Social networks in the school context: Effects of culture and gender

Miri Scharf & Rachel Hertz-Lazarowitz
University of Haifa

Abstract

Similarities and differences in children's interpersonal relationships were assessed through examination of the effects of culture and gender as reflected in the quality of children's relationships in their social network at school. Two cultural contexts representing collectivistic and individualistic orientations were studied. Questionnaires were completed by 1449 fourth- and fifth-grade students (604 Arab and 845 Jewish students) regarding their best friend, their class peers, their homeroom teacher, and their class climate. As expected, findings demonstrated better quality of peer relationships among Arab students (from a relatively collectivistic culture) and among boys, whereas Jewish students (from a relatively individualistic culture) and girls showed better quality of best-friend relationships than their counterparts. The results also highlighted a similarity in children's relationships for both cultures and both genders, reflected in the highest intimacy of best-friend relationships.

Key words: childhood • culture • friendships • peer relations

The present study examined the effects of culture and gender as reflected in the quality of children’s relationships in their social networks at school during pre-adolescence. Four major potential sources of support were investigated, contextual and interpersonal: children’s relationships with their best friends, with class peers, and with the homeroom teacher, as well as the class climate.

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Class climate and various interpersonal relationships at school

Different interpersonal relationships or contexts may serve as sources of emotional and instrumental support for children (Furman, 1989; Furman & Robbins, 1985), although they may differ in their centrality in children’s lives and in their contribution to children’s adaptation.

Friendships (with best friends as well as with other special close friends) are believed to be vital for the acquisition of skills and competencies essential for children’s social, cognitive, and emotional development (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). High-quality friendships fulfill intimacy needs, and function as a secure base from which children explore the intellectual and social arenas, and as a safe haven in times of difficulty. Nevertheless, children’s social relationships are not without negative aspects (Hartup & Stevens, 1997).

Similarly, class peers can be a source of emotional support, and can provide children with a sense of security (Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995). The quality of classroom peer relationships was found to influence children’s adaptation to the school environment and was associated with later adjustment in life (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987). Peer relationships may serve similar functions to those served by friendships, although to a lesser extent (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996).

Recently, homeroom teachers were also identified as significant figures in the school environment with whom children can form close dyadic relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1996). Teachers can provide support and, according to some studies, they can serve as a secure base from which children can explore their surroundings (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992, 1997; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). In addition, positive relationships with teachers may facilitate children’s successful adaptation to the school environment, socially, emotionally, and academically (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 1993).

Children may derive emotional security and feelings of confidence from the general school and class climate (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997; Hertz-Lazarowitz & Sharan, 1979). Children in a favorable school climate are likely to feel more comfortable at school, and are in a better position to optimize the learning opportunities presented to them (Birch & Ladd, 1996).

Children may turn to different significant figures in their social network for different types of support – emotional, instrumental, academic, and social (Burleson & Kunkel, 1996; Furman, 1989; Hunter & Youniss, 1982). For example, students seemed to turn to teachers primarily for opportunities for self-expression and for standards of performance, whereas they turned to friends and peers primarily for companionship and emotional support. Some children may favor one relationship over others or prefer different figures depending on the situation (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1990). The child’s relative preferences are also context bound and may reflect the ease the child feels in the specific relationship, the type of desired help vis-a-vis the figure’s expertise, or the scripted cultural preference to favor specific types of relationships over others.
Cultural influences on children’s personal relationships

Several relationship researchers have argued that children’s relationships are affected by their cultural context (Cheng, Bond, & Chan, 1995; Schneider, Smith, Poisson, & Kwan, 1997; Verkuyten & Masson, 1996). However, the extensive literature on children’s personal relationships focuses almost exclusively on children living in North American and Western European societies (Parker et al., 1995). In the present study, we followed Schneider and colleagues’ (1997) suggestion to examine the influence of culture on children’s interpersonal relationships in order ‘to distinguish between those aspects of child development that may emerge as species-related and universal and those that are sensitive to cultural differences’ (p. 146).

For example, Krappmann (1996) suggested that prosperous social groups whose survival is guaranteed enable their members to have voluntary and private friendships. However, this type of friendship might be limited in groups living under unfavorable conditions, because the relative independence of the friendships may compete with kin relationships and institutional roles that are vital for the existence of the cultural group (Gans, 1962).

The cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism seems especially relevant to the interpersonal relationships of individuals within society (Gudyknust & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Schneider et al., 1997). In collectivistic societies, connectedness and reciprocity among in-group members, who are related in a network of interlocking responsibilities and obligations, are highly important (Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996; Sinha & Naidu, 1994). By contrast, individualistic societies emphasize autonomy, emotional independence, right to privacy, a need for specific relations, and personalized relationships characterized by more intimate and risky interpersonal exchange (Hofstede, 1980). These cultural characteristics may be reflected in the different relationship systems. Specifically, in collectivistic cultures, relationships within this larger social network are expected to have a higher quality than in individualistic cultures. By contrast, in individualistic cultures, dyadic relationships are expected to have a higher quality than in collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994).

In line with this suggestion, Chen and Rubin (1992) found Canadian children (representing an individualistic culture) to be more accepting of their best friends than Chinese children (representing a more collectivist culture). Though surprised by their findings, the authors suggested that Chinese children may be less accepting of their close friends because they tend to form small, well-defined ‘cliques.’ It might be the case that within these cliques their need for closeness is fulfilled so that they do not invest as much in the dyadic relationships with their best friends. In line with this argument, another study showed that Chinese kindergartners engaged in more helping and sharing activities with peers than did their Canadian counterparts (Orlick, Zhou, & Partington, 1990).

Similar results emerged when another context of collective living was investigated. The Israeli kibbutz is a small cooperative community in which
material property is communally owned and many responsibilities are shared, the most salient being child care. As reported by Sharabany and Wiseman (1997), compared with city children, children raised in the kibbutz reported being less intimate with their best friends on several aspects of intimacy. Although they reported doing more activities with their best friends, they were less open and communicative with them and reported less trust and less exclusiveness in the relationships than city children. Kibbutz adolescents also self-disclosed to a lesser extent than city adolescents, and their expressions were less emotional. One interpretation of these findings was that children raised in the communal environment of the kibbutz do not invest as much in close friendships because their sense of closeness and security is satisfied through the community. Additionally, it was suggested that the over-involvement inherent in the communal life style may drive children to reduced intimacy in dyadic relationships in an effort to keep personal autonomy and identity (Sharabany & Wiseman, 1997). Together, these findings underscore the differential quality of peer and best-friend relationships in individualistic and collectivistic environments.

In the present study, two cultural contexts in Israel, one representing a collectivist orientation (the Arab culture), the other representing a more individualistic orientation (the Jewish culture), were studied. Arabs constitute a large minority in Israel. According to the Israeli Statistical Yearbook 2002, 19% of the Israeli population are Arabs. Generally, they live in their own communities, and they have separate school systems for their children, where studies are conducted in Arabic. In the Arab society, the centrality of family is emphasized (Lawson, 1977; Weller, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1993), and members of the extended family maintain extensive close relationships by mutual commitment to each other. There is an overlap between acquaintances and kin, and the peer group frequently consists of first, second, and even third cousins (Seginer, 1992). Arab children have several circles of peer relationships, the innermost one consisting of siblings and two more consisting of neighborhood and school friends, and of blood relatives (Seginer, 1995). From early childhood, education is oriented toward society, and solidarity, cooperation, and helpfulness when interacting with in-group members is stressed (Sharabi, 1975).

Despite also being a society with strong communal values, the Jewish culture in Israel more closely resembles the Western–individualistic culture, in which individual achievements and self-determination are important (Katriel, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Despite heterogeneity in the culture, the Israeli Jewish family is mainly of a nuclear type stressing democratic family relations, and espousing individualistic values similar in many ways to other Western countries (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003). In line with this difference between the cultures, Schwarz (1994) found that Israeli Arabs were distinguished from Israeli Jews on several dimensions of values relevant to the individualistic and collectivistic distinction. For example, Jews evaluated affective and intellectual autonomy more highly than Arabs, and Arab adolescents showed stronger preferences for collectivistic cultural norms (e.g., connectedness with one’s family and community)
than their Jewish counterparts (Jarrous-Absawy, 1999). Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in general, social relationships of Israeli children (Arab and Jewish) resemble the social relationships of North American middle-class children (Elbedour, Shulman, & Kedem, 1997; Sharabany & Wiseman, 1997; Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997). For example, friendships include emotional and instrumental aspects, and intimacy is especially important during the adolescent years. Similarly, the major dimensions of peer group evaluations were also found to be relevant among Jewish students (Krispin, Sternberg, & Lamb, 1992).

Considering the characteristics of the collectivistic versus the individualistic orientations, we hypothesized that the quality of children’s relationships with their best friend and homeroom teacher (dyadic relationships) would be higher among Jewish students than among Arab students, whereas the quality of relationships with class peers and the perceived quality of the school and class climate would be higher among Arab students than among Jewish students. Additionally, we explored which of the relationships would be more intimate and would show higher quality in each culture.

**Gender and children’s personal relationships**

A similar differentiation of various relationships as providing social and emotional support may characterize the two sexes, which Maccoby (1990) termed two distinctive ‘cultures.’ It was suggested that women are socialized to place high importance on interdependence, whereas men value independence and competition (Caldwell & Paplau, 1982). Several scholars have argued that the sexes differ in the quality and nature of their relationships with others (Maccoby, 1990). Gilligan suggested that, whereas females are concerned with inclusion, exclusion, and caring, and largely define themselves in relation to others, males are interested in dominance, submission, and justice (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990). Buhrmester (1996) suggested that both sexes form strong connections with others of the same sex, but boys’ friendships are more extensively focused on agentic concerns, whereas girls’ friendships focus more on communal concerns.

Several studies have found that females were more dyadic, exclusive, expressive, and intimate in their same-sex friendships than males, focused more on emotional sharing, and had fewer friends (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987; Caldwell & Paplau, 1982; Eder & Hallinan, 1978). Accordingly, by middle childhood, boys form groups more than girls, and girls interact in dyads and triads more than boys (Belle, 1989; Benenson, 1996; Thorne, 1986). Thus, it seems that girls perceive dyadic relationships as the major place for the give-and-take of emotional exchange, whereas boys are less selective in their target network (Belle, 1989). Note that research on sex differences has been primarily conducted with children in Western societies, so these results may or may not apply to children in other cultures.

We hypothesized that the quality of the relationships with the best friend and homeroom teacher, which are dyadic in nature, would be higher among girls, whereas the quality of the relationships with class peers and the class
climate would be higher among boys. Additionally, we set out to examine which of the relationships would be more intimate and would show higher quality in each sex.

**Method**

**Sample and procedure**
Participants were 1449 fourth- and fifth-grade students: 604 Arabs and 845 Jews (682 boys: 288 Arabs and 394 Jews; 767 girls: 316 Arabs and 451 Jews). Arab and Jewish students have separate school systems, and they learn in their native languages (Arabic and Hebrew). They were sampled from 56 mixed-sex classes at 14 schools in nine locations in northern Israel, mostly from the lower range of the middle class. A booklet of questionnaires was administered in the school setting during a one-and-a-half hour class period, in Hebrew or Arabic as relevant. Research assistants introduced the project, then read out a few sample items, and demonstrated how to complete the questionnaires. Participants filled out a background questionnaire, and then answered questionnaires regarding their best friend, their class peers, their homeroom teacher, and finally their class and school climate.

**Measures**
The Friendship Qualities Scale (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994) is a multidimensional questionnaire designed to assess the quality of children's relationships with their best friends. The measure was independently translated into each language (Arabic/Hebrew) by two translators (total of four) who were native speakers of English and Arabic or of English and Hebrew. Then, their translations were compared, disagreements were discussed, and a final version in each language was constructed. In this study, we employed three versions of the questionnaire with regard to the three investigated relationships, namely best friend, class peers, and homeroom teacher.

Participants were asked to indicate on a 1 (not true) to 5 (really true) rating scale the extent to which each of the statements was true for each specific relationship. The best-friend version included five dimensions: companionship (e.g., ‘My friend thinks of fun things for us to do together’); help (e.g., ‘My friend helps me when I am having trouble with something’); conflict (e.g., ‘My friend can bug me or annoy me even though I ask him not to’); security (e.g., ‘If there is something bothering me, I can tell my friend about it, even if it is something I cannot tell other people’); and closeness (e.g., ‘Sometimes my friend does things for me, or makes me feel special’).

The same statements were repeated with regard to children's class peers and homeroom teacher with the necessary adaptations. In reference to class peers, the children were asked to report to what extent these statements were descriptive of their class peers in general, and not just their friendship group, if they had one. This was aimed to reflect the student’s perception regarding his or her classmates (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). The companionship and conflict scales were not included in the teacher’s version because their content was not applicable to that relationship.

Employing the questionnaire to study best-friend relationships, Bukowski et al. (1994) reported a high level of internal consistency for each dimension (Cronbach’s α ranged from .71 to .86). The validity of the scale was indicated...
by higher ratings for mutual friends than for nonmutual friends, and higher ratings for stable friends than for nonstable friends.

In the present study, we constructed two aggregate scales: companionship and help (r = .52 for friends and r = .58 for class peers), representing the more instrumental dimension of the relationships (Burleson, 1997), and security and closeness (r = .58 for friends, r = .53 for class peers, and r = .71 for teachers), reflecting the expressive dimension. We decided to keep the conflict scale separate, as this was the only scale tapping a negative aspect. Cronbach’s α reliabilities in our study were as follows: .76 for companionship and help, .45 for conflict, and .78 for security and closeness in the best-friend relationships. The reliabilities for the class peers relationships were .82 for companionship and help, .56 for conflict, and .81 for security and closeness; and, for relationships with the homeroom teacher, reliabilities were .75 for help and .76 for closeness and security. Although the conflict scales demonstrated low reliabilities, the items comprising the scale demonstrate appropriate face validity (e.g., ‘I can get into fights with my friend’). The low reliabilities of the conflict scales may reflect the relatively small number of items on this scale (four items).

To explore the ordering of the quality of relationships, we also constructed a composite scale, termed ‘intimacy,’ based on the closeness, security, and help scales that were employed for the best-friend, class peers, and homeroom teacher relationships. As indicated before, the companionship and conflict scales were not included in the teacher’s version because their content was not applicable to that relationship. To be able to compare the three relationships, we needed to construct an analogous scale for all three relationships. The composite intimacy scales for each relationship showed adequate internal reliabilities: .83 for best friends, .89 for class peers, and .84 for homeroom teachers.

The Classroom Climate Questionnaire (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Od-Cohen, 1992) is a self-report questionnaire designed to describe the academic and social environment of the class. Participants were asked to indicate on a 1 (not true) to 5 (really true) rating scale the extent to which each of the statements characterized their class. It has been used in many studies with internal reliabilities ranging from .75 to .85. The revised version employed in this study included 13 items that trace the student’s general perception of and attitude toward the class and the school (Cronbach’s α = .81).

Results

Relationships with best friend

A MANOVA followed by univariate ANOVAs was conducted for the best-friend relationships. Cultural background and sex served as independent variables, and ratings of relationship qualities served as dependent variables. Sex (F(3,1443) = 19.08, p < .001) and cultural background (F(3,1443) = 30.43, p < .001) were significant. The two-way interaction was not significant. As can be seen in Table 1, Jewish students reported higher levels of security and closeness with their best friends, and lower levels of conflict with them, than did Arab students. There were no other significant cultural differences. With regard to sex, as hypothesized, girls reported higher levels of companionship and help, and higher levels of security and closeness, than did boys in the relationship with their best friend. No sex differences emerged relating to conflict with best friend.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Arabs (n = 604)</th>
<th>Jews (n = 845)</th>
<th>Boys (n = 682)</th>
<th>Girls (n = 767)</th>
<th>Cultural background</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Best friend</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companionship and help</td>
<td>4.05 0.76</td>
<td>4.00 0.81</td>
<td>3.89 0.79</td>
<td>4.14 0.77</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>40.79***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>2.89 0.93</td>
<td>2.49 1.07</td>
<td>2.67 0.94</td>
<td>2.65 1.11</td>
<td>53.94***</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security and closeness</td>
<td>4.02 0.79</td>
<td>4.19 0.75</td>
<td>3.96 0.80</td>
<td>4.26 0.71</td>
<td>16.52***</td>
<td>54.38***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class peers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companionship and help</td>
<td>3.61 0.89</td>
<td>3.45 0.91</td>
<td>3.52 0.89</td>
<td>3.51 0.91</td>
<td>10.57***</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>3.21 0.96</td>
<td>3.20 0.85</td>
<td>3.24 0.90</td>
<td>3.18 0.89</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security and closeness</td>
<td>3.56 0.99</td>
<td>3.16 1.04</td>
<td>3.37 1.02</td>
<td>3.28 1.05</td>
<td>54.93***</td>
<td>3.19+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homeroom teacher</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help</td>
<td>4.15 0.95</td>
<td>4.21 0.88</td>
<td>3.98 0.96</td>
<td>4.37 0.81</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>68.78***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security and closeness</td>
<td>3.82 0.97</td>
<td>3.73 0.99</td>
<td>3.55 1.01</td>
<td>3.95 0.92</td>
<td>3.60+</td>
<td>59.96***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class climate</td>
<td>3.96 0.82</td>
<td>3.80 0.75</td>
<td>3.66 0.82</td>
<td>4.05 0.71</td>
<td>4.12+</td>
<td>106.03***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* + p < .10; *p < .05; *** p < .001.
Relationships with class peers
A MANOVA followed by univariate ANOVAs was conducted for relationships with class peers. Cultural background and sex served as independent variables, and ratings of relationship qualities served as dependent variables. Cultural background \( (F(3,1431) = 22.84, p < .001) \) was significant, and sex \( (F(3,1431) = 2.45, p = .06) \) approached significance. The two-way interaction was not significant. As can be seen in Table 1, Arab students perceived higher levels of companionship and help, and higher levels of security and closeness in their relationships with class peers than did Jewish students. Boys showed a tendency \( (p < .07) \) to have higher security and closeness ratings with class peers than girls.

Relationships with teacher
Finally, a MANOVA followed by univariate ANOVAs was conducted for the teacher relationships. As before, cultural background and sex served as independent variables, and ratings of relationship qualities served as dependent variables. Sex \( (F(2,1419) = 39.28, p < .001) \) and cultural background \( (F(2,1419) = 7.43, p < .001) \) were significant. The two-way interaction was not significant. As can be seen in Table 1, girls reported higher levels of help, security, and closeness in their relations with their homeroom teacher than did boys. However, although the cultural background effect of the MANOVA was significant neither of the two follow-up ANOVAs reached significance. Nonetheless, there was a trend for Arab students \( (p < .06) \) to report higher levels of closeness and security with their homeroom teachers than those reported by Jewish students.

Because all the students in the class described the same person (the homeroom teacher), an analysis by class \( (n = 56) \) was also performed. These results replicated the ones described earlier, with individual respondents rather than classes as the unit of measurement.

Class climate
The ANOVA, with cultural background and sex serving as independent variables and class climate serving as a dependent variable, showed a significant sex effect and a significant cultural effect. The two-way interaction effect was not significant. Girls perceived the class climate more positively than boys, and Arab students perceived the class climate more positively than Jewish students.

Relative intimacy in the various relationships
A MANOVA was conducted with cultural background, sex, and type of relationship (friendships, class peers, and homeroom teacher) as independent variables (the last variable as a repeated measure) and the composite intimacy scale as the dependent variable. Reflecting the findings reported earlier, the main effects of sex \( (F(1,1419) = 35.56, p = .001) \), cultural background \( (F(1,1419) = 4.50, p = .03) \), and type of relationship \( (F(1,1419) = 515.84, p = .001) \) were significant. Additionally, there were significant two-way interactions between sex and type of relationship \( (F(1,1419) = 49.32, p = .001) \), and between cultural background and type of relationship \( (F(1,1419) = 19.21, p = .001) \). The three-way interaction was not significant.

The two-way interactions between cultural background and type of relationship, and between sex and type of relationship required an examination of simple effects, specifically of the differences among the three relationships for
TABLE 2
Intimacy of the three relationships according to cultural background and sex
(means and standard deviations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Arab students</th>
<th>Jewish students</th>
<th>Boys (n = 682)</th>
<th>Girls (n = 767)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy with best friend (A)</td>
<td>4.02 0.74</td>
<td>4.13 0.72</td>
<td>3.93 0.74</td>
<td>4.23 0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy with homeroom teacher (B)</td>
<td>3.91 0.89</td>
<td>3.87 0.90</td>
<td>3.69 0.92</td>
<td>4.07 0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy with class peers (C)</td>
<td>3.52 0.96</td>
<td>3.13 0.99</td>
<td>3.36 0.96</td>
<td>3.23 1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired t-tests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*** p &lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A versus B</td>
<td>3.35***</td>
<td>8.02***</td>
<td>6.60***</td>
<td>5.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A versus C</td>
<td>13.04***</td>
<td>31.58***</td>
<td>17.10***</td>
<td>27.44***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B versus C</td>
<td>9.09***</td>
<td>20.38***</td>
<td>8.10***</td>
<td>22.46***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p <.001.

Each cultural background and for each sex. Because type of relationship was a repeated measure, paired post-hoc t-tests were conducted for each cultural group separately and for each sex separately, comparing intimacy levels across the three relationships.

In general, a similar pattern was revealed for both cultures and both sexes. As can be seen in Table 2, the quality of the relationship with the best friend was the highest, second was the quality of relationship with the homeroom teacher, and last was the class peer relationships for each culture and each sex. This profile of results remained significant after correction of the p-values by the Bonferroni method (all significant t-values exceeded the Bonferroni required level of p < .004).

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to highlight the similar and different aspects of various interpersonal relationships in different cultural backgrounds and for the two sexes. We hypothesized that in the school context the quality of the relationship with best friend and with the homeroom teacher (which are dyadic relationships) would be higher in individualistic cultures (represented in our study by Jewish students), whereas the quality of the relationship with class peers and the perception of the class climate would be higher in collectivistic cultures (represented in our study by Arab students). Except for the relationship with the homeroom teacher, these hypotheses were generally confirmed. The emphasis of the Arab collectivistic culture on connectedness and reciprocity among group members seems to have been reflected in the higher quality of the peer relationship and in a more positive perception of the class climate in Arab students than in their Jewish counterparts. By contrast, the centrality of the personalized
and intimate relationships in the Jewish individualistic culture seems to have been reflected in the higher quality of the expressive dimension in the best-friend relationship as compared with the Arab respondents. These findings highlight the importance of cultural values in shaping students’ interpersonal relationships in the school context, lending support to the notion that the quality of individuals’ interpersonal relationships may reflect the social and economic characteristics of the culture in which they are embedded (Schneider et al., 1997).

Contrary to our hypothesis, the quality of the relationships of the Jewish students with their homeroom teachers was not higher than that of Arab students. It might be that, although the teacher–student relationships are dyadic, because they are nonvoluntary and nonexclusive, they are more similar to the social network relationships. Indeed, with hindsight it seems that individualistic cultures may only foster voluntary dyadic relationships because only in such dyadic relationships can one’s autonomy be enhanced. There were also limitations in the way we examined the relationship with the homeroom teacher. There are other aspects of this relationship, positive as well as negative, which were not assessed in the current study (using the teacher as a role model, or evaluation apprehension). Future studies may need to address these aspects as well.

We focused on the collectivism–individualism cultural dimension, but future studies may need to explore the effects of other cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980), such as hierarchy or conservatism, in order to highlight possible diverse cultural effects. In addition, for better differentiation of cultures, cultural values such as individualism/collectivism as well as other cultural aspects should be measured directly, and not just assumed.

It might be that differences in relationship quality were due to differences in salience within each culture, which then led to greater investment in that relationship. However, we did not examine these mediating mechanisms; future research may need to explore this issue directly and move beyond the social-address model by employing a context-process research model (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The social-address model compares developmental outcomes of people living in contrasting environments, whereas the process-context model assesses the impact of the external environment on particular processes, with the emphasis not only on consequences, but also on the processes leading to these outcomes. In this respect, the present study may be construed as a first step in examining the effects of culture on the quality of different relationships.

Our hypotheses regarding sex differences were partly confirmed. Specifically, the quality of girls’ relationships with their best friend and homeroom teacher was higher than boys’ for both the instrumental and the expressive dimensions. Although boys’ levels of security and closeness with their class peers tended to be higher than girls’, this effect only approached significance. By practicing their social competencies in these distinct arenas, girls and boys may acquire different types of interpersonal expertise, which may be reflected in the quality of the relationship (Maccoby, 1990). Boys may have their own interpersonal expertise in the arena of peer
relationships. However, in most previous cases, only the better quality of girls’ dyadic relationships with their best friends was demonstrated (Sharanbany, Gershoni, & Hoffman, 1981). Even in our large sample, in which effect sizes could be rather small and still significant, the presumed advantage for boys in the peer group only approached significance. Future research attempting to define such expertise and examine its manifestations for boys and girls may shed light on this issue.

Another possible explanation for girls’ tendency to perceive lower levels of security with their class peers can be traced to ‘silencing of girls’ (Gilligan, 1982, 1993). Girls’ desire to avoid behaviors that might threaten relationships may result in a feeling of less security. Nonetheless, in our study, contrary to our hypothesis, girls perceived the class climate as better than boys perceived it. Because elementary-school girls tend to have less confrontation and lower levels of conflict in the class and school context (Ben-Tzvi-Mayer, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Safir, 1989), they perhaps perceive the class climate to be better than boys do.

Together these findings pointed to the unique effects of cultural background and gender on the quality of interpersonal relationships in the school context. However, they also highlighted a shared dimension in this realm. Specifically, for the two cultures and the two sexes the intimacy with the best friend was the highest, revealing a similar aspect in children’s relationships. Even in collectivistic contexts, the unique role of friendship, in particular the best-friend relationship, was sustained. This finding is in line with the view that the best-friend relationship is a major source of security and validation of one’s feelings and worth, and that this relationship satisfies a major developmental need (Hartup, 1996).

This study showed the importance of relationships with the homeroom teacher as a source of support, in addition to children’s relationships with best friend and peers. The intimacy of the relationship with homeroom teachers proved higher than the intimacy of the relationship with class peers. This high quality of the homeroom teacher relationship may be specific to the context of the elementary school, where more individualized attention is given to students by teachers, and could also reflect the teacher’s role in validating students’ competencies and helping them develop their capacities; with class peers, relationships may be with both friends and enemies. In any event, this interesting finding underlines the important role of the teacher as a socializing agent in the interpersonal arena of the school context.

The findings of the present study derived from a large-scale sample, a characteristic that strengthens their validity and generalizability. Note, however, that most of the significant effect sizes were not large. Thus, the phenomena that we set out to uncover are not very marked. The findings of this research were elicited from self-reports. Although children’s reports on their own personal relationships are a major and important source of information regarding these relationships, more can be learned about their qualities when reports of outsiders observers are examined. For example, perceptions of best friends, class peers, and teachers could enrich our
understanding. Furthermore, issues of demand characteristics are more salient when self-report measures are used. This might have been a problem had we expected one group (i.e., Arab students) to experience more demand characteristics and to be more biased towards positive responses. Differences between cultures could be due to cultural biases in how respondents use the Likert response scales. However, because differences in the dependent variables were found in both directions (Arab students scoring higher on some dimensions and Jewish students on others), it is unlikely that such a pattern could be produced by response biases (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997).

In conclusion, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of cultural context in understanding the nature of social development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Given that diverse cultures emphasize different aspects of social life and vary in the importance attributed to different interpersonal relationships and different social competencies, our study displayed some of the similar and different aspects of children’s interpersonal relationships. Knowledge about these aspects may promote our understanding of this important arena and could help practitioners and educators working with children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

REFERENCES


