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## The cultural grounding of personal relationship: Friendship in North American and West African worlds

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### Abstract

This study considers how different constructions of self and social reality influence the experience of relationship. Reflecting the relational interdependence of West African worlds, the authors hypothesized and observed that Ghanaian participants were significantly more likely than U.S.A. participants ( $n_s = 50$  each) to advocate caution toward friends and to emphasize practical assistance in friendship. Reflecting the atomistic independence of North American worlds, the authors hypothesized and observed that U.S.A. participants were significantly more likely than Ghanaian participants to indicate a large friendship network; to emphasize companionship, particularly relative to Ghanaian women; and to emphasize emotional support, particularly relative to Ghanaian nonstudents. Results suggest that friendship is not a universal form; instead, it takes different forms in different cultural worlds.

Beware of friends.  
Some are snake under grass;  
Some are lions in sheep's clothing;  
Some are jealousies behind their façades  
of praises;  
Some are just no good;  
Beware of friends.  
(Kyei & Schreckenbach, "Beware of  
Friends," 1975, p. 59)

This passage appears in a collection of poems written by a Ghanaian author and inspired by a common sight in many settings throughout West Africa: slogans painted on trucks. The theme of the passage—a cautious approach to friends—is not limited to truck slogans, but also features prominently in material artifacts, cultural practices, and popular discourse of many West African worlds. This theme contrasts with the representations about friends that are prominent in the popular discourse and social science of many North American worlds. Although individuals in these settings sometimes express ambivalence about friends, prevailing representations suggest that "friends can be good medicine" (Basic Behavioral Science Task Force, 1996) or that "how to win friends" (Carnegie, 1936) is an important skill for personal success. Research indicates that these different approaches to friendship are not limited to popular discourse, but also extend to personal experience. People from diverse settings in the West African country of Ghana tend to report fewer friends, claim to have fewer

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This paper is based on portions of a PhD dissertation submitted to Stanford University by the first author. The research was supported by awards to the first author from the Social Science Research Council International Predissertation Fellowship Program and the J. William Fulbright Fellowship Board. The Department of Psychology at the University of Ghana in Legon, the Tamale Institute of Cross-Cultural Studies, and the University for Development Studies in Navrongo supported the research in Ghana by granting affiliation to the first author. We would like to thank Rachel B. Amo, Kelly Garrett, Kwarteng Ofosehene Mensah, and Kim Rios for assistance with the research. Hazel Rose Markus served as advisor for the project. The paper is dedicated to the memory of Stephen Humphrey, a friend by many definitions.

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friends than other people around them, and endorse more cautious approaches to friendship than people in the various North American settings studied (e.g., central Pennsylvania, San Francisco Bay Area, Stanford University, and the University of Kansas; G. Adams, 2000, 2003).

These observations serve as a point of departure for investigating the cultural grounding of friendship. Limiting one's focus to a subset of North American settings, one might conclude that an abundance of friends is good and that a suspicious caution toward friends suggests pathology (cf. Myers, 2000). Instead, we consider how the suspicious caution toward friends in many West African settings not only reflects local realities, but also may be a product of sociocultural forces that many people consider beneficial. Equally important, we consider how patterns of friendship observed in North American settings—like a relative lack of concern about harm from friends—are not simply natural, but are themselves the product of particular cultural worlds.

#### *Implicit constructions of self and social reality*

The dominant framework for studying culture in the field of social psychology is the contrast between individualist and collectivist value orientations. Popular understandings of these constructs associate individualist, North American settings with the value of personal autonomy and associate collectivist, West African settings with the value of interpersonal connection. Based on these understandings, students in our classes regularly predict that if anyone regards friendship cautiously it should be North American individualists and not West African collectivists. How then is one to explain the apparent paradox that people in West African settings report fewer friends and endorse greater caution toward friends than people in North American settings?

The key to this apparent paradox is to locate the importance of culture not in value orientations or beliefs about how things

should be, but in constructions of reality or beliefs about how things really are. In particular, our explanation builds on the distinction between independent and interdependent construals of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The essence of this distinction is the extent to which people experience their being as bounded and separate or fluid and interconnected. Although this distinction was originally phrased in terms of differences in self, it has broader implications for the experience of relationship and marks a larger difference in constructions of social reality (Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996).

Specifically, the independent constructions of self that are prominent in many North American settings imply *atomistic* constructions of reality in which the default experience is a sort of existential solitude. Associated with philosophers like Locke and Rousseau, these implicit constructions promote an experience of relationship in general—and friendship in particular—as a secondary product. These constructions promote the experience of relational connection as something that is derived or created. It is not built into the natural order, but instead reflects the work of originally independent selves (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998).

In contrast, scholars suggest that less atomistic or more *relational* constructions of reality are prominent in popular discourse and everyday worlds of many West African settings (cf. Piot, 1999; Shaw, 2000). These constructions promote the experience of relational connection as the default experience of human beings (Fiske et al., 1998). Rather than a collection of originally independent selves, these implicit constructions consider reality to be a pre-existing field of authority-ranked interdependence (Fiske, 1991). People experience themselves as interdependent not only with other people, but also with land, spiritual forces, and a sense of built-in order (Riesman, 1986).

We propose that these implicit constructions of self and social reality provide the assumptive world or common ground in

which individuals conduct friendship. We refer to these constructions as *implicit* because they are not typically conscious or explicitly taught, but instead are acquired in automatic fashion as a byproduct of life in culturally patterned worlds. We refer to *constructions* or *worlds*, instead of *construals*, to emphasize that these patterns are not limited to beliefs but include the realization of beliefs in institutions, practices, and artifacts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). If constructions of self and social reality vary across settings, so too should experience of friendship.

#### *Implications for friendship*

Scholars in several disciplines have proposed how different constructions of self might influence the experience of friendship (Carrier, 1999; Cross & Madson, 1997; O'Conner, 1998; Oliner, 1998; Wright, 1978). Based on these ideas, we propose 11 hypotheses.

*Size of friend network.* Definitions of friendship often refer to it as a purely voluntary relationship (cf. Wiseman, 1986). From this perspective, real friendship is not a product of structural affordances (e.g., being neighbors or coworkers), it is context independent rather than context specific, and it involves spontaneous acts of affection rather than scripted performance of institutionalized obligations. All of these features imply independent constructions of an unconstrained self that is free to create such relationships (Carrier, 1999). Accordingly, we would expect friendship to approach this form more closely in worlds where atomistic-independent constructions of reality are prominent: not only North American settings, but also male-dominated, urban, highly educated, or middle-class worlds (Allan, 1977; Argyle, 1994; Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus, Curhan, Ryff, & Palmerheim, 2003; Paine, 1969; Palisi & Ransford, 1987).

Friendship may take other forms in worlds where more relational-interdependent constructions of reality are prominent. For

example, the voluntary aspect of friendship may be less about *making* friends from scratch than *choosing* friends from a pool of readily afforded connections (Wierzbicka, 1997). With respect to West African settings, research indicates that relationships glossed as *friendship* often take less voluntary forms that admit a greater role for structural affordance, context specificity, institutionalized obligations, and instrumental use of the relationship for practical ends (e.g., patronage networks and inter-familial alliances; Fiske, 1991; Piot, 1999; Tait, 1961).

These observations about different forms of friendship have implications for the size of friendship networks. We propose that the forms of friendship associated with atomistic-independent constructions of reality grant people freedom to have as many friends as they have skills or resources to make. Because these forms of friendship are associated with relatively few constraints or obligations, they permit people in North American worlds, but perhaps especially men (Verkuyten & Masson, 1996), to interact with a larger number of partners than is true of people in many other settings (cf. Goodwin, 1999; Wheeler, Reis, & Bond, 1989). In contrast, we propose that more relational-interdependent constructions of reality grant less opportunity for relationship creation and entail more binding forms of friendship that are characterized by greater obligation and afford less opportunity to have many friends. This suggests our first hypothesis.

- H1: *Compared to people in North American settings, people in West African settings will report a smaller network of people that they call friends.*

*Motivations for friendship.* Besides different forms of friendship, another rationale for the *size of network* hypothesis concerns different motivations for friendship. Rather than feeling less motivation for friendship because they devalue connection,

people in North American settings may feel greater motivation for friendship because, although they still desire companionship, they inhabit worlds of atomistic independence that may not readily afford the experience of companionship. This suggests a second hypothesis.

- H2: *Although people in North American settings may report a larger network of friends, they will nevertheless be more likely than people in West African settings to feel loneliness.*

Similarly, if people in West African settings report a smaller friendship network, the reason may not just be that they lack opportunity to make friends; instead, they may not agree that a large friend network is desirable. Why should this be so? One reason is the complementary side of social support (cf. Rook, 1984; Rook & Pietromonaco, 1987). A large friend network means greater support in the time of one's own need, but it also means that one has a large number of people to whom one has obligations of support when they need it. This hazard is particularly likely given constructions of friendship that emphasize obligation. Too many friends and associated obligations can strain resources and become a source of stress (cf. Hobfoll, 1989).

Besides straining resources, friendship can also be a site of conflict. Although true of friendship in any setting, conflict is a particularly serious concern given the limited mobility, context dependence, and embeddedness of relationship in many West African worlds (G. Adams, 2000; cf. Feld & Carter, 1998). These hazards of relational interdependence make the negative consequences of friendship more difficult to avoid (Paine, 1999) and suggest two hypotheses.

- H3: *People in West African settings will be more likely than people in North American settings to advocate caution toward friendship.*

- H4: *People in West African settings will be more likely than people in North American settings to regard a person who has many friends as foolish.*

*Evaluation of a person who has no friends.* If people in North American and West African settings differ in their evaluation of a person who claims many friends, it is likely that they will also differ in their evaluation of a person who claims to have no friends. Although people in both settings may evaluate such a person negatively, we propose that they will do so for different reasons. To the extent that people in North American settings inhabit worlds that afford an experience of relational connection as something that requires making, they will interpret having no friends as an inability to make friends, and negative reactions toward a person with no friends will take the form of pity or sympathy. This reasoning underlies our fifth hypothesis.

- H5: *People in North American settings will be more likely than people in West African settings to regard a person who has no friends with pity.*

To the extent that people in West African settings inhabit worlds of interdependence that readily afford the experience of connection, they will interpret having no friends as a refusal to take a friend. If they consider this to be negative, their tone will resemble accusation more than pity.

- H6: *People in West African settings will be more likely than people in North American settings to regard a person who has no friends with accusation.*

*Defining features of friendship.* Different constructions of self and social reality also imply differences in what features people consider central to friendship. To the extent that they inhabit worlds of relational interdependence that afford the experience of

companionship from a host of other relationships (e.g., neighbors, age mates, relatives), people in West African settings may reserve their friendship choices to a limited number of partners that they maintain for reasons other than companionship. In particular, given the relative poverty of many West African settings, people may be especially attentive to the potential for friends to provide material assistance (Goodwin, 1999). This suggests the following hypothesis.

H7: *People in West African settings will be more likely than people in North American settings to regard practical or material assistance as a defining feature of friendship.*

In contrast, relationship ideology in many North American settings holds that real friendship is based on something other than material need (O'Conner, 1998). To the extent that local constructions of reality do not readily afford the experience of companionship, people may define friendship by its ability to provide this need. Alternatively, people may define friendship by its ability to provide emotional intimacy (R.G. Adams, Blieszner, & de Vries, 2000; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Oliner, 1998; Parks & Floyd, 1995). This is particularly true to the extent that emotional intimacy provides opportunities for independent selves to engage in mutual introspection, disclosure, and affirmation (G. Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, in press; O'Conner, 1998; Oliner, 1998; Wright, 1978). In contrast, to the extent that worlds of relational interdependence are associated with greater potential for conflict, people in West African settings may be especially wary of revealing personal information, even to friends (Shaw, 2000). This suggests the following hypotheses.

H8: *People in North American settings will be more likely than people in West African settings to regard emotional support as a defining feature of friendship.*

H9: *People in North American settings will be more likely than people in West African settings to regard companionship as a defining feature of friendship.*

H10: *People in North American settings will be more likely than people in West African settings to regard self-disclosure as a defining feature of friendship.*

H11: *People in North American settings will be more likely than people in West African settings to regard self-expansion as a defining feature of friendship.*

#### *The present study*

To investigate the association between different constructions of reality and differences in the experience of friendship, we conducted a study that compared interdependence-affording settings in the West African country of Ghana with an especially independence-affording, North American setting: the San Francisco Bay Area (California, U.S.A.). Although a primary purpose of the study was to investigate the hypotheses derived in the previous section, an equally important purpose was to investigate the constructions of reality that underlie friendship experience in these settings. For this reason, we used an interview procedure. The benefit of this procedure was an open-ended format that elicited more material from participants than a written questionnaire, and therefore held the potential to reveal more about the implicit constructions that underlie friendship experience. For the same reason, we interviewed roughly half of the participants in each national setting in groups of two to three people. Again, the rationale was to create an interactive exchange that would elicit more discussion about local constructions than would interviews with a lone participant (cf. Morgan, 1996).

Although cross-national differences were our primary interest, we included two

factors, gender and university student status, that are also likely to influence friendship. For example, research in Western settings has noted that men tend to report a larger network of friends, but that the role of emotional intimacy is higher in women's friendships (Wright, 1982). Similarly, to the extent that university students inhabit worlds that tend to be younger, more highly educated, and characterized by greater mobility than the worlds that nonstudents inhabit, we anticipate that they will be more likely to display patterns of friendship associated with independent constructions of self and social reality (Aguilar, 1999; Markus et al., 2003). We emphasize, however, that our primary purpose for including these factors was not to test effects of gender and student status, but to ensure that differences we interpreted as cross-national differences were not an artifact of unequal gender and student ratios across national settings.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 100 adults (50 Ghanaians, 50 Americans), recruited alone or in naturally occurring groups two to three people. They included (a) nonstudent adults in the San Francisco Bay Area (15 men, 14 women); (b) students at Stanford University, located in the San Francisco Bay Area (7 men, 14 women); (c) nonstudent adults in Accra, the capital city of Ghana (6 men, 4 women); (d) students at the University of Ghana, located in metropolitan Accra (6 men, 4 women); (e) nonstudent adults in the predominantly rural Upper East Region (UER) of northern Ghana (13 men, 8 women); and (f) students at the Navrongo campus of the University for Development Studies, located in the UER (7 men, 2 women). Ghanaian participants were from African ethnic backgrounds. American participants were from European ethnic backgrounds.

### *Interview items and procedure*

Interviewers approached potential participants in public spaces (i.e., markets, parks, transportation centers, and student unions). To determine potential participants, interviewers randomly selected a number,  $n$ , and then invited every  $n$ th person or group they encountered to participate in the study. More than 90% of individuals who were approached agreed to participate.

The first two items required participants to indicate how many friends they had and whether they had more or fewer friends than others around them. The second item asked participants to define *friend* (i.e., "To you, what is a friend?"). The last two items asked participants to indicate what they would think about a hypothetical person, of the same gender as the participant, who claimed to have (a) "no friends" and (b) "many friends—like 50."

*Interviewers.* One of four interviewers (the first author and three research assistants) conducted the interviews, all of which took place in English (which is the official language of Ghana). In order to test for effects of interviewer, we included Interviewer as a factor in initial loglinear analyses of all variables. These tests revealed no differences due to interviewer.

*Interview type.* Fifty-one participants were interviewed individually (22 Ghanaians and 29 Americans) and 49 participants were interviewed in groups (28 Ghanaians and 21 Americans). To discount the possibility that subsequently observed cross-national differences were an artifact of unequal proportions of each interview type, we included Interview type as a factor in initial analyses of all variables and found no effects of interview type and no Nation  $\times$  Interview type associations. Although one drawback of group interviews is the potential nonindependence of participant-level observations and the corresponding question of appropriate unit of analysis, we found that results did not change as a function of whether we conducted analyses at the level of session or

individual participant. Accordingly, we decided to report results at the participant level, in part for ease of presentation, but also because people within group interviews often expressed contradictory ideas that were difficult to code at session level.

#### *Coding scheme and procedure*

Prior to reading interview transcripts, we developed a set of coding items designed to test our 11 hypotheses. This coding items included four groups of binary items that coders completed after reading each participant's open-ended responses. The first group referred specifically to the first two interview items. Coders indicated whether or not participants reported having five or more friends and claimed to have fewer friends than others around them. The second group referred to the entire interview. After reading participants' open-ended responses, coders indicated whether or not participants mentioned different levels of friends, loneliness, and caution. The third group referred specifically to the interview items about hypothetical people who

reported no friends or many friends. Coders indicated whether or not participants' open-ended responses to these items included expressions of (a) pity and (b) accusation toward a person with no friends and (c) the opinion that a person with many friends is foolish. The fourth group referred specifically to the interview item about defining features of friendship. Coders indicated whether or not participants' open-ended responses to this item mentioned practical help, emotional support, companionship, disclosure, and self-expansion. In addition to these a priori items, we added two items to the fourth group, advice and trust, that coders suggested after an initial reading of 15 interview transcripts. For a summary and description of coding items, see Table 1.

Two Stanford students (an African-American woman and a European-American woman) applied the final coding scheme to all transcripts to yield the results reported below. Both coders were unaware of the hypotheses of the study, and no indication of gender, nationality, or student status appeared on the transcripts. Coding items consisted of binary judgments about the

**Table 1.** *Description of interview codes and tests of cross-national differences*

Coding category	Description	Ghanaian respondents (%)	American respondents (%)
How many friends	Reports more than 5 friends	64	82*
Fewer than others	Claims fewer friends than others	56	45
Levels of friends	Good, best, or close friends	28	52**
Loneliness	Loneliness, being alone	0	10**
Caution	Caution or suspicion about friends	44	4****
Foolish	<i>Many friends</i> target is foolish or naïve.	29	4**
Pity	<i>No friends</i> target is sad or regrettable.	8	59****
Accusation	<i>No friends</i> target is bad or wrong.	67	24****
Help	Material and practical support	56	12****
Support	Emotional support	32	52
Disclosure	Share secrets, ideas, information	48	28
Companionship	Share interests, activities, time, fun	38	46
Self-expansion	Provide self-enhancement, affirmation	8	6
Advice	Give guidance, correction, warning	22	0****
Trust	Trust, respect	8	36***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

presence or absence of a concept. The percentage agreement between the two coders, determined by calculating the number of times the two coders made the same judgment over all 15 binary items and all 100 interviews, was 83%. In the remaining cases, we used judgments of a third coder (a Ghanaian woman attending the University of Kansas) to resolve disagreements.

## Results

Our hypotheses concerned cross-national differences in the construction and experience of friendship. For a more qualitative analysis of interview responses with respect to themes that extend beyond the present hypotheses, see Adams (2000).

To test for cross-national differences while controlling for the potential effects of gender and student status, we conducted loglinear analyses of each coding item with nation, gender, and student status as categorical predictors of the binary outcome. In loglinear analysis, partial associations between combinations of predictors and the binary outcome variable are analogous to main effects and interactions in factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a continuous outcome variable (Marascuilo & Busk, 1987). For a summary of results for tests of cross-national differences, see the two rightmost columns of Table 1. Due to the large number of tests, we set a conservative alpha level of .01 for reporting effects. Variation in number of subjects from analysis to analysis indicates cases of missing values.

### *Size of friend network*

Because many participants gave nonnumerical responses (e.g., "a lot") to the item asking how many friends they had, we divided cases into two groups: participants who reported fewer than five friends and participants who reported five or more friends (including those who responded "a lot"). In support of our first hypothesis (H1) and consistent with results of questionnaire research (G. Adams, 2000) the percentage of people in the *many friends*

group was greater among American participants (82%) than Ghanaian participants (64%). Loglinear analysis indicated that the corresponding partial association of Nation  $\times$  Number was marginally significant using the conservative alpha level of .01,  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 4.25, p < .05$ .

Besides cross-national differences, loglinear analysis revealed a significant partial association of Student  $\times$  Number,  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 13.58, p < .001$ . Regardless of national setting, the percentage of participants in the *many friends* group was higher among students (90%) than nonstudents (62%). The analysis also revealed a significant partial association with student status for the related item regarding comparisons of self and other,  $\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 16.36, p < .001$ . Regardless of national setting, nonstudents (68%) were more likely than students (25%) to claim to have fewer friends than others around them. The predicted effect of nation for this item was not significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 1.49, p = .22$ .

Stronger evidence of predicted, cross-national differences came from a more indirect measure. If American participants have a larger friend network than Ghanaian participants, then they should be more likely to invoke concepts like *good* or *best* friends to distinguish between different levels of friendship (Wierzbicka, 1997). As a test of this hypothesis, coders judged whether or not each participant explicitly invoked different levels of friendship. Loglinear analysis of the resulting proportions revealed a cross-national difference in the form of a significant partial association between Nation and Levels,  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 6.48, p < .01$ . As predicted, the percentage of participants who mentioned different levels of friendship, thus implying a large friend network, was greater among American participants (52%) than Ghanaian participants (28%).

### *Motivations for friendship*

Given the experience of existential solitude associated with worlds of atomistic independence, our second hypothesis (H2)



was that, even though American participants might indicate a larger friendship network, they would still be more likely than Ghanaian participants to mention the concept of loneliness. Indeed, the percentage of participants who spontaneously mentioned loneliness was higher among American participants (10%) than Ghanaian participants (0%). Loglinear analysis indicated that the corresponding partial association of Nation  $\times$  Loneliness was significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 5.97, p < .01$ . However, significance tests must be interpreted with caution in this case due to small expected frequencies for mentions of loneliness.

As a measure of the tendency to regard friendship with caution, coders judged whether or not each participant spontaneously advocated caution toward friends at some point in the interview. Our third hypothesis (H3) was that the percentage of participants who mentioned caution would be higher in Ghanaian settings than in American settings. Loglinear analysis confirmed this prediction in the form of a significant partial association of Nation  $\times$  Caution,  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 24.03, p < .0001$ . The percentage of participants who advocated caution toward friends was greater in Ghanaian settings (44%) than in American settings (4%).

An additional measure of suspicious caution toward friendship came from the item about a hypothetical person who claimed many friends. Coders judged whether or not each participant regarded this *many friends* target as foolish or naive. Loglinear analysis of the resulting proportions indicated a cross-national difference in the form of a significant partial association of Nation  $\times$  Foolish,  $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 10.51, p < .01$ . As predicted by our fourth hypothesis (H4), the percentage of participants who regarded the *many friends* target as foolish or naive was greater in Ghanaian settings (29%) than in American settings (4%).

#### *Evaluation of a person who has no friends*

Another clue to local experience of friendship emerges from participants' evaluations of a hypothetical person who claims to have

no friends. To evaluate our fifth hypothesis (H5), coders judged whether or not participants regarded the *no friends* person with pity. To evaluate our sixth hypothesis (H6), coders judged whether or not participants regarded the person with accusation. In both cases loglinear analyses confirmed only the predicted, cross-national differences in the form of significant partial associations of Nation  $\times$  Pity,  $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 22.46, p < .0001$ , and Nation  $\times$  Accuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 89) = 16.58, p < .0001$ . The percentage of participants who expressed pity was greater in American (59%) than Ghanaian settings (8%), but the percentage of participants who expressed accusation was greater in Ghanaian (67%) than American settings (24%).

Results for pity are consistent with the theory that constructions of reality in American settings afford an experience of friendship as the active creation of inherently independent selves. These constructions foster the interpretation that the *no friends* person wants friends but is unable to make them. As one American participant put it, "I think that is really, really sad. To have a friend, you need to be a friend. So this person must not know how to be a friend."

In contrast, results for accusation are consistent with the theory that constructions of reality in Ghanaian settings readily afford the experience of relational connection. One does not need to make friends by creating connection; instead, one can choose friends from among those connections that are readily afforded by the social world. The issue of accusation arises to the extent that some (but not all) Ghanaian participants consider people selfish if they decide not to choose a friend. As one Ghanaian participant put it, "By all means, you can get at least one. So when she says that she doesn't have friends, then she is not a human being." The assumption underlying such reactions is that the *no friends* person deliberately rejects friends.

#### *Defining features of friendship*

Several of our hypotheses concerned the qualities that participants mentioned as

defining features of friendship. Across national settings, the most frequently mentioned features were *companionship* (42%), defined as sharing interests, activities good times, and fun; *disclosure* (38%), defined as sharing secrets, ideas, or information; and two different categories of social support: *support* (42%), which included emotional aspects and *help* (34%), which included material or practical aspects. Less frequent features were *trust* (22%), defined as trust and respect; *advice* (11%), including guidance, correction, or warning; and *self-expansion* (7%), defined as friendship contributing to an enhanced or expanded sense of self.

*Practical support.* Given the relative poverty and emphasis on relationship obligation in West African worlds, our seventh hypothesis (H7) was that a greater percentage of Ghanaian participants than American participants would cite practical aspects of support as defining features of friendship. Loglinear analysis of coders' judgments confirmed this prediction in the form of a significant partial association of Nation  $\times$  Help,  $\chi^2(1, N=100)=20.74$ ,  $p<.0001$ . The percentage of participants who mentioned practical support was greater in Ghanaian settings (56%) than American settings (12%). As one Ghanaian participant put it, "A friend is a person you are close to and when you visit him, he will help solve your problem." Another Ghanaian participant said, "A friend is someone who is ready to help you, whether it is financially or socially, where there is a need. That's what I think is most important about a friend."

A similar result emerged for a specific type of practical support, *advice*. The percentage of participants who mentioned advice as a defining feature of friendship was greater in Ghanaian settings (22%) than in American settings (0%). Loglinear analysis confirmed that the partial association of Nation  $\times$  Advice was reliable,  $\chi^2(1, N=100)=16.13$ ,  $p<.0001$ .

*Emotional intimacy.* In contrast, based on the association of atomistic independence

with emotional expression and intimate disclosure (O'Conner, 1998; Oliner, 1998), our eighth (H8) and tenth (H10) hypotheses were that greater percentages of participants in American settings than in Ghanaian settings would mention emotional support and self-disclosure as defining features of friendship. In the words of an American participant, "A friend is someone who knows you well and is supportive. They understand and respect who you are, even during your worst moments. I feel like I can cry in front of a friend."

Results revealed qualified support for these predictions. First, loglinear analysis of coders' judgments about emotional support revealed a marginally significant partial association of Nation  $\times$  Student  $\times$  Support (corresponding to a Nation  $\times$  Student interaction in ANOVA terms),  $\chi^2(1, N=100)=5.10$ ,  $p<.05$ . Follow-up analyses revealed the predicted cross-national difference, but only in the case of nonstudents. Only 9% of nonstudents in Ghanaian settings mentioned emotional aspects of support, compared to 55% of nonstudents in American settings,  $\chi^2(1, N=60)=8.51$ ,  $p<.01$ . Respective percentages for students were 53% and 48%.

Likewise, loglinear analysis for the disclosure category revealed a significant partial association of Nation  $\times$  Student  $\times$  Disclosure (corresponding to a Nation  $\times$  Student interaction in ANOVA terms),  $\chi^2(1, N=100)=10.64$ ,  $p<.01$ . Follow-up analyses revealed a cross-national difference that was restricted to students; however, this difference was in the opposite direction from that predicted. The percentage of participants who mentioned sharing of secrets, ideas, or information was greater among Ghanaian students (74%) than Stanford students (19%),  $\chi^2(1, N=40)=12.0$ ,  $p<.01$ . Respective percentages for nonstudents were intermediate between these extremes (35% for Ghanaian settings and 32% for American settings). Further examination revealed that this pattern was largely due to the tendency of Ghanaian students to use the phrase *share ideas*, and that the connotations of this

phrase were less about self-disclosure than advice or informational aspects of support (i.e., to share ideas about opportunities). Consequently, results for this item did not address the hypothesis about self-disclosure in the way that we had anticipated.

*Companionship.* Related to the hypothesis about loneliness (H2), our ninth hypothesis (H9) was that American participants would be more likely than Ghanaian participants to mention companionship as a feature of friendship. Loglinear analysis revealed a marginally significant partial association of Nation  $\times$  Gender  $\times$  Companionship (corresponding to a Nation  $\times$  Gender interaction in ANOVA terms),  $\chi^2(1, N=100)=4.62$ ,  $p < .05$ . Follow-up analyses revealed a marginal cross-national difference, but only among women. The percentage of women who mentioned companionship was smaller in Ghanaian settings (17%) than in American settings (50%),  $\chi^2(1, N=46)=5.2$ ,  $p < .05$ . Corresponding percentages for men were 50% and 41%.

*Self-expansion.* The predicted, cross-national difference for self-expansion (H11) was not significant,  $\chi^2(1, N=100)=0.05$ ,  $p = .83$ . Few participants in either setting indicated it as a defining feature of friendship.

*Trust.* In addition to hypothesized differences, we observed a partial association of Nation  $\times$  Trust. The percentage of participants who mentioned trust or respect was greater in American settings (36%) than in Ghanaian settings (8%),  $\chi^2(1, N=100)=12.72$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

As an exploration of the cultural grounding of friendship, the present study had two main purposes. The first purpose, reflected in the quantitative analyses described in previous sections, was to test hypotheses about cross-national differences in friendship. The second purpose, reflected in the

choice of interview method and decision to include group interviews, was to probe more deeply into the implicit constructions of reality that underlie friendship experience.

### *Cross-national difference in friendship experience*

Regarding the first purpose, results provided support for nearly all of our hypotheses about cross-national differences. As predicted, Ghanaian participants were more likely than American participants to advocate caution toward friends, to regard a person who has many friends as foolish, and to express accusation toward a person who has no friends. In addition, resonating with an emphasis on obligation in friendship, Ghanaian participants were more likely than American participants to mention practical assistance and advice as defining features of friendship. In contrast, American participants were more likely than Ghanaian participants to report a large number of friends (a marginally reliable difference given our conservative criterion), to distinguish between different levels of friends, to mention loneliness, and to express pity toward a person who has no friends.

We also observed qualified support for the predictions that American participants would be more likely than Ghanaian participants to mention companionship and emotional support as defining features of friendship. In the former case, the cross-national difference was limited to women; Ghanaian women were less likely than all other participants to mention companionship. In the latter case, the cross-national difference was limited to nonstudents; Ghanaian nonstudents were less likely than all other participants to mention emotional support.

We did not specifically predict these interactions, but they are consistent with the theoretical framework that underlies our other predictions. We propose that patterns related to the experience of friendship as voluntary association, like having a large

friend network or expressing relatively little caution about friends, are the products of worlds where atomistic-independent constructions of reality are prominent. These include not only North American settings, but also highly educated (Markus et al., 2003), male-dominated (Cross & Madson, 1997), middle-class (Allan, 1977; Paine, 1969), or young adult (R. G. Adams et al., 2000) worlds. Although many West African worlds afford the experience of relational interdependence, there are cultural spaces within West African worlds, such as male-dominated (Peil, 1983) or university settings (cf. Aguilar, 1999), that afford a greater experience of atomistic independence. To the extent that people inhabit atomistic-independent spaces within West African worlds, they will begin to acquire patterns of friendship that resemble North American patterns. Results of the present study are consistent with this account. Men were more likely than women in Ghanaian settings to mention companionship as a defining feature of friendship. Likewise, students were more likely than nonstudents in Ghanaian settings to mention emotional support.

Finally, results indicated that Ghanaian participants were less likely than American participants to mention trust as a defining feature of friendship. Although not explicitly predicted, this pattern is consistent with the idea that trust is somewhat irrelevant to Ghanaian constructions of friendship. Rather than judge friendship according to the presence or absence of trust, local ideology in many Ghanaian settings advocates an attitude of protective distrust that finds expression in public representations like truck slogans that proclaim *Beware of Friends* (Kyei & Schreckengbach, 1975).

#### *Participants' reasons for caution about friends*

Regarding the second purpose of the study, a primary strength of the interview procedure is its ability to elicit qualitative data that can offer clues to local constructions of

reality. Of particular interest in the present study were the reasons Ghanaian participants offered for suspicious caution toward friends. Many Ghanaian participants suggested that even good friends bring problems if they impose too many demands or distract resources from business or family. However, most participants who expressed caution warned about *bad friends*. Bad friends can cause trouble directly by revealing secrets or other acts of betrayal. Bad friends can cause trouble less directly by leading a person astray or damaging one's reputation. As one participant remarked, "We have a popular saying, 'Bad friends cost good money.' Friends can either influence you to do the things that you don't want to do, or can even push you to do the wrong thing against your will."

#### *Limitations and future directions*

*Interview method.* The open-ended, interview format may be one of the strengths of the present study, but it also constitutes one of its limitations. Although we designed the interview items to elicit information relevant to our hypotheses, spontaneous responses did not always provide this information. More direct tests of our hypotheses require more controlled procedures that ask questions about local constructions in a more explicit way and limit participants' responses to a few, investigator-designed options. For example, in our ongoing research we experimentally manipulate local constructions of reality and then observe the effect of this manipulation on both trait ratings of a person who advocates caution toward friends and importance ratings of various types of social support (e.g., material, practical, and emotional; cf. G. Adams et al., in press).

Nevertheless, we see the present project as a valuable step in a larger program of research on the cultural grounding of friendship. From this perspective, it is important to supplement tightly controlled tests with more descriptive research, like the present study, that attempts to articulate the constructions of reality, "stimulus fields" (Kelley, 1997), or worlds of independence

and interdependence that underlie relationship experience in different settings.

*Sampling issues.* Another potential limitation of the study concerns the nature of the samples. Because participants did not constitute probability samples of relevant populations, one should exercise caution before extrapolating results to those larger populations. However, the purpose of the present study was not definitive description of timeless, bounded entities (G. Adams & Markus, 2001). Instead, the purpose was to outline different constructions of self and social reality, whatever the specific boundaries of those patterns, and then consider their implications for the construction and experience of friendship. From this perspective, the focus of the study is not West African, North American, Ghanaian, or American cultures. Instead the focus is the cultural patterns that are prominent in geographic spaces associated with those labels.

Although some of these patterns may arise from forces that are typically regarded as *cultural*, others may arise from environmental circumstances, like urban residence or situations of poverty, that are often referred to as *structural*. It is possible that many results of the present study—like the tendency for Ghanaian participants to mention material and practical support more frequently than American participants, or the tendency for Ghanaian nonstudents to mention emotional support less frequently than all other participants—reflect the relative poverty of Ghanaian settings. Although this possibility remains a topic for future research, we emphasize the following point. Even if observed patterns have their ultimate source in economic differences, they can still be considered cultural to the extent that they do not derive from individual socioeconomic status but from shared conceptual realities shaped by environments of poverty and abundance.

*Sample size.* A third limitation of the study is sample size. Our sample was not large enough to adequately test effects of

gender, student status, or the interaction of these factors with national setting. Even so, the study did reveal effects of student status on the size of friendship networks. Although these differences were not the empirical focus of the present paper, they are compatible with its theoretical focus. To the extent that students inhabit cultural worlds that promote the experience of atomistic independence (Greenfield, 1994), we would expect them to report a large network of friends. If we had conducted a larger project that focused on student status, we might have found even more evidence of cultural differences between student and nonstudent settings.

Similarly, a future study that includes more balanced gender ratios is likely to find greater evidence than we did in the present study of gender differences in friendship. Equally important, such a study is likely to reveal that gender differences in friendship vary across cultural and historical settings. To the extent that the everyday worlds of men and women differ more in many West African settings than in contemporary North American settings, one might expect greater evidence of gender differences in the former than the latter. Consistent with this reasoning, we observed that women and men in Ghanaian settings differed in the extent to which they mentioned companionship as a defining feature of friendship; in contrast, there was no such difference between women and men in American settings.

We emphasize again that our rationale for including gender as a factor was not to test hypotheses about gender, but to ensure that cross-national differences we did observe were independent of gender. Given our small sample, it would be inappropriate to interpret our results as evidence against gender differences. Instead, the more appropriate interpretation concerns the strength of the cross-national differences that we did observe, despite the small sample size.

*Cross-national similarities.* A final limitation of the study is an emphasis on cross-national differences and a corresponding

neglect of cross-national similarities. At a general level, the fact that people in diverse settings understand and respond to similar questions about friends suggests that relationship forms like *friendship* are similar across cultural worlds. For example, participants across national settings distinguished between relatively obligatory connections of kinship and relatively optional connections of friendship, even if their responses also implied a cross-national difference in the place of obligation in friendship. So although the present study tests hypotheses about cross-national differences, it does not deny the possibility of cross-national similarities in friendship. Rather than debate the extent of cross-cultural difference or similarity, the point of the study is to illuminate how friendship in any setting is grounded in particular constructions of self and social reality.

#### *Conclusion: The cultural grounding of friendship*

When American audiences learn about this research, they typically wonder why it is that Ghanaian participants express so much caution about friends. Results of the present study suggest that the prominence of suspicious caution toward friendship is not a pathological distortion of reality in general; instead, it reflects the particular realities of relational interdependence that are prominent in many West African worlds. These realities promote construc-

tions of friendship that emphasize obligation and make it difficult for people to extricate themselves from connections that turn negative. Given these realities, it makes sense to be wary of friends and to limit one's friendships to a well-selected few.

The problem with an exclusive focus on suspicious caution in West African settings becomes clear when we discuss this research with West African audiences. Rather than ask why it is that people express so much caution about friends, people often wonder why it is that American participants express so little caution. Results of the present study suggest that the relative absence of caution about friends is not the default, natural human tendency; instead, it reflects the particular realities of atomistic independence that are prominent in many North American worlds. These realities afford relatively open approaches to friendship that de-emphasize obligation and make it relatively easy to escape problem connections.

In this way, the present study helps to make visible the cultural grounding of relationship not just in West African settings, but also in the middle-class, North American settings for which the process is typically invisible. Careful attention to this process helps to explain not only why it makes sense in some worlds to "beware of friends" (Kyei & Schreckenbach, 1975), but also why it makes sense in other worlds to be less cautious about friends.

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