“Offer No Readymade Solutions”: Men’s support provision in specific episodes with an upset friend

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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 unskilful 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; Paajanen, 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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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 to 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 (Mortensen, 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 (Mortensen, 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, Mortensen, & 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 women’s 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 & Iso, 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 (Makkel & Mustonen, 2000). In Finland the level of drinking and problems connected to it are higher compared to other Western European countries (Knibbe, Derickx, Kuntsche, Gittner, & 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 (Piirainen, 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 & Mortensen, 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 (Makkel & 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:
3.1. Participants and method

We utilized a novel episode interview approach to meet the study’s objectives because (1) qualitative research is important in discovering activities, goals and central features around which same-sex friends organize relationships (Samter & Burleson, 2005), and (2) interview is a valid method for gathering data on communication intentions as well as on behaviors used by social actors in natural settings when those settings are inaccessible. Finnish-born men between the ages of 21 and 67 (N = 25; M = 41; Mdn = 37) volunteered to be interviewed. At the time of the study, the men were all living in the wider metropolitan of Helsinki. However, some of them had moved to south Finland for work. The unfamiliar respondents had come across the electronic research request, which the first author had sent out through social networks. The men represented various occupations: IT-worker, unemployed, artist, journalist, student, customer servant, teacher, fireman, executive, retiree, and CEO. All interviews were conducted one-on-one in places of respondents’ preferences. Such places were mainly quiet cafes and private offices. All interviews were tape-recorded and no compensation was provided.

Episode analyses (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000) and episodic interviews (Flick, 2000) typically ask respondents to reconstruct scenes according to their experiences or knowledge about the social world in relation to a certain topic. Similar methods to episode interview have been applied in various quantitative studies on support provision (e.g. Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge et al., 2003; Samter, 2002). However, in qualitative episode interview, respondents themselves produce related elements of context that they perceive important to consider, and which of these impact their support choices as helpers.

In this study, the interviewer (first author) asked each respondent to reconstruct a communicative scene according to his experience or knowledge in four different episodes (see Flick, 2000; Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Order of episodes remained consistent throughout interviews—Lo, PA, SA, and BU—and each episode was introduced in the same manner. For example, in the Lay-off (Lo) episode the interviewer asked the respondent to think about one of his friends. He was instructed to picture himself as a helper in a situation where his friend has just been laid off from work because of cutbacks in the company. The interviewer then asked: “Tell me about your thoughts upon hearing about his problem. Do you think your friend would tell you about it? What would he say? What would you say to your friend?” The men were encouraged to think aloud about what they would actually say to a support-seeking male friend. The interviews were part of a larger interview study. The episode interview data analyzed for this study lasted six hours in total and were transcribed into 119 single-spaced pages in 12-point Times New Roman.

3.2. Analysis

The material was coded with two different approaches: (1) in vivo coding and (2) Barbee and Cunningham’s (1995) Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (ICBCS). We used qualitative analysis software, ATLAS.ti, to manually code data line-by-line (see also Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). First, the helper’s response to each episode was divided into meaningful units. For example, 27-year-old Pasi replied to the Separation-alcohol (SA) episode:

“I’d say ‘you can’t seriously think you’re happy for more than just a few moments. Can you really imagine yourself continuing like this? Plus, it’ll most likely make your life shorter, affect your relationships and the whole thing. It can’t be worth it, can it?’ But it’s a big challenge to get it all across to him and for him to change. Ultimately it’s up to him. I can only function as a mirror and break the positive images and illusions that drinking heavily is great.

One meaning unit consists of a helper’s utterance that carries a singular meaning. Each meaning unit was then assigned an in vivo code, which followed closely its original wording. The purpose was to capture the intention of the helper’s support provision. For example, “function as a mirror” and “change positive illusions about heavy-drinking” became codes to which other similar communicative goals were linked.

Second, coding focused on specific messages that helpers would communicate to a friend. The meaning units of Pasi’s response above were now coded with ICBCS. ICBCS is a valuable method for documenting specific behaviors individuals use when they comfort, approach, or avoid talking about another person’s problem or emotion (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Burleson, 2003b; Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). The coding system consists of two dimensions: Problem versus emotion and avoidance versus approach behaviors (see Table 1). As a result, it has four main categories—Solve, Solace, Dismiss and Escape—and 28 sub-categories. For example, Pasi’s supportive message “Can you really imagine yourself continuing like this?” was coded with Solve-questions (see Table 2). Each instance of supportive communication in all four episodes from each helper was assigned a code from ICBCS. After analysis, data received 430 ICBCS codes. An impartial communication researcher crosschecked twenty percent of the material (inter-coder consistency 97%). After a discussion, 100% agreement was achieved.

Third, coded data was read through thoroughly. The results on in vivo coding of supportive intentions were manually linked with support behaviors (ICBCS) when connections were detected. Finally, for research questions 1b, 2b, 3, and 4, a non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test was estimated to best address differences in categorical data and to account for small sample size. The test evaluated differences among four ICBCS main categories on number of behaviors utilized and was corrected for tied ranks in each instance; effect size was computed for each significant result. Results are presented next with extracts from interviews to confirm analysis. Quotation marks in extracts indicate respondent’s supportive message, which was directed at the friend and are used to separate the message from his description of supportive intent. Respondents’ ages are given after their pseudonyms.

4. Results

RQ1a asked what type of support Finnish men provide for a friend’s professional and personal problems when alcohol is not involved, and why. In the Lay-off (Lo) episode, solving approaches were most common (54.3%, see Table 1), primarily giving solutions but also suggestions and perspective. Helpers stressed that their goal was first to offer the friend a sense of closure about being laid-off and second to create possibilities for the future. This intention was done mainly through solace behaviors (36.4%), like reassurance.

There’s work in this country for those who are willing to do it. (Sami, 37)
Solutions and reassurances did not occur as frequently in any other episode (see Table 2).

In Break-up (Bu) episode, Solve (47.6%) and Solace (40.2%) were both common approaches. Perspective giving accounted for half of solve behaviors. Out of Solace sub-categories, availability, empathy, and reassurance were most frequent. The personal problem of being dumped for another was perceived as “very tough” and “the worst scenario in the study.” Some helpers said the situation would be upsetting for them too, because they pictured themselves being close with the friend’s partner as well. Several respondents described their actions in Bu-episode as follows: “I would be there for him, letting him speak, and just listening.” Support goals indicated attempts to create space for whatever the friend needed at the particular time.

RQ1b queried whether and how support Finnish men provided for their friends for personal problems differed from support for professional problems. None of the four different types of behaviors—Solve, Solace, Dismiss and Escape—were statistically significant for their effect on median change of number of behaviors enacted. Due to lack of statistical significance, no follow-up tests were performed. Qualitatively, the biggest difference was found in support goals. In the work problem, solace behaviors intended to get the friend actively to move forward. In the relationship problem, comforting focused more on friend’s coping, managing emotions and the present moment.

RQ2a sought to describe types of support men give for friends in personal and professional problems with alcohol, and why. Solace was very infrequent in both being fired—the FA-episode (7.7%)—and in being separated with one’s partner—the SA-episode (12.7%); in fact, only seven men out of 23 used comforting. When it did occur, solace behaviors mostly took the form of indicating support availability.

If you get kicked out because of drinking and there’s no chance she’ll take you back then with some, it may encourage them to drink even more. So then you’d have to spend more time with him so it won’t happen. (Tapio, 31)

No one used empathy in the FA-episode. On the contrary, dismissive behaviors (21.2%)—like criticizing, and escape behaviors (3.8%)—such as irritation—occurred most frequently in FA-episode. Helpers said they would tell the friend outright why they thought he was now out of work and that he should “get a grip.”

You’d have to lay down the cards and hand him the mirror: “Take a look.” To tell him as a friend: “Of course they fired you. If I were an employer I wouldn’t keep you either if you constantly booze. So it’s your own fault. Get it together.” (Visa, 49)

RQ2b asked whether and how support Finnish men provided for their friends for a personal problem differed from support for a professional problem if alcohol was involved. None of the four different types of behaviors—Solve, Solace, Dismiss and Escape—were statistically significant for effect on median change of number of behaviors enacted in this scenario. Due to lack of statistical significance, no follow up tests were performed.

Qualitatively, we found differences between supportive intentions in FA- and SA-episodes. In the former, helpers did not think that the friend would get his job back. Thus, they focused on dealing with the alcohol problem and some said they would propose that he seek professional help.

“Ok, so now you book yourself a visit with a social worker so that you’ll get yourself in treatment if you can’t do it on your own.” (Sampo, 37)

Some men said they themselves, their fathers or close male relatives had also had a drinking problem, which impacted their motivation to support and the approaches they would take. Conversely, when the friend’s partner had left him because of his drinking some helpers expressed a need for personal evaluation on what constitutes “drinking too much.” On occasion they wondered if the romantic partner’s reaction was exaggerated.

Has the nagging broad driven him to drink? Or did she start nagging because he spent too much time at the bottom of the pint? I guess that should be analyzed somehow. (Anssi, 27)

### Table 1
Occurrence of support behaviors in each of the four episodes in percentages (%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Lay-off</th>
<th>Firing alcohol</th>
<th>Break-up</th>
<th>Separation alcohol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solve</td>
<td>54.3 (76)</td>
<td>67.3 (70)</td>
<td>47.6 (51)</td>
<td>67.1 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solace</td>
<td>36.4 (51)</td>
<td>7.7 (8)</td>
<td>40.2 (43)</td>
<td>12.7 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismiss</td>
<td>9.3 (13)</td>
<td>21.2 (22)</td>
<td>10.3 (11)</td>
<td>17.7 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>3.8 (4)</td>
<td>1.9 (2)</td>
<td>2.5 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (140)</td>
<td>100 (104)</td>
<td>100 (107)</td>
<td>100 (79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
The percentages (%) of solve and solace sub-categories in each episode.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Lay-off</th>
<th>Firing alcohol</th>
<th>Break-up</th>
<th>Separation alcohol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solve Pers.</td>
<td>15.8 (12)</td>
<td>15.7 (11)</td>
<td>52.9 (27)</td>
<td>30.2 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sol. Pers.</td>
<td>18.4 (14)</td>
<td>34.3 (24)</td>
<td>15.7 (8)</td>
<td>18.9 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td>36.8 (28)</td>
<td>8.6 (6)</td>
<td>11.8 (6)</td>
<td>7.5 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause</td>
<td>11.8 (9)</td>
<td>17.1 (12)</td>
<td>7.8 (4)</td>
<td>20.8 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>9.2 (7)</td>
<td>20.0 (14)</td>
<td>7.8 (4)</td>
<td>20.8 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible</td>
<td>7.9 (6)</td>
<td>4.3 (2)</td>
<td>3.9 (2)</td>
<td>1.9 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total solve</td>
<td>100 (76)</td>
<td>100 (70)</td>
<td>100 (51)</td>
<td>100 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solace</td>
<td>62.7 (32)</td>
<td>25.0 (2)</td>
<td>25.6 (11)</td>
<td>20.0 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available</td>
<td>11.8 (6)</td>
<td>62.5 (5)</td>
<td>41.9 (18)</td>
<td>50.0 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>15.7 (8)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27.9 (12)</td>
<td>10.0 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lift mood</td>
<td>7.8 (4)</td>
<td>12.5 (1)</td>
<td>4.6 (2)</td>
<td>20.8 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliment</td>
<td>2.0 (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total solace</td>
<td>100 (51)</td>
<td>100 (8)</td>
<td>100 (43)</td>
<td>100 (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Uncertainty may have decreased blame and the friend’s perceived responsibility for the matter. All in all, helpers perceived excessive drinking a difficult problem to handle and ultimately one could only help oneself.

RQ3 appraised whether support helpers provided for their male friends differed between whether or not alcohol was involved in discussion of personal or professional problems. In personal problems, median change in number of support behaviors was significant in only one case: Solace behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=25)=9.77; p = .002$). Solve, Dismiss and Escape did not display significant effects. Proportion of variability in the dependent variable accounted for by solace behaviors was .41, indicating a moderate association. For support that helpers provided in alcohol and non-alcohol professional problems we detected two cases in which median change in number of support behaviors was significant: Solace behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=25)=17.39, p = .0001$) and escape behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=25)=4.26, p = .04$). Proportion of variability in the dependent variable accounted for by solace behaviors was .73, indicating a strong relationship. Proportion of variability in the dependent variable accounted for by escape behaviors was .18, indicating a small, yet noteworthy, connection. Solve and Dismiss were not significant.

RQ4 asked whether support Finnish men provided for male friends in alcohol-related problems differed from that provided in non-alcohol episodes. Regardless of scenario, alcohol differentiated median change in behaviors only in the instance of solace behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=50)=26.86, p = .0001, \eta^2 = .55$). Qualitative analysis on solace in alcohol-episodes revealed mainly behaviors of support availability. Availability was also the most common solace approach in Bu-episode.

I don’t think I could say anything much. I’d just be there in quietude. Maybe I can show a solemn face and just let him speak. (Kevin, 21)

In alcohol-episodes, helpers described being available as fulfilling the friendship expectation whereas in break-up situation availability intended to communicate care as in “whenever and whatever my friend needs.”

Overall, Solve was the most common approach variable in all episodes but particularly in alcohol-situations. Drinking episodes provoked respondents to ask more questions to find out the cause. Further comparison of solve behaviors found that the most customary response to a friend’s problem influenced by alcohol was to offer suggestions, not solutions, like in Lo-episodes. Helpers pursued to find out reasons for the friend’s drinking and to ask how he was going to handle the situation.

“If you were told that that’s the reason why [you were dumped] is because you drink too much then what would be the solution for this matter?” But still, you let him seek the solution for it and you offer no readymade solutions. (Sampo, 37)

The goal of avoiding solutions was that more permanent change could be achieved if the friend came to realization himself. In relationship situations, with or without alcohol, perspective giving was common, particularly in Bu-episode.

“She can’t help it if she’s truly in love with someone else. People can’t fight their feelings, you just can’t lock them up.” (Seppo, 31)

Some codes of the ICBCS (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995) received no mentions in these data. These codes included, for instance, comforting behaviors such as conveying confidentiality, affection and encouragement to display feelings. This observation does not mean, however, that those elements could not have been present. Listening, for example, was said to be a useful way to communicate a friend’s right to vent. A few codes were discussed as things one could not or would not say to a friend. The first example is of polyanna, or feigned sympathy, which is a subcategory of dismissive behaviors. The respondent validated his argument by particular norms of speaking.

And then the kind of comforting that “you’ll soon find someone else.” It doesn’t like, it’s not part of our code system, our speech code system, and it definitely isn’t the way I talk. (Kauko, 46)

Interestingly Kauko perceives the insensitive remark as representing a certain speech community other than his own. It is unclear whether he means Finnish speech culture, the way men communicate or speech code between his friends.

Another respondent argued that solace behavior of affection would feel faked. During the comment he made nonverbal gestures of wrapping his hand over a hypothetical friend’s shoulder and stroked his arm when pretending to console him. Part of his Finnish response was made in English (utterance underlined).

I can’t lay down these like “there, there now.” That “you don’t need to cry, everything is alright.” In my opinion it feels so artificial. (Kevin, 21)

This statement may imply that Kevin felt awkward in expressing such comforting messages in Finnish, that he could not find a Finnish equivalent for the saying, or he did not find the right words to articulate his thoughts.

Some respondents said that it was best not to say anything than say something clichéd. Further, sugar-coating matters could have implied lack of consideration toward another’s emotional state, communicating inauthentic availability, or creating false hope. It is probable that the men did not want to paint too pretty a picture of reality for their friends when they had no guarantee that things would actually improve. Both Kauko and Kevin’s extracts suggest that the norms of a speech community influence helper’s choice of support approach.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to identify and explain types of supportive behaviors Finnish men use when helping their same-sex friends cope with personal and professional problems. Furthermore, we aimed at distinguishing possible differences in support provision for problems caused by alcohol. Results show that both solutions and comfort are available for male friends but supportive communication varies according to the problem-type and the friend’s perceived responsibility (see also Jones & Burleson, 1997; MacGeorge, 2001; MacGeorge et al., 2003). A friend’s problems caused by drinking generated questions, criticism and significantly less solace from helpers than the friend’s problems without the alcohol factor.

Critiquing a friend can challenge the relationship (Barbee et al., 1998) and is generally considered as insensitive and unsophisticated support (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005; Burleson, Samter, et al., 2005). According to our results, however, cold comfort may also be used deliberately. Men were aware that tough love is not always something that their friend would like to receive but it was considered a significant part of being a good friend: He should tolerate but also justly expect straight talk from a caring friend (e.g., Rawlins & William, 1992). Even though matter-of-fact talk may seem insensitive and undesirable as support, honesty and truthfulness in communication is highly valued in Finnish culture (see also Carbaugh, 2009; Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). The expressions of disapproval and even cutting him off for a little while aimed to shake the friend and make him reevaluate his drinking habits. Helpers believed that change in friend’s alcohol consumption would result in more positive and permanent transformation if it were self-motivated. Straight talk paired with availability is likely to express acceptance toward the friend’s character but not his conduct. For
the same reason, the helpers were given suggestions rather than quickly handed solutions to the friend's drinking problem. Availability and suggestions are implicit ways of encouraging the friend's own reappraisal of his situation, and such support behaviors were frequently described as being a mirror for the friend.

Solutions are more readily given for unemployment than relationship problems when alcohol does not play a role. They are typically suitable in instances where the outcome is well defined, effective actions are apparent, and solutions do not threaten either party of the supportive interaction (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Relationships, however, are trickier to resume than jobs. In an aftermath of a break-up, emotional support such as being there for the friend, empathy, and reassurance, were frequent support approaches men would take (cf. Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005).

Helpers also try to support the friend's reappraisal of the situation by giving him perspective. Appraisal support intends to facilitate another's emotional change through making sense of the matter and its associated feelings (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Jones & Wirtz, 2006). Such support is no simple task due to the nature of the interpersonal problem: If the helper only hears one side of the story, how appropriate can his support be? The results show that men acknowledge their lack of interpersonal information on the friend's break-up (see also Jones & Burleson, 1997) and this awareness impacts his perceived self-efficacy to support a friend. Additionally, helpers showed some hesitation in judging their friend's alcohol consumption because his partner may have exaggerated the problem or his drinking could be an excuse for other problems in the relationship. Research supports the view that spouses most commonly address men's binge drinking (Polcin, Korcha, Greenfield, Bond, & Kerr, 2012; Raitasalo, 2008). In matters as impactful as alcohol abuse, supportive relationships between the drinker's spouse and friends should also be encouraged.

Emotionally tough situations can make male helpers dismiss support situations (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005). Often motivation to avoid topics like relationship issues is to protect one's self-image and autonomy (Affifi & Guerrero, 1998). Our findings show that Finnish men do provide support for problems that are sensitive and not in the friend's immediate control. However, such support may be indirect and subtle in efforts to be unimposing on another. Thus far autonomy support has been shown to have positive effect on experiences of friendship quality and need satisfaction (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006) and needs further investigation in the context of men's supportive communication.

Results suggest that not only are words considered valuable but also that being physically and emotionally present is perceived as conveying meaningful care and solace. In fact, helpers criticized even verbal support approaches one could take to comfort and made it a case of communication norms of culture or gender. Some support behaviors are likely to be culturally and relationally more meaningful than others. For example, Finns have been shown to value quietude—“positive silence”—very highly (Carbaugh, 2005). It should be noted that implicit communication has its risks. Indirect messages can go unnoticed or be misunderstood (Barbee et al., 1998), and this risk in turn may leave a friend feeling upset and unsupported. Subtle ways of providing comfort have not received enough scholarly attention and need to be an integral part of social support research (see also Bodie & Jones, 2012).

Overall results indicate that support seeker's communication behavior and his responsibility for the stressor are important in determining the type of support he receives. In addition to motivating the friend to overcome a problem, helpers may need to tackle their own confidence issues in believing in the friend's chances of successful reappraisal and change. Finnish people believe strongly in personal independence, which means that they want to be able to control their own lives and not be imposed upon by others (Poutiainen, 2007). This observation is reflected in men's beliefs about persons' responsibility and their capacity to change drinking behavior without outside help (Hirschovits-Gerz et al., 2011). Because support providers expect a friend's attempts at coping, the seeker's actions are decisive in determining the nature of supportive interaction.

The method of episode interview proved to be useful in generating self-report data on men's communicative behaviors and support goals. There are certainly limitations. The method did not allow us to expand on results that reflected nonverbal immediacy such as support availability and listening. Additionally, avoidance-oriented behavior variables of Escape and Dismiss have been found less common in self-report studies than in observational studies (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002). Therefore, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting nominal results of avoidance behaviors. Finally, small sample size suggests taking care in interpreting and generalizing statistical results.

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References


