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Abstract

The present research examined cultural differences in the type and frequency of support provided as well as the motivations underlying these behaviors. Study 1, an open-ended survey, asked participants about their social interactions in the past 24 hours and found that European Americans reported providing emotion-focused support more frequently than problem-focused support, whereas Japanese exhibited the opposite pattern. Study 2, a closed-ended questionnaire study, found that, in response to the close other’s big stressor, European Americans provided more emotion-focused support whereas Japanese provided equivalent amounts of emotion-focused and problem-focused support. In addition, Study 2 examined motivational explanations for these differences. Social support provision was motivated by the goal of closeness and increasing recipient self-esteem among European Americans, but only associated with the motive for closeness among Japanese. These studies illustrate the importance of considering cultural context and its role in determining the meaning and function of various support behaviors.

Keywords

social support provision, culture, problem-focused support, emotion-focused support, caregiving

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Mary has just lost her job and shared this experience with a close friend to seek support during this stressful time. Her close friend could provide support in many different ways. For instance, she could assure Mary that everything will be fine, express her respect and affection for Mary, or help Mary look for job openings. She could also offer to lend money or give compliments before Mary’s first job interview. The list of potentially supportive behaviors is long. Although these are all attempts to reduce a friend’s stress, people differ considerably in the exact ways in which they provide such support. One important factor that could influence the specific form of support provision that a person might adopt is culture.

A full understanding of individuals’ psychology requires consideration of their cultural context (Bruner, 1990; Kim & Markus, 1999; Shweder, 1995), which provides the values, meanings, and norms for maintaining close relationships. Considering culture as an influence on the motivations underlying support provision is crucial to broadening our understanding of human relationships. In the present research, we investigated the nature of social support provision in two cultural contexts (North American and Japanese) and examined the motivational underpinnings of these cultural differences. We propose that support provision takes different forms systematically depending on the cultural context and that the same support behavior may have different meanings (or underlying motives) across cultural contexts.

Social Support Provision

Social support has been defined as an interaction in which the provider conveys to the recipient that he or she is loved and cared for and part of a network of communication and mutual obligations (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Researchers have theorized and documented various factors that influence social support provision processes, including aspects of the relationship, seeker, situation, and provider (Dunkel-Schetter & Skokan, 1990; Iida, Seidman, Shrout, Fujita, & Bolger, 2008). However, these investigations have been largely confined to Western cultural contexts. Our goal

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is to incorporate culture into the understanding of social support provision.

The provision of social support can take a variety of forms, and there have been many types of support delineated by previous researchers. Esteem support has been defined as reflecting a positive image of the recipient back to himself, and communicating that he is accepted and valued for his individual identity. (Cobb, 1976; Wills, 1985). Emotional support provision focuses on the support recipient’s emotional reaction to a stressor to facilitate emotional coping and could involve both physical and verbal attempts to comfort the recipient (Cohen & Wills, 1985). These two types of social support are closely linked (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Taylor, 2007), and both aim to assuage the personal implications (i.e., threats to self-esteem or positive self-regard, emotions) of experiencing a stressor.

However, there are types of social support that focus on reappraising the stressor or solving it. Instrumental, or tangible, support involves providing tangible resources (e.g., money, transportation, information) to help the recipient resolve the stressor (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Orina, 2007; Taylor, 2007). Instrumental support provision involves giving advice about how to appraise or cope with the stressor (Taylor, 2007). Both instrumental support and informational support focus directly on the interpretation and resolution of the stressor, as opposed to the recipient’s emotional experience. In the present research, we rely on this distinction between emotion-focused and problem-focused support provision.

Previous research on support provision shows that emotion-focused support provision typically brings more positive outcomes than problem-focused support provision, although it is important to note that benevolent motivations can undermine both forms of social support provision. For instance, Collins and Feeney (2004, Study 1) manipulated the quality of provided support to examine the role of attachment style on perceived effectiveness. Their “high support” condition used emotion-focused support messages (e.g., “You’ll do great” and “You did a really good job”), and these messages were perceived as highly supportive. Burleson (2003) noted that emotional support has occupied center stage in research on close relationships and that it is purported to be the most beneficial type of social support. Benefits of emotion-focused support are particularly strong when the recipient voices emotional distress (i.e., when it is matched to the recipient’s needs; Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, & Gardner, 2007). Unlike emotion-focused support provision, the psychological outcomes of problem-focused support are mixed, as it can be perceived as intrusive or controlling (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Deelstra et al., 2003; Feeney, 2004; J. D. Fisher, Nadler, & Whitaker-Alagna, 1982; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). However, we propose that the relative benefit of emotion-focused support over problem-focused support is specific to the U.S. cultural context because emotion-focused support is more congruent with core American values and social norms.

**Culture as a Moderator**

There has been research on cultural differences in social support seeking (see Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008, for a review) and receiving (e.g., Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008), but relatively little research has examined the processes involving support provision in different cultural contexts. Because support provision may be solicited or unsolicited, responsive or unresponsive to what is sought, the study of culture and support provision raises questions that are unanswered by the existing literature on culture and social support seeking.

Previous conceptualizations of social support processes have emphasized the importance of partners’ maintaining their independence within a caring relationship. As Feeney and Collins (2001) wrote,

> [B]oth partners must encourage autonomy (provide a secure base) while also accepting dependence (provide a safe haven) when it is needed. This delicate balance of dependence and autonomy seems vital for healthy relationship functioning and may be a process that is negotiated by couple members over time. (p. 992)

As this quote clearly shows, the key to successful support provision is the balance between autonomy and dependence.

The relative importance of maintaining individual autonomy and independence of the self varies across cultures and is more central to people from Western individualistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In Western cultural contexts, people generally focus more on influencing and being in charge of their own situations and are motivated to maintain high self-esteem and a sense of personal agency. Consequently, in North American cultures, providing emotion-focused support may be a preferred type of support provision because it affirms the recipient’s thoughts and emotions without infringing on the person’s sense of competence or independence. In addition, emotion-focused support such as encouragement and reassurances of self can buffer negative self-thoughts and increase the recipient’s self-esteem. On the other hand, problem-focused support provision may be less prevalent because providers wish to avoid suggesting that the recipient is inefficacious or codependent (cf. Bolger & Amarel, 2007). Thus, we speculate that much of support provision effort would be motivated by the concern for self-esteem of the support recipient.

In contrast, people from collectivistic cultures, such as Asians, are generally more concerned with maintaining relational interdependence than individual autonomy (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Moreover, being influenced by a close other is more normative and accepted within collectivistic cultural contexts (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2003; Savani, Morris, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2011). One study found that Chinese participants valued their close others’ instrumental skills (i.e., skills at persuading or influencing) more than American participants valued these skills in their...
close others (Burleson, 2003). Another study, by Harber, Schneider, Everard, and Fisher (2005), found that Asian American college students reported receiving more directive support (attempting to control how others cope) than European Americans reported receiving. These findings suggest that problem-focused support provision may be quite natural and normative to Asians because it enhances relational interdependence and interpersonal accommodation.

Furthermore, Asian support providers may hesitate to provide explicit assurances of worth, which deviate from cultural norms about emotional expression and modesty and could make the recipient feel more uncomfortable than comforted (Burleson, 2003). Butler, Lee, and Gross (2007, 2009) have shown that people from collectivistic cultures do not value emotional expression and benefit from it to the same extent as do people from Western cultures. Consequently, Asians and Asian Americans are less willing to seek emotional support (Kim et al., 2008), and support seeking in fact increased experience of stress among them (Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007). Thus, support providers, who share the same cultural understanding of the expectations and effects of emotional interactions are less likely to choose the type of support provision that might not match the needs of support recipient. Indeed, Burleson and Mortenson (2003) found that support messages focused on the self were perceived as less sensitive by Chinese perceivers than by American perceivers. It seems equally unlikely that Asian providers would focus on bolstering recipients’ self-esteem, when this quality is not prioritized in collectivistic cultures (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). As such, emotion-focused support may be the cultural ideal in North American cultural contexts but may not be in Asian cultural contexts.

Problem-focused support, giving advice or providing concrete help, may be a more culturally appropriate way to affirm the relationship between provider and recipient in Asian cultures, compared to North American cultures. We argue that Asians will give problem-focused support not only to help solve recipient’s problems but also to convey their affection and care; thus, problem-focused support in Asian cultures may serve the same functions served by emotion-focused support in North American cultures. Indeed, Chentsova-Dutton (in press) found that Russians, also highly collectivistic, subscribed to the notion of practical interdependence, that is, cultivating social networks that can help the individual solve her or his practical problems. Chentsova-Dutton found that Russians show a strong preference for giving advice over other types of support. In fact, Russians gave more advice independent of what type of support was sought, and they reported that advice giving was a prototypical form of social support.

Building on these previous findings, the present research examined cultural differences in the provision of emotion-focused support and problem-focused support. Moreover, we examined two potential motivations for providing these different types of support: the motivation to maintain positive self-esteem of close others and the motivation to strengthen relational closeness. More specifically, we aimed to understand culture-specific importance of these different motivations and how they underlie different forms of support provision. We hypothesized that European Americans would more commonly provide emotion-focused support than problem-focused support, whereas the Japanese would not prioritize emotion-focused support over problem-focused support and, in fact, might prefer problem-focused support. We also hypothesized that the self-esteem motive would be a more central concern than the closeness motive among European Americans support providers, but the pattern would be opposite for the Japanese providers.

Overview of Studies

We investigated our hypotheses in two studies. Study 1 was an initial investigation into cultural differences in the provision of social support using an open-ended survey. We asked participants in the United States and Japan to recount their most recent interaction with a close other. Then, we asked participants to detail any help that they gave their close others during this interaction. In Study 2, we used a closed-ended questionnaire in Japan and the United States to investigate potential motivations that underlie the cultural differences in social support provision observed in the previous studies.

Study 1

In Study 1, we sampled European American and Japanese support behaviors with an open-ended questionnaire. These questions were designed to determine if support provision was more or less characteristic (i.e., frequent) in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures and whether or not it would be moderated by support type. We probed participants to write about an interaction within the past day to obtain a sample of normative relationship behaviors and minimize recall biases. We hypothesized that European Americans would report providing more emotion-focused than problem-focused support, whereas Japanese responses would not exhibit the same preference for emotion-focused support.

Method

Participants. Ninety-nine female college students from an East Coast college in Pennsylvania and 93 female college students from a Japanese college participated in the study. Students from the United States received course credit for participating, whereas students from Japan participated as part of a volunteer class exercise in their English and social sciences classes. Participant age was not collected.

Materials. Participants were given a questionnaire asking them to describe their most recent significant social interaction and their support provision in those situations, if any.
The first prompt did not specifically mention support provision, and it read,

Think about the social interaction/social interactions you have participated in, in the last 24 hours. Consider only the social interactions that involved people that you are close to, and know well: friends, family, classmates, teammates, etc. A social interaction can include a conversation, but it does not have to. Now think carefully about only the one social interaction that happened most recently. Please briefly describe the most recent social interaction here.

We specified the time frame of 24 hours to obtain a sample of behaviors that were representative of everyday social interactions. In addition, we reasoned that more recent memories would be least likely to have been distorted by individual and cultural biases. The questionnaire also included a question on how typical the described situation rated on a scale from 1 (no, not at all) to 7 (yes, very much).

Then, participants were asked a question whether or not they tried to help someone in the situation (yes or no), and the second prompt instructed participants to describe how they tried to help someone, if they did. The second prompt read,

At any point in this social interaction, did you try to do something to help the other person? Did you try to improve their lives in some way, even a small way? If YES, describe how you tried to help the other person.

Participants from the United States were given questions in English, and participants from Japan were given identical questions in Japanese.

Procedure. The survey was administered during afternoon hours for both the Japanese and American administrations. Japanese responses were translated into English by a Japanese bilingual coder and checked for accuracy by another bilingual Japanese speaker. As participants first described a recent social interaction without any prompt mentioning social support, responses to this first question were coded as either containing or not containing social support behaviors of any kind and then according to support type (problem-focused and/or emotion-focused support). Emotion-focused support was defined as behavior addressing the close other’s emotions or self-worth, whereas problem-focused support was defined as behavior aimed at resolving a stressor (i.e., the provision of tangible resources or advice; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). When participants described giving help in response to the follow-up question, their descriptions were also coded for the type of support provided. For an example, one emotion-focused response was, “I told my friend that no matter what, she’d be OK and that things would get better.” A problem-focused response was, “I tried to help her by giving her advice on how to deal with her issue.” Situations were coded by an Asian American and a European American coder (Cohen’s κ = .61) who were unaware of our hypothesis. Disagreements over the type of support provided were resolved by a third coder who was European American.

Results
Perceived typicality of the situations did not differ by culture, t(179) = –0.68, p = .50. Japanese and European American participants rated situations as similarly typical. We also coded the relationship to the support recipient (friend, romantic partner, family member, or other) and found that the type of support recipient mentioned did not differ by culture, χ²(1, n = 45) = 1.92, p = .383. The majority of social support instances involved a friend as the support recipient (88% in the United States, 100% in Japan).

Reports of overall support provision. There was a significant difference between cultures in the amount of support that participants reported providing in the main social interaction responses. European American participants (17%) spontaneously reported providing more social support than Japanese participants (8%), χ²(1, n = 192) = 4.08, p = .04. In the second prompt, where participants were asked specifically to describe help that they provided, European American participants (35%) also reported providing more social support compared to Japanese participants (16%), χ²(1, n = 192) = 9.20, p = .002 (two-tailed).

Type of support provided. To examine the relative prevalence of different types of support provision, we categorized responses to either emotion-focused or problem-focused support provision among those who indicated that they provided support.

There were four participants who reported providing both types of support, and they were excluded from the chi-square analysis. We found a marginally significant difference in support type by culture (see Figure 1), with European Americans reporting more emotion-focused (66%) than problem-focused support (31%) and Japanese reporting more problem-focused (64%) than emotion-focused support (36%), χ²(1, n = 45) = 4.06, p = .047 (two-tailed).

Discussion
Study 1 utilized an open-ended response format that enabled us to examine how participants naturally perceived their social interactions, and we found evidence for differences in the frequency and type of support provided in Japan and the United States. First, there were differences in the frequency with which Japanese and European Americans provided social support to their close others. Specifically, we found that European Americans were more likely than Japanese to spontaneously report providing support to a close other. This finding suggests that social support is more “in the air” in the United States than in Japan and complements previous research showing that Asians seek less social support than...
European Americans (Kim et al., 2008; Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006; Taylor et al., 2004).

More importantly, within-culture comparisons showed that Japanese and European Americans differed in what types of support they reported providing more frequently. European Americans reported providing more emotion-focused support than problem-focused support, whereas Japanese reported providing more problem-focused support than emotion-focused support. This provides initial evidence for cultural patterns in support provision and lends support to our hypothesis that emotion-focused support would be provided more frequently in cultures that place high importance on high self-esteem, personal competence, emotional expression, and individual autonomy than in cultures that do not. In the next study, we sought to investigate the underlying motivations of social support empirically.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to investigate social support provision in response to a close other’s stressor and to examine the potential motivations behind support provision in collectivistic and individualistic cultures. We have argued that European American support providers are relatively more concerned with improving the recipient’s self-resources and respecting her or his autonomy, whereas Japanese providers are relatively more concerned with affirming the closeness and interdependence with the recipient. To test this idea, we examined the degree to which participants from the two cultures endorse these two motivations. Our predictions led us to examine the role of two motives—wanting to be close and wanting to increase the other’s self-esteem—in predicting support provision in American and Japanese contexts. We predicted that European Americans would report stronger motivation to increase the other’s self-esteem (motivation for self-esteem) whereas Japanese would report stronger motivation for closeness (motivation for closeness).

We also hypothesized that social support provision would have different motivational underpinnings depending on the cultural context. To investigate this prediction, we examined the relationship between the two motivations and participants’ reported support provision. Social support provision by European Americans is geared toward achieving a balance between closeness and autonomy (Feeney & Collins, 2001), even if the motivation for closeness may be relatively less important compared to the motivation for self-esteem. Consequently, we hypothesized that both the motivation for self-esteem and the motivation for closeness would independently predict European American emotion-focused support provision, the culturally prototypical form of support. In contrast, we predicted that European American provision of problem-focused support, which has been shown to have negative effects on self-esteem, would be predicted only by the motivation for closeness.

In contrast, we argue that Japanese social support provision is motivated by the goal of achieving closeness and interdependence between the provider and recipient and that the motivation for self-esteem is a less central concern. As such, we predicted that motivation for closeness would be the only predictor of Japanese support provision.

Method

Participants. Seventy-eight European American undergraduate students (71% female) from a large West Coast university participated in the study in exchange for credit in their introductory psychology class. One-hundred and fifty-six undergraduate students (59% female) from a large Japanese university participated in the study for partial course credit in a psychology course. The average age of Japanese participants was 19.54 years ($SD = 1.03$).

Materials and procedures. The questionnaire was implemented using Qualtrics, an online survey company (www.qualtrics.com). The questionnaire was created in English, then translated from English to Japanese by a bilingual Japanese social psychologist, then back translated by another bilingual Japanese social psychologist.

The questionnaire about social support provision asked participants first to recall and openly describe a recent and highly stressful event experienced by a close other (a friend or family member). Next the participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements about how they helped the close other cope with the event. Among these items were measures of emotion-focused and problem-focused support adapted from the behavioral coding scheme in Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, and Orina (2007). Emotion-focused support was measured with two items (“I tried to offer..."
comforting and encouraging words” and “I tried to tell my close other how much I care about them”), $r(78) = .52, p < .001$ for European Americans and $r(148) = .52, p < .001$ for Japanese. Problem-focused support was also measured with two items (“I tried to give specific suggestions about how to solve the problem” and “I provided my close other with advice to help them deal with the problem”), $r(78) = .77, p < .001$ for European Americans and $r(147) = .69, p < .001$ for Japanese. We also collected background information about the relationship between the provider and recipient: the nature of their relationship (e.g., parent, friend, romantic partner), the frequency of contact, and the relationship closeness. Then, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which various motivations were behind their support provision. Motivation for closeness was measured with three items (“I wanted my close other to feel close to me,” “I wanted us to feel close to each other,” “I wanted my close other to know that I care about him or her”), Cronbach’s alpha = .84 for European Americans and .82 for Japanese. Motivation for self-esteem was measured with three items (e.g., “I wanted my close other to feel better about him or herself,” “I wanted my close other to feel good about him or herself,” “I wanted my close other to have high self-esteem”), Cronbach’s alpha = .89 for European Americans and .79 for Japanese. At the conclusion of the study, participants completed a demographic questionnaire.

Results

Type of support provided. A 2 (culture: United States vs. Japan) × 2 (support type: problem vs. emotion focused) mixed model ANOVA was conducted. There was a main effect of culture, $F(1, 226) = 66.63, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .23$, such that European Americans provided more support overall. There was also a main effect of support type, $F(1, 226) = 9.02, p = .003, \eta^2_p = .04$, such that participants provided more emotion-focused support than problem-focused support. We found a significant Culture × Support Type interaction, $F(1, 226) = 10.77, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .05$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons revealed similar patterns to those in Study 1; European Americans provided more emotion-focused support ($M = 5.29, SD = 1.51$) than problem-focused support ($M = 4.60, SD = 1.81$), $p < .001$. Japanese participants provided equivalent amounts of problem-focused ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.58$) and emotion-focused support ($M = 3.37, SD = 1.74$), $p = .81$.

To rule out the alternative explanation that the type of support recipient accounted for the observed cultural difference, we conducted a 2 (culture: United States vs. Japan) × 2 (support type: problem vs. emotion focused) mixed model ANCOVA with support recipient (friend, romantic partner, family member, other) entered as three dummy-coded covariates (“other” was the reference group). There was no main effect of support type, $F < 1$. The main effect of culture was significant, $F(1, 223) = 79.52, p < .001$, and the Culture × Support Type interaction remained significant, $F(1, 223) = 8.17, p = .005$. Pairwise comparisons showed that, controlling for the type of support recipient, the pattern of results and all the relevant significance levels remained the same. Recipient type did not interact with culture or type of support provision either. Gender of participants also did not affect any of the results and is not be mentioned in the subsequent analyses.

Relative strength of motivations for social support. To investigate the degree to which people from the two cultures endorse the two motivations for providing social support, we conducted a 2 (culture: United States vs. Japan) × 2 (motivation: closeness vs. self-esteem) mixed model ANOVA. There was no main effect of motivation, $F < 1$. There was a main effect of culture, $F(1, 226) = 182.18, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .45$, such that European Americans reported having higher motivations for closeness and self-esteem than did Japanese. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant Culture × Motivation interaction, $F(1, 226) = 26.50, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11$ (see Figure 2). Consistent with our hypotheses, European Americans reported stronger motivation for self-esteem ($M = 5.59, SD = 1.27$) than motivation for closeness ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.49$), $p < .001$. On the other hand, Japanese reported having stronger motivation for closeness ($M = 3.05, SD = 1.59$) than self-esteem ($M = 2.67, SD = 1.37$), $p < .001$. This analysis confirms our hypothesis that the motivation for self-esteem is a more prominent concern for European American providers than for Japanese providers and the motivation for closeness is a more prominent concern for Japanese providers than for European American providers.

Motivational underpinnings of social support. We were predicting that specific motivations would manifest differently in different cultural contexts. To investigate these hypotheses, we conducted moderated multiple regressions, hypothesizing that culture would moderate the association between each motive and the provision of emotion- and problem-focused support. In each analysis, we controlled for the other
motivation by entering it into the initial step of the regression. As a result, our findings show how each motivation predicts social support provision across cultures above and beyond the contributions of the other motivation.

**Motivation for closeness.** We conducted two moderated multiple regressions, predicting problem-focused and emotion-focused support, to determine how culture and the motivation for closeness predicted support provision.

**Motivation for closeness: Emotion-focused support.** In Step 1, we entered motivation for self-esteem, \( R^2 = .45, \beta = .67, p < .001 \). In Step 2, we entered motivation for closeness and culture, \( \Delta R^2 = .14, p < .001 \). Culture (European American = 0, Japanese = 1) was marginally negatively associated with providing emotion-focused support, \( \beta = -.11, p = .07 \). European Americans were marginally more likely to provide emotion-focused support to their close others than were Japanese. Motivation for closeness was positively related to providing emotion-focused support, \( \beta = .59, p < .001 \). In Step 3, we entered the Culture \( \times \) Motive interaction term, and the interaction was significant, \( \Delta R^2 = .01, p = .05 \). To interpret this interaction, we calculated the simple slopes between motivation for closeness and emotion-focused support provision for each culture. Motivation for closeness predicted increased provision of emotion-focused support to a greater extent among European Americans, \( \beta = .73, p < .001 \), compared with Japanese, \( \beta = .51, p < .001 \), although the relationship was strong also among Japanese.

**Motivation for closeness: Problem-focused support.** In Step 1, we entered motivation for self-esteem, \( R^2 = .22, \beta = .47, p < .001 \). In Step 2, we entered motivation for closeness and culture simultaneously, \( \Delta R^2 = .03, p = .02 \). Problem-focused support provision was not predicted by the provider’s culture. The motive to feel close to the recipient was associated with increased provision of problem-focused support, \( \beta = .26, p = .01 \). In Step 3, we entered the Culture \( \times \) Motivation for Closeness interaction term. However, culture did not moderate the association between motivation for closeness and provision of problem-focused support.

In both cultures, wanting to be close to the recipient predicted both emotion-focused and problem-focused support. However, the motivation for closeness was more strongly associated with emotion-focused support provision in the United States than in Japan.

**Motivation for self-esteem: Emotion-focused support.** In Step 1, we entered motivation for self-esteem, \( R^2 = .57, p < .001 \). In Step 2, we entered culture and motivation for self-esteem simultaneously, \( \Delta R^2 = .03, p < .001 \). Culture (European American = 0, Japanese = 1) marginally significantly predicted emotion-focused support provision, \( \beta = -.11, p = .07 \), as European Americans were more likely to provide emotion-focused support than were Japanese. In Step 3, we entered the Culture \( \times \) Motive interaction term, \( \Delta R^2 = .01, p = .02 \). To investigate this interaction, we computed simple slopes for each culture (see Figure 3). For Japanese, wanting to make the support recipient feel better about herself or himself did not lead to more emotion-focused support provision, \( \beta = .02, p = .83 \). For European Americans, motive for other enhancement was strongly positively related to providing emotion-focused support, \( \beta = .61, p = .01 \).

**Motivation for self-esteem: Problem-focused support.** In Step 1, we entered motivation for self-esteem, \( R^2 = .22, \beta = .47, p < .001 \). In Step 2, we entered culture and motivation for self-esteem, \( \Delta R^2 = .03, p = .02 \). The motivation for self-esteem predicted increased provision of problem-focused support, \( \beta = .28, p = .02 \). In Step 3, we entered the Culture \( \times \) Motive interaction term, \( \Delta R^2 = .03, p = .004 \). To explore this interaction, we computed simple slopes for each culture. Wanting to increase the recipient’s self-esteem predicted more problem-focused support provision for European Americans, \( \beta = .61, p < .001 \), but not for Japanese, \( \beta = .01, p = .95 \) (see Figure 3).
Taken together, these results show that concern for the recipient’s self-esteem was a significant predictor of support provision among European Americans, whereas it was not a significant motive for Japanese support provision of either kind.

Discussion

The current study extended the findings from Study 1 using a closed-ended survey. We found that, in response to a close other’s life stressor, European Americans were more likely to provide emotion-focused than problem-focused support. On the other hand, Japanese provided equal amounts of emotion-focused and problem-focused support. The fact that Japanese reported equal amounts of both types of support provision may seem somewhat inconsistent with the findings from Study 1, in which Japanese reported providing more problem-focused than emotion-focused support. However, we believe that this discrepancy is the result of the methodological differences between the two studies. In Study 1, participants responded to the open-ended response prompt, and the vast majority of participants chose to report one incidence of support provision. Thus, it is reasonable to interpret the findings as participants reporting the most salient form of support provision in the past 24 hours, and, in such a format, Japanese participants chose to write about problem-focused provision more than emotion-focused provision. However, in Study 2, participants rated their provision of both forms of support independently; in this case, Japanese participants reported providing both forms of support to the same extent. The results across the two studies show that there is a very strong preference for emotion-focused support in the United States, whereas problem-focused support is mildly preferred in Japan.

The relative importance of two motivations for providing support also differed across the two cultures. Wanting to make the support recipient feel good about herself or himself was a more prominent concern among European American providers. On the other hand, Japanese providers were more concerned with achieving closeness with the recipient.

Moreover, the motivation for closeness to the recipient predicted support provision in both cultures. Wanting to feel close to the recipient was also strongly associated with emotion-focused support provision in both cultural groups, but more strongly for European Americans. Both European American and Japanese providers also increased their provision of problem-focused support when they wanted to increase closeness with the recipient.

The motivation for self-esteem—wanting the other person to feel good about herself or himself—did not underlie Japanese social support provision. In contrast, European American support provision was highly associated with wanting to make the recipient feel good about herself or himself. European American providers offered both types of support when they wanted the recipients to feel confident and assured in themselves. We did not expect that the motive for self-esteem would predict problem-focused support by European Americans, particularly in light of previous research showing that advice and tangible assistance are typically poorly received because they imply recipient inefficacy (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Feeney, 2004; E. B. Fisher, La Greca, Greco, Arfken, & Schneiderman, 1997; J. D. Fisher et al., 1982). The current findings suggest that European American providers of problem-focused support have good intentions but may lack awareness of the risky nature of this type of support provision.

Taken together, these results suggest that the motivation for closeness underlies support provision in both cultures for both forms of support provision, although its relative importance is greater in Japan than in the United States. In contrast, the motivation for self-esteem is highly prioritized in U.S. culture, as it was a strong motivation for both types of support provision among European American participants. Not only did Japanese rate this motive as less important, but also the motivation for self-esteem did not uniquely predict either type of support provision in Japan. These findings demonstrate that social support provision has culturally specific motivational underpinnings and that cultural context helps determine the type of social support that is provided.

General Discussion

Two studies using different methodologies were conducted to incorporate culture into our understanding of social support provision. Study 1 found that European Americans freely reported providing more emotion-focused support than problem-focused support in everyday interactions, with the trend toward the opposite pattern of support provision among Japanese participants. Study 2 extended these findings to support provision in response to a close other experiencing a highly negative stressor, replicating the pattern by European American providers and showing that Japanese providers relied on both types of support equally in these situations.

Study 2 also examined the motivations underlying support provision in each culture. The motivation for relationship closeness predicted both types of support provision in both cultures, but motivation for self-esteem predicted support provision only in the United States. These results are consistent with the finding that self-esteem maintenance is a more important motive in individualistic cultures (Heine et al., 1999).

The observed cultural preferences in social support provision reflect several important differences between individualistic Western cultures and collectivistic Eastern ones. For Japanese, social support may be characterized by practical interdependence, in which the provider attempts to communicate closeness and intimacy with the recipient. This transaction may affirm the relational interdependence between provider and recipient without violating cultural norms about
emotional expression or burdening others by talking about one’s problems when they can be solved. Problem-focused support transactions seem to be more characteristic of everyday social interactions and may be more fulfilling or satisfying to Japanese than to European Americans (similar to the case of Russians vs. European Americans; Chentsova-Dutton, in press). It is clear that Japanese do not prioritize emotion-focused support over other methods of support provision.

On the other hand, European Americans exhibited a strong inclination for emotion-focused support, across everyday interactions and stressful events. Their support provision was characterized by both the motive to feel close to the recipient and the motive to increase her or his self-esteem. This focus on the self-resources of the support recipient was absent among Japanese participants. These findings are consistent with mainstream American culture’s valuation of emotional expression, high self-esteem, individual autonomy, and personal competence.

**Questions for Future Research**

There are many possible extensions to the current research. We predicted and found cultural differences in methods of support provision and the motives behind it. However, it is likely that the observed cultural differences in providing emotion-focused and problem-focused support may depend on the particular stressor (e.g., chronic vs. temporary, solvable vs. unsolvable). Moreover, we adopted relatively broad categories of emotion versus problem-focused support provision, but as we noted earlier, there are finer distinctions to be considered within each category (such as advice and instrumental support within problem-focused support). The constraints of the situation and the demands of the stressor should also influence which specific type of support is provided, and the magnitude of cultural differences in relation to providing each type of support may also vary.

One of our goals in Study 2 was an initial examination of the motivational underpinnings of these cultural differences. However, our investigation of support motives was not exhaustive by any means; there are many potential culture-specific motivations for support provision (e.g., ingratiation, motive to solve the problem, feeling obligated to the recipient, wanting to influence the recipient) that should be investigated further. Follow-up research needs to provide a more fine-grained analysis of motives that underlie specific types of problem-focused and emotion-focused support within collectivistic cultures (e.g., Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998) and should establish causal relationships between the support motives and behaviors.

Cultural differences in support provision will contribute to the understanding of how cultures differ in support transaction perceptions and outcomes. For instance, how does culture influence the perception of problem-focused support? Our findings suggest that interdependent people do not perceive problem-focused support to be intrusive or detrimental but rather a positive way to support a close other. Therefore, it may be that receiving problem-focused support may benefit Asians more than other types of support such as emotional support.

Furthermore, there should be additional work examining the psychological and physiological consequences of providing culturally normative versus nonnormative types of support. For example, is providing a less preferred type of support associated with increased discomfort, anxiety, or stress for the provider? If so, what is the impact on the support recipient and the provider–recipient relationship? As previous research (Taylor et al., 2007) has shown that culturally nonnormative social coping could lead to negative psychological and biological consequences, provision of such support could also lead to negative consequences to the providers themselves.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Across the world, in different cultures, people are supporting one another through tough times. The present research suggests that researchers need to consider cultural context, values, and norms when studying social support processes. In our studies, we relied on the distinction between emotion-focused and problem-focused social support. This distinction has a long tradition in the theoretical and empirical discussions of coping (Carver, 2007; Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, we have demonstrated that the meanings and functions of emotion-focused and problem-focused support differ across cultures. It is very possible that specific behaviors may be perceived as emotion focused in one culture and problem focused in another. For example, the act of loaning money is typically perceived as problem-focused support in the West. However, loaning money is literally more costly to the provider than is offering a compliment, hug, or loving remark; in some cultures, the exchange of tangible resources may be the ultimate way to convey the provider’s trust in and interconnectedness with the recipient. The possibility of culture-specific construals of support behaviors reinforces our current argument that culture shapes the meaning and function of supportive interactions, and certainly warrants future investigation.

Our findings may also have implications beyond close personal relationships. A growing number of social interactions and relationships are between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, and these relationships are likely to be characterized by at least some level of social support transaction. Yet, in these cross-cultural relationships, one interaction partner’s conceptualization of social support may be very different from the other partner’s definition of support. This incompatibility can potentially lead to misperceptions of the support provider as unhelpful or unsupportive—perceptions that can impede development of positive relationships.

The problem of cultural incompatibility between the expectations and goals of support providers and seekers may
have implications for acculturation processes and cross-generational interactions in immigrant families. For instance, a Chinese mother’s advice may be considered overbearing and intrusive by her Chinese American daughter. On the other hand, the daughter may believe that giving emotion-focused support to her grandmother increases her self-esteem, when the grandmother actually seeks advice or tangible assistance. In general, cross-cultural interactions can lead to incompatible providers and seekers, where the provider may be asked to give a type of support that they are uncomfortable with or a seeker may receive support that she or he perceives as ineffective or unresponsive.

In addition, there are implications for social support provision at the intergroup level. Research from the stigma literature has demonstrated that when a minority group member receives problem-focused support from a majority member, she or he experiences a drop in competence-based self-esteem (Schneider, Major, Luhtanen, & Crocker, 1996). However, for Asian providers, problem-focused support is motivated by the desire to help and to fulfill a relational obligation between provider and recipient. In fragile cross-cultural situations, the subtle difference between trying to help and patronizing another person’s or group’s competence can be highly consequential. To avoid miscommunications and misunderstandings that lead to negative intergroup relations, it is crucial to understand cultural differences in social support provision broadly and deeply.

Conclusion
The present research represents an initial step to understanding how culture affects the way that people support one another through stressful times. Our findings suggest different cultural norms for social support transactions and suggest different cultural lay theories about the relative effectiveness of problem- and emotion-focused support. Japanese and European Americans differ in how they provide support in service of achieving closeness and recipient self-esteem. Ultimately, relationships everywhere may function as a secure base and safe haven, but with culturally specific pathways to these ends. We hope that the current research has highlighted the importance of considering cultural influences on social support provision.

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Notes
1. This Japanese college was a women’s college. To match the sample characteristics, we also recruited female participants in the United States.
2. We also conducted a 2 (culture: United States vs. Japan) × 2 (support type: emotion vs. problem focused) mixed model ANOVA to include the previously excluded four participants. The main effect of support type was not significant, F(1, 47) = 0.039, p = .844, nor was the main effect of culture, F(1, 47) = 0.062, p = .804. The Culture × Support Type interaction was significant, F(1, 47) = 4.22, p = .046. We conducted contrasts (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985) to investigate this interaction. Among the participants who reported support provision, European Americans reported providing more emotion-focused (M = 0.71, SD = 0.46) than problem-focused support (M = 0.38, SD = 0.49), Z = –2.83, p = .004. Japanese had a nonsignificant tendency to report providing more problem-focused (M = 0.67, SD = 0.49) than emotion-focused support (M = 0.40, SD = 0.51), Z = 1.52, p = .12.
3. There was low frequency of reporting instrumental support in Study 1 (fewer than 10% providing instrumental support), and so we focused on measuring provision of informational support as problem-focused support for the second study.

References


