A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Friendship Research

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Research on friendship has been a concern of developmental psychology during the past three decades. My discussion of this topic will be focused on reasoning about friendship as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that must be studied in cultural and interdisciplinary context.

Friendship: Development in a Historical Perspective

Friendship is a relationship that has existed across historical times in all types of societies. In developmental psychology, Piaget’s classical distinction between voluntary and symmetrical peer- and friendship relationships and the asymmetrical and—due to its biological nature—compulsory parent–child relationship is still valid. However, given the multiplicity of friendship conceptions and functions that friendship has served in different societies, only core aspects of the distinction between these two types of relationships seem to be universally valid while others vary across time and societies (Beer, 2001; Pahl, 2000). Far from being voluntary, friendships in the past were at times highly regulated, contained an asymmetrical structure or were constituted as a blood relationship resembling kinship. On the other hand, historical changes have brought about in the Western world more symmetrical parent–child relationships and modalities of interaction that were traditionally reserved as a characteristic of friendship. This is the reason why some researchers have voiced doubts about the idealization of the two types of relationships. A better understanding of the complex interconnections between friendship and societal conditions therefore seems necessary.

Friendship: Development in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Many studies of children’s understanding of friendship expectations and conceptions have documented age-related regularities in the course of development. However, most of these studies have been performed in Western countries. Therefore it is a question for future research to find out what core characteristics of friendship are and what varies in different societies.

Given the numerous studies on moral development from a cross-cultural perspective, the neglect of friendship as a topic of cross-cultural research is astonishing. While there are cultural similarities in the concept of friendship in different societies, there are also cultural differences in the meaning and function of friendship (Krappmann, 1996). We have but little knowledge of the meaning of friendship in non-Western industrialized societies and in more traditional societies. Given that societies are not homogeneous, the definition of friendship varies further within societies and according to gender. It seems that only in (modern) Western societies close friendship is a personal relationship mostly free from societal influence. The question can be raised whether the notion of emotional intimacy, that is so characteristic especially for adolescent friendships in Western cultures, is typical for other types of societies as well. In subsistence economies, where the distribution of resources is not guaranteed, the help of others is needed and friendships are more instrumentally oriented towards material exchange (Beer, 2001). Similarly, it is a question whether, or how, the concept of relationship autonomy (Selman, 1980) comes to be established in less individualistic Asian societies (Keller, 2004).

A Developmental and Cross-Cultural Research Project

My colleagues and I have studied the development of expectations in parent–child and friendship relationships in cultural context. The same age groups from childhood (7 and 9 years) to adolescence (12 and 15 years) and young adulthood (19 years) were interviewed individually in different Western societies and in China, using cross-sectional (former West- and East Germany, Russia, USA, Japan), longitudinal (Iceland) and both cross-sectional and longitudinal (China) comparisons (Keller, 1996, 2003; Keller, Edelstein, Schmid, Fang & Fang, 1998). We assessed friendship conceptions in general and in reasoning about a morally relevant friendship dilemma that could be interpreted in different ways. A protagonist (self) must decide whether to keep a promise to
a best friend or to accept an interesting invitation from a third child who is new in class (Selman, 1980). Participants had to define the problem, reason about a choice and its alternative, about the consequences of choices for self and others, and about strategies to compensate for (negative) consequences.

Our findings reveal a complex interaction of development, domain and content of reasoning and culture. Both Western and Chinese participants used prototypical stage-related arguments referring to playing and sharing at the first level, helping and supporting at the second level, trust and intimacy at the third level, and autonomy and integration of friendship in a wider system of relationships at level four. However, culture influenced the developmental dynamics in the emergence of levels in different topics of general and situation-specific reasoning (Keller, 2003; Keller & Wood, 1989), as well as content aspects of reasoning in the friendship dilemma: While there are many similarities in the meaning and function of friendship, different societal conditions also give rise to different saliencies of certain aspects of friendship and of the dilemma-situation. Consistent with our knowledge of Chinese culture and socialization (Bond, 1996), Chinese participants emphasized the moral quality of close friendship and the connection of friendship and society more than Western participants did and were more altruistic towards the third person. Western participants focused predominantly on interaction qualities and promise-keeping and, in particular, in late adolescence on relationship intimacy (Keller, 2004, Keller et al., 1998).

Interestingly, cultural differences in the content of social and moral reasoning about choices were greater during childhood than in adolescence where close friendship was equally important for Western and Chinese adolescents. This greater similarity may be due to universal biological and social factors in puberty. The time-lagged longitudinal comparison in China documents that societal changes and radical modernization processes during the past two decades have indeed influenced the interpretation of the action dilemma (Keller, Edelstein, Gummerum, Fang & Fang, 2003). While Chinese participants in the cross-sectional study were more altruistic compared to the Western participants, the longitudinally assessed participants became more similar to Western participants in their emphasis on personal hedonistic interests. Overall, these findings reveal direct societal influence on personal relationships. A task of future research is to further disentangle the complex relationship between development, culture and historical time.

Friendship and Moral Development in a Cultural Perspective

Friendship has frequently been characterized as a special moral relationship that fosters moral goodness in persons (Blum, 1980; Bukowski & Sippola, 1996). It is seen as a special relationship in which children come to understand and to emotionally share the perspective of another person. Adolescence in particular is seen as an important phase in which a moral self is established (Keller, 2004; Keller & Edelstein, 1991; Youniss, 1980).

The fact that children become increasingly more sensitive to moral aspects of friendship has mostly been treated as a developmental phenomenon. But as our own and other research in moral development has shown (Keller, 2004), there are individual and cultural differences in sensitivity to the moral aspects of relationships and situations. This is particularly important when complex situations have to be interpreted, and choices have to be made in situations that involve conflicting motives, such as selfish or other-oriented motives. This raises questions about the nature of the relationship between general knowledge about friendship expectations (friendship ideology) and the situation-specific and motivated use of this knowledge in situations of choice or moral conflict. A person may have a conception of friendship—how it ought to be—and still act differently in a specific situation. Friendship research may face the same problems here that have troubled research on moral development and moral action.

While being morally sensitive in friendship persons may be morally insensitive to persons outside their group of close relationships. We know little about friendship in authoritarian groups, such as right wing (Edelstein, in press) or child soldier groups, in which obedience to rigidly defined group norms may have little in common with the personalized symmetrical relationship structures that are assumed to foster moral development. We also have to understand more how friendships can become deviant from moral standards, what provides protection against deviant norms and how persons acquire the capacity to resist such deviation. In Kohlberg’s (1984) theory of moral development the integration of the self in close relationships represented a developmental stage that must be superseded in order to establish a morality of equal rights. It may be a task of future research to integrate the morality of friendship with a universal morality that is at the heart of the concept of human rights and a concept of personal autonomy that characterizes a moral self (Blasi, 1993).
**Conclusion**
Recently, a further discipline has entered the field of friendship research. Studies with primates have revealed reciprocity behavior that is similar to friendship interactions. It will be a fascinating task to explore similarities and differences in humans and primates relationships (Silk, in press).

My comments should have made it clear that friendship is a relationship that results from both social and personal conditions. In order to understand friendship it must be studied as a diverse and multifaceted phenomenon among psychologists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists and even biologists.

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**References**
