



## “Offer No Readymade Solutions”: Men’s support provision in specific episodes with an upset friend<sup>☆</sup>



Ira A. Virtanen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Pekka Isotalus<sup>a</sup>, Shaughan A. Keaton<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Tampere, Finland

<sup>b</sup> Young Harris College, USA

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### ABSTRACT

This study describes Finnish men’s support provision for same-sex friends. Two main problem scenarios—break-up and sudden unemployment—were used, which were moderated by alcohol abuse. These data consist of 25 episode interviews and were analyzed with qualitative and quantitative methods. Results showed that men provide support by giving *perspective, suggestion, reassurance*, and support *availability*. The amount of solace for a friend was significantly scarcer in alcohol-related problems. The study found that indirect support aims to motivate self-realization and thus, result in more permanent and positive change. Such interactions can also lead men to give “cold comfort.”

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Human life is filled with diverse interpersonal relationships with colleagues, family members, romantic partners, neighbors, and friends. At their best, relationships bring joy, comfort, and support for men and women. Emotional support—the effort to assist another in coping with a perceived upset (Burleson, 2003a)—is especially important in close relationships because it provides reassurance, validation, and acceptance to a person (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Common interpersonal goals in friendships help individuals manage emotional distress, dissolve conflicts in manners that preserve relationships, and make friends feel good about themselves (Samter, 2003). In face of hardship, supportive communication is particularly important from trusted friends. However, a friend’s motivation to help may vary according to perceptions of problem severity and who is to blame for trouble. Unmotivated or unskillful support may lead support receivers to reject providers or intensify uncertainty about the situation (see Burleson, Samter, et al., 2005). Consequently, successful and unsuccessful supportive communication can have substantial long-term impact on relationships (Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998).

Social support, when appropriate, has important effects on individuals’ psychological well-being (for review, see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002) and physical health (for review, see Reblin & Uchino, 2008). According to MacGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011), communication is the key mechanism through which social support is experienced. Supportive communication is produced, perceived, processed and received commonly in interpersonal encounters. The communication perspective thus argues that positive effects of support take place through communicatively induced reappraisals of one’s stressful situation and affect state (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). But do men provide such support for their same-sex friends? The popular beliefs contest that men are less willing and less able to talk about their upsets than women, and they provide solutions rather than solace to those with hurt feelings. Some findings concur that female spouses often provide the most emotional support for men (Ojala & Kontula, 2002; Paaajanen, 2003). A study by Burleson, Holmstrom, and Gilstrap (2005, Experiment 2) showed that men were significantly less likely to pursue the goal of solace when providing support for a male target than for a female target. Similarly, when the support targets were viewed as highly responsible for their problems, men produced less sensitive messages to other men than to women (Experiment 4).

This qualitative inquiry investigates support provisions of differently aged Finnish men to their distressed same-sex friend. We further scrutinize support attempts for two different types of problems—a friend’s relationship and work problems—and how the

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [ira.virtanen@gmail.com](mailto:ira.virtanen@gmail.com) (I.A. Virtanen).

friend's accountability for these situations may or may not influence support he is given. Drinking works as a moderator of the friend's responsibility and controllability for problems.

### 1. Gender and culture in supportive communication

Most studies today agree that gender differences in evaluation of effective support messages are small (Goldsmith & Dun, 1997; Samter, 2002), yet existent (see review by Burleson & Kunkel, 2006). For example, men evaluate messages that explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize another's perspective and feelings—i.e., high person-centered messages—somewhat less favorably than women and do not judge low-person-centered messages as critically (e.g., MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004, Study 3). Recent development in supportive communication research has focused on detecting and explaining gender differences in message reception. Burleson et al. (2009) found clear and consistent evidence that cognitive complexity and expressive orientation explain gender difference in comforting message discrimination and in elaboration of support situations. Their results indicate that men would be less able and less motivated than women to process supportive messages. Researchers prompt further investigation on ability and motivation to also produce messages across various support situations, not just everyday upsets or bereavement experiences.

Furthermore, it is likely that cultures differ with respect to value their members attach to providing emotional support (Mortenson, 2002). Intercultural studies on sensitive emotional support do in fact report differences in support goals and message strategies; for example, between Chinese and Euro-Americans (Mortenson, Liu, Burleson, & Liu, 2006). It is particularly noteworthy that ethnicity has been found as a stronger predictor of variability in emotional support evaluations than gender (Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997). When it comes to support provision, results have predominantly been gained from comparative studies between genders and mainly on different ethnic groups of US college students (Burleson, 2003b). Even though further research has been encouraged to detect the quality of these differences, very little investigation to date has described them in detail.

This study focuses on differently aged Finnish men and their support provision for friends in various problem-situations. Finns are a highly homogenous: Among the 5.4 million citizens, only 4.7% are born elsewhere (Official Statistics of Finland, 2013). Finns are listener-centered people who appreciate matter-of-fact talk, honesty and autonomy in their interpersonal relationships (Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). Carbaugh (2009) says Finns sometimes differentiate themselves from US "talking culture." For them, careful weighing up of words and speaking truthfully, briefly and to the point is valued. These communication values may also influence characteristics of supportive messages.

### 2. Support recipient's responsibility for a problem

Helpers adapt messages according to situational appraisals (see also Goldsmith, 2004). They pay attention to information about the seeker's responsibility for problems and this knowledge has considerable impact on supportive intentions and behaviors (Jones & Burleson, 1997; MacGeorge, 2001; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003; Weiner, 1995). Therefore, in respect to support for problems in friends' lives, effective messages are produced not only because of helpers' skills and knowledge but also the motivation they have to exercise these abilities (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005). In other words, friends do not always approach problems or emotions of distressed others with comforting efforts and

assistance (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Excessive drinking may be one such problem.

Across cultures, men tend to drink more heavily than women and more frequently report various alcohol-related experiences (Mäkelä & Mustonen, 2000). In Finland the level of drinking and problems connected to it are higher compared to other Western European countries (Knibbe, Derickx, Kuntsche, Grittner, & Bloomfield, 2006). Consequently, substance use impacts not only lives of those who drink but also people around them (e.g., Caldeira & Woodin, 2012). Research on support providers of alcohol abusers has largely focused on organized peer groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA; for review, see Kaskutas, 2009) and social/health care systems (e.g., Thevos, Thomas, & Randall, 2001). However, close people are the most emotionally invested and thus likely to suffer from and attempt to change alcohol abusers' behaviors.

Hirschovits-Gerz et al. (2011) explored Finns' relationships with and views on alcohol addiction and recovery. Finns rank alcohol as the biggest societal problem in Finland. Yet in comparison to Swedes, Russians and Canadians, Finnish people have a significantly higher confidence in the chances of self-change and in individuals' capacities to solve drinking problems without organized help. Finnish men in particular emphasize individual accountability and the capacity to cope. This belief reflects traditional perceptions of Finns as tough and self-sufficient people needing no outside assistance. People are responsible for their own drinking and it is not anyone else's place to intervene (Raitasalo, 2008) unless another's behavior has become clearly disturbing (Pirainen, 1993).

### 3. Research design

We selected relationship termination as the personal problem and sudden unemployment as the professional problem for this study. The chosen research scenarios have commonly been used in social support research (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Cutrona & Russell, 1990) but never examined with Finnish men. Burrell (2002) suggests that men may perceive divorce as failure, disconfirmation of self-worth and hence, may shut down communicatively when faced with such distress. Even though men may prefer not to talk about a break-up, it does not mean they do not wish to receive support from others. Similarly, various components of social support may need to be used in addressing uncertainties that a stress-like unemployment may cause (e.g. Cutrona & Russell, 1990).

In sum, previous research has shown that perceived problem controllability sometimes affects support provided. However, poor handling of controllable events may increase blame assigned to support seekers. Perceived responsibility for problems does impact more consistently on support approaches helpers take. Because friendships entail sustenance and management of conflicting interpretations in manners that preserve relationships (Samter, 2003), helpers may have to choose words carefully. Because drinking plays a big role in Finnish social life (Mäkelä & Mustonen, 2000), it was chosen as a moderator of controllability of the problem and as a factor increasing a friend's responsibility.

The study has four episodes (see Appendix): *Lay-off episode* (Lo), which marks the friend's professional problem, being laid off from work. *Break-up episode* (Bu) illustrates a personal problem, in this case being dumped for another person. Both personal and professional episodes are modified with alcohol: *Firing-alcohol* (FA) and *Separation-alcohol* (SA) episodes depict situations where loss of job and relationship are caused by excessive drinking. Alcohol-episodes have higher perceived target responsibility and controllability to non-alcohol episodes. The following research questions are posed:

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