What Is a Good Friend: A Qualitative Analysis of Desired Friendship Qualities

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Abstract

Interpersonal attraction leads to friendships and romantic relationships. Research has focused on three specific factors that contribute to interpersonal attraction: the propinquity effect, similarity, and attractiveness. These factors have been found to have a significant effect on who we befriend; thus it was hypothesized that individuals should highlight these factors above others when describing what they desire in a close friend. The present study analyzes similarity, proximity, and attractiveness in regards to friendship selection examining qualitative data collected on the website www.AuthenticHappiness.com. Each participant provided data on what qualities they looked for in close friends, and each description was analyzed and coded. It was found that participants do consider these factors when analyzing their own attraction to individuals; however, qualities such as trust, honesty, and supportiveness were highlighted to a greater extent. Similarity, proximity, and attractiveness were not the most mentioned factors in the self-reported data, thus not supporting the hypothesis proposed. It is then suggested that similarity, proximity, and attractiveness can also work in negative ways: Individuals can come to *dislike* a person in the presence of these factors. Similarity, proximity, and attractiveness are important when selecting close friends, but other factors account for more.

Introduction

From an evolutionary perspective, friendships may be seen as an unnecessary and costly relationship that involves altruism to a non-kin, non-mate individual who may contribute little to an individual's reproductive success. Among cooperative relationships, evolutionary theorists have

generally focused on those regulated by kin-based altruism and pair bonding with mates. Are human friendships even necessary, and how do they differ from these kinds of relationships?

One argument is that the psychological systems underlying the ability to cultivate friendships have been selected. Psychological research has provided abundant evidence for the significance of social support in the lives of individuals. Hartup and Stevens (1999) found that having friends was correlated with a sense of well-being across one's life span and that the developmental outcome depended on the quality of the friendship. Research has found that as social creatures, human beings are motivated to be affiliated with others and have a sense of belongingness in meaningful relationships outside that of family, and that a lack of these interpersonal relationships has a significant negative impact on psychological, emotional, and physical health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hill, 1987). Better social networks are associated with more favorable health outcomes (Cohen, 2004), better coping with life stressors (Thoits, 1995), and increases in positive subjective experiences (Larson, Mannell, & Zuzanek, 1986). Close and meaningful relationships may even be necessary in order to achieve the experience of high well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

Thus friendships can be psychologically adaptive, fostering high well-being and a state of good mental health. A bigger question, however, has been raised among researchers, questioning not why friendships exist, but how they come to be. How are friendships formed? To answer this question researchers have focused on interpersonal attraction—the attraction between people that leads to friendships and romantic relationships. Research has focused on three specific factors that contribute to interpersonal attraction: the propinquity effect, similarity, and attractiveness.

Propinquity Effect

One of the simplest explanations for why two individuals are attracted to one another, whether it is a friendship or a romantic relationship, is physical proximity, also referred to as propinquity. Many studies have developed a general propinquity-attraction hypothesis stating that the closer the physical proximity between two individuals, the more likely they are to be attracted to one another (Segal, 1974).

Festinger, Schachter, and Back (1950) conducted a study on the residents of the Westgate Housing projects to investigate whether physical distance impacted the likelihood of residents forming friendships. They found that 65% of friendship choices were within the same block. Within buildings, 41% of friends lived next door to each other, 22% of friends lived two doors apart, and 10% of friends lived on the opposite ends of the hallway.

Segal (1974) found that alphabetic seating arrangements at a Maryland State police academy predicted the likelihood that the trainees would become friends. The alphabetical position of the person and the average alphabetical position of the friend they named were correlated at .9. Police trainees were more likely to become friends with the people they sat next to in class.

In both studies proximity exerted a powerful influence on who befriended whom; however, cautions may be in order. One could argue that these results may be confounded through the homogeneity of the samples. This would mean that proximity exerts a powerful influence within homogenous groups. It has been found, however, that proximity is one of the most influential effects on people of different ages, races, and social classes (Nisbett, Gilovich, & Keltner, 2005). Nahemow and Lawton (1975) found that the friendships formed between dissimilar individuals were mainly due to close physical proximity and that friendships among similar individuals were formed at greater distances. People are willing to go farther to befriend individuals who are similar to themselves, but friends who are dissimilar just happen to be conveniently nearby.

Similarity

"Birds of a feather flock together" is not only a commonly used expression; this phrase is also being used in the conversations of scholars researching interpersonal attraction. People tend to like other people that are similar to themselves. In the previous section, it was shown that people traveled a greater distance to befriend individuals who were similar to themselves (Nahemow and Lawton, 1975). In another study, Newcomb (1956) provides evidence that links similarity and attraction by studying individuals thrown together for an extended period of time. Seventeen male undergraduates at the University of Michigan lived in a house for a full year, none having known each other previously. With persons as the objects of attitudes, it was found that friendship attraction was closely related to the agreement between what the students thought of themselves and how their roommates perceived them. Similarity in general attitudes towards other roommates also was a predictor of friendship attraction (Newcomb, 1956).

A second type of evidence is the phenomenon called the minimal group paradigm (Nisbett et al., 2005), in which individuals favor their in-group based on the simplest similarities, even if they never have met or will meet these other group members. For example, if a participant named John was told to select his favorite painter, Picasso or Da Vinci, and chose Picasso, John would be put into the "Picasso Group" along with other Picasso choosers. The "Da Vinci Group" would consist of those who chose Da Vinci as their favorite painter. John now knows that he is in the "Picasso Group" and that there is a "Da

Vinci Group." John is then given the task to distribute a certain number of points to people in his group and people in the other group. John will most likely give more points to those in his group, rather than people in the "Da Vinci Group," even if he had never met any of these people beforehand. This is a description of the minimal group paradigm: people favor others based on minimal similarities.

Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness matters significantly in attraction preferences (Stroebe, Insko, Thompson, & Layton, 1971). Physically attractive people are judged to be kinder, stronger, more outgoing, more interesting, more exciting dates, more nurturing, and better people. With this halo effect it is easy to see why attractive individuals are much more popular with members of the opposite sex and are sought out more than their less attractive counterparts (Nisbett et al., 2005).

In a study conducted by Landy and Sigall (1974), male participants were told to read and score the essay of either an attractive writer or an unattractive writer; the male participants were shown photos of the authors. The unattractive authors' essays' lowest scores were lower and the highest scores were not as high as those of attractive authors' essays.

Physical attractiveness even affects how babies are treated. Langlois et al. (1987) found that attractive babies received more affectionate and playful attention than their less attractive peers. This even occurred in the hospital where the infant was born.

Much evidence supports an attractiveness bias in society. It was even found that depending on the crime they are accused of, attractive individuals get less harsh sentences (Sigall & Ostrove, 1974).

The Current Study

Past research shows that the three main correlational factors that contribute to interpersonal attraction are proximity, similarity, and attractiveness. The present study analyzes these three factors in regards to friendship selection, examining qualitative data collected from a questionnaire posted in 2008 on the website www.AuthenticHappiness.com, the homepage of Dr. Martin Seligman, Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. In examining these three factors as significantly contributing to interpersonal attraction it is important to analyze them individually. For the purpose of the present study, only the open-ended descriptions of respondents describing what qualities they looked for in close friends were analyzed and compared across the three demographics—age, gender, and country of origin—that the participants provided. The goal of this analysis is to see how proximity, similarity, and attractiveness play a role in friendship selection across different

demographics. It is hypothesized that individuals should report these three factors, more than others, when describing what they desire in a close friend.

Methods

Participants

The respondent pool consisted of 1,156 participants that responded to the questionnaire. Only 42% (N=491) of this pool responded to the open-ended question: "What qualities do you look for in a close friend?" Those who did not answer the open-ended question were excluded from the qualitative study, approximately 58% of the respondent pool. Of the 491 participants, 86% (N=425) were women and 13% (N=66) were men; 44% (N=219) were between the ages of 15 and 30 years old, 30% (N=148) were ages 31 to 45, 20% (N= 100) were ages 46 to 60, and 4% (N=21) were age 61 years old or higher. Three participants failed to report their age and were excluded from the age analysis. All 491 participants reported where they were born: 68% (N=336) were born in the United States, and 32% reported that they were born outside the United States and reported what country they were born in.

Participants were asked the following questions in the 2008 questionnaire:

1) Gender

2) Age

3) Ethnicity

4) Were you born in the USA?

      —If you were not born in the USA, where were you born?

5) Which religion do you most identify with?

6) Did you spend most of your childhood in the USA?

      —If not, where did you spend the majority of your childhood?

7) What is your current relationship status?

8) What is your current level of educational attainment?

9) What is your family's yearly income (estimate if you don't know for certain)?

10) What qualities are important in a close friendship?

Procedure

The data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Each column represented each question that was answered, and each row represented one participant. Only those (N=491) who answered question 10 were considered in this study. The data were analyzed by age, secondly by gender, and thirdly by

country of origin. Each description was read, and the desired qualities of close friends reported by participants were interpreted. The process of interpretation involved first skimming the descriptions to find the common desired qualities that appeared, of which there were 28. An example is similarity, proximity, and attractiveness, which were three qualities that appeared frequently in the descriptions provided by the participants. Each theme received one tally per participant when the quality itself was mentioned, synonyms were mentioned, or phrases that resemble the meaning of the quality were mentioned. Phrases that were counted as similarity included "similar to me," "shared interest," "we are like each other," "a lot in common," "common interest," "like me," and "we resemble each other." Phrases that were counted as proximity included "face-to-face interaction," "close by," "presence," "we spend a lot of time together," "the ability to physically be there when I need him/her," and "seeing them on a daily basis." Phrases and words that counted as attractiveness included "attractive," "good looking," "physically appealing," and "beautiful." These tallies were then graphed.

Results

Age

Age was broken down into four different subgroups: 15 to 30 years old, 31 to 45 years old, 46 to 60 years old, and 60 years and older. The rationale for this age breakdown was to analyze the changes in what people see as desirable in a friend as age increases. As shown in Table 1, there were 28 qualities that were frequently included in the participants' answers, with some variation across certain age groups. Proximity, similarity, and attractiveness were three qualities that are desired and reported in all four subgroups.

Among the 15-to-30 age group, 9% reported that they needed to have face-to-face interaction with a person they considered a close friend. In terms of similarity, 26% said that they needed to have common/shared interest with a person they considered a close friend. Attractiveness was the least considered, with less than 5% of the participants in this age range reporting that a person needed to be attractive in order to be considered a close friend.

For the 31-to-45 age group, 8% reported that they needed face-to-face interaction with a person they considered a close friend. As for similarity, 26% reported that they desired common/shared interest in a close friend. Again, attractiveness was the least reported desired quality in a close friend, with less than 5% reporting that they desired their close friend to be physically attractive.

For the 46-to-50 age group, physical presence was reported as required by less than 5%. Desiring similarity with close friends was reported by 36% of the group. This group did not report attractiveness as a desired quality in a close friend.

For ages 60 and older, physical presence was not reported by anyone in the group as a desired quality for a close friend. Similarity in interest was reported by 14% of the group, and this group did not report attractiveness as a desired quality. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Age—Percentage Chart (Similarity, Proximity, Attractiveness)

Age Group	% of group that reported similarity as a desired quality	% of group that reported proximity as a desired quality	% of group that reported attractiveness as a desired quality
15 to 30 years	26%	9 %	.9%
31 to 45 years	26%	8%	.14%
46 to 60 years	36%	3%	0%
60 yrs + older	14%	0%	0%

It is evident that there are some differences in what people look for in close friends as they get older. Proximity, similarity, and attractiveness were considered, but not by all groups. These qualities were not the most reported. For ages 15-30 and 31-45 years, trust was the most reported desired quality in a close friend, with 44% and 36%, respectively, including it in their descriptions. For ages 46-60 years, honesty was the most reported desired quality in a close friend, with 40% reporting so. For ages 60 and older, communication, reported by 29%, was the most reported desired quality (see Appendix A). Proximity, similarity, and attractiveness do not seem to be the main factors contributing to the interpersonal attraction that form potential friendships, but they do play a role.

Gender

In the gender analysis, both men and women reported proximity, similarity, and attractiveness as desired qualities of close friends. In terms of face-to-face interaction, 6% of both men and women reported a need to see their close friend on a regular basis. As for similarity, 23% of women and 24% of men reported that they desired a common interest with close friends. Attractiveness was the least reported, with no men mentioning it in their descriptions and less than 5% of women including it in their descriptions. Results are shown in Table 2.

As seen earlier with age, proximity, similarity, and attractiveness were not the most reported desired qualities. For women, trust was the most reported quality, with 39% including it in their description. For men, honesty was the most reported quality, with 30% including it in their description (see Appendix B). Again, proximity, similarity and attractiveness are not the main factors that contribute to the interpersonal attraction that leads to potential friendships, but these factors do indeed play a role.

Table 2: Gender—Percentage Chart (Similarity, Proximity, Attractiveness)

Gender	% of group that reported similarity as a desired quality	% of group that reported proximity as a desired quality	% of group that reported attractiveness as a desired quality
Male	23%	6%	0%
Female	24%	6%	.4%

In this case men and women were similar in considering proximity, similarity, and attractiveness; however, some distinct differences are worth mentioning. Women were more likely to include aspects of emotional intelligence, sharing feelings, and love in their descriptions. Men were more likely to include shared activities, problem solving, and a lack of intimacy in their descriptions (Walker, 1994). This finding was not surprising given that many studies have found that women tend to seek emotional support from friends, while men seek problem-solving help from friends as a way of coping.

Female participant #45 stated:

I feel like it's really important to love and feel loved by the other person. I think that's something that is often totally ignored in our culture; we think of love as something reserved for close family and romantic relationships. But love doesn't have to be romantic/sexual or due to familial relations...and that's what close friendships are. Two people who love each other deeply and are committed and loyal friends. So, the qualities in friendship that I feel are important in that are things that express that: honesty, trust (not just that you "trust" them but that you are willing to make yourself vulnerable to them/depend on them and vice versa), loyalty, affection, thoughtfulness...basically everything important in a romantic relationship, minus the exclusivity and the sex!

Male participant #400 stated:

Shared activities a long time ago, when you placed absolute trust in them, and they in you. Don't need to see them all the time, but when you do, you know that bond is still as real.

Reading these two very different descriptions, one notices the emphasis on love in the female answer, "it's really important to love and feel loved by the other person," and a general

lack of intimacy in the male's description, "don't need to see them all the time." Appendix B shows that women were more likely to include "love," "kindness," and "shared feelings" in their description, while men were more likely to include characteristics that lack emotionality in their description. Women were also more likely to elaborate in their descriptions, while men wrote brief and concise answers.

Country of Origin

In this analysis, participants were divided into two groups: those who were born in the United States and spent a majority of their childhood there, and those who were born outside the United States and spent a majority of their childhood there. Thirty participants were randomly selected for each group; each had to fit the description of one of the two groups in order to be included in the analysis. All 30 participants selected for the "not born in USA" group were born in countries with collectivistic cultures; thus a comparison between individualistic cultures, in which the individual is important, and collectivistic cultures, which value the cohesive ingroup, can be addressed here.

In terms of proximity, 12% of those born in the United States reported that they desired this face-to-face interaction with a close friend. Those born outside the United States did not include proximity in any of their descriptions. Similarity or common/shared interest was included in 20% of the descriptions by those born in the United States and 30% of the descriptions by those born outside the United States. Attractiveness was not included in any descriptions by either group. Results are shown in Table 3.

The most reported desired quality by those born in the United States was trust, with 56% including this quality in their description. Supportiveness was the most reported desired quality by those born outside the United States, with 43% including this in their description. (See Appendix C.) Once again we see that proximity, similarity, and attractiveness are considered when describing what is desired in close friends, but are not crucial factors that contribute to interpersonal attraction.

Table 3: Country of Origin—Percentage Chart (Similarity, Proximity, Attractiveness)

Country of origin	% of group that reported similarity as a desired quality	% of group that reported proximity as a desired quality	% of group that reported attractiveness as a desired quality
Born in USA	20%	12%	0%
Born outside USA	30%	0%	0%

Discussion

      This study investigated the factors of proximity, similarity, and attractiveness that contribute to interpersonal attraction and whether people consciously consider these factors when describing the qualities they desire in close friendships. Further, three demographic variables—age, gender, and country of origin—were considered. It was found that participants do consider proximity, similarity, and attractiveness when analyzing their own attraction to individuals, but these factors are not the most mentioned factors in the self-reported data; thus the proposed hypothesis is not supported.

      Across all age groups the three factors were reported in a stable manner, not greatly different as age increased. Similarity as a desired quality in a friend was reported most frequently out of the three factors in all four age groups. The least reported desired quality was attractiveness. It was also interesting that of all 28 qualities reported, similarity, proximity, and attractiveness were not the most frequently reported, though past research claims that these three factors are the main factors that contribute to interpersonal attraction.

      Men and women were not very different in reporting proximity, similarity, and attractiveness as desired qualities in a friend. In both groups similarity was the most reported out of the three, and attractiveness was the least reported. Looking at the data we see that these three factors were not the most frequently cited qualities. One interesting difference was the manner in which men and women worded their descriptions. Women's descriptions included more emotional words, such as love, emotion, family, kindness, loving, and intimacy. Men's descriptions were brief and lacked emotional words.

      In the analysis of country of origin again we find that in both groups similarity is the most mentioned desired quality out of the three and attractiveness the least (not mentioned). The group was very similar in their frequency of including the three qualities in their description. These three qualities were not the most mentioned.

      There are some general trends in all three demographics. First, we see that similarity is the most mentioned desired quality out of the three, and attractiveness is the least mentioned desired quality. Second, we find that these three factors were not the most mentioned desired qualities. In each group there were qualities that were mentioned more than proximity, similarity, and attractiveness. This is interesting because literature on interpersonal attraction tends to focus on these three qualities as main factors that contribute to interpersonal attraction. Interpersonal attraction must occur before one can make friends with another person. So why did these participants not report these three main factors as much as expected? Perhaps this is why no global theory exists that explains interpersonal attraction. The research findings on the subject may be flawed. Perhaps these three factors can work in opposite ways as

well, decreasing the chances of attraction, which could explain why these factors are not on the extremely positive end of the "positive-negative" continuum when we are selecting our friends.

In terms of the propinquity effect, it would seem that those who annoy us the most are those that we see frequently or are close by to rain on our parade (Nisbett et al., 2005). One study (Ebbesen et al., 1976) has tested the hypothesis that proximity promoted the making of friends as well as enemies. The participants were residents of a condominium complex in Southern California and were asked to name three people they disliked the most and three people they liked the most. It was found that 63% of those most liked lived in the same cluster as the respondent and that 73% of those most disliked lived in the same cluster (Ebbesen et al., 1976). Proximity has the ability to promote friendships as well as create enemies.

When discussing similarity is it true that "opposites attract"? The theory of complementarity says that two individuals with opposing characteristics that complement each other may go nicely together. Dryer and Horowitz (1997) found that participants in complementary partnerships (submissive-dominant and dominant-submissive) reported more satisfaction with their interaction compared to similar partners. If there were any characteristics that fit this complementarity model it would be personality traits (Nisbett et al., 2005). Research has even found that individuals report greater attraction to a group of team members when personality traits are dissimilar (Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Stevens, 2005). Thus, when selecting a friend, individuals may be just as likely to desire someone who is similar as they are to desire a person who is dissimilar and complements their own personal qualities.

Physical attractiveness, too, may not work in one's favor. Sometimes attractive individuals are perceived as snobby, vain, and obnoxious simply as a result of their physical attractiveness (Nisbett et al., 2005). In one study when attractive individuals were charged with a crime that involved swindling, using their attractiveness deviously, they were given a harsher sentence than unattractive individuals charged with the same crime (Sigall & Ostrove, 1974). Attractive individuals were, however, given less harsh sentences when accused of a crime involving burglary, while their unattractive peers were given harsher sentences when accused of the same crime. Thus being attractive may not always be desired in friends, though some individual differences may exist here.

In conclusion, this study builds on previous research on interpersonal attraction. Past research tends to focus on three main factors (proximity, similarity, and attractiveness). However, these factors can work in both ways, increasing and decreasing the potential of becoming a close friend, which could account for why this study has reached the results above. Future research should attempt to focus on

specific cases of interpersonal attraction, such as individual friendships, to capture the intricate factors and qualities that people consider when befriending a person.

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Appendix A: Important qualities of close friendships in accordance with age groups
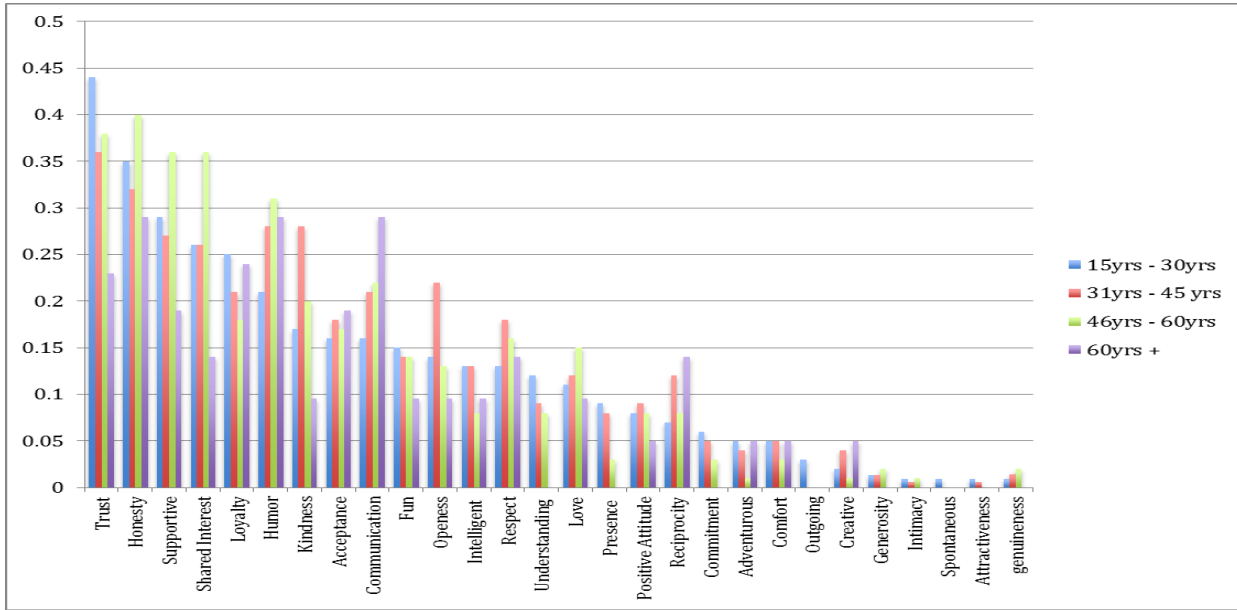
Appendix B: Important qualities of close friendships in accordance with gender
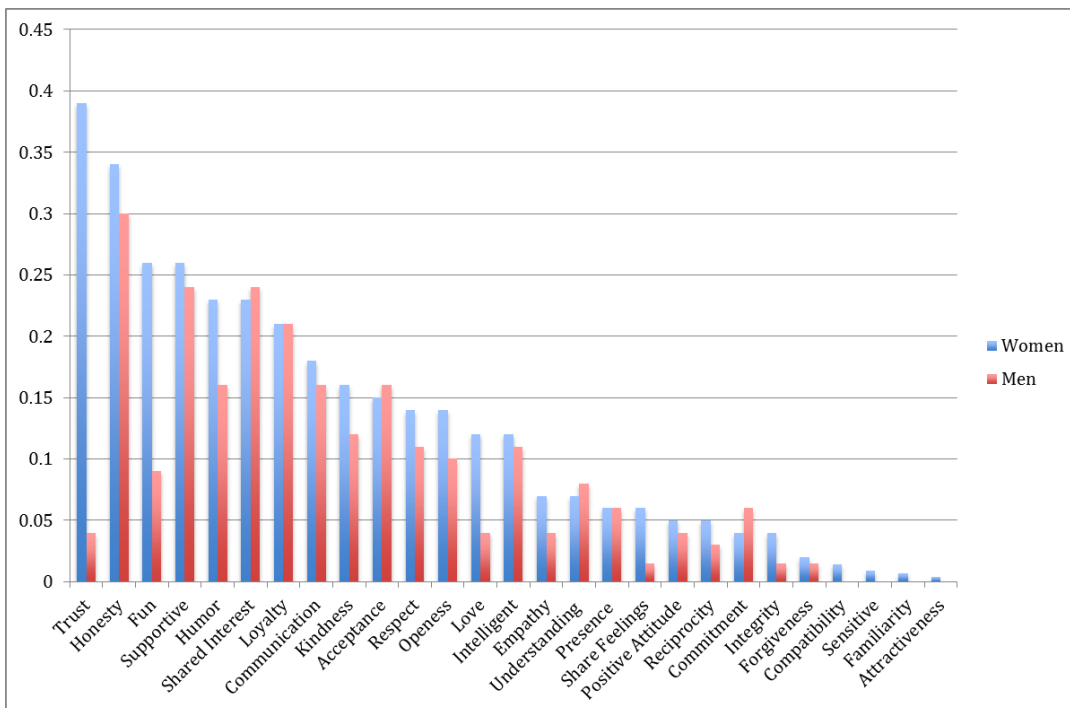
Appendix C: Important qualities of close friendships in accordance with country of origin