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## Communication Behaviors between Close Friends and Romantic Partners in the U.S. and Russia

Deborah Uecker & Jacqueline Schmidt

### Abstract

*This study examined U.S. and Russian willingness to engage in communication behaviors for close friends and romantic partners. Students completed surveys and interviews on communication behaviors in the areas of disclosure, companionship, emotional support, conflict, and instrumental support. Interviews supported survey results for important qualities/behaviors for friends and romantic partners. U.S. and Russians students had more similarities than differences in communication behaviors for close friends and romantic partners. U.S. students perceived smaller differences between friends and romantic partners, but U.S. and Russians were more willing to engage in communication behaviors for romantic partners than close friends.*

Intercultural relationships offer unique and unexpected challenges. The definition of relationships across cultures, as well as what we call or name a relationship (i.e. close friend, friend, significant other, family or who we consider family) can vary. Cultural beliefs, value dimensions, norms and social practices about such things as love, romance, and dating can be perceived quite differently when people are from different cultures. According to Gao (2001), even the meaning and function of terms such as love and romance may vary considerably from one relationship to another and from one culture to another. Such differing cultural orientations can cause disappointment and confusion within these relationships. As people move globally and become more interconnected, the opportunity for working together continues to increase. This highlights the importance of understanding the nature of relationships in such contexts to avoid misinterpretation of behaviors. Friendships and romantic relationships share some characteristics and behaviors and differ in significant behavioral ways. For example, what should one do or what is important for a romantic partner or close friend? Are these similar or different in various cultures? The purpose of this

study was to examine communication behaviors in close friendships and romantic partners for the U.S. and Russia.

### Relationship Framework

Henrick (1988) proposed that relationships are a set of processes with a social structure. Social behavior is rule governed (Harre & Secord, 1972). Rules are behaviors that members of a group or subculture expect should or should not be performed. Baxter and Bullis (1986) argue that rules keep relationships together and when rules are broken, deterioration and dissolution often occurs. These rules give relationships a sense of stability and predictability. (Furhman, Flannagan & Matamors, 2009). Scollo and Carbaugh (2013) stress the importance of culture in shaping, understanding, and applying meaning to these behaviors (rules).

One cultural lens used frequently in analyzing friendship and romantic relationships is Hofstede's collectivism/individualism (Dion & Dion, 1991; Dion & Dion 2005; Karandashev, 2011; DeMunch, Korotayev, deMunch, & Khaltourina 2011). Characteristics of individualism are attributes such as strong personal goals, autonomy, a loosely knit social framework, and looking after one's own immediate interests (Goodwin, 1999; Hofstede, 2001). Collectivism is characterized by a preference for group interaction as compared to individual achievement (Trandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990) However, preference for group interaction is limited in that "collectivist societies are keen to protect and aid their in-group members, but they are not necessarily so helpful to those outside of the group" (Goodwin, 1999, p. 25). This cultural orientation helps people conceptualize themselves and what they experience or want from relationships. Individualists see themselves typically as a separate entity operating within a relatively loose social framework, while collectivists view themselves as part of more extended relationships in a smaller and more tightly held framework (Karandashev, 2011). This concept is related to Lim's (2009) construct of analytic and holistic. Analytic cultures like individualistic cultures are more apt to view the world independently and have many types of friends depending on the context while holistic cultures are more apt to have fewer friends and view a friend as a friend across contexts (Choi, Koo & Cjoi 2007).

## **Russia - U.S. Friendship**

Russians generally are rated as moderate in individualism/collectivism measures, but have many attributes of collectivism such as placing a high value on friendship and interdependence with a family group (Naumov & Puffer, 2000). The U.S. is considered highly individualistic and analytic on most measures and is more flexible in selections of social figures (friends) than collectivistic cultures (Realo & Allik, 1999). Sheets and Lugar (2005) found that the concept of friend may vary between U.S. and Russians. Using scenarios, they found that Russians were more sensitive to violations of betrayal by friends, less likely to confront a friend about an issue, and perceived themselves more in control of their emotions and emotional displays in relationships with friends than U.S. participants. Additionally, Russians reported having fewer friends, but expected more from them. Sheets and Lugar (2005) did not identify any types or categories of friends such as close, business, etc. in their study.

While there is some research on Russia and U.S. friendship, much of the work to date is fragmentary and mainly focuses on cultural similarity, competence, personality and identity. (Gareis, 2012). Research by Schmidt, Uecker and Lau (2014) did identify types of friends (close, business, and internet) and found differences between Russian, Croatian, and U.S. students in motivation for types of friends, noting that there were similarities in areas of emotional support, companionship, disclosure, advice and self-development. In forming close relationships, Russian students were significantly more motivated by material support than were U.S. students. By comparison, U.S. students were more motivated by trust and respect than Russian students.

## **Russia - U.S. Romantic Relationships**

Dion & Dion (1988) and Karandashev (2011) identify individualism/collectivism as a major cultural variable that influences similarities and differences in romantic relationships across cultures. For example, individualist cultures view being dependent on someone else as a negative. However, collectivist cultures view dependency as a sign of another persons' benevolence. They also found that the greater the level of individualism, the less love, care, and trust that was reported in romantic relationships (Dion & Dion, 1991). Furthermore, romantic love

is less likely to be considered an important reason for marriage in collectivist cultures, but is considered the main reason to marry among individualists (Dion & Dion, 1993). Dion & Dion (2006) found that for collectivists love was more in what you did than in what you said.

Most of the research on love has focused on perceptions and beliefs about love and love styles rather than communication behaviors (what one expects or will do for their romantic partner). Sprecher, Aron, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya (1994) examined romantic beliefs' such as the importance of physical appearance, family/friend approval and beliefs about goals in the romantic relationship and found differences in love styles, falling in love predictors, and attachment types between Russian, U.S. and Japanese students. DeMunck, Korotayev, DeMunck, & Khaltourina (2011) focused on types of love (agape, ludus, pragma, mania) goals and beliefs rather than communication behaviors. They found that romantic love did exist for both Russian and U.S. students, but romance was defined differently. Collectivists (Russians) view love as more an unreal fairy tale that ends or is transferred while U.S participants viewed love as more realistic, less illusionary, including friendship as a necessary component of a successful love relationship. Pearce, Chuikova, Ramsey, & Galyautdinove (2010) focused on qualities desired in long term romantic partners including age, physique, and psychological traits such as forgiveness and gratitude.

## **Limitations of Research**

One limitation of this research is that it has not studied close friendship and romantic partners in the same study which makes it difficult to compare results. As noted above friendship at least for the U.S. participants in De Munck et.al. (2011) was a critical component of love. An additional problem is that even when general categories for communication behavior are used such as forgiveness and disclosure, they are not well defined. It is not clear that the participants understood the communication concept being discussed. For example, in looking at friendship, Schmidt et al. (2014) found differences in general affective areas such as disclosure, emotional support, trust and respect, and companionship between Russia and the U.S. However, when analyzing specific communication behaviors (actions such as sharing information) between business and close friends, they discovered inconsistencies compared to earlier findings (Schmidt & Uecker, 2015). One example of

inconsistency was found in the area of disclosure. Russians identified no significant differences between business and close friendships to the general category of disclosure, but when they were asked about specific disclosure behaviors there were differences in that U.S. students expected more forgiveness from their close friends than Russians and expected business friends to listen more than Russians did.

Much of this research has also examined friendships and romantic relationships from a monocultural perspective, using scales and measures developed by U.S. researchers and primarily validated with U.S. participants. In examining friendship, Schmidt et al. (2014) relied on categories from the work of Fehr (1996) to create a U.S. survey. In exploring styles of love across cultures, Sprecher et al. (1994) used surveys and instruments, translated into Japanese or Russian, but based almost exclusively on U.S. values. Dion and Dion (1991, 1993) also conducted surveys and offered insights into the nature of romantic love and its perceived importance for marriage based on US values.

### **Current Study**

Given these concerns about the lack of direct comparison between close friends and romantic partners, the lack of use of specific communication behaviors for clarification, and the dependence on surveys/instruments based on U.S. values, this study used a two-part methodology composed of surveys and interviews to address the following research questions:

- R1: Are there differences in what one is willing to do in communication behaviors (disclosure, companionship, emotional support, conflict and instrumental support) for close friends and romantic partners within countries?
- R2: Are there differences in what one is willing to do in communication behaviors (disclosure, companionship, emotional support, conflict and instrumental support) for close friends and romantic partners between U.S. and Russian students?
- R3: How important are these types of behaviors for the U.S. and Russia students for close friends and romantic partners? Are there variations, and if so, what are they?
- R4 - Are there behaviors/qualities not covered in previous research that are culturally important and if so, what are they?

### **Part One**

For the study there were 66 Russian and 79 U.S. students who completed a survey on communication behaviors that they were willing to do for close friends and romantic partners. The Russian students were from several universities in Russia. The U.S. participants were from two private mid-western universities and enrolled in communication classes. All surveys were in English. The Russian professors were confident their students could read and understand the questions.

The survey was adapted from Fehr's (2004) and Mendleson and Aboud's (1999) survey on communication behaviors. The categories included: disclosure (willingness to listen to work and personal problems, to tell the person if they disagreed with them, to keep secrets, to stop what they were doing and listen if needed); companionship (willingness to spend time with person if they said they were lonely, invite the person to dinner at their house, to a movie, play or concert, to talk with this person daily) ; emotional support (willingness to defend them if someone criticized them, to tell them they cared about or loved them, to compliment them if they did something well, to forgive if they did something wrong ); conflict (willingness to tell them if they made you angry, listen to their anger with you, and to work on resolving the conflict); and instrumental support (willingness to give advice, money, to provide a place to stay, clothes, possessions, food). Participants were asked to respond on a scale of 1-7 with 7 being the highest. All questions are included in the appendix. T-tests were run between and within countries.

### **Part Two**

Following the survey, the researchers conducted interviews with ten Russian students in Volgograd, Russia and ten U.S. students in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Cleveland, Ohio. These interviewees did not take the survey in part one. Interviews were based upon a modification of the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) that has been used to examine romantic relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). All interviews were conducted in person, in English, and were approximately 20 minutes in length. All Russian respondents were fluent in English and made available by Russian professors. This purposive sample facilitated the exploration of specific social practices and the meanings of these

practices in a cultural context. As the study explored specific social phenomenon for unique qualities uncovered in the interview, a normal distribution of a sample population is not an issue (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The interviews began with open ended questions about the most important qualities of a close friend to gauge if there were any specific cultural qualities. Participants were allowed to list as many qualities as they chose. The next set of questions were the same questions from the survey about their expectation of specific communication behaviors using the same 1-7 scale with 7 being the highest. Additionally, after asking the specific behavior questions of the interviewees on a category, participants were asked about the importance of these types of communication behaviors for both close friends and romantic partners using a 1-7 scale with 7 being the most important. This had not been asked in the survey. Interviewers noted the respondents' nonverbal and verbal hesitations, reactions, and questions during the interviews that would indicate problems in understanding.

## Results

### *Communication behaviors between close friends and romantic partners within each country*

In the survey there were significant differences for both U.S. and Russian students between close friends and romantic partners in all of the general areas (see Table 1). The individual questions in each area identified additional differences (see Table 2). Under disclosure, both Russians and U.S. students were more willing to stop what they were doing to listen to a romantic partner than a close friend. U.S. students were more willing for romantic partners to keep secrets and tell them if they disagreed with them than for close friends, but Russian students saw no difference between close friends and romantic partners in these behaviors. Both Russian and U.S. perceived no difference in listening to work or personal problems between close friends and romantic partners. In companionship, both Russian and U.S. students were more willing to spend time, invite person to dinner at their home, movie, play or talk daily with romantic partners than close friends. In emotional support both Russians and U.S. were more willing to tell romantic partner that they cared or loved them and defend them if they were criticized by

others than a close friend. Russians were more willing to forgive romantic partners than close friends while U.S. students perceived no difference. However, U.S. students were more willing to compliment romantic partners than close friends while Russians perceived no difference. In conflict behaviors both Russians and U.S. students were more willing to listen to a romantic partner if they told them they were angry with them and work to resolve the issue than a close friend. U.S. students were more willing to tell a romantic partner if they made them angry, but Russians perceived no difference between close friends and romantic partners. In instrumental support both U.S. and Russians saw no differences between close friends and romantic partners in offering advice about work or personal problems. Both were also more willing to do favors, give money, offer clothes, possessions and food to romantic partners than close friend. U.S. students did not perceive a significant difference in providing a place to stay between close friends and romantic partners, but Russians did.

The interviews supported the within country survey results in all areas for U.S. students between close friends and romantic partners and in all areas but conflict and disclosure for the Russian students. For conflict behaviors in the survey on the question if this person told me they were angry with me I would listen, indicated more willingness to listen for romantic partners than close friends. In the interviews, Russians expressed more willingness to listen for a close friend than a romantic partner. Additionally, when asked if their partner/friend told them they were angry with them, 22% of Russians responded that they might be angry with close friends, and 55% felt they might be angry with a romantic partner for this behavior. On another conflict behavior telling your close friend or romantic partner if you were angry with them, on the survey Russians perceived no difference between close friends and romantic partners. However, in the interviews 45% of Russians students said they would tell their close friend, but only 15% would tell their romantic partner. In the area of disclosure Russians identified no difference in keeping secrets for close friends or romantic partners, but in the interviews only 40% of Russians would keep a secret for close friends, but 100% would for a romantic partner.

### *Comparing treatment of close friends and romantic partners between the countries*

In the survey there were only three behaviors that were significant in the area of close friends. In companionship, U.S. students would invite close friends for dinner at their home ( $p= 0.03011$ ) and talk with them daily ( $p= 0.03957$ ) more than Russians. In instrumental behavior, Russians would give money ( $p= 0.01187$ ) to a close friend more than U.S. students would. There were no significant differences in behaviors or categories for romantic partners.

The interview results supported the survey findings between cultures for both Russian and U.S. students in all areas.

### *Importance of behaviors*

The importance of these general types of communication behaviors was not asked in the survey and only in the interviews. For U.S. students, the means for the importance of communication behaviors between close friends and romantic partners were very close while more variations were present for the Russians (see Table 3).

### *Close friends*

Comparing the importance of communication behaviors between U.S. and Russian students for close friendships, U.S. students rated all categories of communication behavior higher than Russians students and the variation among the means of the behaviors was smaller. The behaviors listed in terms of importance for U.S. students were: emotional support, conflict, disclosure, companionship/activities, and instrumental support. In order of importance for Russian students, the communication behaviors were: conflict, companionship/activities, emotional support, disclosure, and instrumental support.

### *Romantic relationships*

Comparing the importance of these communication behaviors between U.S. students and Russian students in romantic relationships, the U.S. students gave higher ratings to all categories in romantic relationships than Russian students except disclosure where identical

means were present (see table 3). Although the scores of the U.S. and Russian students were more similar for romantic partners than close friends, there were differences in behaviors. In order of importance for U.S. students, the behaviors were: companionship/activities, disclosure, conflict and emotional support, and instrumental support. The importance of these communication behaviors for Russian students was disclosure, companionship/ activities, emotional support, conflict and instrumental support.

The issue of importance was only addressed in the interview. Based on the results, there were none. The most frequent responses for both U.S. and Russians in qualities were covered in previous surveys. For close friends, the top qualities for U.S. students listed in frequency were: understanding and acceptance (10), trust/honesty (6) Monitor behavior (4) humor/fun (3), similar interests (3) respect (2) and reciprocal (2). For Russians qualities listed in frequency were: supportive (9), loyal/trust (5), wants best for you (5), listen/give advice (4), fun (2), and live together (2). With the exception of humor/fun (U.S. 3 and Russians 2), similar interests (U.S. 3 and Russians 2), respect (U.S. 2), and living together (Russian 2) all of these were behaviors in the survey.

## **Discussion**

The use of the qualitative interviews and open-ended questions provided support that the communication behaviors tested by the earlier surveys (Schmidt, Uecker & Lau, 2012 & 2014; Schmidt & Uecker, 2015) although based primarily on U.S. values were perceived as the important behaviors/qualities for close friends and romantic partners by Russians as well as U.S. students. Respect was mentioned by U.S. students for both close friends and romantic partners, and was not included in this study, this finding does support previous studies which found significant respect/trust was a significant factor for U.S. participants, but not for Russians. (Schmidt & Uecker, 2014).

The only new categories identified were fun/humor, similar interests/reciprocal, respect and living together. Fun/humor, similar interests/reciprocal, and living together were reported with a lower frequency of occurrence by both U.S. and Russian students. Fun/humor was seen more in the Russian responses across all categories than in the U.S. student's responses (only for close friend). As a quality, similar interests were identified equally in both Russian and U.S. responses.

Since these behaviors appeared for both groups, they might be less a cultural factor and perhaps more a generational millennial factor. While living together was not specifically asked, questions on frequency of interaction were and Russians listed living together as a quality for close friends, while U.S. students did not. This could be an important factor for Russians in identifying who is a close friend and a possible explanation for why Russians list having fewer close friends than U.S. students (Sheets & Lugar, 2005). One suggestion for future studies would be the inclusion of communication behaviors such as makes me laugh and have fun as well as specific behaviors connected with respect and whether one lives with friend/romantic partner to understand these factors more.

The study also provided information about similarities/differences in the perceived importance of particular behaviors. Overall, from the interviews U.S. students felt all communication behaviors were more important in close friendships than did the Russians. This supports previous findings of U.S. students' higher expectations of close friends than Russians (Schmidt & Uecker, 2015). The closeness of the averages for the importance of behaviors in close and romantic relationships for U.S. students supports previous findings on romantic relationships which found there is a strong emphasis on friendship in love relationships of U.S. respondents (Sprecher et al., 1994), but not for Russians (DeMunck et al., 2011). However, in the survey U.S. students perceived more differences between close friends and romantic partners in their willingness to do certain behaviors. Because willingness not importance was addressed in the survey, more research on the importance of these behaviors needs to be done.

There were more similarities than differences between Russian and U.S. students for both close friends and romantic relationships. Similarly, Russian and U.S. students were more similar in describing the differences between close friends and romantic partners. They agreed on 17 of the 23 behaviors and expressed more willingness to do activities for romantic partners than close friends. If one looks at the discrepancies found by the interviews, they actually agreed on 20 of the 23 behaviors. This suggests that Russian and the U.S. share similar views on behaviors for close friends and romantic partners. This also suggests that Russia may be becoming more individualistic as Naumov & Puffer (2000) had identified or that the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures on communication behaviors is changing.

Overall, the study provides a framework for friendship and romantic relationships using actual behaviors. The study supports the findings of Sheets and Lugar (2005) that Russians are more sensitive to betrayal by friends and are more willing to forgive a romantic partner if they did something wrong than a close friend, while U.S. students perceived no difference. Additionally, conflict was listed first in terms of importance for Russians on close friends. The discrepancies between the survey and interviews especially in the conflict area between willingness to listen to their romantic partner, share anger with them or to tell their romantic partner if they are angry, suggest that more studies should be done in the area of conflict and expressing feelings. Future studies could explore these areas to identify conversation rules for close friends and romantic partners (Scollo & Carbaugh, 2013).

Although there were few differences between the survey and the interviews, the differences found were for Russians. Additionally, both U.S. and Russian students expanded on their answers in the interviews and provided more background. This suggests that researchers might want to use more interview approaches, focus groups, or backchannel translations of the survey/ interview with the non-U.S. population prior to distributing the survey to assure understanding.

### **Limitations of current study**

Several limitations are identified for this study. The sample size, especially for the interviews is small. The participants for the interviews in Russia were individuals conveniently provided by professors, who agreed to be interviewed and were fluent in conversational English. Also, the study did not account for gender. Particularly for Russia the majority of the subjects/participants were female. No doubt with a more even distribution of males and females across both the Russian and U.S. samples the results could be different.

This study provided support that U.S. and Russian students see similar communication behaviors as important in relationships, but vary in the degree and order of importance for the behavior. By providing responses to specific behaviors clarification of the meanings of words such as disclosure, emotional support were operationalized. Results demonstrate that more studies using specific communication behaviors need to be conducted to develop a stronger understanding of expected behaviors and to increase effective communication between cultures. The

more that we can understand the function or structure of friendships and romantic relationships we can continue to advance international understanding and goodwill.

**Table 1: Difference in close friend/romantic partner communication behaviors (survey)**

Communication Behaviors	Russia			USA		
	Close	Romance	pValue	Close	Romance	pValue
Disclosure	6.05	6.46	0.00574	6.03	6.42	0.00003
Instrumental Support	5.82	6.42	0.00142	5.91	6.43	0.00036
Companionship/Activities	5.65	6.40	0.00002	6.20	6.69	0.00067
Conflict	5.73	6.20	0.01322	5.64	6.27	0.00003
Emotional Support	5.59	6.46	0.00042	6.15	6.49	0.00002

**Table 2: Individual Question Responses**

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances	RUSSIA		pValue	USA		pValue
	CLOSE	ROMANTIC		CLOSE	ROMANTIC	
	mean	mean		mean	mean	
<b>Disclosure</b>						
Q1: If this person wanted to talk to you about work problems I would listen.	6.47	6.70	0.16270	6.47	6.57	0.471064
Q2: If this person wanted to talk about personal problems I would listen.	6.74	6.82	0.51743	6.72	6.71	0.915878
Q3: If this person told me secrets, I would not tell others.	5.95	6.20	0.24804	5.90	6.46	0.001476*
Q4: I would tell this person if I disagreed with them.	5.59	5.97	0.20138	5.34	6.13	0.000020*
Q5: Whenever this person wants to tell me about a problem, I stop what I am doing and listen for as long...	5.39	6.30	0.00001*	5.66	6.44	0.000001*
<b>Companionship</b>						
Q6: If this person told me they were lonely, I would spend time with them.	5.77	6.62	0.00000*	6.03	6.61	0.000125*
Q7: I would invite this person to dinner at my house.	5.80	6.58	0.00086*	6.30	6.66	0.031684*
Q8: I would invite this person to go to a movie, play, or concert.	6.02	6.45	0.00085*	6.30	6.66	0.016519*
Q9: I would talk to this person daily.	5.35	6.24	0.00001*	5.84	6.54	0.000008*



**Emotional Support**

Q10: If this person told me that they did something wrong, I would support and forgive them. 5.92 6.30 0.03302\* 5.91 6.15 0.284511

Q11: I would complement this person if they did something well. 6.48 6.38 0.17344 6.30 6.56 0.034120\*

Q12: I would tell this person that I cared about them. 5.80 6.55 0.00028\* 5.85 6.71 0.000002\*

Q13: I would tell this person that I loved them. 5.36 6.39 0.00002\* 5.28 6.47 0.000003\*

Q14: I would defend this person to others if they were criticizing them. 5.95 6.41 0.01534\* 6.13 6.38 0.023219\*

**Conflict**

Q15: If this person made me angry, I would tell them. 5.21 5.68 0.10791 5.18 5.86 0.000016\*

Q16: If this person told me they were angry with me; I would listen to them. 5.83 6.39 0.02537\* 5.89 6.32 0.017131\*

Q17: If I had a disagreement with this person, I would talk to them about how to resolve it. 6.00 6.42 0.01955\* 5.78 6.47 0.000017\*

**Instrumental**

Q18: I would give this person advice about work problems. 5.73 6.00 0.42367 5.76 6.01 0.557041

Q19: I would give this person advice about personal problems. 6.02 6.41 0.27936 6.22 6.34 0.161079

Q20: I would be willing to do favors at any time for this person. 5.77 6.44 0.00003\* 5.82 6.58 0.000000\*

Q21: If this person needed money, I would give it to them. 5.77 6.27 0.00623\* 5.11 6.01 0.000009\*

Q22: If this person needed a place to stay, I would provide it. 5.97 6.53 0.00491\* 6.10 6.56 0.106075

Q23: I would offer this person the use of my clothes, possessions, food. 5.94 6.52 0.00391\* 5.97 6.53 0.002388\*

**Note: \* represents significant pValue**

**Table 3: Importance of behaviors for close friend/romantic partner communication (interview)**

Communication Behaviors	Russia		USA	
	Close	Romance	Close	Romance
Disclosure	5.46	6.70	6.51	(6.7)
Instrumental Support	4.48	5.81	6.16	6.58
Companionship/Activities	5.60	6.58	6.23	7.00
Conflict	6.37	5.88	6.58	6.72
Emotional Support	5.46	6.23	6.72	6.72

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