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Strategies of Friendship Maintenance in Mexico: Gender Differences

Claudia López Becerra
Universidad Justo Sierra, claudialo64@yahoo.com.mx

Isabel Reyes Lagunes
National Autonomous University of Mexico

Sofia Rivera Aragón
National Autonomous University of Mexico

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Claudia López Becerra, *Universidad Justo Sierra, Mexico,*
claudialo64@yahoo.com.mx

Isabel Reyes Lagunes, *National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)*

Sofia Rivera Aragón, *National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)*

Friendship development refers to the course that people follow since they know each other until they may stop being close friends any more. In this process, the actions making the progress of the relationship possible should be considered, as well as what attracts one person to another and the actions that maintain and deepen the relationship. Blieszner & Adams (1992) agree that friendship develops from knowing each other to obtaining emotional closeness; they define phases that describe changes in friendship. They also agree that those phases do not follow a predetermined sequence, for some friendships become quite close and some others remain in an occasional level; so the stages of friendship are not static events. Maintenance stage involves both dynamic behaviors and activities influenced by culture (Dainton, 2003). The purpose of this chapter is to explore how Mexicans from 19 to 40 years old maintain their friendships. An inventory was developed to assess such strategies. The outcomes revealed that among the several ways of keeping a best friend is the fulfillment of behaviors in order to avoid discussions, surpassing the setbacks, giving support, listening, showing affection and having many things in common as well.

Friendship constitutes a fundamental process in our life. Greek and Roman Philosophers recognized the importance of friends as a source of affection, diversion understanding, support, companionship and advice (Bliezner & Adams, 1992a). Litwak & Szlenyi (1969) believe that friends are the means to deal with big problems in life. Studies indicate that friends help people to reduce its fear toward physical or emotional damage and make fear and anxiety more tolerable (Epley, 1974).

The cultural point of view of the term of friendship becomes indispensable, due to its impact on the way a relationship is defined and constituted. Culture is the framework that allows understanding the nature of human relationships. Díaz-Guerrero and Szalay (1993) propose that relationships for Mexicans are the core of their lives, as well as the family, because friends are a kind of family by election, they are the persons that fulfill the affective-emotional needs outside home (Diaz-Guerrero & Szalay, 1993).

In countries with their population holding a "collective" view of life, social and affective relationships are appreciated (Triandis, 1990). Diaz Guerrero states that the Mexican culture is the culture of love whose life philosophy prescribes self-change, affiliated obeying, the positivism of human relationships as a foundation of quality of life where friend and family harmony is preferred over money. Based on a socio-culture that dictates rules and expectations on how women and men should behave, differential socialization practices are performed. These actions influence the development of personality features with collective views in Latin America (Díaz-Loving & Sánchez Aragón, 2002). While studying the socio-cultural "self" of Mexicans, La Rosa and Diaz-Loving (1991) find that social and emotional attributes (respectful, kind, friendly, polite, thoughtful, communicative, fun, expressive, sociable, affectionate, romantic, etc.) allow appropriate and constructive relationships.

A friendship process refers to the course people follow from the time they meet to the point where they decide that they'll no longer continue to be close friends. As part of this process, factors that help the relationship move ahead should be considered, as well as what

attracts one person to another and the actions that help preserve and deepen the relationship. In this regard, Blieszner and Adams (1992) state that friendship develops from the time two people meet until they get emotional proximity. They refer to phases[1] to describe friendship transformations, stating that they do not take place in a fixed sequence, since some friendship relationships get really close, while others remain at an occasional level. These phases are:

Phase 1: Friendship Formation. It involves a movement in which both persons change from strangers to acquaintances. It starts with the first impression in becoming "social friends" as Reisman (1979) refers to it. It involves a process in where each of the two persons is identified with the other one (potential friend) feeling attraction, getting knowledge, and giving the chance for decisions on the progress of the relationship. Allende (1997) adds having something in common with the other person and developing closeness (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989).

Phase 2. Maintenance. If a decision to continue the relationship is made, the next step is to maintain it through specific actions for continuity. According to this, Ayres (1983) mentions that maintenance strategies help reaching satisfaction levels in the relationship after the interchange patterns (both persons are adapted to) are stabilized.

Phase 3. Dissolution. It is possible that any dissolution factors could bring disgust and the wish to opt out from the relationship, and such are internal changes, and relationship variations and cultural influences (Hinde, 1997). According to this, Fehr (1996) establishes that negotiation is basic and should be oriented to achieve equilibrium between independence and dependence, proximity and distance, honesty and self-protection, in order to avoid separation or learn to solve conflict.

In regard to the friendship maintenance process, there are several approach methods in the international literature. For Dainton (2003), the maintenance phase involves dynamic behaviors and activities, which are influenced by culture. This author mentions that maintenance actions occur in four contexts: 1) about oneself (where psychological references or the individual influence the process), 2) the system (with behaviors stipulated by the system), 3) the network (the influences of the community where the system is inserted), and 4) culture (the historic patterns of ideas, beliefs, rules and roles).

As this stage in friendship life is of great importance, Canary and Dainton (2003) put forward to different contributions about this issue. Duck (1988) stated that maintaining friendship involves efforts to sustain a relationship, maintain it, make it more intimate and stabilize a relationship that has gone through several stages. According to Dindia and Canary (1993) the maintenance phase on satisfaction and stability of the relationship, as well as on important features, such as commitment, is essential in personal relationships. Finally, Dindia and Canary (1993) and Dainton and Aylor (2001; Dainton, & Stafford, 1993) suggest that maintenance refers to efforts made to change deteriorated relationships.

Friendship maintenance denotes a stage of development of the relationship, as well as the dynamic processes involved therein (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Lately, Duck (1994) and other authors as Canary and Stafford (1994) have stated that two elements preserve personal relationships: 1) Strategic planning to keep up the relationship, 2) Continuous concessions as part of the relationship, besides everyday interaction and dialogue that characterize it. From her perspective, Fehr (1996) indicates that maintenance strategies in this kind of relationship are countless and she categorizes them as: implicit (of everyday use, unconscious and automatic in

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[1] At this point, it is necessary to notify that such friendship phases do not have a precise duration of time but they are dynamic.

the routine, such as conversation or some mechanisms to create intimacy) and explicit (such as conscious actions like providing support in time of need and looking for moments to share).[2]

Implicit Strategies

Obviously, when friends decide to engage in an activity or hold a conversation, they are motivated (and therefore they receive an intrinsic reward), rather than "planning" with the intention of preserving the relationship. Everyday talk is essential in maintaining the relationship (Duck, 1994). Openness is considered by many to be the primary and implicit basis to maintain friendship and the means for individuals to consciously maintain and improve their relationship. Perretti and Venton (1984, 1986) found that emotional expression, understood as positive and negative reciprocal expression of feelings, was highly scored in studies applied to male and female students aged 18 to 25; females supported that feelings and emotions expressed, mutual understanding, truth and commitment in friendship are the most important components of this kind of relationship. Oswald, Clark and Kelly (2004) found gender differences in maintenance behaviors; female same-sex friendships reported using more supportiveness, openness and interaction than male same-sex friendships did. Duck (1988) has noted that routine behaviors are as important as strategies in making relationships prosper. Some researchers have focused on the paths to be followed in an everyday fashion to secure the continuation of friendship.

Explicit Strategies

Ayers' (1983) study included a variety of settings with different kinds of relationships (friends, teacher-student, colleagues, etc.). Initially, 38 possible maintenance strategies were found, which were reduced to three factors: Avoidance, Balance and Direct Strategy. The second strategy-factor, which is more commonly used, according to Canary and Stafford (1994), is supporting behavior that is, providing social support, comfort, help in solving problems, and celebrating success. It is also stated that friendship is maintained because there is some form of reward while friends are together.

In Mexico, there is scarce information in existing literature about how friendship is maintained, except for the study conducted by Escobar-Mota & Sanchez-Aragon (2002) who found that friends in their daily routine and for 70% of the cases, used to practice sports, drink and eat together, go shopping, go to the cinema, have fun, dance, argue, laugh and interact as brothers/sisters. Also, they listen to each other, chat, talk about personal subjects, talk on the phone, exchange e-mail (64%), support each other (26.8%), and more. According to these findings, Diaz-Guerrero and Szalay (1993) mentioned that notions imbued in the interpersonal reality of Mexicans, such as help and support allow friends to know how much commitment exists between them; so does the relevance of sincerity and loyalty in the presence or absence of its members (Diaz-Guerrero & Szalay, 1993). To Mexicans, friendship is represented by supporting, sharing ideas, experiences and feelings that are only proper for someone who makes us feel confident and trustworthy. Friendship implies listening and giving advice, freedom, respect, understanding and total acceptance. This relationship is created through the intimate interaction which makes the identification of possible members, the recognition of similarities and the valuation of the presence of the person (Sánchez Aragón, 2001). This personal relationship then, has a huge affective basis; friends integrate an important close-knitted selected group of people. Among them, what really matters is collaboration, cooperation, sharing, giving (and receiving) whatever a friend needs, while for Americans, friendship is more oriented to entertainment, fun and happiness (Diaz-Guerrero & Szalay, 1993).

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[2] Strategies may vary according to the subject's sex, the friend's sex, the subject's life-style, the role he/she plays, the nature of friendship, etc. (Fehr, 1996).

Based on this review of the literature and the pertinence of studying friendship in the context of Mexican culture, our interest was to identify the main strategies used in keeping a frioend by Mexicans aged from 20 to 40 years.

Method

Participants

The non probabilistic and intentional sampling consisted of 300 volunteers, males (N=127) and females (N=173), with ages ranging from 20 to 40 years old. Participants' educational levels were: 215 from high school students, 55 under graduate, 19 postgraduate students and of 11 middle high school.

Instrumentation and procedure

The Inventory of Friendship Maintenance Strategies (IFMS) was developed by Lopez-Becerra, Rivera-Aragon & Reyes-Lagunes (2007) in the context of Mexican culture to evaluate the usual strategies used to preserve this kind of relationship, by employing 65 items divided into eight factors accounting for 57.97% of the variance, and with an overall reliability of .967 (Table 1). Mexico City inhabitants (20 to 40 year olds) volunteering to participate, were tested.

Table 1. Inventory of Maintenance Strategies (Definition of strategies)

FACTORS	Example	Items	α
Emotional Support: Behaviors and the expression of feelings that encourage friend's self-esteem.	My friend makes me feel important	14	.9190
Tolerance: Behaviors of unconditional acceptance of the other, offering help and acting to solve conflicts when they arise.	My friend is tolerant to my changes of humor	13	.9018
Closeness: Willingness to be together, keep in touch and establish dialogue and deep communication.	We spend time together	9	.9018
Similarity: Compatibility in the way of thinking	We thinl in similar ways	6	.8538
Growth: Frequent contact, encounters that promote mutual support and sharing changes and different moments of life.	We have "changed" together	7	.8762
Equity: Homogeneity of interests, age and social condition.	We have the same economic status	5	.8074
Loyalty: Expressions of love, acceptance and faithfulness.	He/she has never cheated on me	7	.8373
Conflict Avoidance: Behaviors aimed at avoiding quarrels and fights.	We avoid get angry with each other	4	.8183

Results

Table 2 comprises the theoretical means for males and females along with the observed means for the eight strategies of friendship maintenance. Overall means are presented, also. The strategies most commonly employed by Mexicans in order to keep their friends are: 1) Emotional support: behaviors and expression of feelings that encourage friends' self-esteem; 2) Tolerance: showing unconditional acceptance, offering help and acting to solve conflicts when they arise; and 3) Closeness; dedicating time in being together and keeping in touch, thereby establishing deep communication. Females in particular, are the ones who provide more emotional support to their friends (*Mn*= 62.7), accept them unconditionally, are closer, are willing to be together (*Mn*= 59.7) and share life changes (*Mn*= 31.4) with them.

Table 2. Theoretical and observed means of Maintenance Strategies

FACTORS	Sample mean	Mean (Men)	Mean (Women)	Theoretical mean
Emotional Support	60.8	58.1	62.7	42
Tolerance	58.8	57.7	59.7	39
Closeness	38.3	37.7	38.8	27
Similarity	24.7	24.4	25.0	18
Growth	31.0	30.3	31.4	21
Equality	20.4	20.0	20.6	15
Loyalty	29.3	28.6	29.8	21
Conflict Avoidance	16	15.9	17.2	12

In order to find out whether there were significant differences in friendship maintenance strategies depending on gender, Student's *t* test was applied, which showed that there are differences between males and females in terms of friendship maintenance strategies.

For the Emotional Support strategy Student's $t = -4.328$ $p<.001$. Females display more behaviors whereby they make their friends feel important, encouraging their self-esteem (*Mn*=62.7), as compared to males (*Mn*=58.1). For the maintenance strategy called "tolerance" Student's $t = -2.509$ $p<.01$. Women bestow unconditional acceptance on their friends and act to solve conflicts in order to maintain the relationship. There were also significant differences in the Growth ($t= -2.102$ $p< .05$) and Conflict Avoidance ($t = -3.413$, $p < .001$) strategies, where females were again the ones who dedicate more time to be with and share significant moments with their friends (*Mn*=31.4) and who, in different ways, avoid quarreling or fighting (*Mn*=17.2), thereby securing the continuation of the friendship relation, unlike males (Figure 1).
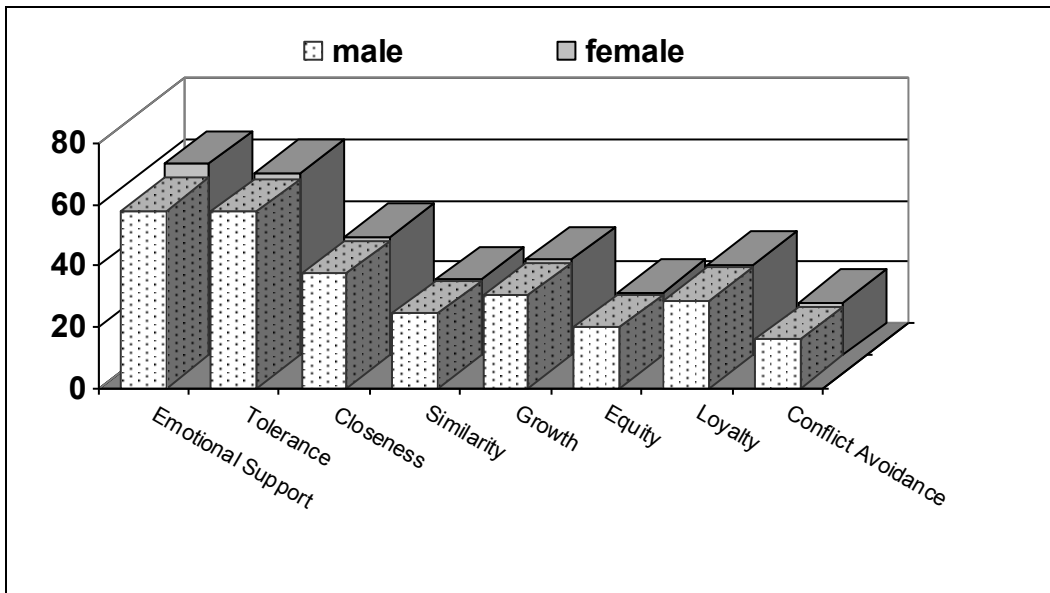
Figure 1. Mean scores by gender.

Discussion

Our results showed that the strategies most commonly used (at least in terms of arithmetical differences) by Mexicans to keep their friendship relations are: emotional support, tolerance, growth and conflict avoidance. These strategies reflect socio-cultural standards internalized by individuals regarding what they think helps maintain friendly relations. These standards are related to historical and socio-cultural premises that emphasize the value of love over power, courtesy, amiability, kindness and consideration to establish or maintain a good deal of relations with the group of reference. This group could be the family, the extended family, the community, the religious group and so forth; and all this, to have harmonic relationships full of cordiality. The basic idea of socio-cultural precepts is to secure a basis of group thinking, feelings and behaviors aimed at keeping friendly relationships. Likewise, Diaz-Guerrero (2003) mentions in "the Psychology of Mexican": "*Maybe Mexicans have gone too far in their way to be. They prefer to lose a discussion, money or time in order to keep their relationships in a good deal*" (p. 48).

These results show that there are significant gender differences in the four maintenance strategies. Females, more than males, express their affection and develop behaviors which make their friends feel important, providing support and unconditional acceptance and avoiding quarrels and fights. It seems that, to females, feeling affection for friends is the implicit strategy to keep friends. This is probably because, as Spence and Helmreich have remarked (1978), being sentimental, kind, understanding and affectionate are positive feminine traits, which is consistent with Diaz-Guerrero's (2003) findings, which state that females often opt for expressive and communicative manifestations.

Accordingly, cultures have a profound impact on how (and why) relationships might be (Goodwin & Pillay, 2006). The impact of male-female differences is clearly present in the results, in the way they relate to or socialize with each other, on what the participants in this study regard as significant ways in keeping friends. As stated by Diaz-Loving (2002), socio-culture prescribes rules and expectations on how women and men should behave affecting their interpersonal relationships. Bliezner and Adams (1992b) contended that men's friendships tend to be relatively more activity focused, whereas women's friendships tend to be more 'emotion focused'.

As a result of the importance of friendship, not only for Mexicans, but all human beings' interpersonal satisfaction, all friendship members seek long-lasting relationships. Taking into account the contributions by Diaz-Guerrero (2003) and by Sanchez-Aragón (2001) towards the characteristics of this kind of relationship (support, sharing ideas, experiences, listening and giving advice, freedom, respect, understanding and total acceptance of a person), the highly valued friendship concept is understandable. It symbolizes self-esteem, identification with other human beings, possibility of being sociable and –at the same time acceptable, and it also allows people to enhance their social skills while being exposed not only to criticism, but also to love.

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