important than individualist Americans.

A third study provides further comparison of the communication skills valued by Americans and Chinese in close relationships. Xu and Burleson (2001) explored the effects of nationality and gender on the supportive communication skills married individuals valued in their spouses. Participants (native-born Americans and Chinese, the latter of whom had resided in the United States fewer than five years) completed a questionnaire in which, among other things, they indicated the extent to which they desired five types of support (emotional, esteem, network, informational, and tangible) from their spouses. A strong effect was observed for type of support, with the support form rankings for most- to least-desired being: emotional, tangible, esteem, informational, and network. Women of both nationalities indicated a stronger desire for all types of support from their spouses than did men. Chinese indicated a stronger desire for two forms of support than did Americans, network and informational. Although these data are interesting and suggest some small cultural and gender differences in the desired provisions of marriage, they do not suggest that emotional support processes occupy a less important place in the marriages of collectivist Chinese than individualist Americans.

Our limited explorations of communication values in different ethnic and national groups indicate that emotional support occupies a preeminent place in close relationships such as friendship and marriage. Thus, our data raise some question about whether cultural values like individualism and collectivism influence people's conceptions of and expectations for close relationships. An important limitation of our studies was the use of sojourning international students rather than resident natives; it is possible that these sojourners are more individualistic (and thus more like Americans) than their nonsojourning countrymen. Still, the import accorded to expressive communication skills and emotion-focused forms of support by both sexes and varied ethnicities and nationalities suggests the centrality of emotional support processes in the close relationships of many peoples. These findings further suggest that different people—men and women, Blacks and Whites, Americans and Chinese—think about close relationships in some fundamentally similar ways, look to these relationships for many of the same things, and see these relationships built around a common emotional foundation.

Differences in Evaluations of Supportive Messages: Implications for Theories of Emotion

Supportive message evaluations and their relevance to emotion theory

Finding that different groups view emotional support as equally important in close relationships does not mean that these groups will find the same sorts of messages equally supportive. Indeed, distinct social groups may view specific support messages quite divergently, and have very different beliefs about which message forms do the best job of providing sensitive, effective support.

People's evaluations of the quality of different support strategies (i.e., their sensitivity, effectiveness, helpfulness) tell us about the message forms people think will relieve emotional distress or what is appropriate to say in support situations. Although people's evaluations of different comforting strategies may not enable researchers to predict the precise message forms employed in actual support situations, people would seem unlikely to use a particular support strategy with others if they do not evaluate that strategy as helpful. If people's perceptions about what does (and does not) work are accurate, the study of message evaluations can have significant pragmatic value, suggesting more and less effective ways of providing emotional support (Burleson, 1994).

At a deeper level, message evaluations provide insight into how people understand the emotional states of others, particularly the social significance of these states as feelings to be expressed or repressed, meanings to be validated or voided, and experiences to be explored or expunged. In studying message evaluations, then, we can learn a good deal about people's emotional lives and their implicit theories of emotion. Exploring cultural and gender differences in message evaluations can thus inform us about the implicit emotion theories utilized by members of various social groups and the extent to which these implicit theories are similar or different.

Studies of cultural and gender differences in evaluations of support messages may also provide some insight about the viability of social constructionist theories of emotion (which emphasize cultural specificity and uniqueness; e.g., Parkinson, 1996) or cognitive theories of emotion (which emphasize universal patterns of appraisal and response; e.g., Lazarus, 1991). Social constructionist theories of emotion, such as those developed by Averill (1980) and Harre (1986), posit that emotions are social roles learned in the context of particular speech communities and cultures (see Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2000). Social constructionist theories predict that the character of emotional experiences and processes will be highly variable across social groups and cultures. In particular, as Lakey and Cohen (2000, p. 36) observed, the social constructionist perspective "suggests that there may be no clear consensus across individuals or groups as to what constitutes supportive behaviors." In contrast, cognitive or appraisal theories of emotion suggest that the experience of particular emotions is similar across cultures (see Mesquita, 2001), and that similar patterns of cognitive appraisal generate similar feelings (and changes in feelings) across cultures (e.g., Lazarus, 1994). The study of gender and cultural differences in message evaluations should thus provide data relevant to assessing claims made by different theoretical analyses of emotion. If there is "no clear consensus across individuals or groups as to what constitutes supportive behaviors," this would provide support for the social constructionist view of emotion. On the other hand, if such a consensus is present, that would be inconsistent with the social constructionist approach and provide some support for alternatives, such as the cognitive approach.

Evaluating supportive messages: Conceptualization and methods

Although numerous methods have been used to examine the social support process (see Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000), only limited attention has been given to the messages that people produce in the effort to provide support to distressed others (see reviews by Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002;

Reis & Collins, 2000). In recent years, however, two approaches to the analysis of support messages have achieved some prominence: Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) typology of interactive coping behaviors and Burleson's (1994) hierarchical analysis of comforting messages.

Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) analysis of interactive coping behaviors is one part of their larger Sensitive Interaction System Theory, which seeks to describe how contextual, personal, and relational factors influence support seeking, provision, and outcomes. The typology of supportive behaviors proposed by Barbee and Cunningham was generated by crossing two theoretical dimensions of the coping process: approach versus avoid and problem-focus versus emotion-focus. Crossing these two dimensions gives rise to a four-category typology of support strategies: *solace* behaviors (approach-based, emotion-focused responses intended to elicit positive emotions and express closeness); *solve* behaviors (approach-based, problem-focused responses designed to find an answer to the distressing situation); *escape* behaviors (avoidance-based, emotion-focused responses that discourage the experience and expression of negative emotion); and *dismiss* behaviors (avoidance based, problem-focused responses that minimize the significance of the problem).

Burleson's (1994) hierarchical framework for the analysis of emotional support distinguishes messages according to the extent to which they exhibit a *person-centered approach* to managing another's emotional distress. In comforting contexts, person centeredness is manifest in terms of the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the distressed other's feelings and perspective. Thus, messages low in person centeredness deny the other's feelings and perspective by criticizing the other's feelings, challenging the legitimacy of those feelings, or telling the other how he or she should act and feel. Messages displaying a moderate degree of person centeredness afford an implicit recognition of the other's feelings by attempting to distract the other's attention from the troubling situation, offering expressions of sympathy and condolence, or presenting explanations of the situation intended to reduce the other's distress. Highly person-centered comforting messages explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings by helping the other to articulate those feelings, elaborating reasons why those feelings might be felt, and assisting the other to see how those feelings fit in a broader context.

There is growing evidence that solace strategies (within the Barbee & Cunningham typology) and highly person-centered strategies (within the Burleson hierarchy) are typically seen as the most sensitive and effective means of providing emotional support. Barbee and Cunningham (1995; also see Cunningham & Barbee, 2000) summarize evidence indicating that solve and, especially, solace behaviors are functional in support contexts whereas dismiss and escape behaviors are not. And my colleagues and I (Burleson & Samter, 1985a; Jones & Burleson, 1997; Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Samter, Burleson, & Murphy, 1987) have developed extensive evidence that highly person-centered comforting strategies are evaluated more positively than less person-centered alternatives across a range of circumstances and situations. In addition, broader reviews of the literature (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992) indicate that affirming, emotion-focused support (as found in both solace strategies and highly person-centered comforting messages) is generally the most effective means of providing comfort.

Although available findings regarding what counts as effective forms of emotional support make a good deal of intuitive sense, the question remains as to whether men and women, along with members of different ethnic and national groups, differ in their judgments about effective and ineffective forms of emotional support. Several studies have addressed this question and, in so doing, have yielded important information about both the pragmatics of providing emotional support and underlying theories of emotion.

Gender differences in message evaluations

The gender-as-culture view maintains that men and women should have very different ideas about effective, sensitive, comforting messages—ideas that flow from different implicit theories of emotion and emotion change. Specifically, this viewpoint maintains that women should strongly endorse messages that explicitly elaborate and explore a distressed person's feelings (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1997). In contrast, men are predicted to prefer messages that avoid discussion of feelings and focus on either fixing the problematic situation or redirecting attention away from that situation. According to the different cultures view, then, men should positively evaluate messages exhibiting low levels of person centeredness, and women should positively evaluate messages exhibiting high levels of person centeredness (see Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). This prediction is consistent with social constructionist notions that men and women have different emotional makeups, with women being emotional and expressive and men being instrumental and inexpressive (Balswick, 1988).

There are, however, reasons to question whether the alleged differences in preferred forms of support are as large as suggested. Numerous deficiencies have been documented in claims regarding broad-scale sex differences in communication (e.g., Aries, 1996), especially supportive communication (e.g., Goldsmith & Fulfs, 1999). More important, increasing evidence indicates that men and women have very similar ideas about what counts as sensitive emotional support (Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1998). Thus, we have predicted that men and women would similarly evaluate messages exhibiting different degrees of person centeredness.

Our initial assessment of sex differences in the evaluation of support messages (Burleson & Samter, 1985b) had college-aged men and women rank-order for their overall quality several sets of comforting messages that systematically varied in person centeredness. A significant but small sex effect was found, with women viewing highly person-centered messages as better ways to comfort than did men. Employing a more elaborate methodology, Samter and her colleagues (1987) had participants evaluate the sensitivity of comforting messages embedded in several conversational dialogues. Analyses detected only a significant main effect for the person-centered quality of the messages; both men and women viewed highly person-centered messages as more sensitive than less person-centered strategies.

Adrianne Kunkel and I (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999) asked participants to rate the sensitivity and effectiveness of 27 comforting messages varying in level of person centeredness. We found that men and women evaluated these comforting messages in substantially similar ways; level of message person centeredness explained approximately 80% of the variance in evaluations of message sensitivity and effectiveness. However, women tended to rate highly person-centered messages slightly more favorably than did men and to rate less person-centered messages slightly less favorably than did men. This overall pattern of results was replicated by Jones and Burleson (1997) with a more diverse array of stimulus situations.

More recently, Susanne Jones and I (Jones & Burleson, in press) found that men and women do not differ in their *actual* emotional responses to messages exhibiting different levels of person centeredness. Participants in this study shared a recent upsetting event with either a same-sex or opposite-sex confederate who had been trained to employ comforting messages exhibiting low, moderate, or high levels of person centeredness (see Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Both men and women reported feeling better when exposed to highly person-centered messages, regardless of the sex of the confederate. This study is also noteworthy for its examination of sex differences in the effects of nonverbal behavior by helpers. Confederates in this study exhibited low, moderate, or high levels of nonverbal immediacy (behaviors such as smiling and eye gaze that reflect warmth and psychological closeness) when responding to distressed participants.

Participants of both sexes reported feeling most comforted by confederates displaying high levels of nonverbal immediacy, and this effect was not qualified by sex of the confederate.

The results of studies examining message perceptions and outcomes are quite consistent and provide very little support for the different cultures perspective. Men and women appear to have largely similar ideas about what messages do a better and worse job of reducing emotional distress, suggesting some important similarities in their implicit theories of emotion. Both men and women believe that the explicit elaboration and exploration of feelings is the best way to provide comfort to another, and are themselves most comforted by such messages.[2]

Cultural differences in message evaluations

Considerable research indicates that there are noteworthy cultural differences in a broad range of communication practices and behaviors (see the review by Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). Moreover, a few recent studies (e.g., Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall, 1996; Goodwin & Plaza, 2000) suggest there may be cultural differences in preferred approaches to providing emotional support. Theoretically, this issue is relevant to our understanding of emotion as both a universal and culturally bound

phenomenon (Boucher, 1983; Lazarus, 1994); pragmatically, it is relevant to providing helpful forms of support in intercultural settings.

One recent study (Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997) examined whether comforting messages varying in person centeredness were evaluated differently by three distinct ethnic groups (African Americans, Asian Americans, and European Americans). A strong effect was observed for level of message person centeredness, with this factor explaining almost half of the variance in message evaluations. However, ethnic differences were also observed. Overall, level of person centeredness accounted for substantially more variance in the message evaluations of European Americans (74%) than in the evaluations of Asian Americans (45%) or African Americans (32%). These results suggest underlying cultural differences in implicit theories of emotion, with European Americans believing more strongly than other ethnic groups that explicit talk about distressed feelings will help improve the other's affective state.

If diverse ethnic groups within the same society differentially evaluate varied approaches to providing emotional support, then members of distinct national cultures might differ even more substantially in their evaluations of emotional support strategies. Both anecdotal evidence and systematic theories of culture and emotion suggest that Americans and Chinese should view the distressed emotional states of others differently, as well as differentially evaluate alternative approaches to comforting others. In particular, social constructionist views of emotion suggest there should be considerable cultural variability in preferred forms of emotional support, whereas cognitive theories of emotion (e.g., appraisal theories) suggest less variability.

In individualist cultures like America, the experience of distress centers around events that block individual attributes such as goals, needs, desires, or abilities (Mesquita, 2001). Supportive responses that grant legitimacy to an individual's distress (such as solace behaviors and highly person-centered

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2. The lack of sex differences in evaluations of comforting message quality is all the more noteworthy in light of other findings indicating that highly person-centered comforting messages are perceived as more feminine in character, and comforting messages exhibiting a low level of person-centeredness are viewed as masculine (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Moreover, considerable research indicates that women typically employ comforting messages exhibiting a higher average level of person centeredness than do men (MacGeorge et al., 2002; Samter, 2002). Despite the gender-typing of person-centered comforting as feminine, and actual sex differences in the person-centeredness of messages produced, our experimental evidence indicates that men and women generally employ very similar standards in their evaluations of different comforting messages and strongly prefer highly person-centered messages.

messages) are a way of saying the individual has a right to feel bad for having his or her goals or wants frustrated. Moreover, responses verbally explicating and elaborating feelings emphasize what is important (in individualist cultures) about the emotional experience—the way events impact individuals' unique attributes. Assisting the troubled individual in working through his or her feelings is often the primary focus, and little concern for larger social units may be manifested. Thus, members of individualist cultures—like Americans—positively evaluate approaches to emotional support such as solace and highly person-centered comforting.

In contrast, in collectivist cultures like China, an individual's distressed emotional state may be upsetting for the entire social group (Wellenkamp, 1995), and result in separating the distressed party from the group, further exacerbating his or her distress (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Thus, an aim when providing comfort in collectivist cultures may be to restore social harmony and repair social rupture. In particular, support efforts may be directed at restoring personal composure and smooth social functioning in a manner that avoids loss of face, embarrassment, and undue emotionalism. Moreover, because much meaning for collectivists resides in the context (see Triandis, 1994), the *presence* of others whose concern can be assumed may be more important than anything that these others happen to say (Chang & Holt, 1991). Thus, collectivists (such as traditional Chinese) may be much more comfortable with messages that are less person-centered and with dismiss and escape strategies that avoid "undue" focus on the socially disruptive subjective states of the distressed other.

Steve Mortenson and I recently conducted a study in which samples of native-born Chinese and Americans evaluated various approaches to providing emotional support (Burleson & Mortenson, in press). Participants responded to questionnaires written in their native languages, in one section evaluating the quality of 27 comforting messages that varied in person centeredness,

and in another section assessing the appropriateness of 30 interactive coping behaviors (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995) that varied in the strategy used (escape, dismiss, solve, solace). Both Americans and Chinese rated highly person-centered comforting strategies as superior to their less person-centered counterparts; however, Chinese viewed messages low in person centeredness as more sensitive than did Americans, whereas Americans viewed messages high in person centeredness as somewhat more sensitive than did Chinese. In addition, both Americans and Chinese rated escape and dismiss strategies as much less appropriate than solve and solace strategies; however, Chinese viewed the avoidance strategies of escape and dismiss as somewhat more appropriate than did Americans.

What to make of these findings? Overall, the greatest amount of variance in participants' evaluations of support behaviors was explained by the nature of the behavior evaluated, and not by culture. This finding is important because it suggests broad similarities in how distressing situations are interpreted by people from different cultural backgrounds, as well as similarities in how different approaches to remedying another's distress are evaluated. These data are also consistent with research indicating that there are transcultural similarities in emotional experiences, as well as in the circumstances that both provoke certain emotions and lead to emotional change (Boucher, 1983; Lazarus, 1994). Moreover, our findings of cross-cultural similarities in evaluations of support behavior are consistent with the view that highly person-centered messages and solace behaviors are more effective at relieving distress, not because they are conventionally approved responses in particular cultures, but rather because of how these support forms influence the cognitions that underlie emotional experiences (see Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998).

Against the broad baseline of cultural similarities in evaluations of supportive behaviors, there were some noteworthy differences. The results suggest that Chinese

discriminated less than Americans in their evaluations of support behaviors. A likely explanation for these findings is that communication among the more collectivist Chinese is comparatively *high context* in character whereas communication among more individualistic Americans is relatively *low context* in character (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Triandis, 1994). When Chinese receive support from in-group members such as friends, they appear to rely less than Americans on the specific content of support behaviors to infer their friends' intentions and concerns. Rather, a friend's concern and desire to help can be taken for granted, with these assumed intentions providing the context or interpretive frame for processing and evaluating verbal messages. In contrast, low-context Americans are more likely to scrutinize and evaluate what helpers actually say. Individualist Americans who experience emotional upset appear to be more focused than collectivist Chinese on having their personally distressing feelings and problems addressed, motivating them to draw sharper distinctions among various comforting messages and interactive coping behaviors.

There are some important limitations of this study associated with the samples, both of which were relatively young and well educated. Moreover, our Chinese participants, who were attending an American university, may have been comparatively individualistic. Despite these limitations, we should not overlook the very substantial similarities among Chinese and Americans in what they regarded as helpful emotional support. In particular, both Chinese and Americans viewed solace behaviors and highly person-centered comforting messages as the most helpful forms of emotional support, and viewed escape behaviors and messages exhibiting low levels of person centeredness to be least helpful. Thus, there is consensus across cultures about the types of messages that do the best job of relieving emotional distress, although there is less strong agreement about the helpfulness of other kinds of messages.

Differences in Interaction Goals Generated in Support Situations: Implications for Conceptions of Communication and Its Uses

Interaction goals and their implications for conceptions of communication

People's reports concerning the goals they are likely to pursue when others need support can provide important information about how they conceptualize both support situations and communication as a resource for managing these situations (i.e., their implicit theories of communication and support; Burleson et al., 2000; Kunkel, 2002). Goals are used, both projectively and retrospectively, to judge the appropriateness or suitability of behavior for a given situation (Gollwitzer & Brandstatter, 1997). Interaction goals thus reflect what people want to accomplish in a setting; they express people's pragmatic orientation to an interactional situation.

My colleagues and I have used several versions of an instrument we call the Support Goals Inventory (SGI) to capture goal priorities in support situations (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002; Burleson & Mortenson, in press; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). All versions of the SGI have participants rate the importance or appropriateness of different goals that might be pursued when interacting with an emotionally distressed target. An early version of the SGI obtained ratings of broadly defined affective (emotion management) and instrumental (problem management) goals, a later version included avoidance as a potential goal, and the most recent version follows Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) advice in crossing the dimensions of approach/avoidance and emotion-focus/problem-focus to yield a four-fold typology of interaction goals (dismiss, escape, solve, solace).

Gender differences in supportive goals

The different-cultures perspective on gender suggests that men and women should differ appreciably in the features of support

situations they take to be significant, and thus in the goals they develop and pursue in these situations. According to this view, the sexes should differ particularly in terms of the situation focus (emotion versus problem) of their interaction goals, with women taking an emotion focus and men a problem focus (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1993, 1997). Affective or emotion-focused goals prioritize listening to distressed others and helping them work through their feelings, whereas instrumental or problem-focused goals prioritize giving advice and helping others solve problems so they can move on with life. The different cultures view maintains that men should be much more problem-focused than women in their interpretation of support situations, and thus should be much more likely to develop and pursue instrumentally oriented goals directed at fixing problems producing distress.

Kunkel and Burleson (1999) asked participants to rate the importance of affective and instrumental goals in support contexts. Contrary to the predictions of the different cultures view, we found that *both* men and women assigned greater priority to affective goals than to instrumental goals. Men and women did not differ in the priority given to instrumental goals, though women did place greater emphasis on affective goals than did men. Type of goal accounted for substantially more variance in participants' ratings than did sex of the participants.

To further investigate sex differences in supportive interaction goals, Burleson and Gilstrap (2002) employed an elaborated version of the SGI in which participants rated the importance of solace, solve, escape, and dismiss as interaction goals in support situations involving upset friends. Goal type accounted for more variance than any other factor. Both men and women indicated that the solve goal was more important than either escape or dismiss. And both men and women indicated that the solace goal was more important than the solve goal. Within this overall pattern, some sex differences were observed. Specifically, women were more likely to pursue the goal of solace, and less likely to pursue the goal of escape, than were men. In contrast, men were more

likely to pursue the goal of solve than were women.

Caution must be exercised in interpreting the results of these two studies due to the use of self-report methods in assessing interaction goals. Research assessing supportive behaviors with observational methods (e.g., Shamblen, Cunningham, & Barbee, 1999) suggests that avoidance-oriented behaviors (dismiss and escape) are considerably more common than indicated by the self-reports obtained by Burleson and Gilstrap (2002). It may be that our self-report methods underestimate the extent to which people pursue various avoidance-related goals in support interactions, as well as attenuate the magnitude of sex differences in goals manifest in actual support interactions.

Despite these limitations, the available evidence provides little support for claims derived from the different cultures view about the extent to which men and women supposedly differ in the goals they pursue in support situations. Although some small sex differences have been observed, these differences exist within much more substantial patterns of similarity, with both men and women assigning priority to the management of distressed feelings in support situations. Both men and women also develop goals focused on solving problems underlying the other's distressed feelings, but appear to view such problem solving as a secondary activity. Significantly, neither sex is primarily focused on just one aspect of support situations as the different cultures view maintains. These results suggest that the conduct of men and women in support situations is informed by largely similar implicit theories of communication and support; both sexes see communication as a vehicle for managing problematic feelings and situations, but give priority to the management of distressed feelings when those are salient.

Cultural differences in supportive goals

Only a few studies have examined whether interaction goals for support situations differ as a function of ethnicity and nationality. Asian Americans and African Americans

are more collectivist in orientation than European Americans and, further, typically engage in more high context communication than do European Americans (Gaines, 1997; Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). This suggests that both Asian Americans and African Americans may be less familiar and comfortable than European Americans with explicit talk about intense, personal feelings and the situations generating those feelings. Thus, when asked to imagine themselves in situations calling for the alleviation of emotional distress, there may be substantial differences in the interaction goals expressed by European Americans versus Asian Americans and African Americans. Samter et al. (1997) found complex interactions involving ethnicity, sex, and goal type with respect to the perceived importance of interaction goals in support situations. However, one finding stood out: For every combination of sex and ethnicity, emotion-focused goals were rated as more important than problem-focused goals. Thus, both sexes and all three ethnicities prioritized the management of emotions in support situations.

One problem with the Samter et al. (1997) study is that it included assessments of only problem-focused and emotion-focused goals; no assessment of any avoidance goal was obtained. Literature reviewed previously suggests that members of collectivist cultures, such as Chinese, may be more inclined to pursue avoidant goals in support situations than are members of individualist cultures, such as Americans. A cross-cultural assessment of the goals typically pursued in support situations was obtained by Burleson and Mortenson (in press) in their study of native-born Americans and Chinese. Americans and Chinese differed substantially with respect to avoidance and problem-management goals (with Chinese scoring higher on each of these variables); they differed only marginally on the emotion-management goal (with Americans scoring slightly higher on this variable). Still, in a now-familiar pattern, these differences existed within a larger framework of similarity: Both Americans and Chinese rated emotion- and problem-management goals as more important than

avoidance goals. However, although Americans rated emotion management as more important than problem management, Chinese participants rated problem management as more important than emotion management. This latter result suggests that members of different national cultures diverge somewhat in how they define support situations and in the goals they are likely to pursue in those situations. Chinese appear most oriented to fixing whatever problem is responsible for another's distress; Americans are more focused on attending to the other's distressed emotional state.

Studies examining sex and culture differences in interaction goals are comparatively few in number and exhibit important methodological limitations. Nonetheless, these studies indicate that men and women differ little in their support goals, suggesting that they define the elements of support situations similarly and prioritize the management of emotions. Very similar findings were obtained with three American ethnic groups. In contrast, native-born Chinese are more likely than Americans to avoid support situations, and, when confronting them, to focus on solving the problem rather than addressing distressed emotions; the problem-focused approach of Chinese may be an efficient means of restoring harmony within the group without giving undue attention to the particularizing affect states of the distressed party.

Conclusion

Social constructionist theories, such as the different cultures view of gender, anticipate large, broad-based differences among social groups in the forms and functions of their social relationships, the character of their emotional experiences, and the uses to which communication is put. Some proponents of more radical versions of social constructionism (Gergen, 1985; Harre, 1986) even claim that cultural differences in these domains are so deep that the practices of different groups are incommensurable to one another. Radical versions of social constructionism exhibit serious logical flaws, as

well as significant empirical inadequacies (Zuriff, 1998); certainly, the findings of the studies reviewed here are inconsistent with a radical social-constructionist thesis.

Our studies of the value placed on emotionally supportive forms of communication, beliefs about the properties of helpful messages, and relevant goals for supportive situations indicate that there is much more similarity across genders, ethnicities, and nationalities than anticipated by social constructionist theories of culture and gender. As previously emphasized, caution must be exercised in generalizing from our data; we have examined limited age groups, ethnic groups, and nationalities. Our studies need to be replicated with other ethnicities and nationalities and extended through the use of other forms of measurement, particularly those that are less reliant on the self-reports we used in much of our early work. Thus, although our studies raise important challenges to social constructionist theories of relationships, emotion, and communication, they obviously do not falsify these theories in any conclusive sense.

More moderate versions of social constructionism (Averill, 1980; Parkinson, 1996) allow for substantial similarities in human experiences and conduct while maintaining that culture can, and often does, powerfully shape certain patterns of thought and action. The findings of our studies might be regarded as most consistent with these moderate versions of social constructionism in that we typically found small differences associated with cultural variables that existed within larger patterns of cross-cultural similarity. More specifically, members of the different groups examined in our studies generally exhibited similar values, preferences, and priorities with respect to emotional support in close relationships. These specific similarities suggest (though they certainly do not establish) broader similarities in how members of these groups think about close relationships, emotion, and communication. Our findings thus add to the growing body of work suggesting that diverse peoples exhibit some fundamental similarities in what they seek from their close personal relationships (Argyle et al., 1986), what experiences lead to particular emotional reactions (Fischer & Manstead, 2000), and what ends can be appropriately pursued through communication in various situations (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996).

Men and women within homogeneous ethnic and national groups typically exhibited the smallest differences; somewhat larger differences were apparent across ethnic groups, and still larger differences were present for comparisons involving members of distinct national groups (Americans vs. Chinese). This pattern (small gender differences, moderate ethnic differences, and somewhat larger national differences) makes intuitive sense; however, it undermines the different cultures view of gender, which posits large differences in men's and women's relationship conceptions, emotional experiences, and communication practices. Our studies of support-related values, preferences, and goal orientations indicate that sex differences are comparatively small and exist within larger patterns of similarity. For example, in their study of ethnic and gender differences in varied aspects of emotional support (values, messages, and goals), Samter et al. (1997) found that effects due to ethnicity overwhelmed effects due to sex; ethnicity typically explained five to eight times the variance in dependent variables as did sex. These findings led Samter et al. to conclude, "To treat sex as a cultural variable may therefore be misleading. It suggests an inflated image of the amount of variance sex typically explains—especially when compared to 'true' cultural variables like ethnicity" (p. 427).

Although there are some very important similarities in how members of diverse social groups think about close relationships, emotion, and communication, I certainly do not mean to suggest that there are not also some important differences in the ways in which members of these groups *behave*. For example, women tend to produce comforting messages exhibiting higher levels of person centeredness than do men (e.g., MacGeorge, Clark, & Gillihan, 2002; Samter, 2002), and the magnitude of this sex difference appears

reliably larger than the magnitude of sex differences in evaluations of comforting messages varying in person centeredness (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). In other words, there are larger sex differences in behavior than in evaluations of behavior. It seems likely that there may also be larger cultural differences in behavior than in evaluations of behavior (and related internal experiences).

The comparatively high degree of similarity among social groups with respect to support values, preferences, and priorities, combined with a comparatively high degree of dissimilarity in supportive behavior, has several important implications. For example, this pattern may help explain the widely replicated finding that both men and women are more likely to seek support from women than men (e.g., Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987). Both men and women prefer highly person-centered emotional support strategies and correctly see women as more likely than men to use such strategies (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Thus, it makes sense that both men and women are more likely to seek comfort from women than men in times of distress.

The pattern of similar support values, preferences, and priorities combined with comparatively more dissimilar behavior also has some important implications for intercultural interactions. Specifically, this pattern suggests the hypothesis that European Americans are more likely to be put off by the emotional support strategies used by different ethnic and national groups (especially those exhibiting a high degree of collectivism) than these groups are to be put off by the support strategies typically used by European Americans. No research appears to have examined this hypothesis, but exploring it may be important given the prominent role that emotional support plays in most close relationships. For example, this hypothesis suggests that partners in interethnic and intercultural friendships may experience difficulties associated with the provision of emotional support; education and training devoted to enhancing multicultural awareness, while improving supportive communication skills, may result in more stable intercultural relationships.

Beyond these pragmatic consequences, there are several theoretical and methodological implications that follow from a pattern of strong similarities in support values, preferences, and priorities coupled with comparatively large differences in support behaviors. Some writers (e.g., Wood & Inman, 1993) have argued that the coding systems for supportive behaviors constitute a biased feminine ruler that ignores masculine notions of closeness, care, and nurture. However, as the findings summarized in this article indicate, men and women tend to use very similar, if not identical, rulers in evaluating the sensitivity and effectiveness of emotional support. Thus, assessments of comforting behavior in terms of emotion focus or person centeredness do not unduly rely on an exclusively feminine standard, but rather employ standards that men and women consensually share. A related implication is that the modest differences in values, preferences, and priorities observed in the studies summarized here are insufficient to explain the larger differences in supportive behavior documented by other studies. Thus, for example, men do not appear to typically produce supportive messages exhibiting a comparatively low level of person centeredness because they, themselves, prefer such messages, see these messages as best, have fundamentally instrumental goals for support situations, or value the activity of comforting less than do women. Rather, it appears plausible to suppose that men may produce less person-centered messages because they lack the skills necessary to generate more sophisticated, sensitive forms of emotional support (see Kunkel & Burleson, 1998).

More broadly, numerous questions remain about the social and psychological factors that explain differences in behaviors associated with sex, ethnicity, and nationality, as well as differences in outcomes associated with emotional support. Identifying relevant explanatory variables and developing a comprehensive model incorporating a diversity of factors will be no small task, and must carefully consider elements of the behavior to be explained (see Burleson, 2002) and the context in which that behavior occurs

(Fischer & Manstead, 2000). Though challenging, developing coherent theories that systematically account for both similarities and differences in the cognitions and

conduct of diverse social groups should add profoundly to our understanding of close relationships, emotion, and communication.

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