

**A FLUENCY OF FEELING**  
**Exploring Cultural and Individual Differences (and Similarities)**  
**Related to Skilled Emotional Support**

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The present study presents a multilevel analysis of cultural level and individual level differences in the evaluation of emotional support message strategies and interactive support goals. This is done in an effort to distinguish cultural norms regarding social support (i.e., recognizing what counts as an effective message) from a sense of cultural efficacy in social support (i.e., the motivation to provide effective support) and furthermore, to link social support efficacy to individual differences associated with mental well-being and effective emotional management. Analyses indicate that evaluations of message sensitivity are predicted by cultural differences but not individual differences. In contrast, valuing specific interactive support goals was associated both with differences in distinction and belonging and the interaction between individual and cultural differences. The pattern of findings supports the conceptual distinctions between culturally appropriate and culturally efficacious dimensions of emotional support.

**Keywords:** social support; cultural differences; individual differences

**For the past 20 years,** a growing body of research has examined the interplay between culture, psychological processes, and emotion. This tri-part relationship is claimed to have a pronounced effect on a variety of interpersonal and emotional processes, particularly in comparisons of East Asian collectivist cultures with Western European and North American individualist cultures.

Social support is an important domain of communication that receives relatively little attention in cross-cultural research. Emotional support is widely regarded as one of the most important provisions of interpersonal relationships (Gottlieb & Wagner, 1991; Wills, 1991). Accumulating evidence strongly suggests that emotional support not only makes people feel better, but it can also make them physically and emotionally healthier (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 1997). At the same time, considerable research indicates that there are noteworthy cultural differences in a broad range of communication practices and behaviors (Gudykunst et al., 1996). To date, however,

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little research has sought to determine whether there are cultural differences in what counts as sensitive and helpful emotional support (see Dilworth-Anderson & Marshall, 1996).

With this in mind, the present study presents a multilevel analysis of cultural differences (American vs. Chinese) and individual differences (self and other orientation) in evaluations of emotional support strategies and support goals. This is done in an effort to distinguish between components of social support that merely reflect a sense of cultural appropriateness, from components that reflect a sense of cultural efficacy to examinations of how cultural and individual differences (and their interaction) predict evaluations of specific support goals and support message strategies. We begin by reviewing literature that focuses on culture and emotion.

#### DIFFERENCES IN EMOTIONAL DISTRESS WITHIN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

Cultural value systems have profound implications for the ways in which emotions are constituted, experienced, expressed, and managed (Aune & Aune, 1995; Mesquita, 2001; Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). In individualist cultures such as the United States, the achievement of personal goals and the expression of a differentiated, independent self are valued (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Triandis, 1994). Thus, among North Americans, the experience of distress centers on events that block individual attributes such as goals, needs, desires, or abilities (Mesquita, 2001). For example, compared to the Mainland Chinese, Euro-Americans reported more intense feelings of frustration and disappointment in the aftermath of a personal failure. (Mortenson, 2006). In terms of social context, Euro-Americans commonly view emotional distress as something to be examined, analyzed, scrutinized, and explicitly explored in discourse with friends and family (Burlison & Mortenson, 2003). Consistent with this claim, Euro-Americans rated expressing sadness and fear and employing direct forms of communication such as crying or talking about one's feelings in presence of family and friends as more appropriate than did the Chinese (Mortenson, 2001). Euro-Americans also rated seeking social support as a more appropriate form of coping with emotional distress than the Chinese did (Mortenson, 2006).

In contrast, within collectivist cultures such as China, the achievement of group ends, the maintenance of group harmony, and an interdependent, relational self are valued (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Triandis, 1994). Members of East Asian cultures such as China often view an individual's distressed emotional state as disrupting the harmony of the social group (Wellenkamp, 1995) and are inclined to appraise distressing events on social dimensions such as the impact on in-group relationships (Mesquita, 2001). For example, compared to Euro-Americans, the Chinese reported more intense levels of fear in response to hurting a family member's feelings and rated masking and inhibiting sadness and fear in the presence of friends and family as more appropriate ways to manage such emotions (Mortenson, 2001). When coping with emotional distress, the Chinese also rated distracting themselves from their troubles, blaming themselves for becoming emotional and managing problems as more appropriate than did Euro-Americans (Mortenson, 2006).

In terms of emotional support, Chinese and Euro-Americans both show similarities and differences. Both cultural groups preferred emotionally sensitive message strategies above messages that avoid emotions to comfort a distressed person (Burlison & Mortenson, 2003). However, compared to the Chinese, Euro-Americans put greater value on helping another person work through and discuss his or her upset feelings. In contrast, the Chinese put greater value on distracting an upset person away from his or her feelings and focusing on managing the problem (Burlison & Mortenson, 2003; Mortenson, 2005b). Taken

together, the findings above suggest that compared to the Chinese, Euro-Americans have a greater preference for emotional support that verbally explicates and elaborates on a distressed person's feelings. In contrast, compared to Euro-Americans, Chinese have a stronger preference for support that is directed at solving problems and restoring personal composure in a manner that avoids undue emotionalism. With this in mind, it was hypothesized as follows:

*Hypothesis 1a:* Euro-Americans endorse emotion-focused support messages as more appropriate than the Chinese do.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Euro-Americans endorse emotion-focused interaction goals as more important to pursue when comforting another than the Chinese do.

*Hypothesis 2a:* The Chinese endorse emotion-avoidant support messages as more appropriate than Euro-Americans do.

*Hypothesis 2b:* The Chinese endorse emotion-avoidant interaction goals as more important to pursue when comforting than Euro-Americans do.

*Hypothesis 2c:* The Chinese endorse problem-focused support messages as more appropriate than Euro-Americans do.

*Hypothesis 2d:* The Chinese endorse problem-focused interaction goals as more important to pursue when comforting than Euro-Americans do.

#### **EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN DISTINCTION AND BELONGING**

Becker (1971) contends that universally, human beings buffer themselves against negative emotions through efforts to meet two fundamental and paradoxical motives: the need for distinction and the need for belonging. Distinction involves the need for uniqueness, to stand out as something different and apart. "Psychologically it is the urge for individuation: how do I realize my distinctive gifts, make my own contribution to the world through my own self-expansion?" (p. 152). Belonging entails the need to merge with something larger than oneself: "When one merges with the self-transcending parents or social group he is, in some real sense trying to live in some larger expansiveness of meaning" (p. 152).

Accumulating evidence suggests that meeting these two fundamental motives promotes emotional well-being and is linked to effective emotional management. For example, identifying strongly with a sense of personal uniqueness is connected to both self-esteem and increased mental health (Baumeister, 1993, Taylor & Sheppard, 1998) and serves as a buffer mechanism against anxiety (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997, Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Likewise, findings indicate that a lack of interpersonal belonging may cause anxiety, emotional distress, loneliness, and health problems (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and further increasing commitment and connection in close relationships functions as a coping mechanism for fear and anxiety (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002; Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). A sense of belonging is also linked to problem-based assistance, cooperation, and resource sharing (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985; Kramer & Brewer, 1984).

Cultural theorists increasingly endorse the concept that amid the considerable diversity of cultural values, there nonetheless exist universal aspects of human nature in the form of psychological needs for personal autonomy and interpersonal relatedness (e.g., Inghilleri, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Kagitcibasi (1996) contends that a sense of individual agency and interpersonal relatedness can coexist within the same culture and that people can demonstrate both orientations at the same time with different groups or with different situational demands. Other research asserts that the self-enhancement motive is robustly present in both U.S. and Japanese cultures, but cultural differences influence its

expression (e.g., Brown & Kobayashi, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Finally, within both U.S. and Chinese cultures, a sense of interdependence was associated with valuing emotionally sensitive forms of comforting (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003) and valuing emotion-focused communication skills in friendships (Mortenson, 2005a). Taken together, the findings described above suggest that people with both a strong sense of personal distinction and a strong sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse the use of emotion-focused social support in Euro-American and Chinese cultures. Furthermore, people with a strong sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse the use of problem-focused social support across both cultural groups.

*Hypothesis 3a:* Individuals that identify strongly with a sense of personal distinction will endorse emotion-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups.

*Hypothesis 3b:* Individuals that identify strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse emotion-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups.

*Hypothesis 4:* Individuals that identify strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse problem-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups.

Emotion-avoidant forms of social support are viewed as effective ways of providing comfort among the Chinese and are valued by people high in interdependence (Mortenson, 2005b). However, Euro-Americans generally see emotion-avoidant support as insensitive and ineffective (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). This leads to the question of whether individuals high in belonging will endorse emotion-avoidant forms of social support in both cultural groups. With these issues in mind, the following research question was posed:

Research Question 1: Do individuals that identify strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging endorse emotion-avoidant forms of social support in both cultural groups?

#### **DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN APPROPRIATE AND SKILLED DIMENSION OF SOCIAL SUPPORT**

With the above review of literature in mind, the analysis that follows is based on two specific arguments regarding the influence of cultural differences and individual differences in distinction and belonging—on evaluations of social support. My first argument contends that cultural differences between the Americans and the Chinese will predict differences in common conceptions or norms for appropriate social support. For example, identifying emotionally sensitive messages as effective forms of support is a pervasive norm in the United States (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Burleson & Samter, 1985) that may represent a kind of cultural common sense. Similarly, among the Chinese, messages designed to discourage discussing emotion are consistently viewed as appropriate (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). Given this, it is reasonable to suggest that cultural norms of conduct allow people to distinguish between culturally appropriate and inappropriate support messages.

Although recognizing what counts as appropriate support messages is necessary for providing effective social support, it is not sufficient. A support provider must also be motivated to generate emotionally sensitive messages. Hence, my second argument suggests that a strong identification with distinction and belonging might be linked to differences in the motivation to use culturally appropriate forms of support. Indeed, the likelihood of pursuing specific kinds of support goals has been shown to vary as a function of both cultural and individual differences. Burleson and Mortenson (2003) found that Euro-Americans valued emotion-focused support goals more than the Chinese did, whereas Chinese valued

problem-focused and emotion-avoidant support goals more than Euro-Americans did. Valuing emotion-focused support goals has also been shown to vary as a function of individual differences related to effective communication. Research suggests that both individual differences in emotional expressivity (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002) and cognitive complexity (Wilson, 1995) predicted valuing emotion-focused goals. Finally, in cross-cultural analyses, individual differences in personal distinction predicted valuing emotion-focused goals among Euro-Americans, whereas a sense of emotional connection predicted valuing emotion-avoidant goals among the Chinese (Mortenson, 2005b).

Building on these findings, the analyses here contend that among the Chinese, a heightened sense of belonging should be positively associated with valuing problem-focused and emotion-avoidant support goals among Chinese participants significantly more than among Americans. In contrast, personal distinction should be positively associated with valuing emotion-focused support goals among Americans significantly more than among Chinese. With this in mind, we hypothesized the following:

*Hypothesis 5:* Personal distinction is positively associated with valuing emotion-focused support goals among Euro-Americans significantly more than among the Chinese.

*Hypothesis 6:* Interpersonal belonging is positively associated with valuing problem-focused support goals among the Chinese significantly more than among Euro-Americans.

Research Question 2: Is interpersonal belonging positively associated with valuing emotion-avoidant among Chinese significantly more than Euro-Americans?

Interaction goals are increasingly seen as a proximate influence on communicative behavior (Berger, 1997; Dillard, 1997). Constructs such as value orientations, in contrast, are viewed as more distal influences on message production, exerting their effects, in part, through the particular interaction goals they help to generate (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002; Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). At issue here is whether individual differences influence message evaluation directly or through valuation of support goals. With this in mind, we posed the following research question:

Research Question 3: Do individual differences in distinction and belonging predict evaluations of support message appropriateness?

Finally, extant theory and research imply that valuing interaction goals will predict evaluations of support messages. In short, we expect to replicate such findings through the structural models presented here.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study were 511 students drawn from Euro-American (i.e., North American Caucasian cultural heritage) and Chinese cultural groups. Euro-American participants (128 males and 132 females) were recruited from students attending classes at a large Eastern university in the United States. Euro-American participants were between 18 to 25 years old and U.S. citizens by birth. Chinese participants were 242 college students (120 men and 122 women) drawn from a major Chinese university in Beijing, China. The majority of participants ranged in age from 19 to 24; this group consisted of undergraduates and a small

portion of graduate students. The majority of participants were recruited from college English classes that were required of all undergraduate students regardless of their academic departments in the university. One of the top-tier universities in China, this university recruits students from all major cities and provinces of the country based on a quota system. As such, participants in the study represented Chinese students from a variety of geographical areas across China. Cultural background was operationalized by having participants respond to a series of items that asked them to identify their major cultural and ethnic background (e.g., Euro-American, Latino, Asian, African, etc.). Chinese participants responded to questions that asked them to identify themselves as members of Taiwanese, Hong Kong, or Mainland Chinese nationalities.

## PROCEDURE

All materials for Chinese participants including instruments, consent forms, and debriefing statements were translated into Chinese to assure that participants had a full understanding of their rights and role within the project. After signing an information sheet, participants logged onto an Internet site that contained the measures employed in the present study and a background information questionnaire designed to assess general information about sex, age, college status, major, and cultural background. Euro-American participants also used an Internet site to respond to the survey items used in these analyses.

## MEASURES

Two versions of all measures were used in this study. One version, completed by Euro-American participants, was written in standard American English. A second version completed by Chinese participants was written in Chinese. Linguistic equivalency was obtained via back translation technique. For this project, bilingual Chinese graduate students who were experienced in translating English texts were employed as translators.

*Belonging and distinction.* Prior to the main investigation, we conducted an instrument development study to generate scales for tapping the degree to which participants identified with a sense of interpersonal belonging and individual distinction (Mortenson, 2005b). Based on their face validity, 13 items were adapted from Leung and Kim's (1997) Self-Construal Scales. Five items were selected from the Independence Scale that reflected a valued sense of individual distinction. Eight items were selected from the Interdependence Scale and reworded to reflect a specific sense of interpersonal belonging that references friends and family rather than the group. These items focus on the importance of being accepted among family and friends, keeping them happy, concealing negative emotions from them, and consulting them on decisions. Accordingly, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine the factor structure among items for each variable.

A principal axis analysis with oblique rotation was conducted on the five distinction items resulting in a single-factor solution. Two items were loaded weakly and were dropped; the resulting three-item factor accounted for 58% of the variance. The same procedure was conducted on the eight belonging items. The resulting two-factor structure revealed three items that cross-loaded onto two factors. These items were dropped from analysis, and the resulting two-factor solution accounted for 33% of the total variance (see the appendix for items retained for analysis). The remaining eight items were then subject

**TABLE 1**  
**Fit Statistics for all CFAs and SEM Analyses**

<i>Figure</i>	<i>Comparative Fit Index</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>Confidence Interval</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> <	<i>N</i>
1. CFA belonging, China	0.99	.034	.000 to .057, <i>p</i> close = .58	5.39	4	.25	242
2. CFA belonging, United States	0.98	.042	.000 to .113, <i>p</i> close = .49	5.68	4	.22	237
3. CFA distinction, United States	1.0	.001	.000 to .112, <i>p</i> close = .77	1.72	1	.67	237
4. CFA distinction, China	0.99	.073	.000 to .203, <i>p</i> close = .24	2.28	1	.13	242
5. SEM emotion-focused, United States	1.0	.001	.000 to .054, <i>p</i> close = .93	17.91	19	.5	237
6. SEM emotion-focused, China	0.95	.044	.000 to .076, <i>p</i> close = .57	28.58	19	.07	242
7. SEM avoidance-focused, United States	0.98	.042	.000 to .085, <i>p</i> close = .44	26.98	19	.1	237
8. SEM avoidance-focused, China	0.95	.051	.015 to .082, <i>p</i> close = .43	31.83	19	.03	242
9. SEM problem-focused, United States	1.0	.001	.001 to .063, <i>p</i> close = .86	12.57	19	.16	237
10. SEM problem-focused, China	0.93	.06	.022 to .095, <i>p</i> close = .28	25.02	19	.48	242

NOTE: CFA = Confirmatory Factor Analyses; SEM = Structural Equation Modeling.

to a series confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to estimate the fit and dimensionality of the measurement models in each culture (Burt, 1973, 1976; Herting & Costner, 1985; James, Mulaik, & Brett, 1982).

Initial analyses indicated that the distinction variable did not covary significantly with the two belonging factors. Hence, separate CFAs for distinction and belonging were run for each cultural group (Figures 1 and 2). The CFA confirmed a good fit of the measurement model with the data for both cultural groups (see Table 1 for fit statistics). Because the Belonging Scale contained two factors, the means for each factor were averaged into a single score to be converted into a single observed variable. Reliabilities for each scale are as follows: for Euro-Americans distinction ( $\alpha = .84$ ), belonging ( $\alpha = .73$ ); for Chinese distinction ( $\alpha = .69$ ), belonging ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

#### EVALUATIONS OF THE QUALITY OF SUPPORT MESSAGES

Instruments developed by Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, and Burleson (1997) in their cross-ethnic study of emotional support were adapted for use in the current investigation to obtain participants' evaluations of comforting messages that exhibited emotion focus, problem focus, and emotion avoidance. Participants were presented with a hypothetical situation in which a "close, same-sex friend" was emotionally hurt after being dropped by a long-term dating partner. This situation has been employed in message construction (e.g., Burleson, 1984; Samter, 1992) and message perception studies (e.g., Burleson & Samter, 1985; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999) and has been found to reflect a realistic instance in which

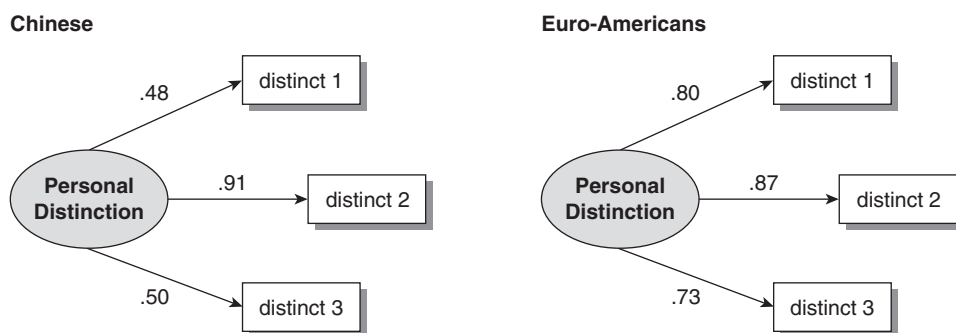


Figure 1: Confirmatory Factor Analyses: Personal Distinction

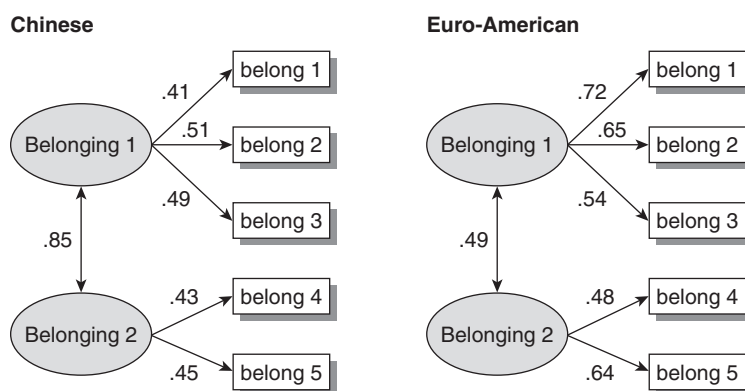


Figure 2: Confirmatory Factor Analyses: Interpersonal Belonging

comforting is called for in both U.S. and Chinese cultures (Burlison & Mortenson, 2003). Furthermore, MacDonald and Leary (2005) suggested that relational rejection is associated with both the concept and linguistic expression of “hurt feelings” in both the United States and in China. The scenario in the current study presented participants with a friend who was hurting over the breakup (see the appendix). Thus, the support context of the present study appears to demonstrate sufficient cross-cultural equivalency regarding both the support context and the associated emotional construct.

A list of nine messages followed the hypothetical scenario. Three messages exhibited emotion avoidance, three messages exhibited a problem focus, and three exhibited a high level of emotion-focus, as defined by Burlison’s (1984) hierarchy for comforting strategies. Participants were instructed to rate each strategy for its sensitivity (with a 1 representing *very insensitive* and a 7 representing *very sensitive*). Previous research indicates that ratings of message sensitivity are highly correlated with other dimensions of message evaluation (e.g., effectiveness, helpfulness, appropriateness; see Jones & Burlison, 1997; Kunkel & Burlison, 1999) and thus provide a good, overall index of message quality. Each latent support message variable consists of three items. Cronbach’s alpha for each two-item index is

as follows: for Euro-Americans, emotion focus ( $\alpha = .72$ ), emotion avoidance ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and problem focus ( $\alpha = .63$ ); for the Chinese, emotion focus ( $\alpha = .70$ ), emotion avoidance ( $\alpha = .83$ ), and problem focus ( $\alpha = .61$ ).

### INTERACTION GOALS ORIENTATION IN SUPPORT SITUATIONS

An assessment of the goals typically pursued in support situations was obtained by having participants complete a version of Burleson and Gilstrap's (2002) Support Goals Inventory (SGI). The version of the SGI employed in the present study provides a measure of participants' evaluations of three goals relevant in support situations suggested by MacGeorge's (2001) review of the literature: avoidance, problem management, and emotion management. The present version of the SGI described a situation in which a good friend is upset about having recently discovered that his or her boyfriend or girlfriend for the past year and a half has been cheating on him or her. Prior studies indicate that this situation is a relevant context for providing social support among both American and Chinese participants (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). Accompanying each situation was a list of statements describing goals that might be pursued when talking to the upset friend, three items for each goal (avoidance, problem management, and emotion management). Participants rated each goal statement for how important they thought it would be when talking to their distressed friends on 7-point scales. Each latent interactive support goal variable consists of three items. Cronbach's alpha for each index is as follows: For Euro-Americans, emotion focus ( $\alpha = .85$ ), emotion avoidance ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and problem focus ( $\alpha = .81$ ); for the Chinese, emotion focus ( $\alpha = .80$ ), emotion avoidance ( $\alpha = .79$ ), and problem focus ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

### Model Design

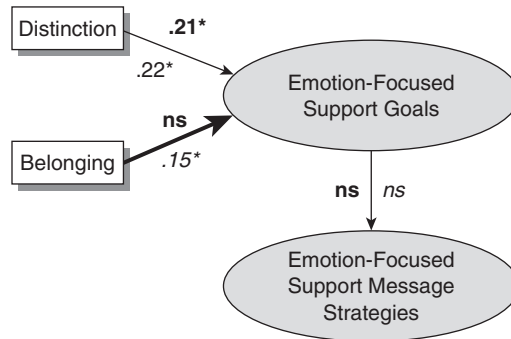
The SEM analysis reported here used a full-information maximum likelihood estimation procedure. The present study also used a hybrid model design based on Stephenson and Holbert's (2003) description of hybrid structural equation models. A hybrid model combines both observable variables and latent composite variables in the same model. Hybrid structural equation models have outperformed both observable variable models and latent composite models in a recent Monte Carlo simulation (Stephenson & Holbert, 2003). Most notably, the path estimates in hybrid models were significantly more robust compared to those in observable variable models and latent composite models.

Structurally, the social support models consist of three blocks (see Figures 3 through 5). The first block consists of the individual distinction and interpersonal belonging variables. The second block consists of the criterion variable interactive support goals. The third block consists of the criterion variable social support messages.

## RESULTS

### DISTINCTION, BELONGING, AND CULTURE

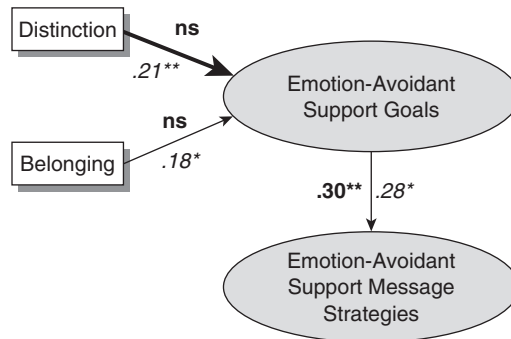
The review of literature presented prior suggests that individual differences in distinction and belonging should be robustly present in both Chinese and Euro-American cultural groups but that culture should show an influence in the way such differences are expressed. This contention was evaluated initially with a  $2 \times 2$  mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on the last factor. The between-groups factors was



**Figure 3: Emotion-Focused Support and Individual Differences**

NOTE: All coefficients are standardized. Bolded coefficients represent Euro-Americans, and italicized coefficients represent the Chinese. Bolded regression paths indicate a significant moderation effect in the Multiple Structuring Equation Modeling Test; *ns* = nonsignificant effect.

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



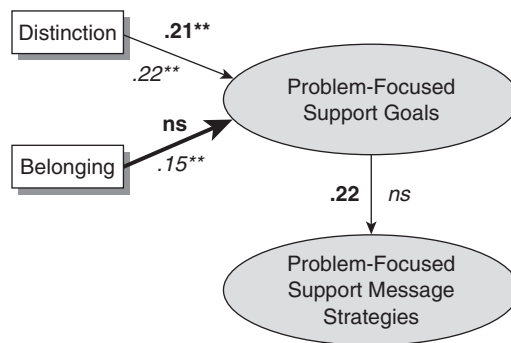
**Figure 4: Emotion-Avoidant Support and Individual Differences**

NOTE: All coefficients are standardized. Bolded coefficients represent Euro-Americans, and italicized coefficients represent the Chinese. Bolded regression paths indicate a significant moderation effect in the Multiple Structuring Equation Modeling Test. Only significant regression paths are reported here; *ns* = nonsignificant effect.

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

culture (American vs. Chinese), the within-subjects factor was distinction and belonging, and the dependent variable was perceived identification with each orientation.

The ANOVA detected a main effect for culture,  $F(1, 498) = 30.06, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ . There was also a main effect for the within-groups factor of social orientation,  $F(1, 498) = 237.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$ . Participants from both cultural groups identified more with a sense of personal distinction ( $M = 5.40$ ) than interpersonal belonging ( $M = 4.50$ ). Importantly, these two main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between them,  $F(1, 498) = 87.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ . Decomposition of this interaction revealed that Euro-Americans ( $M = 5.51$ ) identified more strongly with a sense of distinction than did Chinese participants ( $M = 5.29$ ),  $t(489) = 2.36, p < .02$ . However, Chinese participants ( $M = 4.92$ ) identified more strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging than did Euro-American participants ( $M = 4.02$ ),  $t(498) = 11.02, p < .001$ .



**Figure 5: Problem-Focused Support and Individual Differences**

NOTE: All coefficients are standardized. Bolded coefficients represent Euro-Americans, and italicized coefficients represent the Chinese. Bolded regression paths indicate a significant moderation effect in the Multiple Structural Equation Modeling Test; ns = nonsignificant effect.

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

## EMOTION-FOCUSED SOCIAL SUPPORT

### Regression Analyses

Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b predicted that Euro-Americans would endorse both emotion-focused support messages and emotion-focused support goals. Regression analyses indicated that membership in Chinese culture was negatively associated with evaluations of both emotion-focused support messages ( $\beta = -.18, p < .001$ ) and emotion-focused support goals ( $\beta = -.39, p = .001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b were both supported. Notably, individual differences had no significant influence on evaluations of emotion-focused messages suggesting that Research Question 3 might be answered in the negative. However, valuing emotion-focused goals was significantly predicted by distinction ( $\beta = .22, p = .001$ ). Finally, consistent with extant research, valuing emotion-focused support goals was positively associated ( $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ) with evaluations of emotion-focused support messages.

### SEM Analyses

*Effects tests.* All SEM analyses were conducted using AMOS 5 (Arbuckle, 2003). Both Chinese and American models fit the data well (see Table 1 for fit statistics). Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b predicted that individuals that identify strongly with a sense of personal distinction and interpersonal belonging will endorse emotion-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups. Consistent with Hypothesis 3a, distinction was positively associated with valuing emotion-focused goals within both the American model ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ ) and the Chinese model ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ). Unfortunately, Hypothesis 3b failed to find support in these analyses, whereas belonging was associated with valuing emotion-focused goals within the Chinese model ( $\beta = .20, p < .001$ ), no significant link between belonging and goals was found in the Euro-American model (Figure 3).

### Multiple Structuring Equation Modeling (MSEM) Analyses

Hypothesis 5 predicted that personal distinction is positively associated with valuing emotion-focused support goals among Euro-Americans significantly more than among

Chinese. The hypothesized moderating effect of culture on the association between distinction and emotion-focused support goals was assessed in a multigroup test in which two analyses were conducted and compared (Hayduk, 1987; Rigdon, Schumacker, & Wothke, 1998). First, unconstrained tests were conducted in which the pathways were allowed to vary freely for each of the two cultural groups. In these runs, AMOS estimated the path coefficients and covariances for each group separately. After estimating the parameters uniquely for each group, another run was conducted in which the pathways were constrained to be equal for both groups—that is, AMOS found one set of parameters that best accounted for the covariance structure in both groups. The difference between the chi square values for the unconstrained model and equality-constrained model was then calculated (Hayduk, 1987; Rigdon et al., 1998). Chi-square values predict whether the covariance matrix the model predicts is different than the observed covariance matrix (Crowley & Fan, 1997). A significant difference between these two chi-square values would indicate a significant deterioration in fit from the unconstrained to the equality constrained model, and it would indicate that culture is a significant moderator (Holmbeck, 1997). The distinction-to-goals pathway was estimated using the multigroup approach. Unfortunately, when the group specific parameters were compared to the equality constrained ones, no significant difference in chi-square values emerged. Thus the null is retained for Hypothesis 5. However, when the belonging to goals pathway was estimated, a significant change in chi-square values emerged ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 8.732, p < .01$ ), indicating that the model fit deteriorated when the parameter was constrained to be equal for both groups. Thus, culture served to significantly moderate the influence of belonging on valuing emotion-focused goals, with the Chinese showing the stronger association.

The results of these analyses indicate that although cultural membership predicts evaluations of support messages, both cultural and individual differences predict valuing interactive support goals. In the regression analyses, Euro-Americans showed a clear preference for pursuing emotion-focused goals. At the same time, distinction predicted valuing emotion-focused goals in both the American and Chinese SEM models. Such findings support the contention that distinction represents a transcultural motive that is linked to effective emotional support. Finally, the link between belonging and goals was moderated by cultural differences in the MSEM analyses. That is, the Chinese with a strong sense of belonging put greater value on emotion-focused support goals than did Euro-Americans who shared the same orientation. Taken together, these results suggest that skilled emotional support is linked more with the pursuit of goals than the recognition of message strategies, and furthermore, that pursuing emotion-focused goals is perceived as especially skilled among the Chinese with a strong sense of belonging.

## EMOTION-AVOIDANT SOCIAL SUPPORT

### Regression Analyses

Consistent with Hypotheses 2a and Hypothesis 2b, membership in Chinese culture was positively associated with evaluations of both emotion-avoidant support messages ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ) and emotion-avoidant support goals ( $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ). Individual differences also failed to produce a significant effect on evaluations of support messages, further suggesting that Research Question 3 be answered in the negative. However, valuing problem-focused support goals was significantly predicted by both distinction ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ) and belonging ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ). Finally, consistent with extant research, valuing emotion-avoidant support goals was positively associated ( $\beta = .25, p < .05$ ) with evaluations of emotion-avoidant support messages.

### SEM Analyses

*Effects tests.* Both the Chinese and American models fit the data well (see Table 1 for fit statistics). Both belonging ( $\beta = .17, p < .05$ ) and distinction ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ) were positively associated with valuing emotion-avoidant goals within the Chinese model (Figure 4). However, within the American model, neither distinction nor belonging was associated with valuing emotion-avoidant goals. Research Question 1 inquired if individuals that identify strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse emotion-avoidant forms of social support in both cultural groups. These findings answer Research Question 1 in the negative. Also, valuing emotion-avoidant goals was associated with evaluations of emotion-avoidant messages for both the Americans ( $\beta = .29, p < .05$ ) and the Chinese ( $\beta = .28, p < .01$ ).

### MSEM Analyses

Research Question 2 inquired if interpersonal belonging is positively associated with valuing emotion-avoidant support goals among the Chinese significantly more than among Euro-Americans. The belonging-to-goals pathway was estimated using the multigroup approach. However, when the group specific parameters were compared to the equality constrained ones, no significant difference in chi-square values emerged. Thus, Research Question 2 is answered in the negative. However, when the distinction-to-goals pathway was estimated in a multigroup test, a small but significant change in chi-square values was apparent  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.86, p < .05$ .

Taken together, the results of these analyses further support the distinction between appropriate and skilled aspects of social support. In the regression analyses, culture had a significant influence on message evaluation with Chinese participants showing a clear preference for emotion-avoidant messages and valuing emotion-avoidant goals. Chinese participants viewed pursuing emotion-avoidant goals as important; Americans did not. These differences were further reflected in the cross-cultural (multigroup) analyses in which culture slightly moderated the influence of distinction on valuing support goals. In short, efforts to distract a distressed person away from their upset feelings is understood as an effective and appropriate means of emotional support among the Chinese students but not among the Euro-American students.

## PROBLEM-FOCUSED SOCIAL SUPPORT

### Regression Analyses

Within the regression analyses, membership in the Chinese culture was not significantly associated with evaluations of problem-focused support messages as appropriate; thus, the null is retained in relation to Hypothesis 2c. Individual differences in belonging produce a small but significant effect on evaluations of problem-focused support messages ( $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ); however, subsequent analyses of the message items will show this finding to be problematic. Hypothesis 2d predicted that Chinese endorse problem-focused interaction goals as more important to pursue when comforting than do Euro-Americans. As expected, valuing problem-focused support goals was significantly predicted by membership in the Chinese culture ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ) supporting Hypothesis 3d.

### SEM Analyses

*Effects tests.* Both the American and the Chinese models fit the data well (see Table 1 for fit Statistics). Hypothesis 4 predicted that individuals who identify strongly with a

sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse problem-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups. Belonging was positively associated with valuing problem-focused goals within the Chinese model ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) but not the Euro-American model (Figure 5). Hence, the null is retained for Hypothesis 4. Notably, distinction was positively associated with valuing problem-focused goals among both the Chinese ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ) and the Euro-Americans ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ). Valuing problem-focused goals was significantly associated with evaluations of problem-focused messages for Americans ( $\beta = .22, p < .01$ ) but not for the Chinese.

#### CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSES: MSEM

When the belonging-to-goals pathway was estimated in a multigroup test, a small and marginally significant change in chi-square values was apparent ( $\Delta\chi^2[1] = 3.61, p = .057$ ) lending some support to Hypothesis 6. Taken together, the results of these analyses provide some further support for the conceptual distinction between evaluating message support strategies and valuing support goals. Valuing problem-focused goals was associated with individual differences in both cultures (particularly in regard to distinction). Furthermore, culture moderated (albeit weakly) the influence of belonging on valuing goals. In this case however, the link between goals and messages appears less clear cut. Apparently, the problem-focused message items used here were not viewed consistently across cultures. This was most evident in the within-group analyses. Within the American model, valuing problem-focused goals was positively associated with message evaluations. In the Chinese model, the association was insignificant. Given the number of hypotheses and questions posed here and the complex pattern of results, we have summarized the results found here (see Table 2).

## DISCUSSION

This exploratory study attempts to distinguish between aspects of social support related to cultural norms of appropriate behavior from those aspects of social support related to a sense of efficacy. Furthermore, this study was designed to determine the extent to which cultural and individual differences contributed to distinctions between culturally appropriate and culturally efficacious components of social support. The results of this study, while still initial in nature, suggest four important patterns on which to build future research: (a) Recognizing what counts as an effective social support message strategy reflects broad cultural norms of appropriate conduct, whereas valuing specific support goals reflects a sense of efficacy in regard to social support; (b) Individual differences related to a valued sense of personal distinction and a sense of interpersonal belonging were associated with the motivation to pursue specific support goals; (c) In relation to emotion-focused and problem-focused goals, dimensions of distinction operate in similar ways across culture; and (d) cultural differences also moderate the influence of distinction and belonging on the value accorded to specific support goals.

Across all three forms of social support, recognizing an effective support message appeared to be more a matter of pervasive cultural norms for appropriate conduct, especially in relation to emotion-focused and emotion-avoidant messages. In contrast, individual differences in distinction and belonging showed strong links to valuing support goals. Such results support the notion that valuing goals is related to efficacy to a greater extent than evaluating messages.

**TABLE 2**  
**Hypotheses and Results**

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Result</i>
Hypothesis 1a: Euro-Americans endorse emotion-focused support messages as more appropriate than the Chinese do.	Yes
Hypothesis 1b: Euro-Americans endorse emotion-focused interaction goals as more important to pursue when comforting another person than the Chinese do.	Yes
Hypothesis 2a: The Chinese endorse emotion-avoidant support messages as more appropriate than Euro-Americans do.	Yes
Hypothesis 2b: The Chinese endorse emotion-avoidant interaction goals as more important to pursue when comforting than Euro-Americans do.	Yes
Hypothesis 2c: The Chinese endorse problem-focused support messages as more appropriate than Euro-Americans do.	No—insignificant finding
Hypothesis 2d: The Chinese endorse problem-focused interaction goals as more important to pursue when comforting than Euro-Americans do.	Yes
Hypothesis 3a: Individuals that identify strongly with a sense of personal distinction will endorse emotion-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups.	Yes
Hypothesis 3b: Individuals that identify strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse emotion-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups.	No—only among the Chinese
Hypothesis 4: Individuals that identify strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging will endorse problem-focused forms of social support in both cultural groups.	No—distinction was associated across cultures
Research Question 1: Do individuals that identify strongly with a sense of interpersonal belonging endorse emotion-avoidant forms of social support in both cultural groups?	No—only among the Chinese
Hypothesis 5: Personal distinction is positively associated with valuing emotion-focused support goals among Euro-Americans significantly more than among Chinese.	No—belonging, not distinction was moderated
Hypothesis 6: Interpersonal belonging is positively associated with valuing problem-focused support goals among Chinese significantly more than among Euro-Americans.	Yes, but only moderately
Research Question 2: Is interpersonal belonging positively associated with valuing emotion-avoidant among Chinese significantly more than Euro-Americans?	No—distinction, not belonging was moderated
Research Question 3: Do individual differences in distinction and belonging predict evaluations of support message appropriateness?	No

The transcultural patterns in personal distinction found here are consistent with theory suggesting that people universally experience both the need to merge with a group or purpose larger than themselves and the need to distinguish themselves from their cohorts (Becker, 1971; Kagitcibasi, 1996) but that culture influences the expression of such needs (Brown & Kobayshi, 2003). Self and other orientations were robustly present in both cultural groups, and a sense of distinction predicted valuing emotion and problem-focused goals across cultures. However, emotion-avoidant goals were linked to both distinction and belonging for Chinese participants but not at all with Americans. Cultural differences also moderated the influence of interpersonal belonging: Chinese participants with a strong sense of belonging valued pursuing both emotion-focused and problem-focused goals more than Euro-Americans with the same orientation.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are several limitations with the features of the current study that qualify the generality of its results. One obvious limitation has to do with generalizing about Chinese and Euro-American cultures using university students for participants. Second, all the measures used here were originally developed with Western samples and are informed by Western ideas regarding emotions, emotional distress, and emotional support. We took several precautions to ensure the relevance of the questionnaires and procedures regarding the Chinese sample.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the scale used to measure psychological distinction and belonging is still in an initial development phase. Currently, the Distinction and Belonging Scales represent a highly focused version of Leung and Kim's (1997) Self-Construal Scale with items related to valuing personal opinions, self-reliance, power distance, and respecting authority removed. Finally, because we only examined one kind of distressing situation (i.e., the breakup of a romance), we have no way of knowing if our results would generalize to other kinds of distressing situations. Research examining the antecedents of emotion across cultures suggests both similarities and differences in the kinds of situations that produce emotions and the kinds of emotions elicited by a specific social context (Matsumoto, 1996).

Despite the limitations with the current study, our findings provide a useful base on which to build future research. Currently, one major challenge to cross-cultural research involves articulating and empirically supporting theoretical links between psychological processes, cultural differences, and behavior in an effort to unpack a culture's influence on behavior (Levine et al., 2003; Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999). Many research efforts to meet this challenge have focused on the "cultural self" perspective (see Sedikes, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003) that emphasizes cultural differences and often obscures cultural similarities. The results found here, along with a growing body of recent research, suggest that only by taking both cultural similarities and differences into account can researchers adequately address the influence of culture on behavior.

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## APPENDIX

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### DISTINCTION, BELONGING, AND SAMPLE GOAL AND MESSAGE ITEMS

#### Individual Distinction Items

1. I act as a unique person, separate from others.
2. I enjoy being unique and different from others.
3. I enjoy being admired for my unique qualities.

#### Interpersonal Belonging Items

1. I conceal my negative emotions so I won't cause unhappiness among my friends or family.
2. The security of being an accepted member among my friends and family is very important to me.
3. It is important to consult close friends and get their ideas before making decisions.
4. My happiness depends on the happiness of my friends and family.
5. If my brother or sister fails, I feel responsible.

### **Romantic Breakup Situation**

A friend has been dumped by his or her boyfriend or girlfriend of a year and comes to you to talk about what happened. You can see that your friend is really hurting over the breakup. Indicate how well each statement describes what you would do in this situation.

### **Emotion-Focused Support Message**

That sucks.

It's really frustrating to have someone end a relationship so suddenly, especially if you thought things were going okay.

It makes you feel like you got played, like you did something wrong.

But you've got a lot going on and this isn't your fault.

This probably doesn't count for much right now, but I've been where you are.

I think I understand how awful you must be feeling—I'm sorry.

### **Emotion-Avoidant Support Message**

You are my friend, so I have to be honest with you. You're acting like this is the end of the world, not the end of a relationship. It's crazy to make yourself so miserable over something you can't control.

### **Problem-Focused Support Message**

People go through stages, and maybe they're just not ready for a relationship right now. Or maybe they got scared because they liked you too much. Whatever the reason, it sucks. But it's definitely not you, that's for sure.

### **Interactive Support Goals**

Emotion-focused: help them work through their feelings

Emotion-avoidant: get their minds off the troubling situation.

Problem-focused: suggest ways of putting the problem behind them and getting on with life.

### **NOTE**

1. Prior to the main investigation, the authors conducted an instrument development study to ensure that the language and situations used were seen as realistic and appropriate by the cultural groups. Initial interviews indicated that the original wording for some of the items was perceived as unrealistic; thus, we conducted a series of focus groups with individuals from each cultural group to ascertain ways in which the language of the comforting messages could be made more realistic (the services of a bilingual Chinese graduate student were essential in this endeavor). The strategies were then rewritten to incorporate the phrasing and linguistic devices identified in these interviews.

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