Interpersonal Trust and Social Skill in Seeking Social Support Among Chinese and Americans

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The present study examined how social skills and interpersonal trust facilitate the support-seeking process in two different cultures, namely, those of China and the United States. Drawing from Sensitive Interactions Systems Theory and attachment theory, the current study examines the connections between social skill, interpersonal trust, the perceived appropriateness of seeking support, and the likelihood of displaying emotional distress to friends. Results indicated both similarities and differences between Americans and Chinese in terms of support seeking. Across both cultural groups, interpersonal trust was associated with appropriate help seeking, which, in turn, predicted the likelihood of showing emotional distress to friends. The two culture groups differed in terms of attenuating displays of distress (showing less than one actually feels). Among Chinese participants, attenuating displays of emotion was seen as positive and was associated with appropriateness. Among European Americans, attenuating displays of distress was negatively associated with appropriateness.

Keywords: cultural differences; interpersonal trust; social skills; social support

Seeking and receiving social support from trusted friends in times of crisis is fundamental to maintaining both mental and physical health (Burleson, 2003; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Accumulating evidence suggests that the receipt of social support not only contributes substantially to physical and psychological well-being when coping with a stressful life event (e.g., Seeman, 2001; Spiegel & Kimerling, 2001) but also constitutes a primary function of close relationships across American and international cultures (e.g., Mortenson, 2002; Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997; Xu & Burleson, 2001).

Despite the importance of providing support to close friends in need, potential helpers frequently do not volunteer their aid. As a result, distressed individuals often must provide some indication that they would like to be comforted and must actively seek support from those they trust (Cutrona, Suhr, & MacFarlane, 1990). As a "first act" in initiating supportive interactions, skillful support seeking often sets the stage for the entire social support process (Feng & Burleson, 2006). Moreover, the various strategies used to seek support not only influence whether potential helpers provide support but also strongly influence the suitability of the provided support to the problem at hand (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995).

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While receiving effective support involves obvious benefits, seeking social support from friends and family often involves risks and relational consequences that may discourage people from seeking that help. Support seekers may worry about burdening their friends and families and may also fear a loss of face due to the revelation of embarrassing problems and feelings (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). Beyond these interpersonal consequences, cultural factors may further compound the risks of seeking support. In East Asian cultures such as China and Japan, cultural norms discourage people from expressing emotional distress to friends and family for fear of disturbing relational harmony (Lee, 1996; Matsumoto, 1996; Taylor et al., 2004); although seeking support is often integral to maintaining emotional and physical well-being, many factors prevent people from getting the help they need.

Focus of the Current Study

Given the relational and cultural obstacles of seeking social support, it is essential to understand the kinds of factors that facilitate (rather than hinder) support seeking. Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) Sensitive Interactions Systems Theory (SIST) attempts to capture the delicacy and complexity of the support process by systematizing relationships between individual differences, cognitive appraisals, relational factors, and support behaviors. This theory provides typologies of support-seeking and support-provision behaviors, as well as a theoretical model of how these variables may be chained together to predict the outcome of a supportive interaction. As such, SIST provides a useful theoretical framework for examining how cultural and individual differences in social skill and interpersonal trust predict the perceived appropriateness of seeking support, as well as the likelihood of signaling emotional distress to friends.

The current study presents the first cross-cultural examination of SIST by assessing how cultural differences (among European Americans and Chinese) influence the support-seeking process. The current project also uses attachment theory to identify the kinds of individual differences that promote support seeking (Bowlby, 1982, 1988). Increasingly, support researchers are drawing from attachment theory to understand the origins of support-seeking behavior and how childhood relationships influence the ways people seek help as adults (Bartholomew, Cobb, & Poole, 1997; Sarason et al., 1991).

SIST

As outlined by Barbee and Cunningham (1995), SIST posits that help-seeker characteristics (e.g., gender, personality traits, social skills, support network size) influence the way people appraise the importance and controllability of their troubling situations. This, in turn, influences decisions to seek support in the face of

perceived relational and individual costs (e.g., face threat, reciprocity burdens, perceived demands on others) and to engage in support activation behaviors (e.g., asking for help, sighing, crying). Importantly, SIST maintains that the kind of activation behavior the distressed person uses to seek help does influence the kind and quality of support received. Specifically, support providers are more likely to provide solace or advice in response to a direct signal, such as a verbal request for help or nonverbal indicators of emotional upset (e.g., crying), than they are in response to an indirect behavior, such as hinting, sighing, or fidgeting (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Indirect behaviors allow for ambiguity and misunderstanding in interaction: Potential helpers may fail to realize the gravity of the situation or that a situation exists at all. While both indirect and direct behavior elicited helpful support such as giving comfort and advice, indirect behaviors were also more likely to elicit less helpful responses, such as dismissing the problem or changing the subject.

The current project focused on three of nine variables proposed by SIST to influence the seeking and provision of support: help-seeker characteristics, factors that influence decisions to seek support, and support activation behaviors. These variables and their relationship to attachment theory are discussed next.

Help-Seeker Characteristics and Attachment Theory

Barbee and Cunningham (1995) theorize that several social and individual differences influence people's decisions to seek support, as well as the manner in which they go about seeking it. Social characteristics include occupation, social position, gender and gender role, and support network density. Individual differences include sex-role orientation, social skills, support outcome expectations, and the expectation that others are willing and available to help one if necessary (i.e., perceived social support).

Research suggests that the predilection to seek support appears to be rooted in early attachment patterns with primary caregivers, such as parents (Sarason et al., 1991). Indeed, some theorists claim that, conceptually, social support and healthy attachment to parents are linked by some of the defining features of each construct (Bartholomew et al., 1997). Central to both constructs are perceptions that others are willing and available to help in times of trouble and perceptions that others value, accept, and care for one (Bartholomew, 1990; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). Consistent with this, research in attachment theory and support seeking suggests that individuals who maintain positive expectations about how others will treat them appear to have richer and healthier relationships and receive better social support from others. For example, one of the more studied help-seeker characteristics within SIST, the extent to which social support is perceived as available, is defined by the expectation that others are available and willing to help; this individual difference is believed to be a product of healthy attachment patterns. Sarason et al. (1991) reason that "individuals' generalized or global perceptions of social support availability may be an overarching schema derived from specific relationship experiences within

the family, especially experiences with parents" (p. 1071). Developmentally, perceived social support availability also helps build the confidence and social skills needed to form other relationships, which in turn increase a person's support resources in times of trouble (Sarason et al., 1991). Consonant with this line of reasoning, Sarason and her colleagues (1991) found that individuals reporting high perceived social support availability evaluated the actual support they received from others more positively than did individuals reporting low perceived social support availability. Perceived support availability was also associated with feelings of social competence and skill and with the sense that one is valued (Sarason et al., 1991). At the same time, researchers note that measures of perceived support availability are at best only modestly related to measures of social support actually received (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). In other words, while perceived support availability robustly predicts how people evaluate the support they get, it does not predict the amount of support they actually receive (Sarason et al., 1991).

Another variable that involves maintaining positive expectations of how others will treat one is interpersonal trust. Like perceived support availability, interpersonal trust, as a global orientation, is seen as a product of early attachment patterns in childhood. As expectations about the predictability of and dependability of the caregiver are formed, infants develop a secure sense of attachments that expand into a more global orientation toward trusting others (Bowlby, 1982). This generalized sense of interpersonal trust constitutes the expectation that an individual or group can be relied upon (Rotter, 1971). Theoretically, interpersonal trust is not understood as a dimension of trusting behavior *per se;* rather, interpersonal trust constitutes an antecedent condition to taking interpersonal risks and making oneself vulnerable to another person (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In terms of social support, trusting individuals are more likely to view seeking it as an appropriate course of action despite the potential risks. These individuals are more motivated to become vulnerable to a potential helper because they expect that people will respond to their request with benevolent intentions. Research suggests that global measures of interpersonal trust predict the amount of social support people report receiving. For example, persons scoring low in "generalized interpersonal trust" reported a lack of received social support (Bierhoff, 1992). Similarly, subsequent research (Lakey, Tardiff, & Drew, 1994) reported that high levels of interpersonal trust were associated with greater amounts of received support. These findings suggest that trustful people receive more social support because they are more willing to expose themselves to possible risks and seek help from others.

Another help-seeker characteristic described in SIST and attachment theory is social skill. Attachment theorists reason that social skills develop together with interpersonal trust during childhood. As an individual learns to trust parental figures in childhood, the sense of being valued and cared for within the family builds the confidence and social skills needed to form other relationships, which in turn increase a person's support resources in times of trouble (Sarason et al., 1991). As noted above,

people who believe that social support is readily available to them are more likely to see themselves as socially skilled and capable (Sarason et al., 1991).

Researchers also see social skill as important to effective support seeking. As Feng and Burleson (2006) argue, "[P]oorly crafted efforts to seek support may accomplish more harm than good; they may fail to obtain any support, garner the wrong type of support, damage the relationship between the seeker and helper, and exacerbate the seeker's coping difficulties" (p. 249). Recent research provides evidence for such reasoning: Socially skilled individuals reported receiving greater social support in times of crisis (Lopes et al., 2004). In contrast, individuals who lack the ability to accurately read the emotional states of others and are unskilled at initiating and managing social interactions suffer from a lack of social support (DiTommaso, Brannen, & Best, 2004).

Taken together, existing research and theory suggest that individual differences in interpersonal trust and social skill function as help-seeker characteristics that influence decisions to seek social support. Additionally, attachment theory and social support research suggest that both interpersonal trust and social skill are developed simultaneously within secure relationships with parents. Hence, it is likely that individual differences in interpersonal trust and self-perceived social skill should covary positively. This prompts the following research question:

> *Research Question 1 (RQ1):* Do levels of interpersonal trust and social skill covary in a positive manner for both European Americans and Chinese?

Cultural Norms of Appropriateness and Decisions to Seek Support

SIST proposes several factors that influence decisions about whether to seek social support, based on the perceived costs of asking for help. For example, persons who dread the loss of self-esteem that may accompany discussing problems, or who fear possible rejection by a potential helper, may decide to cope alone. Several studies indicate that the perceived cost of seeking support is a strong determinant of whether people seek aid (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Silver, Wortman, & Crofton, 1990).

Cross-cultural research suggests that in addition to interpersonal costs, cultures produce distinctly different normative orientations toward emotional distress that, in turn, influence how people decide to cope with crises. For example, members of East Asian cultures often view an individual's distressed emotional state as disruptive to the harmony of the social group (Wellenkamp, 1995). Distressed feelings not only are troublesome for the affected individual but also call inappropriate attention to the individuality and distinctiveness of the distressed party (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Moreover, in many East Asian nations, emotional crises are often associated more with a loss of face and feelings of shame than with feelings of frustration or anger (Matsumoto, 1996). Rather than instigate support seeking, shameful feelings commonly produce social withdrawal (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989).

In contrast to East Asian norms, "within the United States, a person's distressed emotional state is commonly viewed as something to be examined, shared, and explicitly explored in discourse" (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003, p. 120). A recent review of research suggests that compared to Japanese and Chinese, European Americans consider seeking help and overtly displaying emotional distress to be more appropriate means of coping with distress. In contrast, members of these East Asian cultures view self-coping and understated displays of emotional distress as more appropriate than do their American counterparts (Feng & Burleson, 2006).

The foregoing analysis assumes that, despite cultural differences, individual differences in interpersonal trust and social skill will predict the judged appropriateness of seeking support in both Chinese and European American culture groups. This claim is consistent with prior cross-cultural research suggesting that there are substantial transcultural similarities in emotional experiences, as well as in the circumstances that provoke certain emotions and lead to emotional change (Boucher, 1983; Lazarus, 1994; Scherer & Wallbott, 1994). Although cultural differences do appear, these often stand out against a backdrop of broader cultural similarities (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Feng & Burleson, 2006). For example, a recent study (Mortenson, 2006) found that both Chinese and American college students associated academic failure more with feelings of frustration than with feelings of shame. Further, students from both nations saw seeking support as more appropriate than coping alone (Mortenson, 2006). However, within these broad cultural similarities were more subtle cultural differences: Chinese students associated failure with shame more so than did Americans and also viewed solitary coping as more appropriate than did Americans. Similarly, Feng and Burleson (2006) suggest that although reliable cultural differences in support seeking exist, they are generally small in magnitude. This line of reasoning on cultural similarities and differences leads to the following hypotheses and the second research question:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Individual differences in interpersonal trust are positively associated with the appropriateness of seeking social support for both European Americans and Chinese.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Individual differences in social skill are positively associated with the appropriateness of seeking social support for both European Americans and Chinese.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Does culture significantly moderate the influence of interpersonal trust and social skill on the perceived appropriateness of seeking support?

Support Activation Behaviors

Barbee and Cunningham (1995) characterize their typology of support activation behaviors along two dimensions: verbal-nonverbal and direct-indirect. Their typology of verbal behaviors includes such strategies as asking for help, giving details about the problem, hinting, and complaining. Nonverbal behaviors include crying, pouting,

sighing, sulking, and fidgeting. As discussed above, research suggests that direct activation behaviors such as crying or asking for help are more likely to elicit helpful support than are indirect behaviors such as sighing or complaining.

The current study focuses on the support activation behavior of nonverbal displays of distress while in the presence of friends. Specifically, this study focuses on social displays of sadness and anxiety and on the extent to which people show their feelings openly or modify their emotional displays to show some (but not all) of what they feel. This choice of display behaviors is informed by Goldsmith's (1995) critique of Barbee and Cunningham's support activation typology. Goldsmith contends that the SIST typology blurs the line between verbal and nonverbal behaviors because nonverbal behaviors in the typology also contain verbal components. For example, the nonverbal behavior "crying" is defined as "[a behavior in which a person] actually cries or holds back tears while talking about the problem," and the nonverbal behavior "eye contact" includes the definition "looks partner in the eye while talking" (Goldsmith, 1995, p. 419).

Research concerning emotional regulation focuses more exclusively on nonverbal behaviors. Emotion regulation research distinguishes five classes of emotional display behaviors: showing the full extent of feeling, showing less than one is really feeling (attenuating), showing no feelings at all (inhibiting), masking one's feelings with a different expression (such as smiling when one is embarrassed), and intensifying one's feelings (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). People often modify their emotional displays for both prosocial and self-protective reasons. For example, feigning happiness when one is given a disappointing gift is a prosocial display; such a display reflects normative expectations of what is considered appropriate in public settings (Saarni, 1984). An example of a self-protective display is keeping a "stiff upper lip" (inhibiting emotion) when getting teased so as to avoid further torment and embarrassment (Gnepp & Hess, 1986).

An important initial step in the support-seeking process involves displaying verbal or nonverbal emotional distress cues to potential supporters. Displays of emotional distress fulfill various functions. They can signal both a state of need and the willingness to share one's troubles and feelings with a trusted other (Cutrona et al., 1990). Indeed, when experiencing emotional distress in the presence of friends or family members, people consider it more appropriate to show all, or at least some, of their feelings rather than show no emotion or try to mask their hurt with a smile (Mortenson, 2001). This suggests that two of the five display behaviors, clearly showing feelings and attenuating emotional displays (showing some but not all of what one feels), may function as support activation behaviors in close relationships. The current study suggests that help-seeker characteristics (interpersonal trust and social skill) influence the decision to seek support (how appropriate people feel it is to ask for help), which in turn predicts the likelihood of engaging in support-activation behaviors (displaying some or all of one's emotional upset to others).

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The perceived appropriateness of seeking support predicts the like-
lihood of displaying anxiety and sadness before friends.

Feng and Burleson (2006) suggest that while cultural variations in aspects of sup-
port seeking may be relatively small, they remain worthy of examination. These
researchers suggest that East Asians are often taught to minimize overt displays of
feelings, since these displays tend to disrupt the harmony and attentional focus of
in-groups such as friends and family. When emotions, especially negative emotions
such as anger and depression, are displayed, they are often expressed in an oblique
and understated manner (Lee, 1996). In contrast, people from Western cultures are
socialized to be more open in the expression of their thoughts, wants, and feelings
as a way of both enhancing interpersonal understanding and maintaining personal
psychological health (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). As
a result, they are more likely than East Asians are to rely on overt, direct support-
seeking strategies such as openly displaying emotional upset (Feng & Burleson,
2006). These findings suggest that cultural differences may influence how strongly
the perceived appropriateness of seeking support predicts the likelihood of clearly
showing emotional distress or attenuating displays of emotional distress. This
prompts the following research question:

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Does culture significantly moderate the association
between the perceived appropriateness of seeking social support and the likelihood
of engaging in full and attenuated displays of emotional distress?

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were taken from a sample of 556 students attending a
large Eastern university in the United States and a large university in Northern
Mainland China. Participants responded to a series of items that targeted their major
cultural/ethnic backgrounds (e.g., European American [white], Latino, Asian,
African, Middle Eastern). In order to control for ethnic differences within the U.S.
sample, only data from European Americans were used in these analyses. The final
U.S. sample consisted of 93 men and 144 women. Participants ranged in age from
18 to 26 years and were U.S. citizens by birth. Chinese participants were 268 col-
lege undergraduates who ranged in age from 19 to 24 years. Chinese students were
recruited from various departments and majors. Chinese participants responded to
questions that asked them to identify themselves as members of Taiwanese, Hong
Kong, or Mainland Chinese nationalities. Only data from Mainland Chinese partic-
ipants were used for these analyses. The final Chinese sample consisted of 130 men
and 112 women. The data in the present study were collected as part of larger,

international data collection that focused on different aspects of emotional management and social support. Another portion of data from this sample was used for analysis in Mortenson (2006).

Procedures

Two versions of all measures were employed in this study. One version, completed by European American participants, was written in Standard American English. A second version, completed by Chinese participants, was written in Mandarin Chinese. All materials for Chinese participants were translated into Chinese. Linguistic equivalency was obtained via the back-translation technique. Chinese language professors who were experienced in translating English texts were employed as translators. After signing an information sheet, participants logged onto a Web site that contained the measures used in the present study as well as a background information questionnaire designed to gather general information on sex, age, college status, major, and cultural background. European American participants also used a Web site to respond to the survey instruments used in this study.

Measures

Individual differences in social skill. Evaluations of social skill were assessed with items taken from Riggio's (1989) Social Skills Inventory (SSI). The SSI consists of six scales that measure individuals' perceptions of their social skills on two levels (emotional and social) and across three skill domains (control, expressivity, and sensitivity). As mentioned earlier, people who are confident in their social skills have larger support networks and are also secure in their knowledge that others are willing and available to help them. As a result, skilled individuals more readily seek and receive support than do people lacking in such skills. Consistent with this claim, DiTommaso et al. (2004) indicate that three of the six SSI subscales (emotional sensitivity, social control, and social expressivity) predict levels of received social support. Hence, items from those scales were consolidated into one 45-item scale.

The emotional sensitivity scale measures skill in receiving and interpreting the non-verbal cues of others. Individuals high in emotional sensitivity attend to and accurately interpret the subtle emotional cues of others (e.g., "I always seem to know what people's true feelings are no matter how hard they try to conceal them"). The social control scale measures skills at managing and guiding interactions and discussions in face-to-face conversations, group discussions, and public addresses (e.g., "When I am with a group of friends, I am often the spokesperson for the group"). The social expressivity scale measures skill at initiating and participating in interactions in face-to-face conversations and at social events like parties (e.g., "I usually take the initiative to introduce myself to strangers"). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each item on a 9-point Likert scale (9 = *strongly agree* to 1 = *strongly disagree*). In an

effort to streamline the structural equation modeling (SEM) models and present a more parsimonious analysis, means for each subscale were combined to form a single social skills score. The resulting scale proved reliable for both European American (α = .91) and Chinese (α = .85) participants.

The SSI has shown convergent validity with performance-based measures of communication skill (Riggio & Riggio, 2001) and has proven reliable in a number of studies (Riggio & Carney, 2003). Within the present study, confirmatory factor analyses and multigroup tests were utilized to confirm the cross-cultural invariance of the instrument. Confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the three-factor structure specified for the instrument for both cultural groups. The European American sample fit the data well (CFI = .96; RMSEA = .04; χ^2 = 91.0; df = 24), as did the Chinese sample (CFI = .95; RMSEA = .06; χ^2 = 91.0; df = 24). To measure the cross-cultural invariance of the factor structure, multigroup tests with equality constraints on all covariance paths were conducted. The chi-square difference test was used to determine model invariance (Hayduk, 1987; Rigdon, Schumaker, & Rothke, 1998). The chi-square difference tests showed no significant difference between the constrained and unconstrained models ($\Delta\chi^2_c$ [1] = 2.61, p = .19). Hence, the measurement model demonstrated cultural invariance.

Interpersonal trust. To assess interpersonal trust, three items were taken from Inglehart's (1997) World Values Survey. These items asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt people are generally fair and trustworthy (e.g., "Generally speaking, most people can be trusted"). Factor analyses were conducted separately for European American and Chinese data sets and confirmed the single-factor structure of the instrument for each cultural group. The factor accounted for 60% of the variance among European American participants and 61% of the variance among Chinese participants. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities were .90 for European Americans and .92 for Chinese participants.

Perceived appropriateness of seeking support. To assess the perceived appropriateness of seeking social support as a coping strategy, six items were taken from Folkman and Lazarus (1988) Ways of Coping Questionnaire. Three items assessed seeking advice as a form of support (e.g., "asking advice from a relative or friend I respect"), and three items reflected seeking emotional solace as a form of support (e.g., "accepting sympathy or understanding from someone"). Three new items were generated for the present study that reflected seeking tangible favors from others in order to solve a distressing situation (e.g., "asking a favor from someone who can help").

All nine support-seeking items asked participants to indicate how appropriate it would be to respond to an upsetting situation by engaging in the action specified by the item (e.g., "When upset, I think it is appropriate to ask a favor from someone who can help"). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each item on a 9-point Likert scale (9 = *strongly agree* to 1 = *strongly disagree*).

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables

	U.S.		China	
	M	σ	*M*	σ
Interpersonal trust	5.99	1.72	6.70	1.85
Social skill	4.48	1.11	4.54	1.51
Show emotion	7.03	1.92	5.42	2.06
Attenuate display	4.55	2.55	6.02	2.48
Solace	8.25	1.87	7.05	2.09
Advice	8.13	1.80	7.47	1.95
Favors	7.39	1.89	6.37	2.20

Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the three-factor structure specified for the instrument. The European American sample fit the data well (CFI = .95; RMSEA = .06; χ^2 = 74.3; *df* = 24). The Chinese sample had a CFI less than .95 and thus fit the data adequately (CFI = .93; RMSEA = .07; χ^2 = 184.7; *df* = 24). This was probably due to lower factor loadings on solace and advice variables in the Chinese model. Within the European American model, these variables loaded between .80 and .88. Within the Chinese model, solace and advice loaded between .60 and .73.

Once more, multigroup tests were conducted to test model equivalence across the two culture samples, and results showed no significant difference between constrained and unconstrained models ($\Delta\chi_c^2$ [1] = 1.34, *p* = .246). Hence, the measurement model demonstrated cultural invariance. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities were as follows: for European Americans, seeking solace (α = .88), seeking advice (α = .91), seeking favors (α = .86); and for Chinese, seeking solace (α = .72), seeking advice (α = .77), seeking favors (α = .89). Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for all variables in this study.

Signaling emotional distress. The tendency to signal emotional distress to friends was assessed with a series of items developed for this study. As discussed earlier, research in display rule behavior suggests that when people feel sad or anxious in front of friends and family, they view displaying some or all of their emotions as more appropriate than showing no emotions or masking their feelings. This suggests that two of the five display rule behaviors (attenuating and showing emotion fully) may function as support activation behaviors. Two two-item scales were developed to assess the perceived likelihood of nonverbally displaying anxiety or sadness to others (e.g., "If I am feeling anxious in front of my friends, I would show all of my anxiety to them," or "If I am feeling sad in front of my friends, I would show some, but not all, of my sadness to them"). Participants indicated their levels of agreement with each item on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). Factor analyses were conducted separately for European American and

Table 2
Correlation Matrix for All Variables

	Trust	Skill	Show	Attenuate	Solace	Advice	Favors
Interpersonal trust	—	.338**	.154**	.220**	.220**	.268**	.248**
Social skill	.229**	—	.059	.176**	.132*	.136*	.112*
Show emotion	.223**	.199**	—	−.059	.362**	.440**	.299**
Attenuate display	.027	.145**	−.293**	—	.184**	.186**	.132*
Solace	.241**	.150**	.495**	−.097*	—	.626**	.608**
Advice	.161**	.150**	.462**	−.059	.830**	—	.568**
Favors	.197**	.171**	.328**	.003	.694**	.627**	—

Note: Correlation coefficients above the diagonal represent Chinese participants, and coefficients below the diagonal represent European American participants.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

Chinese data sets and confirmed the two-factor structure of the instrument for each cultural group. Items representing partial displays of emotion loaded on the first factor and accounted for 50% of the variance among European American participants and 37% of the variance among Chinese participants. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities were ($\alpha = .79$) for European Americans and ($\alpha = .76$) for Chinese. Items representing full displays of sadness or anxiety accounted for 28% of the variance among European American participants and 31% among Chinese participants. Alpha reliabilities for these items were ($\alpha = .80$) for European Americans and ($\alpha = .72$) for Chinese.

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Model Design

Correlations among the variables tested in the model are featured in Table 2. Notably, all three types of support seeking (i.e., emotional support seeking, problem support seeking, tangible support seeking) were highly correlated with one another in both cultural groups, suggesting that neither group distinguished among these forms of support-seeking behaviors. Hence, the three support-seeking variables were combined into one composite variable, with the mean score for each subscale as the indicator. This allows for a more parsimonious analysis using one model to examine all the variables rather than a series of three models for each cultural group.

SEM Analyses

The support-seeking model consisted of three blocks based on variable relationships outlined in SIST (see Figure 1). The first block represented help-seeker characteristics and comprised the variables *social skill* and *interpersonal trust.* The second block represented factors related to the decision to seek social support and

Figure 1
**Theoretical Model of Individual Differences and Support Variables**
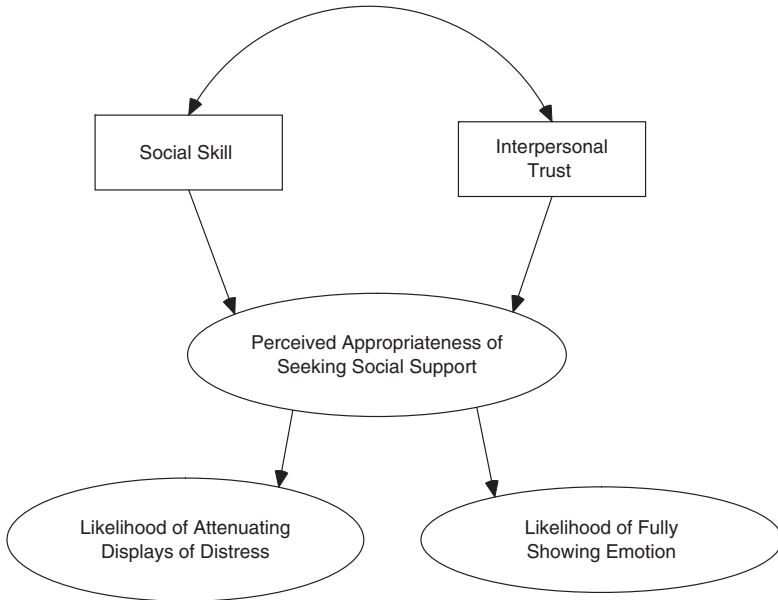
was composed of the variable *perceived appropriateness of seeking support*. The third block represented support activation behaviors and was composed of the variables *likelihood of attenuating displays of distress* and *likelihood of fully showing emotion*. The SEM analysis employed a maximum likelihood estimation procedure using AMOS 6.0 software (Arbuckle, 2003). The model fit the data for both cultural groups (European American: CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05, χ^2 = 54.2, *df* = 21; Chinese: CFI = .95, RMSEA = .06, χ^2 = 58.3, *df* = 21).

RQ1 inquired whether levels of interpersonal trust and social skill are positively correlated across both European American and Chinese participants. Within the European American model (Figure 2), both individual difference factors covaried positively and significantly with one another (β = .23, *p* < .05). This was also true within the Chinese model (Figure 3); both social skill and interpersonal trust covaried positively (β = .34, *p* < .05). Thus, RQ1 was answered in the affirmative.

H1 predicted that individual differences in interpersonal trust would be positively associated with the appropriateness of seeking social support for both European Americans and Chinese. Within the European American model, the pathway from interpersonal trust to perceived appropriateness was significant (β = .21, *p* < .05). This was also true for the Chinese model; interpersonal trust significantly predicted

Figure 2
European American Model
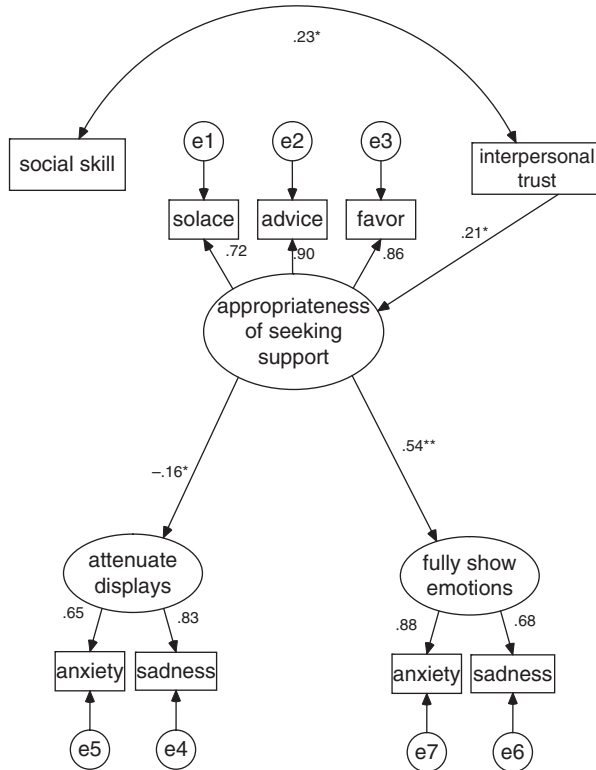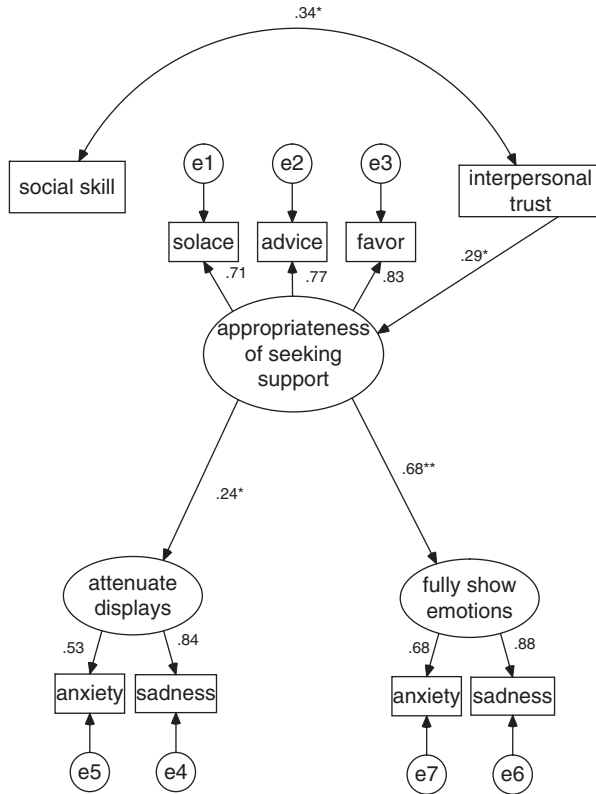

Note: All regressions are standardized. Only significant regression paths are shown here.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

the perceived appropriateness of seeking social support ($\beta = .29$, $p < .05$). Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that individual differences in social skill would be positively associated with the appropriateness of seeking social support for both European Americans and Chinese. However, the path between social skill and perceived appropriateness failed to achieve significance in both the European American model ($\beta = .11$, $p = .07$) and the Chinese model ($\beta = .06$, $p = .36$). Interestingly, social skill was significantly (albeit weakly) correlated with the appropriateness of seeking all three types of social support within each cultural group (see Table 2). However, when tested within the theorized structural model of variables, the predictive influence of social skills was rendered insignificant. Consequently, H2 was not supported.

Figure 3
Chinese Model

Note: All regressions are standardized. Only significant regression paths are shown here.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

RQ2 inquired whether culture moderates the influence of interpersonal trust and social skill on the perceived appropriateness of seeking support. Multigroup analyses were employed for this test. Equality constraints were placed on the path from interpersonal trust to perceived appropriateness, However, the chi-square difference test failed to produce a significant change (Δ_c^2 [1] = 1.01, p = .3). Hence, RQ2 is answered in the negative.

H3 predicted that the perceived appropriateness of seeking support would predict the likelihood of displaying anxiety and sadness in front of friends. Within the European American sample, the perceived appropriateness of seeking support was positively associated with the likelihood of fully showing emotion (β = .54, $p <$ .001). However, the perceived appropriateness of seeking support was negatively

associated with attenuating displays of emotion ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$). Within the Chinese model, the perceived appropriateness of seeking support predicted the likelihood of fully showing emotion ($\beta = .68$, $p < .001$) and attenuating displays of emotion ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$). Although these results are mixed, H3 is largely supported by these analyses.

RQ3 inquired whether cultural differences significantly moderate the association between the perceived appropriateness of seeking social support and the likelihood of engaging in full or attenuated displays of emotional distress. Multigroup tests produced significant differences in chi-square values for both fully showing emotion ($\Delta_c^2 [1] = 4.0$, $p < .05$) and attenuating displays of emotion ($\Delta_c^2 [1] = 10.01$, $p < .01$), with Chinese participants showing the stronger association in both cases. Thus, RQ3 is answered affirmatively.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine factors that facilitate seeking social support in two different cultures, namely the Chinese and European American cultures. Receiving emotional support during times of crisis and stress is essential for emotional and physical health (Burleson, 2003; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). However, help often does not materialize instantaneously and automatically. Thus, distraught persons must actively seek help from a friend or family member by making their support needs known. SIST and attachment theory predict that individuals who maintain positive expectations about how others will treat them (i.e., have a high degree of interpersonal trust) enjoy higher-quality social support than do people who are unsure of how their friends or family will respond to their crises. Both theories also suggest that in addition to interpersonal trust, people with a high level of social skill have developed more extensive social networks to draw upon in times of crisis, as well as the confidence to ask for help when life becomes overwhelming.

The results of the current study indicate that interpersonal trust, but not social skill, predicted how appropriate participants felt it was to ask for help when they were upset. The perceived appropriateness of seeking support in turn predicted the likelihood of fully showing sadness and anxiety while in the presence of friends. The links between social skill, interpersonal trust, appropriateness of asking for help, and fully displaying emotional distress to friends were not influenced by differences in culture. Cultural differences did emerge in relation to attenuating displays of distress to others (showing some, but not all, of what one feels). For European Americans, the perceived appropriateness of seeking support was negatively related to attenuating displays of distress to friends. In contrast, among Chinese participants, the perceived appropriateness of seeking support was positively related to attenuating displays of distress.

These results provide empirical support for SIST and also address some of the criticisms of Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) theory. For example, the current data support the theorized links between a help-seeker's individual characteristics, elements that factor into the decision to seek help, and the likelihood of engaging in specific support activation behaviors. Prior research utilizing SIST has focused more on support providers than on support seekers. Given the comprehensive and complex nature of SIST (and the social-support process in general), it is important for researchers to assess and test different variables and their relationships in order to evaluate SIST's predictions. The current study also extends the theory's understanding of what people consider when deciding to request help. Currently, SIST only examines the personal and relational costs of asking for help. Cross-cultural research in social support suggests that cultural values influence how appropriate it is to seek help. Such normative orientations serve to encourage Westerners to seek support but discourage East Asians from doing so. Including the perceived appropriateness of seeking support usefully extends SIST's typology beyond such concerns as face threat or obligations to others, to illustrate how more global orientations influence support seeking. The current study was also informed by Goldsmith's (1995) critique of SIST's support activation behavior typology. Goldsmith argued that because nonverbal items in the typology contain verbal components (e.g., "actually cries or holds back tears while talking about the problem"), the typology blurs the line between verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The current study's examination of purely nonverbal display behaviors addresses this concern and further suggests that nonverbal displays of emotional distress can function as requests for social support. Finally, the results reported here represent the first cross-cultural test of SIST. The results of this study largely support the theory's predictions regarding individual differences, decisions to seek support, and support activation behaviors in two distinct cultural groups.

The current project holds important implications for cross-cultural work in support seeking. Previous research has demonstrated reliable cultural differences suggesting that members of East Asian cultures seek and receive less social support than do people from the United States and other Western nations such as Britain and Canada. What is currently missing from our understanding of culture and social support are insights into what facilitates (rather than hinders) support seeking in the face of cultural deterrents. This omission is probably due to the fact that support research has generally highlighted cultural values that discourage support seeking in East Asia but has failed to examine transcultural characteristics that may facilitate help seeking at the individual level (e.g., Chang, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004).

Feng and Burleson (2006) claim that people across cultures are generally similar in the value they place on social support as well as in the techniques they use to marshal support when it is needed. Indeed, these are the results of the present study as well. Across both cultural groups, trustful individuals perceived that seeking support was an appropriate way to cope with emotional upset. Further, among both European

American and Chinese participants, perceptions of the appropriateness of seeking support strongly predicted the likelihood of fully showing the extent of one's feelings.

Such findings are consistent with the concept that amid the considerable diversity of cultural values, there exist universal aspects of human needs, behaviors, cognitions, and emotions (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Boucher, 1983; Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; Inghilleri, 1999; Lazarus, 1994). Although culture itself does not produce human needs, cultural value systems influence the expression of such needs through behavior and cognition (Brown & Kobayshi, 2003). Amid broad cultural similarities, the results of the current study also show that culture influenced the way people expressed their need for support: Americans appeared unlikely to attenuate their displays of emotional distress, whereas Chinese were more likely to show only some of what they felt to their friends as a way of signaling their desire for help.

Another human universal that exists in varying degrees within all cultures is interpersonal trust (Inglehart, 1997). In nations with relatively high levels of interpersonal trust (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Canada, United States), people put greater value on interpersonal connection and belonging, tolerance for others, and free expression. Within nations where interpersonal trust levels are relatively low (e.g., Turkey, Nigeria, Slovenia, Brazil), people are more concerned with controlling crime, maintaining national order, and economic survival (Inglehart, 1997). While most "trustful" cultures tend to be Western European or North American, Mainland China embodies a culture of trust roughly equal to that of the United States (Inglehart, 1997). Within the present study, the transcultural nature of interpersonal trust was demonstrated by the linkages—between interpersonal trust and social skill and between interpersonal trust and the appropriateness of seeking support—for both Chinese and European Americans.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study concerns the samples that were used. Both American and Chinese samples were made up of relatively young and college-educated participants. The lack of middle-aged, elderly, or non-college-educated adults in the sample employed here limits the generalizability of the results. Another limitation involves measures such as social skill, interpersonal trust, and seeking support, all of which were developed originally with Western samples only and thus are informed predominantly by Western ideas. It is possible that the Chinese hold distinctly different views of what constitutes social skill, interpersonal trust, and social support. Several precautions were taken to ensure that the questionnaires and procedures used in this study would be viewed as realistic by Chinese participants (e.g., using native-born Chinese informants to assess the realism of wording employed in items and having participants complete a version of the questionnaire translated into their native language).

The failure of the social skills instrument to significantly predict the support-seeking variables may represent another limitation to the current study. It may be that motivational factors such as interpersonal trust predict the likelihood of seeking support (or displaying emotional distress to others), whereas abilities such as social skill predict the effectiveness of the behaviors used to seek support. Future studies should seek to examine how individual differences in abilities and skills influence the quality of support-seeking behaviors.

Despite such limitations, the findings presented here usefully build upon and expand research in social support and cross-cultural studies. By employing structural equation modeling, the current study was able to test a system of variables specified by SIST and, further, to examine how cultural differences influence the links between individual differences and support-seeking variables.

Appendix

Signaling Emotions Items

If I am feeling anxious in front of my friends, I would show all of my anxiety to them.

If I am feeling sad in front of my friends, I would show all my sadness to them.

If I am feeling sad in front of my friends, I would mask my sadness with a smile.

If I am feeling anxious in front of my friends, I would mask my anxiety with a smile.

If I am feeling sad in front of my friends, I would show less sadness than I feel.

If I am feeling anxious in front of my friends, I would show less anxiety than I feel.

Seeking Tangible Support Items

When I am upset, I think it is appropriate to ask a favor of someone who can help.

When I am upset, I think it is appropriate to find someone who can do something to fix my problem.

When I am upset, I think it is appropriate to ask a favor of someone who can influence the situation.

Note

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