IRA A. VIRTANEN

Supportive Communication in Finnish Men's Friendships

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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What is most personal is most universal

Carl R. Rogers

FOREWORD

I grew up in a household of boys and our close family friends had three. We interacted with them almost daily from a very early age on and one of the boys, Pasi, was my best friend all throughout childhood. We were inseparable. Adults had teased us as long as I could remember for having "only" feelings of friendship but when peers started to also question the nature of our relationship it finally changed everything. We were twelve. Nothing in our biology said that we could not be friends. The social expectations, however, made our contact wane. I cannot remember when I saw him last but the sense of connection never disappeared.

I started to think about friendship again when I entered communication studies. I had worked nights as a croupier and wondered why so many men sat alone drinking in bars and nightclubs. If the gaming was slow, men wanted my company—someone to talk to about their lives and troubles they were having. My first attempt at understanding supportive communication and coping was to study Finnish single middle-aged individuals and how they sought support from their friends and family (Virtanen, 2005, 2009). The study left me with a bigger question: The men in the study described greater unhappiness than the women, and were hoping that they would still find a life partner from whom to receive comfort and love. Because acceptance, care, reassurance—*support*—is fundamental to social beings, to our positive sense of self and relational satisfaction, I had to know how to make that happen for people.

During this dissertation process, I have received a great deal of support myself from countless individuals, all of whom I know I fail to acknowledge here. Also the numerous conversations with hairdressers, taxi drivers, beauticians, electricians, baristas, and many more have assured me how important the topic is. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for the touching and inspiring exchanges.

I owe deep gratitude to my advisor, Professor Pekka Isotalus, who believed in me as a developing scholar and provided me with opportunities to succeed. The topic of supportive communication keeps me in close proximity to people's struggles and emotional hurt. At times it has overwhelmed me. Pekka's firm coaching has reminded me of the instrumental goals of my research, and supported me to carry on.

I want to express my sincere thanks to the pre-examiners, Professor Owen Hargie and Docent Jukka-Pekka Puro, for their insightful commentary on the dissertation. Their valuable feedback helped me to improve the manuscript and look ahead to the future prospects of this work.

My mentor and friend, late Professor Brant Burleson, opened the world of supportive communication research for me. His enthusiasm, encouragement and persistent "why" questions never leave me. I want to also thank the scholarly community of Purdue University, especially Dr. Steven Wilson and Dr. Erina MacGeorge, for their support and kindness.

I have been privileged to receive funding from numerous sources. It has meant a lot that they too believe in the value of studying men's supportive communication. I have received support from the national Doctoral School of Communication Studies, CORE (Academy of Finland), Finnish Cultural Foundation, The Fulbright Center, University of Tampere Foundation, Alli Paasikivi Foundation, and Finnish Concordia Fund. Additionally, CORE provided me with lifelong friendships. I thank my colleagues Dr. Anne Laajalahti, Dr. Jonna Koponen, and Dr. Pipsa Purhonen for sharing their loving wisdom with me and the passion for interaction. Thank you to Dr. Päivi Setälä, Dr. Reeta Pöyhtäri, Dr. Leena Ripatti-Torniainen, Dr. Harri Pälviranta, Dr. Kari Koljonen, Heli Lehtelä, Dr. Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg, and Simo Pieniniemi for always being intrigued by what I do. Your reassurance has meant more than you know.

Special thanks go to my friend Dr. Shaughan Keaton, who also co-authored a paper in this dissertation. I have enormous appreciation for Elizabeth Trimber who is the most dialogical proofreader ever. For my dear cousin, Maria Alikoski I express my gratitude for working as my research assistant. I thank the Science Fund of Tampere City for their generous grant for the editing work of this book.

During the times that I have not been in the "research bunker," I have had the privilege to interact with the PhD Seminar members of speech communication at Tampere University. I want to particularly thank Marjanna Artkoski, Dr. Riitta Vanhatalo and Venla Kuuluvainen, and the faculty members, Dr. Tuula-Riitta Välikoski and Dr. Maija Gerlander, for always reflecting such a bright light towards me. The last few years of the dissertation writing have taken all my free time, weekends, nights and holidays. My colleagues from Helsinki University, Katariina Hollanti, Dr. Saila Poutiainen, Dr. Sanna Herkama and Docent Seija Pekkala, deserve a warm embrace for the stimulating conversations at work.

Friends are my absolute strength. Therefore this research entails a painful paradox: I have been so present for the study of support among friends that I have been so very absent from providing it to my own. Your continuous care, commitment and love for me are a testament to friendship being the most valuable relationship I know. Thank you Minna Finstad (KTKkk) for your continuous support through laughter and existential craziness. I have been blessed with such a colorful palette of unique and loving friends, as you are Merja Turunen, Taru Pilvi, Marja Jaarinen, Tiina Landen, Lotta Koskinen, Talvikki

Hovatta, and Minna Härkönen. My poetry-reciting group *Siitä pitäen* is friendship embodied. Thank you (and your partners) Elina Kreus, Kaisa Osola, and Sampo Harju for the ten years of pure magic. Thank you also to those of you in my life, Petteri Maunu, Sami Vartiainen, Carlos Orrego, Tero Ipatti, and Tero Pilvi, who have empowered me with clarity, resilience and sharp wit.

My relatives have given me plenty of support and not the least by accommodating me whenever and wherever I have needed a place to stay during my travels in Finland and around the world. My New Zealand whānau has shown me the realms of our infinite possibilities as human beings, and you, Sally Liggins, changed my life for good.

My father Lassi and my mother Sirpa have made sure that my days are filled with art and activities. You have provided me with experiences that most people only dream of and for that I am grateful. My brothers, Tero and Aki, have accepted me no matter what and always been there for me. I love you dearly. My affectionate nephews, Miska and Miika, and their beautiful mother Riikka mean the world to me. I dedicate this book to the precious boys.

There would be no dissertation without the generosity of the twenty-five men who participated in this research. Your personal stories, openness, and dedication to your friends are forever appreciated. I am privileged to have learnt from your friendships.

3 November 2014, in the midst of sunrays in Helsinki, Finland.

Ira Virtanen

ABSTRACT

This dissertation represents the field of interpersonal communication and focuses on support in Finnish men's friendships. The purpose of the interpretive research is to depict and understand the phenomenon of social support and supportive communication through men's experiences. The research aims to distinguish men's supportive functions, goals and support approaches with friends, and the meaning of three contexts—relationship, gender, and culture—in supportive conversations. By doing so the dissertation addresses the leading theory on supportive communication, the theory of person-centeredness.

Men are said to avoid talking about emotional troubles, which reflects on the stereotype of men being poorly skilled at comforting. In fact, many of the problems that Finnish men may encounter in life are rationalized for being the result of little self-disclosure and agentic relationships. Yet, no study so far has explored Finnish men's supportive communication with friends. Previous, mainly Anglo-American research has found that men and women evaluate similar types of supportive messages as most sensitive and helpful. Nevertheless, men do not discriminate as strongly as women between the highly sophisticated and less sophisticated supportive communication. This is usually explained by men having lesser motivation and skill in providing and processing of such support. Supportive communication, however, is a complex process and both content and non-content elements influence the interpretation of messages. There may be contextual elements that act as triggers for sensations, associations, and heuristics for men, which connect supportive conversations and their benefits together.

This dissertation comprises of four peer-reviewed original publications and an overviewing thesis. The studies approached the subject matter in following ways: Social support definitions and men's experiences of support were reduced to propose the essence of social support (Study I). The subsequent studies built on the essence by scrutinizing how men depict its manifestation—supportive communication—in friendships. The research described the support goals and support approaches that men perceive beneficial and unbeneficial in general (Study II) and in problem-specific situations (Study III). The final sub-study further distinguished the meaningful settings and modes of being for Finnish men to talk about troubles with others (Study IV).

The research was conducted with multiple methods: The data consists of two sets of interviews, thematic and episode interviews, as well as of social support definitions. The empirical material was gathered with 25 Finnish men (21–67 years of age, M=41, Mdn=37). The data were analyzed with both qualitative (Studies I, II, III, IV) and quantitative means (Study III).

The results reveal that the essence of social support is the awareness of a real or potential void in a person's life experience, and of otherness, which attempt to assist another in altering the experience to achieve wholeness. The unique nature of individuals' problems requires accepting one's own and the friend's vulnerability as inherent to the lived experience of a human being. This is key in meaningful supportive conversation. Empathy is being part of the experience of another's coping with verbal and nonverbal means. The results show that the function of Finnish men's supportive communication is to assist the friend to move forward. Men aim to be with, be for, and reflect with the friend. Consequently, their key support approaches are listening actively and empathically, promoting positive affect, and helping a friend to reappraise his experience. Quietude is also a valued approach in some support situations, particularly in culturally meaningful settings like the sauna or the cabin.

The results further propose that supportive communication with a friend who is experiencing a problem is not determined by culture or male gender even though supportive conversations are shaped by these contexts. The provided support depends primarily on the individual's characteristics and the friendship and problem contexts. Friendship closeness enables the provision of explicit emotional support as the "good friend" identity is more valued than sustaining a "masculine man" identity. The individual's experience of needing support is unique and therefore authenticity, availability, and support for one's autonomy are important characteristics of men's supportive communication. However, meaningful experiences of supportive conversations can take place even with strangers when the interactants share an understanding of "talking deep" as a communication scene.

This research shows that individual Finnish men do have close friendships in which emotional support is provided. Meeting vulnerability with empathy enhances connection in men's friendships. Active-emphatic listening is an important aspect of support provision. The results underline the significance of motivation in supportive communication. Beneficial support acknowledges otherness and is thus experience-centered: The helper is mindful not only, or necessarily, about the friend's problem but also about his experience of needing and receiving support. Men's supportive communication situations are typically interpersonal and best oriented towards as unique conversations. They have vast possibilities to entail emotional support as well as distraction with the goal of assisting the friend to endure his autonomous coping. Such supportive communication, which addresses both relational and interactional goals, requires skills in social perception, message production and reception, and interaction coordination.

Keywords: autonomy, context, culture, experience, Finnish man, friendship, listening, motivation, person-centeredness, social support, supportive communication, vulnerability

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä puheviestinnän väitöskirja sijoittuu interpersonaalisen viestinnän tulkinnalliseen traditioon. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kuvata ja ymmärtää sosiaalisen tuen ilmiötä ja sen viestinnällistä toteutumista eli supportiivista viestintää suomalaisten miesten ystävyyssuhteissa. Tutkimuksessa selvitetään miesten tavoitteita tuen antamisessa sekä niitä viestinnällisiä tapoja, joilla miehet pyrkivät tavoitteensa saavuttamaan. Erityistä huomiota kiinnitetään niihin merkityksiin, joita vuorovaikutussuhteella, sukupuolella ja kulttuurilla on suomalaisten miesten supportiivisissa viestintätilanteissa ystävien kanssa. Tutkimus osallistuu tulosten avulla supportiivisen viestinnän teorian kehittämiseen.

Miesten ajatellaan usein välttelevän tunteista puhumista, minkä takia heitä saatetaan pitää naisia heikompina tuen antajina. Stereotyyppisessä ajattelussa suomalaisten miesten ongelmat selittyvät sillä, että he eivät puhu vaikeuksistaan eivätkä ylläpidä tukea antavia ihmissuhteita. Aikaisempi tukea antavan eli supportiivisen viestinnän tutkimus on pääosin yhdysvaltalaista. Tutkimuksissa on havaittu, että miehet ja naiset arvioivat samankaltaisen, tunteet huomioon ottavan tuen hyödylliseksi. Miehet eivät kuitenkaan ole arvioissaan yhtä kriittisiä kuin naiset. Tuloksia on selitetty sillä, että miehet ovat naisia taitamattomampia viestijöitä ja vähemmän motivoituneita sekä tuen antamiseen että annetun tuen käsittelemiseen. Supportiivinen viestintä on kuitenkin monimutkainen prosessi, johon vaikuttavat sekä viestinnän sisällölliset että ulkoiset seikat. Tästä syystä on tarkoituksenmukaista kuvata myös supportiivisia viestintätilanteita sen sijaan, että kiinnitettäisiin huomiota ainoastaan viestinnän sisältöön. Esimerkiksi kontekstuaaliset tekijät, kuten vuorovaikutuskumppanien välinen suhde, voivat ohjata niitä tulkintoja ja merkityksiä, joita supportiiviselle viestinnälle annetaan.

Väitöskirja koostuu neljästä kansainvälisestä vertaisarvioidusta julkaisusta sekä yhteenvedosta. Osajulkaisut pyrkivät vastaamaan tutkimustavoitteeseen seuraavasti: ensimmäisessä julkaisussa määritellään sosiaalisen tuen ydin (Study I), minkä jälkeen sen viestinnällistä toteutumista eli supportiivista viestintää tarkastellaan miesten ystävyyssuhteissa sekä yleisesti (Study II) että erityisissä ongelmatilanteissa (Study III). Näissä julkaisuissa kuvataan lisäksi hyödyllisenä pidetyn tuen tavoitteita ja viestintätapoja. Neljännessä osajulkaisussa havainnollistetaan tilanteita ja paikkoja, joissa suomalaisten miesten ongelmista puhuminen merkityksellistyy tukea antavaksi (Study IV).

Tutkimus toteutettiin monimenetelmätutkimuksena, jonka pääasiallisena aineistona on 25 suomalaisen, 21–67-vuotiaan (M=41, Md=37) miehen haastattelua. Empiirinen aineisto kerättiin jokaiselta tutkimukseen osallistuneelta mieheltä kahdella eri haastat-

telumenetelmällä: teemahaastattelulla ja episodihaastattelulla. Lisäksi yhdessä julkaisussa redusoitiin tutkimuskirjallisuudessa esiintyviä sosiaalisen tuen määritelmiä (Study I). Julkaisuissa käytetyt aineistot analysoitiin sekä laadullisin (I–IV) että määrällisin (III) menetelmin.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että sosiaalinen tuki on tietoisuutta siitä, millainen on ”lovi”, joka voi syntyä tai on syntynyt ihmisen kokonaisena pitämään tai ehjäksi toivomaan elämänkokemukseen, sekä toiseutta, joka pyrkii auttamaan siinä, että kokemus elämästä tulisi jälleen ehjäksi. Kokemus ongelmasta ja siitä selviytymisestä on yksilöllinen ja ainutlaatuinen. Miesten supportiivisissa viestintätilanteissa on hyödyllistä, että niin tuen saaja kuin tuen antaja hyväksyy haavoittuvaisuuden kokemukset osaksi ihmisen elämää ja sallii haavoittuvaisuuden ilmenemisen myös ystävien välisessä vuorovaikutuksessa. Haavoittuvaisuuden kokemuksen jakaminen vahvistaa keskinäistä yhteyttä ja läheisyyttä miesten ystävyyssuhteissa.

Tulosten mukaan miesten supportiivisen viestinnän tavoitteena on auttaa ystävää pääsemään ongelmasta eteenpäin. Tähän tavoitteeseen miehet pyrkivät kanssaolemisella, vartenolemisella ja peilaamisella. Näitä tuenantotapoja viestitään kuuntelemalla aktiivisesti ja myötätuntoisesti, tuottamalla ystävälle myönteisiä tunteita sekä auttamalla häntä uudelleen arvioimaan kokemustaan. Koska miesten ystävyyssuhteiden supportiivinen viestintä tapahtuu usein kulttuurisesti tunnistettavissa tilanteissa ja merkityksellisissä paikoissa, kuten saunoessa tai mökkeillessä, myös hiljaisuus ja rauhassa yhdessä oleminen saavat supportiivisia merkityksiä.

Tutkimuksen tulokset havainnollistavat, että kulttuuri tai sukupuoli ei määritä supportiivista viestintäkäyttäytymistä läheisen ystävän kanssa vaan kyseiset kontekstuaaliset tekijät pikemminkin heijastuvat viestintään ja tulevat neuvotelluiksi vuorovaikutuksessa. Miesten supportiivisen viestinnän tavoitteita ja tapoja ohjaavat eniten ystävän yksilölliset piirteet, ystävyyssuhteen laatu sekä tuen saajan ongelman luonne. Ystävyyssuhteen läheisyys mahdollistaa myös suorapuheisen tuen antamisen, jossa ”hyvän ystävän” identiteetin ylläpitäminen on ”maskuliinisen miehen” identiteettiä merkityksellisempää. Yksilön tuen tarve on ainutlaatuinen ja siksi saatavilla oleminen, autonomian tukeminen sekä aitous ja rehellisyys ovat keskeisiä elementtejä miesten supportiivisessa viestinnässä. Tulokset viittaavat vahvasti siihen, että mitä läheisempi miesten ystävyyssuhde on, sitä todennäköisemmin emotionaalista tukea on saatavilla. Kuitenkin merkityksellisiä tuenannon vuorovaikutustilanteita voi syntyä myös vieraiden ihmisten kesken, kun vuorovaikutuskumppanit jakavat yhteisen ymmärryksen viestintätilanteesta ja päätyvät ”puhumaan henkeviä”.

Tulokset osoittavat, että tutkimukseen osallistuneilla suomalaisilla miehillä on läheisiä ystävyyssuhteita, joissa emotionaalista tukea viestitään. Omien haavoittuvaisuuden kokemusten tunnustaminen ja niiden hyväksyminen toisissa lähentää ihmissuhdetta. Aktiivinen ja empaattinen kuunteleminen on keskeinen supportiivisen viestinnän muoto. Tuloksissa korostuu lisäksi motivaation merkitys tukea annettaessa. Hyödyllinen tuki on toisen asemaan asettumista, mutta ei ainoastaan ongelman kokijana vaan myös tuen tarvitsijana

ja sen vastaanottajana. Koska toisen kokemusta ei miesten mukaan voi koskaan täysin ymmärtää, miehet välttävät verbaalisesti määrittämästä ystävälle hänen kokemustaan ja pyrkivät mieluummin hienovaraiseen tuen antamiseen. Tutkimus luokin uuden käsitteen kokemuskeskeinen tuki, jossa toisen ihmisen yksilöllistä kokemusta pyritään kunnioittamaan tiedostamalla aktiivisesti supportiivisen viestintätilanteen ainutlaatuiset piirteet. Usean viestintätavoitteen yhtäaikainen hallinta, kuten tavoite ylläpitää sekä ystävyyssuhdetta että supportiivista vuorovaikutusta, edellyttää miehiltä vuorovaikutusosaamista.

Avainsanat: autonomia, haavoittuvaisuus, henkilökeskeisyys, kokemus, konteksti, kulttuuri, kuunteleminen, motivaatio, sosiaalinen tuki, suomalainen mies, supportiivinen viestintä, ystävyys

LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

I Virtanen, I. A., & Isotalus, P. (2011). The essence of social support in interpersonal communication. *Empedocles: Special Issue, 3*(1), 25–42.

II Virtanen, I. A., & Isotalus, P. (2013). A clear mirror on which to reflect: Beneficial supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships. *Qualitative Communication Research, 2*(2), 133–158.

III Virtanen I. A., Isotalus, P., & Keaton, S. A. (2014). "Offer no readymade solutions": Men's support provision and intentions in specific episodes with an upset friend. *Studies in Communication Sciences, 14*(1), 54–60.

IV Virtanen, I. A., & Isotalus, P. (2014). Talking troubles with Finnish men: Meaningful contexts of 'supportive silence'. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies, 9*(2), 111–125.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

Study I: The essence of social support in interpersonal communication
The design and the means of the study were discussed with professor Pekka Isotalus. The data used in the study were social support definitions and thematic interviews. I collected the data and conducted the interviews. I analyzed the material, wrote the paper and worked as the corresponding author in the publication process. Dr. Brant Burleson commented on the paper's theory chapter. Dr. Isotalus commented on the manuscript. Virginia Mattila proofread the paper.

Study II: A clear mirror on which to reflect: Beneficial supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships
I conducted the thematic interviews, analyzed the material, wrote the paper, and worked as the corresponding author. Dr. Isotalus commented on the manuscript and Virginia Mattila proofread it.

Study III: "Offer no readymade solutions": Men's support provision and intentions in specific episodes with an upset friend
The design and the means of the study were discussed with Dr. Isotalus. I conducted the episode interviews, and analyzed the responses using qualitative content analysis and Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (ICBCS). Dr. Jonna Koponen crosschecked the coded data. Dr. Shaughan Keaton assisted in analyzing the data with SPSS and nonparametric tests. I wrote the paper and worked as the corresponding author. Dr. Isotalus and Dr. Keaton commented on the manuscript and Dr. Keaton proofread it.

Study IV: Talking troubles with Finnish men: Meaningful contexts of 'supportive silence'
I conducted the thematic interviews, analyzed the material, wrote the paper and worked as the corresponding author. Dr. Isotalus commented on the paper and PhD candidate Elizabeth Trimber proofread it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

"A friend is a mirror that you can talk deeply with and then hug at the end of the night." This is not a description of a typical evening among Finnish men—the mythical, silent ones. However, it is not atypical among male friends. The purpose of this dissertation is to depict *what supportive communication is like in Finnish men's friendships*.

The dissertation takes an interpretive-oriented approach to the study of interpersonal communication (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014). It comprises of this current thesis and four original publications, which make use of interpretivism, phenomenological thinking, and constructivist theory. The dissertation has three main goals in describing and understanding the experiences of supportive communication (for specific research questions, see chapter 4.2). First, it depicts the qualities of Finnish men's supportive communication by defining the needs that their support intends to meet, and the ways men go about doing so in their friendships. Second, the dissertation discusses the meaning of contexts, which influence and are influenced by supportive conversations. A particularly close look is directed at three specific contexts: Relationship, gender, and culture. Third, the research aims to contribute to the prevalent person-centered theory of supportive communication by underlining the experiential nature of supportive conversations.

This research is first to investigate supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships. Certain cultural stereotypes such as "men don't talk about feelings" are widespread and as with many stereotypes, they have the potential to be sources of amusement and connection but also harm and constraint. Furthermore, Finns as a people are described as reserved and shy (Sallinen-Kuparinen, 1986) who take pride in their ability to be comfortable with interpersonal silence. Even if the wider communication culture is depicted as silence-valuing (Carbaugh, 2009), the myth of a silent Finn falls most strongly on the men (e.g., Heikkinen, Mantila, & Varis, 1998). Usually it is not intended to be a positive characteristic. Additionally, the media regularly perpetuates the negative stereotypes by painting Finnish men in rather unfortunate colors. However, so does research; even though some studies have focused on the caring features of male gender, e.g., fathering and fatherhood (Aalto & Kolehmainen, 2004), the majority of studies describe men's misfortunes and destructive behaviors. These include unemployment, high mortality, suicide, interpersonal violence, buying sex, alcohol abuse, and unhealthy habits like smoking and bad diet (see Novikova et al., 2005). Many Finnish men's troubles are believed to result from a lack of interpersonal support system.

This research explores how men experience situations in which supportive communication is called for. However, the dissertation's primary focus on problems and coping should not be taken as a confirmation of the aforementioned negative stereotypes. Challenges, as well as joys, are part of human life, irrespective of gender. In other words, this research concentrates on the supportive function of men's friendships, which is one of many meaningful characteristics of these relationships (see Rawlins, 2009). Rawlins (1992) summarizes that friendships are bonds that are nonhierarchical, created and maintained voluntarily, entail equality and mutuality, support, reciprocity, good will, and trust, and a friend is somebody to talk to and have fun with. Many of the assorted orientations and activities of friendships are thus integrated into other relationships like collegial or spousal relations. Even if friendship is among the most valuable and unbound relationships in a person's life, it still includes public and private constraints and challenges.

It is especially during times of hardship that support from friends is required. Supporting others is a significantly meaningful way of being in the world: It can make a profound difference in a person's coping efforts and positive sense of self. Social support creates a sense of belonging and being needed in a good way (Moss, 1973) largely because it communicates acceptance and care for others (Albrecht, Burleson, & Goldsmith, 1994). People who receive sensitive comforting are more likely to experience tangible affective benefits than people who do not receive such support (High & Dillard, 2012). Furthermore, research consistently shows that social support plays a key role in enhancing one's psychological and physiological health (Jones, 2004; Uchino, 2009). In scarcity therefore, support can have severe negative effects on an individual's social and personal well-being (Samter, 1994). The outcomes of the presence or absence of support strongly validate its research.

MacGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011) summarize that communication is a central mechanism through which social support is experienced. Thus supportive communication research typically focuses on a support provider's intentional responses to a support target's needs and the target's evaluations of that support. According to the message-centered perspective, some supportive messages are better in achieving supportive outcomes, since messages and situations vary qualitatively. "Good" support communicates a host of significant factors affecting a person's life satisfaction such as love, acceptance, reassurance, information, and tangible assistance (e.g., Xu & Burleson, 2001) and is therefore fundamental to the creation of supportive relationships. Supportive communication further enhances satisfaction with those relationships and maintains them (e.g., Burleson, 1990, 2003a; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). In its various forms, supportive communication is part of many social contexts and interactions in personal and professional relationships. Arguably, supportive communication is one of the most ethical expressions of personhood and the focus on supportive behaviors is therefore the focus on the enactment of human goodness.

After four decades of research we know that support makes a difference in people's quality of life as support recipients and providers. However, the process of exchanging messages to

seek and provide support is far from uncomplicated. Most recent findings indicate that the effects of messages are often dependent on a host of other factors, including aspects of the message source, the message recipient, and the interactional context (Burleson, 2009; see reviews by Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Cutrona, Cohen, & Igram, 1990). Consequently, researchers need to extend the concentration on messages to also include nonverbal immediacy and supportive conversations (Jones & Bodie, 2014). The task at hand for today's scholars is to consider the additional factors that influence message efficacy and to build a solid understanding of the phenomenon.

Very recently the leading scholars of supportive communication recommended that researchers acknowledge the situational nature of supportive communication and "pay close attention to the kinds of interpersonal contexts they choose to use as proxy for or representation of enacted support" (Bodie, Jones, Vickery, Hatcher, & Cannava, 2014, p. 22; see also Goldsmith, 2004). That is precisely what this dissertation attempts to do; a thorough understanding requires the study of individuals' supportive intentions, support approaches and meaningful situational elements. The research goals are grounded on the premise that interpretive approaches best illuminate individual experiences of friendship, gender, and culture.

Sex and gender are widely used variables in communication research. Even though there has been a rigorous debate about gender differences and similarities in communication (Burleson, 2003b; Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005; Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1996), the evidence shows that men and women are more similar than different in ways that they communicate (Kunkel & Burleson, 1998; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Furthermore, a convincing body of research shows rather consistently that message recipients, both men and women, evaluate similar types of supportive messages as most sensitive, sophisticated, and helpful (Burleson, 2003b). However, findings have not been as consistent with *how* helpful or unhelpful the less sophisticated and less sensitive messages are according to different genders (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999; Jones & Burleson, 1997), and *how* men and women actually provide support for each other (MacGeorge et al., 2002; Burleson, 2003b). For example, some studies have concluded that men prefer to receive emotion-focused comforting from women more than from men, and that they tend to provide women with more sensitive support than other men (e.g., Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005). This research argues that it is important to acquire men's own descriptions about why such leanings might occur in order for us to understand the diverse experiences of support in interpersonal relationships.

Most research on supportive communication has been done in the cultural context of the United States and with different ethnicities in the US (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997). However, in recent years, research has expanded to include other nationalities (e.g., Dressler, Campos Balieiro, & Dos Santos, 1997; Goodwin & Hernandez Plaza, 2000). As a result we now know more about what constitutes sensitive and helpful supportive communication and that it resonates to people

across different genders, ethnicities, and nationalities (Burleson, 2003b). However, within the broad array of similarities there still exist differences. The most sophisticated forms of comforting that have produced consistent results within the European American population are rather verbose (High & Dillard, 2012; Jones, 2011). These may reflect the American ideal of "working things through in conversation" but might differ in cultures where talking has a different value. For communication scholars such differences, which are brought to light by relationship, gender, and culture, are valuable in advancing the development of what might become a universal theory on supportive communication.

This research has benefitted from fields like gender and cultural studies but aims to be of academic contribution, first and foremost, within the communication field. I view gender and cultural membership as social categories typically assigned to an individual at birth. However, individuals thereafter construct, produce and negotiate their gender and cultural identities in the social world. Gender and culture are thus also individual experiences. These are important elements in the study of Finnish men's supportive communication, since he[1] who engages in supportive conversations "needs to consider individual characteristics of the distressed other, the relationship shared with the other, features of the social situation, and the cultural milieu in which comforting occurs" (Burleson, 1994a, p. 150).

The dissertation comprises of published sub-studies and the present summarizing thesis. The purpose of this thesis is (1) to provide an overview of the chosen conceptual, theoretical and methodological foundations, and (2) to discuss the results and conclusions of the sub-studies to further develop their arguments. The dissertation follows the multiple methods tradition (e.g., Brewer & Hunter, 2006). The first sub-study (Study I) describes the essence of social support. The great number of support definitions lack foundation in experience or context, which makes it hard to operationalize the phenomenon (Williams, Barclay, & Schmied, 2004). Since no one has pushed for a conclusion on what social support really is in a decade (Burleson, 2010a, see also Vangelisti, 2009), the study aims to take a stance in order to contribute to its wider discussion. The second and third sub-studies describe what types of support goals and approaches men find beneficial in nonspecific (Study II) and problem-specific support situations (Study III). Both sub-studies also aim to answer the question why. The last study discovers the meanings of contextual elements and settings of men's troubles talk situations (Study IV). All four sub-studies used empirical material that was acquired from either one of the two sets of interviews, thematic and episode interviews, with 25 Finnish-born men of different ages.

The dissertation is organized in the following way: In the next chapter, I first review the beneficial outcomes of supportive communication, the roles that individuals play in supportive conversations and the supportive message strategies that have received the

1 The Finnish language does not separate between genders when using the third person pronoun 'hän', which is gender neutral. This research will use the personal pronoun 'he' throughout to refer to an individual due to the dissertation's focus on men. The decision aims to serve the subject of interest in the dissertation. When gender categories are important to distinguish (e.g., when presenting previous research), gender separators such as 'he' and 'she' will be used.

most attention. Chapter 3 outlines previous research done on three contextual elements—relationship, gender, and culture—that this thesis explores more closely. Chapter 4 articulates the research methodology and questions in detail. Summaries of the main results in the sub-studies I–IV are presented in chapter 5. The discussion in chapter 6 draws from the conclusions of the sub-studies to elaborate on the dissertation's overall contribution and proposes further understanding on the experience of supportive conversations and the person-centered theory of supportive communication. The chapter also evaluates the research as a whole. The original publications can be found as appendices.

2 SOCIAL SUPPORT AS AN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION PHENOMENON

The most influential contributions to the study of social support have come from fields like sociology, psychology, and communication. Respectively, social support can be perceived as information, which makes a person feel that he belongs to a network of communication and mutual commitment (Cobb, 1976). The cognitions about support being available, on the other hand, may safeguard the individual from health-damaging effects and assist him psychologically in the coping process (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). The communication perspective, however, stresses that social support is inherently a communication process: Being connected to a network of support and perceptions of support availability are achieved by communicative means. Social support could thus be viewed as verbal and nonverbal communication between helpers and recipients that reduces (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987) or, as Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003) further defined, helps manage uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience. The difference between the interdisciplinary concept of social support and supportive communication is that communication research focuses directly on the prosocial interactions through which individuals express their supportive intentions (Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Support commonly manifests in interpersonal communication situations, in other words, supportive conversations. Burleson (2010b, p. 151) outlines the message-centered perspective on interpersonal communication as "a complex, situated social process in which people who have established a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to generate shared meanings and accomplish social goals." In support situations, the primary goal is to help another in some way (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002). Supportive communication is thus the production of messages generated with an intention to respond to a support-seeker's needs (Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

Inline with one of the research goals—to depict support needs and men's support enactments in friendships—the next chapters elaborate on the existent research on coping processes, describe the benefits of face-to-face supportive communication, and discuss

communication behaviors that social actors use in communicating the goal of being supportive and/or becoming supported by others.

2.1 Individuals and the coping process

2.1.1 Individuals in interactive coping

Individuals can experience a variety of stressors in their lives. Emotional hurt and stress typically result from invalidation of self, either indirectly (e.g., experiencing a failure in something that is connected to one's self concept) or more directly (e.g., being rejected by a significant other) (Burleson, 2003b). Some of the issues individuals are challenged by can be settled with one's own coping resources. For others, additional assistance is needed. Problems do not, however, come at a person as problems. Problems occur when incidents become stressful and people view the demands of the event greater than their resources, both their motivation and ability, to cope (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stressful events can be situations, issues, and things that disrupt the normal flow of life and are negatively appraised. Encountering a stressor "may result in an increased sense of vulnerability, changes in coping resources, or changes in values, mastery, relationships with others, and so on" (Aldwin, 2011, p. 16). This research uses the term 'problem' hereafter to refer to the multitude of negative issues or events that challenge a person and require support to manage (see discussion on 'problem' and 'lack' in chapter 6).

The process of coping is the person's own efforts at reducing negative affect and cognitions about a problem. Coping is thus the attempt to mitigate the harmful effects of stress (Folkman, 2012). For example, positive thinking and exercising may help individuals to lift their mood (Giacobbi, Hausenblas, & Frye, 2003), and spending time in nature (Korpela, Borodulin, Neuvonen, Paronen, & Tyrväinen, 2014) or meditating can calm down both the stressed mind and the body (Krygier et al., 2013). Investing in the development of coping skills is no trivial accomplishment: Successful coping with stresses in everyday life is found to be the best predictor of psychological well-being, mood (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and even physical health (e.g., Uchino, 2004).

Supportive interactions with another person have also been referred to as coping, specifically, interactive coping. Barbee et al. (1993, p. 386) defined *interactive coping* as "a dynamic behavioral process in which one individual responds verbally and nonverbally, in either helpful or unhelpful ways, to another individual's problem or emotion." Most upsets are caused by everyday matters, such as having an argument at work, getting a nasty phone call, forgetting an important event, or disagreeing strongly with a spouse. In the same way, people in one's everyday life, such as friends or family members, are quite naturally the most likely sources of one's supportive communication (e.g., Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, & Vickery, 2013).

Perceived support and cognitions about support availability affect an individual's experience of personal health (see Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Some have argued that a tendency to perceive support as available in one's life can be a stable personality characteristic that varies among individuals according to their infant or childhood attachment experiences (Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986, cited in MacGeorge et al., 2011). Personality traits and mood does influence how an individual perceives support available to him (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Yet, the role of others in his life satisfaction cannot be underestimated. People are healthier when they are socially integrated (for a review, see Uchino, 2004). While an association between longevity and belonging to social networks has been established, on its own it offers little insight into the mechanisms by which social relationships may be linked to well-being or morbidity (Dressler et al., 1997). The current investigation suggests that we pay attention to an individual's experience of coping and communication with others.

In order for support to be processed and have positive outcomes on personal and relational levels, it has to somehow have been communicated. MacGeorge et al. (2011) perceive the connection between communication and individual's well-being rather direct. Accordingly, supportive communication research studies messages that have immediate or relatively immediate outcomes on relational well-being, and on psychological and physiological coping. The objective of supportive communication research is to find out what the important characteristics of persons, situations and messages are, which achieve these outcomes (see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

Often messages, which help the other cope effectively with his emotional distress, appear to do the best job (Dakof & Taylor, 1990). Individuals welcome emotional support, for example, when they are feeling down or doubtful about their choices in life. Helpers target the receiver's need especially via communicative actions in the hopes of overcoming the exigency or managing the need's emotional effects (Burleson, 2003a). In order to explain such a process, Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) developed an account for conversationally induced reappraisals (CIR). The integrative model is based on appraisal theories of emotional experience and holds a central premise that emotional reactions are a product of a person's own appraisals about the external events that take place in the context of what is important to his present life goals. All behaviors that are directed at helping the target cope with upset feelings or with the situation producing those feelings can be considered emotional support—support that is given "in the effort to alleviate distress and restore happiness, or at least inner peace" (Burleson, 2003a, p. 552).

Other types of support may be well suited for instances when information or concrete assistance is desired. For example, instrumental support (Tardy, 1994) can be very helpful when a renovation project is overdue and one needs an extra pair of hands to finish. Informational support such as advice (MacGeorge, 2009) is called for when one needs assistance in making tough decisions like choosing to leave one's job. Nonetheless, even in situations where instrumental or informational support is needed, the receiver may

also experience the provided support as care and acceptance, that is, emotional support (Burleson, 2003b).

Even though most studies have focused on the production or evaluation of supportive messages, those messages are responses to something. Barbee and Cunningham (1995) confirm that a support episode begins with a problem and a support seeker who expresses the need for assistance. Seeking support can be extremely rewarding but it can also be unsatisfying or risky (see Barbee, Gulley, & Cunningham, 1990). The support seeker may be dissatisfied with the content of the helper's message or the lack of motivation he is presenting. The risk in supportive interaction comes from having to possibly disclose details about previous coping attempts, personal information related to the problem, or available resources to cope. The disclosure may challenge one's positive and negative face (Goldsmith, 2004). Face in this context refers to people's socially situated identities that others claim or attribute to them (Tracy, 1990). The same is true for the helper; Cohen and Syme (1985) suggest that helper's resources to assist may or may not be adequate for the task at hand. Therefore, support approaches can have negative effects on individuals' personal and relational well-being. If the helper's attempts fail, he too may experience unwelcomed emotions about not having been helpful to another (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998) or not receiving appreciation for his attempts to help.

In spite of risks involved, supporting others is recommended: Providing support has been found to have health benefits not only for the one receiving support but also for the helper. Giving and being generous is beneficial because it adds to the helper's sense of worth (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Schenier, & Ryan, 2006). Nonverbal forms of comfort, like giving hugs and caresses, can release serotonin and oxytocin, which calm individual's heart rate, enhance immune function, even decrease depression, and make individual's feel good about the connection with another (see review by Field, 2010). Additionally, supportive interactions between seekers and helpers have the possibility to enhance satisfaction with relationships and thus bring forth social well-being (see Kuuluvainen & Isotalus, 2014).

Supportive functions are manifested in communication situations through different types of verbal and nonverbal messages. Research has shown that support providers pay attention to the characteristics of the problem, which the support seeker is experiencing. Cutrona and Suhr (1992, 1994) were among the first to research support behaviors in problem contexts. Problem-specific approaches to support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; see also Cutrona & Suhr, 1992, 1994) suggest that supportive behaviors are effective if they tap into the specific needs that the stressor has provoked. The experience of stress varies according to the area of life in which the stress occurs, how controllable the stressor is, how intense the negative emotions related to it are, and how long the effects of the problem are expected to last.

Social support studies have in fact looked at various problem contexts, for example, illnesses like HIV (Derlega, Winstead, & Barbee, 2003; Haas, 2002; Wrubel, Stumbo, & Johnson, 2010), caregiving for people with dementia (Monahan & Hooker, 1995),

rheumatic diseases (Lanza, Cameron, & Revenson, 1995); and troubles such as job loss (Mallinckrodt & Fretz, 1988), unemployment (e.g., Bolton & Oatley, 1987; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Ullah, Banks, & Warr, 1985), divorce (Burrell, 2002; Pinquart, 2003), academic stress (MacGeorge, Samter, & Gillihan, 2005) or academic failure (Mortenson, 2006), and grieves like bereavement (Balaswamy, Richardson, & Price, 2004; Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Servaty-Seib & Burleson, 2007, Toller, 2011; Russell, 2004; Drentea, Clay, Roth, & Mittelman, 2006). Studies on various problems have not produced a consistent pattern of messages that work best to specific problems. Accordingly, in spite of its reasonable attempt, the optimal matching model (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994), i.e., meeting a stressor with a specified support message did not succeed in its explanatory power. The reason can be found in the wide array of factors influencing support outcomes. In other words, even though there is some evidence to support the idea that approaches match the type of problem one is facing, such perspectives lack focus on the multifaceted nature of supportive conversations and the situations in which they take place.

There is, however, extensive evidence to show that helpers attend to information about the support seeker's responsibility for the stressor and that this knowledge has a considerable impact on the helpers' supportive intentions and behaviors (MacGeorge, 2001; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003; for review, see Weiner, 1995). Barbee (1991, in Barbee et al., 1998) noted that if helpers perceive support seeker's problem as controllable and caused by internal effects they are likely to blame the seeker. Helpers are less motivated to use highly sensitive support to alleviate another's emotional stress if the person is perceived as the cause of his problems (Jones & Burleson, 1997; MacGeorge, 2001). Furthermore, the more blame is involved the more the helpers use avoidance behaviors such as dismissing the emotions of the seeker and the more likely they are to shun away from the supportive interaction. Gender expectations such as masculinity may impact on what is viewed as legitimate upsets and appropriate coping. Let us review male gender, problems and coping next.

2.1.2 Men coping interactively

Interactions in which an individual's coping resources are enhanced typically require that he expresses his support needs and welcomes another's assistance. Some support strategies are more effective or more preferred than others, and are often introduced through socialization. Gender ideals may enhance and limit certain support seeking behaviors, which statements like "boys don't cry" and "men don't wine" concretize. Adams and Coltrane (2005) summarize that boys are the targets of stronger gender stereotyping than girls, and thus are also the targets of expectations for greater conformity with masculine ideals. Such gender identity is considered more easily broken than the feminine identity as well as more tedious to maintain psychologically. Masculine ideals tend to demand the

denial of emotional connection and feelings of vulnerability that are common to all human beings. Rawlins (1992, p. 274) goes further:

> *Overall, however, males do not demonstrate females' flexibility or range of jointly negotiated possibilities in their friendships. They are hampered by negligible early training and reinforcement in matters of communal interpersonal relationships and insufficient lifelong practice in developing same-sex intimacy. Moreover, cultural proscriptions against male vulnerability, and continued confinement to competitive, career-oriented arenas and achievements for their foremost validations of self-conceptions as worthwhile human beings limit their interpersonal options.*

At the same time, coping styles as masculine ideals are not clear-cut. Ojala and Pietilä (2013) describe masculinity as a norm that characterizes behavior and comprises of the ideal elements for manliness. Thus, masculinity is not a description that mirrors reality but rather an expectation of how a man should carry himself. The typical criteria for manhood incorporate elements like activeness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, independence, rationality, self-control, and strength. Such criteria may promote coping on one's own.

Problems, however, do not discriminate—they occur at some point in everyone's life. An appraisal of the problem and the emotions that the problem causes are a set of evaluations that a person makes about who he is in relation to what is taking place in his life (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). According to Helgeson's (2011) review, men and women do not differ in the amount of potential stressors in their lives but men may experience and appraise, or they report appraising problems as less severe. During preadolescence, boys seem to experience fewer non-interpersonal stressors than girls but for both sexes in adolescence involvement in romantic relationships adds to the overall stressors that they experience. At the same time, the romantic partner is often the greatest source of emotional support for men (Paajanen, 2003).

Turner (1994) found in a study of Canadian men and women that gender differences exist in social support and emotional involvement in relationships. However, even though women reported significantly more support than men, they also reported more depressive symptoms. The relationship between gender and support did not differ significantly for men and women. Men reported fewer confidants, less contact with network members, and less empathy and emotional disclosure than women but they also described fewer conflicts and negative interactions in their relationships. Even though women reported more support from their network members, the influence of negative interactions and conflict events on depression was still greater for women than for men. Social network contacts may be tighter for women and provide them with more resources than men, but at the same time, being embedded in many close supportive relationships has more costs for women than men, as they are targeted with more negative emotional burdening of support-seeking (Helgeson, 2011).

Support providers who help an upset friend to cope can experience different levels of emotional contagion. Magen and Konasewich (2011) detected large differences between

women and men's deterioration of emotional state after offering emotional support to a friend. The support receivers' emotional state did not impact male helper's emotions, not when the recipient's state got worse nor when it got better during the interaction. However, in both instances women helpers reported being affected emotionally. What is noteworthy is that the helper's emotional contagion did not make any of the support recipients feel better. At the same time, when support recipients felt better after receiving emotional support they felt better regardless of the helpers' gender. This suggests that at least young adult men who provide emotional support are not mimicking the emotions of the support receiver, which women may be more prone to do.

Rumination, or the continual contemplation of negative emotional experiences, poses risks on a person's health and is found to be somewhat more typical for women than men (Kokkonen & Kinnunen, 2008). Recently Afifi, Afifi, Merrill, Denes, and Davis (2013) set out to investigate what happens to those who receive good or poor support when they are verbally ruminating. The factors that they looked at were brooding, anxiety, and relationship satisfaction. Poor support predicted both rising anxiety levels and dissatisfaction with the relationship. Interestingly, when a person was provided with good support for his or her verbal rumination, it only positively impacted satisfaction with the friendship. However, their anxiety was not significantly reduced and brooding still continued. The researchers hypothesize that maybe individuals can only help themselves to feel better psychologically when they are in the midst of cognitive rumination episodes. They suggest that future research focus more precisely on reappraisals in such situations.

According to Helgeson (2011), researchers have often concluded that men are more likely to pursue and prefer to use problem-focused coping than emotion-focused coping. Focusing on problems means that a person attempts to alter the stressor itself by seeking advice and developing a plan to solve the problem. When emotions are central to coping, a person attempts to adjust to the stressor. He might try distracting himself, accepting the problem or thinking about positive things. Nonetheless, the problem-focused or emotion-focused dichotomy is too simplistic to be used when studying men's supportive communication. Coping is a far more complex phenomenon than a set of polarized behavioral options, and gender alike.

For one, each coping event is a unique experience. Therefore it is difficult to predict how long it takes for an individual to overcome a stressor. McNess (2008) found in a study of men recovering from their sibling's death that friends were perceived to tire after 6 months of support provision. Furthermore, the support receivers themselves also felt that the bereavement was taking a long time even though they tried their best to cope with it. They found it understandable that people who were not as closely involved would not have the tenacity to continually support them in grief. Nonetheless, not being supported had a negative impact on the grieving man and for many, enhanced the feelings of loss. Kortteinen (1992) perceived the coping task for Finnish men as a lonely endeavor. He argued that Finnish women live in relation to others but men live in existential aloneness

and are battling against the whole universe on their own. In Finnish working class men and women's narratives work was what brought self-worth. For men it was sacrificing even one's health when taking risks and claiming their individual autonomy. It was depicted as a necessity for one's honor. The extent to which these cultural narratives on coping reflect the lived experiences of individuals is an intriguing question: While tails of hardship and endurance may be romanticised they also have the potential to construct our realities.

It appears clear that individual circumstances, gendered expectations and cultural norms influence on how people talk about and appraise problems in their lives. In relation to the social world, these contextual elements are likely to appear in the accounts of a person's experiences, which this research collects and analyzes. Next I will elaborate on the communication perspective on coping processes.

2.2 Communicative means to facilitate the coping process

Previous research on social support and supportive communication has shown that an individual can participate in supportive communication in various roles: He can seek or activate support needs, enact or provide support for another's needs, receive support for the needs he has, or perceive support available to him if he were to need it. Goldsmith (2004) asserts that the study of supportive communication should focus on the supportive process. The supportive communication process comprises of support activation, support provision, target reaction and helper response (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Barbee et al., 1998), which are likely to have an impact on how goals for supportive encounters are set. In order to have communication be effective and successful in achieving its supportive function, interaction has to have positive consequences for the participants. When it comes to comforting messages, their success or effectiveness is thus a complex matter (Burleson, 1994a).

Because this dissertation applies the interpretive approach to the study of supportive communication, individuals are viewed as the primary sources of what supportive conversations are like in men's friendships. According to the theoretical framework of this research, an individual as a social actor—unrelated to the role he has in supportive interaction—gives meaning to the communication of oneself and others, and thus experiences the communication event in his own way. This chapter describes the various roles individuals can have in supportive conversations and the support enactments that have received attention within the supportive communication research. Furthermore, I will introduce the currently most prominent theory on supportive communication, the theory of person-centeredness, and how it relates to the research goals of this dissertation.

2.2.1 Participant roles and enactments in supportive conversation

There are various ways that people can communicate their need for support. Asking for comfort directly is one way to seek support. Yet, individuals do not always make straightforward requests from others to alleviate their distress. Barbee and Cunningham (1995) showed that, for example, sulking, crying, and being quiet were indirect behaviors, which attempted to elicit supportive actions from potential helpers. It is likely that the vaguer the seeker's enactment of his support need, the more challenging it is for the helper to detect the need and its nature (Barbee et al., 1998). The uncovering of indirect support activation may, however, be facilitated by environmental cues such as relationship closeness, interpersonal schemata, and cultural aspects (see Bodie & Burleson, 2008), which could aid the process. Presently there is very little we know about their meaning. This research is one attempt to shed light on these qualities in supportive conversations.

There are also many ways to respond to someone after his need for support has been detected. A combination of sensitive verbal messages and nonverbally communicated warmth is generally a recommended approach (see Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Messages are sets of behavioral expressions, which make communication possible. They consist of symbols that mostly have conventional interpretations within a community (Burleson, 2010b). At the same time, close relationships like friendships are known to contain idiomatic talk that is created and recreated by mutual and shared experience with the intention to enhance the connection between friends and mark the relationship as unique (see also Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Supportive expressions have commonly been divided into broad categories of emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support. Barbee and Cunningham (1995) attempted to further categorize messages into approaches that are either effective or ineffective. They divided interactive coping behaviors into two dimensions, problem versus emotion and avoidance versus approach behaviors. Such actions are communicative in nature and conveyed in both verbal and nonverbal messages (see also Cutrona & Russell, 1990). The aforementioned typologies have been widely used but also targets of criticism: Classifying the support that is given does not address the elements of helpfulness of such support and the important question why those approaches are beneficial.

Because one of the main functions of supportive communication is to improve the psychological state of another (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), it is often called for when a person needs reassurance or "a nudge to the right direction." Reduced coping resources may cause a person to doubt his abilities or even his identity. In such circumstances, esteem support may be desired. It is the communication of affection, concern, interest towards the other, and positive appraisal (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Esteem support messages typically attempt to impact the support receiver's positive self-evaluation and sustain or restore his self-esteem and self-worth. It is a "unique form of emotional support focused on enhancing how others feel about themselves and their attributes, abilities, and accomplishments" (Holmstrom, 2012, p. 78).

A common support type, yet high-stake, is advice-giving (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Studies show that solicited advice that comes from someone who is perceived as an authority in the issue is often well-received (MacGeorge, 2009). However, if advice is not welcome it can threaten the receiver's *face* and the helper can be perceived as putting the support receiver down or feeling superior towards him (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). Goldsmith (1994) stresses the importance of doing facework, i.e., protecting another's desired identity while providing advice, since face concerns may be substantial for people that hold strong cultural beliefs about self-presentation. Furthermore, the sequential placement of advice is relevant to enacted social support, which is communicated in troubles talk conversations between close relational partners (Goldsmith, 2004). Feng and MacGeorge (2010) have expanded the theory on advice and showed that supportive messages are more beneficial if they are followed or preceded with certain types of communication. Advice appears to be more helpful when it is an appropriate approach to the problem, when the content is useful and responds to solving the problem, and in particular, if advice is communicated in a manner that takes into consideration the identity and relational implications of the directing action (Goldsmith, 2004). Similarly, Feng (2009) found that when advice followed a comforting message it was evaluated more favorable than when the advice was given before such a message.

If advice is one of the most straightforward support behaviors, then invisible support is somewhat the opposite (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). Howland and Simpson (2010) suggest that invisible support works as a dyadic process in which the benefits occur because the receiver is unaware that he has been given support. Invisible support is detected from naturally occurring situations and is typically provided as practical or emotional support. Invisible support deemphasizes the roles between the interactants in supportive communication, deflects attention from the problems or upsetting feelings that the receiver may be experiencing, and communicates support 'under the radar.' The researchers depict two ways to enact invisible support. One is the recipient effect in which the person is unaware of the support being provided. The other is the provider effect, in which the support is subtly and skillfully provided. Invisible support has been shown to decrease the experience of negative affects and increase receiver's self-efficacy (see also Saltzman & Holahan, 2002). The benefits of invisible support may lie in the receiver's chance to escape the feelings of debt or gratitude to the helper. This may be important for those individuals who view reliance on others as a threat to their autonomous self. While intriguing, the phenomenon of invisible support is somewhat ambiguous. It could possibly benefit from concepts that have recently achieved growing attention in supportive communication research—listening and nonverbal immediacy.

The majority of research on supportive communication has focused on verbal support messages, and until now listening and nonverbal immediacy have received little operationalization in the context of support episodes. G. D. Bodie and his colleagues, however, are making rapid advances in scrutinizing the imperative role of listening in

interpersonal communication. Bodie, Vickery, and Gearhart (2013, p. 46) found that supportive listeners are characterized as "other-focused, involved, friendly, understanding, and engaged in appropriate verbal responding." The fundamental goal of relational listening is to try to understand how others feel and connect emotionally with them, which can be coherently summarized as active-emphatic listening (AEL)—the acts of sensing, processing, and responding (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011).

Bodie, Gearhart, et al. (2013) sought to investigate the stability of people's AEL across time and situations. They found that AEL is related to both the goals of an individual listener and to the contextual characteristics of the listening situation (Study 2). It appears that the conversational setting influences the utilization of AEL more than one's trait score on active-emphatic listening. The relational dynamics between a listening friend and the speaker is likely to impact the motivation and ability to listen emphatically and respond with attentive markers. Nonverbal immediacy is such behavior. It refers to, for example, gazes, smiling, direct body orientation, hugs, and other comfort-providing touches (e.g., Bodie & Jones, 2012). Nonverbal immediacy is meaningful in supportive communication because it can result in increased liking, connection, interpersonal intimacy, and positive affects and feelings of being cared for and loved (e.g., Jones, 2004). The next chapter describes a sound theoretical foundation, the person-centered theory of supportive communication, to which the aforementioned models could significantly contribute (see Jones & Bodie, 2014).

2.2.2 Person-centered theory of supportive communication

The specifics of supportive message content, the skillful enactment of such messages, and their evaluations have been common focuses in recent supportive communication studies. This chapter introduces the dominant research program, the person-centered theory of supportive communication (e.g., High & Dillard, 2012). I will elaborate on the core concepts of the theory, the direction it is developing, and the theory's relevance to the thesis at hand.

A large body of research shows that in times of distress, emotion-focused support or the provision of solace would be the most effective means to support another (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). B. R. Burleson and his associates have conducted extensive work on the provision of comforting messages. Comforting communication is something that attempts to manage or modify the psychological state of another (Burleson, 1994a) with messages that alleviate emotional distress that an individual is experiencing (Burleson, 1985). The research on comforting has mainly focused on verbal person-centeredness and negative feelings at a moderate level, such as disappointments or sadness (cf. Servaty-Seib & Burleson, 2007). In sum, the research emphasis has been on the form and content of supportive messages that are more often emotion- than problem-focused (Jones & Bodie, 2014).

The theory of person-centeredness and the nine-level hierarchical model of comforting messages describe the verbal message strategies that people use when behaving altruistically, i.e., supporting others. Person-centeredness means the extent to which messages, typically verbal messages, "reflect an awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational aspects of communicative contexts" (Burleson, 1987, p. 305). Sophisticated comforting strategies express greater involvement with an upset person and his problem through, for example, being more listener-centered, neutral, focusing on the psychological reactions to certain events, and accepting the other's point-of-view of the situation (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Originally proposed by Applegate (1980) and extensively developed by Burleson (e.g., 1982, 1984, 1994a, 1994b), the nine-level hierarchical model of person-centered comforting strategies has proven to be a valid measure for sensitive and sophisticated support messages.

When a comforting message is highly person-centered it explicitly recognizes and legitimizes the other's feelings, helps the other person to articulate those feelings, elaborates reasons why those feelings might be felt, and assists the other to see how those feelings fit in a broader context (Burleson, 1994a). In contrast, the low level messages either explicitly or implicitly deny the other's feelings and perspectives (Burleson, 1994b). A helper can do so by criticizing the other's feelings, challenging the legitimacy of those feelings, or stating another preferable way to feel and act (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). The level of sophistication of the message does make a difference. High and Dillard's (2012) meta-analysis demonstrates that, "when produced with appropriate partners, high VPC [verbal person-centered] messages consistently yield favorable outcomes and enhance personal well-being." Numerous studies have shown the usefulness of highly person-centered messages across different demographics (Jones & Burleson, 1997; Samter at al., 1997) but the evaluations of such verbal and elaborative messages have been somewhat lower for men and for people in collectivist cultures (Burleson, 2003b) (see chapters 3.2 and 3.3). Typically, men tend to rate messages that fall on the middle of the hierarchical system, the moderately person-centered messages, more favorably than women (Jones & Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999).

Moderately person-centered messages (MPC) provide implicit acceptance or positive response to the feelings of the other person to some extent (Burleson, 1994a). Yet, the messages do not elaborate on, explicitly mention, or legitimize those feelings. MPC strategies can attempt to divert the person's attention from the upsetting situation and its resulting feelings. The helper may acknowledge the person's feelings and offer sympathy and condolence but does not provide further understanding of why those feelings might be felt or how to cope with them. In addition, the helper provides a nonfeeling-centered explanation of the circumstances in an effort to reduce the support receiver's negative emotional state (Burleson, 1994a; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Out of all verbal person-centered messages, the moderate level is likely to be the most commonly applied in everyday support situations (see Jones & Burleson, 2003).

Overall person-centeredness is an important quality of communication that serves a certain function. In support situations functional "messages are responsive to the aims and utterances of an interactional partner, are tailored to the characteristics of the partner and situation, attend to the identity-relevant features of communicative contexts, and may encourage reflection about persons and social situations" (Burleson, 2007, p. 113). It is evident that the production of such messages is not a simple task. At the same time, skilled communicators are more likely to achieve desired social outcomes through message production processes (Burleson, 2007). One common function is influencing others in some way. Dillard, Anderson, and Knobloch (2002, p. 426) define interpersonal influence as "symbolic efforts designed (a) to preserve or change the behavior of another individual or (b) to maintain or modify aspects of another individual that are proximal to behavior, such as cognitions, emotions, and identities." Hargie (2006a) reminds us that motivation is fundamental in determining the goals people seek in interaction. He summarizes that behavior is shaped by goals, while motivation is what determines the degree of commitment to pursue them. Supportive communication possibly has the most ethical and moral motivation out of all message production processes, and thus attempts to influence another primarily for *his* sake.

No matter what the supportive messages are and how they are communicated, their effects on the receiver ultimately define their success. A recent theory of dual-process model of supportive communication outcomes (Bodie & Burleson, 2008) has succeeded in revealing some key elements of supportive message processing. For example, many recipients of support benefit from sensitive and sophisticated comforting messages but the effects of those messages are moderated, sometimes considerably, by the characteristics of the people involved and the situation. Dual-process model argues that the message content has the strongest effect on support outcomes when those who receive support analyze the content of the message extensively; yet, when message content receives little attention, it is the other elements of the situation that may substantially influence recipient outcomes (Burleson, 2009). These are contextual elements, which this research aims to explore.

The level of message scrutiny varies among motivation and ability, namely cognitive complexity. Similarly, it is likely that support providers, when they have experience being the recipients of support, use some heuristics in their own message production. The different contextual elements (environmental cues) may activate meaningful heuristics, associations, or sensations that influence the outcomes of supportive communication situations (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). This research aims to depict the functions of men's supportive communication with friends. The emphasis is on meanings that men give to the elements in support situations that matter in achieving their supportive function. Burleson (2010b, p. 151) defines meanings as

> *internal states (thoughts, ideas, beliefs, feelings, etc.) that communicators seek to express or convey in a message and interpret a message as expressing or conveying. When communicating, persons strive to align their expressions and interpretations of messages*

with one another so as to achieve shared meaning—a common understanding of the internal states associated with messages.

The cognitive theory of communication is valuable and is not at great odds with the interpretivist groundings of this dissertation, in which the focus is also on the individual. Nevertheless, this research holds that men's intentions and interpretations need to be the center of the study. What is being intended and what is being interpreted can be best explored in Finnish men's own descriptions of their experiences on supportive communication with their friends. Because supportive communication is a situated process, what is beneficial to another is negotiated in conversation, and is likely to be influenced by contextual elements that are given individual and shared meanings. The next chapters will discuss some of the contextual elements that may have significance to supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships: Relationship, gender, and culture.

3 SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION SITUATION

One of the three research goals for this dissertation is to explore the meaning of contexts in supportive communication of Finnish men with their friends. Individuals assign meanings to things in relation to their life experience as well as by communicating and constructing meaning with others. The following chapters discuss previous research that has scrutinized the significance of three specific contexts—relationship, gender, and culture—in communication. These three contexts are not meant to be comprehensive. They were chosen because first, the meaning of particular communication behavior and its value depend on interpretive frames that are established and retained between friends (Rawlins, 1992). Second, some masculinities within a particular culture may restrain the expression of emotion whereas homosocial bonding is allowed (see Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). Third, supportive communication is a set of actions and events, which are understood as giving assistance within a certain culture (Goldsmith, 1992). Up till now, however, social support definitions have not captured contexts well (Williams, Barclay, & Schmied, 2004) and this dissertation is one attempt to investigate that.

Interpersonal communication comprises of multiple dimensions of contexts and the intersection of these contexts is what is considered a 'communication situation' (Burleson, 2010b). The unique combination of contexts in support situations makes supportive communication scientifically intriguing and complex to understand. Each context possesses a host of factors that may influence how participants engage in the process of support (e.g., Bodie & Burleson, 2008). Burleson (2009, p. 26) explicates that these factors

> *include aspects of the physical setting (e.g., location, privacy, noise), the medium of the interactional exchange (e.g., face-to-face, computer-mediated), and the problem situation that makes supportive communication a relevant activity (e.g., cause and controllability of the problem, severity of the problem, whether the recipient has solicited support, the type and intensity of the recipient's emotional state).*

Because supportive communication is a situated process, it cannot be scrutinized without paying attention to contexts that shape or even create it. According to Rawlins (2009, p. 21), "all communicative contexts are reflexive achievements." That is to say that the now in which individuals live is co-constructed by the same individuals who share the emerging moment.

For its importance, the concept of context has been very loosely applied and argued in research (Dillard & Knobloch, 2011). Context is an important concept for communication scholars because messages can only be fully discerned when there is awareness of the situational aspects in which communication occurs (Hargie, 2006a). Applegate and Delia (1980, according to Burleson, 2010b) propose five settings that work as elements of communication contexts: The physical setting (e.g., the space), the relational or social setting (e.g., friends), the cultural setting (e.g., nationality or other groupings), the functional setting (e.g., the primary goal of providing support), and the institutional setting (e.g., home, work). Time and temporality can also be considered as contexts (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). They matter because contexts impact the processes and outcomes of social perception, message production and reception, and interaction coordination (Burleson, 2010b). How they matter can be discerned with naturalistic inquiry. It is probable that contexts cannot be clearly distinguished from one another; for example, gender ideals are always part of a particular culture and intertwined with its ideals. Nevertheless, their influence on individuals' identity and social actions encourages a closer scrutiny. Let us now review three widely used contexts in social support and supportive communication research.

3.1 Relationship as context for supportive communication

Supportive communication is a key component of close relationships (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). It both helps to create and sustain a close relational context: Relationships are built largely because of support such as tangible assistance, compliments, comfort, and love (Burleson, 2003a) and they are maintained with reciprocal support (e.g., Xu & Burleson, 2001). Lack of or decrease in support can change the nature or quality of a relationship. Similarly, the increase in support can advance the relationship to a more desired or deeper level.

Several relationships have served as contexts in studies on supportive communication: Friends (Menegatos, Lederman, & Hess, 2010), family relationships (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004; Lynch, 1998), siblings (Voorpostel & Van der Lippe, 2007), grandparents (Soliz, 2008), romantic partners (Bachman & Bippus, 2005; Caldeira & Woodin, 2012; Rini, Dunkel Schetter, Hobel, Glynn, & Sandman, 2006), married couples (Cutrona, 1996; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Cutrona & Suhr, 1994), peers and colleagues (House, 1981; Miller, 2007), and student friends (Goodwin & Hernandez Plaza, 2000; Jones, 2008; Mortenson, 2006; Sabee & Wilson, 2005; Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Mazer, 2009). Additionally, research has focused on supportive communication between nurses and patients (Mikkola, 2006), doctors and patients (Artkoski, 2007), homeopaths and clients (Ruusuvuori, 2005), and caregivers and their close ones (Rapp, Shumaker, Schmidt, Naughton, & Anderson, 1998). Certain support-types may be particularly desired in specific relationships such as informational support from a doctor to a patient who is seeking health advice, or esteem

support from a spouse to a partner who feels underappreciated in the relationship. When the helper meets the seeker's goals in the situation, for example, when he succeeds in providing advice that saves face and supports the receiver's esteem, support is likely to have an impact on how the receiver views the helper.

Friendship is a universally recognized relationship type among people who like each other and perceive each other as having positive qualities. Rawlins (1992, p. 13) defines friendship as a cultural ideal as something that "appears to be a categorical repository for the hope of a mutually edifying moral covenant voluntarily negotiated between people." As opposed to kin relationships or a marital one, friendship typically is not defined by a social category (Fehr, 1996). Friendships are characteristically voluntary, personal, equal, mutually involving and affective in ties (Rawlins, 1992). They are also reciprocal and non-hierarchical (see e.g., Allan 1981, 1989, 1996; Bell, 1981; Gareis, 1995; La Gaipa, 1997; Mendelson & Kay, 2003; Samter, 2003; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Most people have friends even if they do not have a life partner and in spite of also having relationships with family members. Yet, friendship is not all enduring. It is a relationship that ceases to exist if reciprocity or communicative sustenance falters.

People across cultures form friendships, and individuals from different parts of the world can be friends, for example, through social media applications and online games. Friendship is not restricted to people of same age, social status, or gender even though typically friends share binding facets and interests. Friendship is a multidimensional and complex construct, which includes both cognitive and behavioral attributes (Patterson, Bettini, & Nussbaum, 1993) and dialectical tensions (Rawlins, 1992, 2009). It is possible that the growing friendship types, which are enabled by the current technological advances, may also change how we think about friendship in the future. For example, Bleske-Rechek et al. (2012) proposed that cross-sex friendships are historically a new phenomenon and that attraction, which is characteristic to romantic relationships, cannot be automatically excluded from those friendships. Nonetheless, we are seeing a development in friendship diversity as, e.g., communication opportunities and gender equality increase.

Rawlins (1992, p. 271) summarizes the three most commonly depicted expectations of close friendships across diverse research settings and studies on adolescents to older adults: "A close friend is somebody to talk to, to depend on and rely on for help, support, and caring, and to have fun and enjoy doing things with." Studies on early adulthood friendships (Bagwell, Bender, Andreassi, Kinoshita, Montarello, & Muller, 2005; Chu, 2005; Way, 1997), friendships in adulthood (Rawlins, 1992, 2009), and in older age (Adams & Blieszner, 1989; Field, 1999; Johnson & Troll, 1994; Nussbaum, 1994; Offer, Kaiz Offer, & Ostrov, 2004; Rawlins, 2004; Stevens & Van Tilburg, 2011) have indicated that the weight of different friendship characteristic may vary, (e.g., because of age) but what is consistent is that friendship is an autonomous entity constantly in motion (Rawlins, 1992). Nonetheless, not having friends impacts a person negatively at every stage of their life (Samter, 2003). Du Pertuis, Aldwin, and Bosse (2001) detected in their large study of

older age men that the source of social support impacted their perceived well-being. More than half of the men described receiving a lot of support from friends and family. These men had fewer problems due to physical health and they were less prone to depression in comparison to men who reported receiving little support or no support from their friends. The results underline the importance of friendship to people's lives.

Wright (1984) says that interaction in friendships takes place between participants who respond to one another personally as unique individuals. Most of the research done on communication and friendship has concerned disclosure, conflict, and emotional support provision (see review by Samter, 2003). Support for friends is a common communicative undertaking (Barbee et al., 1998; Clark & Delia, 1997; Deci, et al., 2006; Leatham & Duck, 1990; Samter, 1994; Siebert, Mutran, & Reitzes, 1999; Voorpostel & Van der Lippe, 2007; Walen & Lachman, 2000; Winstead, Derlega, Lewis, Sanchez-Hucles, & Clark, 1992). As shown before, though, providing support is also a demanding communicative task that requires both motivation and ability. The communication skills of friends have been shown to impact on individuals' liking and success in the relationship (Burleson & Samter, 1990; Samter & Burleson, 2005).

Close friendships for both genders are rewarding socio-emotionally and instrumentally (Wright, 2006). Hall (2012) conducted three studies in an attempt to construct a factor structure for ideal friendship standards in same-sex friendships. The results suggest that the six expectation factors are enjoyment, agency, communion, instrumental aid, similarity, and symmetrical reciprocity. Interestingly, instrumental aid emerged as a unique and valued friendship expectation, which was not present in Hall's (2011) previous meta-analysis. The factor structure for ideal friendship standards was thus modified by adding concepts to agency and reciprocity: Agency benefits from including physical attractiveness, wealth and physical fitness whereas symmetrical reciprocity now reflects support for loyalty and availability, positive regard, and commitment.

Several studies have addressed men's friendships (Grief, 2009; Kaplan, 2006; Nardi, 1992a, 1992b, 1999; Soilevuo Grønnerød, 2005; Thurnell-Read, 2012; Walle, 2007; Waskow & Waskow, 1993). What we know is that men talk to their friends about their emotions and difficulties, they value their friendships with other men for the support they provide, and those friendships can become very close (Samter, 2003). Closeness and support are important in men's friendships but the results of friendship studies need to be read with a reminder that the concept of friendship is to an extent always cultural (Winstead, Derlega, & Rose, 1997). According to Wright's (2006) review, men and women do not differ significantly in the prominence of talk for talk's sake in their friendships, in the importance of fun and relaxation in them, nor on the values and conceptions they place on friendship and friendship agency-instrumentality. However, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship between best friends among men and among women would be stronger for women (Duck & Wright, 1993). This does not mean that men's same-sex friendships could not or would not be close and meaningful (e.g., Sears, Graham, & Campbell, 2009).

We need to bear in mind that two unique individuals create interpersonal relationships. Thus, even though relationships are in dialogue with the social world and challenged by its expectations it does not mean that friendships among those who identify, for example, as men and Finns would be interchangeable.

Communal and agentic modal patterns are commonly used when talking about the characteristics of men's friendships, the latter being most often linked with men. Wright (2006, p. 50) summarizes that "to the degree that each partner in a friendship considers the other unfeigned and genuine, and responds to that partner with respect to what the partner regards as important and self-involving, the partners are, in a basic sense, expressing communality." Agentic friendship, on the other hand, "reflects a person's needs for sociable communication, interpersonal harmony, objective validation, and social involvement with a variety of others" (Rawlins, 1992, p. 274). Research evidence indicates that close male friendships tend not to be as disclosive, affectionate, or emotionally involving as friendships between two women. The agentic features—autonomy and activity-orientation—are characteristic to male bonds. Because of these characteristics it has been argued that men rely largely on women for emotional closeness (e.g., Rawlins, 1992; Xu & Burleson, 2001).

Rawlins (1992) discussed in detail the contextual and interactional dialectics, which are present in friendships. The communicative management of dialectical tensions is necessary. Contextual dialectics in friendships include the private and the public, and the ideal and the real. Friendships also entail the interactional dialectics of freedom to be independent and freedom to be dependent, the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness, judgment and acceptance, and the dialectic of affection and instrumentality. Within these dialectics acceptance, trust, caring, esteem support, expressiveness and openness can manifest. The typical modeling of friendship will mirror the prevalent cultural practices of each era. Even though friendships are based on the two people's choices and practices, they continue to be both vulnerable to and empowered by features of their circumstances (Rawlins, 2009). It is becoming evident that contextual factors cannot be overlooked in supportive communication research either.

In this dissertation the focus is on supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships. Even though male bonding is a concept that has received attention (e.g., Thurnell-Read, 2012) this research addresses the on-going interpersonal relationships that are created and maintained in communication across contexts and time. Conversely male bonding, as described by Kimmel and Aronson (2004), is fleeting, possibly even anonymous and situational with restricted axis of connectedness. It emerges at places, institutional settings, life stages, or times when maleness is noticeable and the defining feature linking the participants together. The activities that close and personal friendships entail most frequently take place in private settings (Rawlins, 2009). According to Soilevuo Grønnerød (2005), closeness, intimacy, emotional talk, openness, self-disclosure, and mutual resonance contradicts the masculine stereotype but is common in Finnish men's friendships. She suggests that such elements may have been left out of some previous

research because the view could challenge the cultural narrative. She argues that mutuality and resonance is possible without confiding and revealing talk about personal issues. Let us now move to reviewing gender more closely.

3.2 Gender as context for supportive communication

According to Ojala and Pietilä (2013), a common theme for all theoretical perspectives on gender is that gender is perceived as a constructed, naturalized, and normalized category. In other words, most theoretical work questions the idea that gender is a trait that one is born with, which determines the consequences of one's social life (Connell, 1995, 2001, 2002; Jokinen, 2010; Seidler, 1994). Two different bodies do not automatically produce two different categories of humanness (Jokinen, 2000). In fact, even the biological categories of male sex and female sex have in recent years been debated as too narrow and limiting to accurately describe each human body. Perceptions of an individual's physical characteristics typically result in gendering. Connell (2001) says that gender is not simply received from discourse or by socialization. Gender for men is "very actively made, in practices both individual and collective, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting" (p. 143). This research is interested in exploring the meaning of gender in supportive communication of Finnish men's friendships.

Nowadays there exists a wider consensus that sex and gender are not synonymic concepts but formerly some communication researchers argued for sex differences between males and females. The framework was referred to as the different cultures thesis (DCT, Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1996). A careful opposition was built against the theory of two different ways of communicating (Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). Even though the DCT has been widely criticized (see Burleson & Kunkel, 2006), studies on men and women's supportive communication have shown both similarities and differences in seeking, providing and processing of support (Burleson, 2003b; Burleson & Hanasono, 2010). The explanations for why these differences exist, for example, why different genders respond to supportive messages differently, are still unresolved (Burleson et al., 2009). It is vital to remember that overall the differences between genders in supportive communication do appear within larger realm of similarities (Burleson & Kunkel, 2006; Samter, 2003).

Research on *sex* differences and similarities in supportive communication have looked at provision of and responses to supportive communication (MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004), differences in goals in supportive interactions (Burleson, & Gilstrap, 2002); MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, Dane, & Passalacqua, 2005); psychological mediators of sex differences in emotional support (Burleson, 2002); sex differences in evaluation of comforting messages (Kunkel, 2002; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999); provision of skillful emotional support (MacGeorge et al., 2002; MacGeorge et al., 2003), sex differences in provision of emotional support and communication values (Mortenson, 2002), and support in same-sex and cross-sex relationships (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987). The

problem with using sex as a variable in studying the expressions of care, comfort or advice, i.e., supportive communication, is that it inevitably loses the intricacies of expressions of one's biological sex in the social world. In fact, studies on sex differences imply that sex is an important factor in how people express themselves, for example that males express themselves as masculine. Masculinity has been characterized as signifying a state of being in control, strong and independent, powerful and dominant, and active and aggressive (Kaufman, 1993). Such beings would be unlikely to communicate comfort or use support for the sole benefit of its recipient. There is certainly a need for a wider and more flexible categorization than sex.

Because gendered expressions like masculine or feminine are bound by cultural, historical, political, and economic conditions (Behnke & Meuser, 2001), they cannot be reduced to essentialistic concepts of male and female. Therefore, some studies on supportive communication have used *gender*, not sex as a variable. Typical measures for detecting the influence of gender in different roles in supportive interactions have been expressiveness and instrumentality (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002), gender normativeness and gender schematicity (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005), and the so-called BEM-measure (Bem, 1981). These studies have focused on, for example, gender differences in responses to supportive messages (Burleson et al., 2011; Burleson et al., 2009), gender differences in the perception of support availability (Hanasono et al., 2011), gender differences in attributions and emotions in helping contexts (MacGeorge, 2003), and gender differences in self-reported response to troubles talk (Michaud & Warner, 1997). Even though an individual's gender identity is increasingly more flexible in research, there is still room for progress; very rarely do studies discuss several masculinities or the varied possibilities of gender performance, or operationalize masculinities in plural in supportive situations or settings.

In a great number of studies friends have been used as methodological counterparts in supportive communication situations. Some of the support studies have focused on "male problems" from various sources: Support for gay men with HIV (Wrubel, Stumbo, & Johnson, 2010), men with prostate cancer (see review by Paterson, Jones, Rattray, & Lauder, 2013), or post-traumatic stress after military service (Han et al., 2014). Overall, it has been claimed that men are less self-disclosive, seek less support, and are less attentive to emotions when they engage in supportive communication than women (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005).

Burleson, Kunkel, Samter, and Werking (1996) set out to study men and women's evaluations of the importance of various communication skills, mainly affectively and instrumentally oriented skills. In two studies that looked at eight communication skills, first, in friendship, and second, in friendship and romantic relationship, they found practically no difference in men and women's evaluations. Both genders rated affectively oriented communication skills as extremely more important than those of instrumentally oriented. This has not been the case with studies that have focused on *message* evaluations

rather than skills. Men tend to evaluate moderately person-centered support as more appropriate and helpful than women (Jones & Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). In other words, men do not discriminate as much as women between messages that are high, moderate, or low in their level of sophistication (Burleson et al., 2009; MacGeorge et al., 2004, Study 3). Both genders, nevertheless, confirm that they prefer highly person-centered support when they are presented with the options.

When it comes to support provision, greater differences between genders emerge. Studies show that men in general provide less person-centered support (MacGeorge et al., 2003). Currently the most prominent explanation given for why men produce and use less sophisticated support strategies than women is that men are likely to possess lesser ability and motivation to comfort (MacGeorge et al., 2003). Constructivist research has tried to explain the within variation with motivational and skill-differences, namely cognitive complexity. In other words, men would be less skilled or less motivated to provide support than women (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005), and less able and motivated to scrutinize supportive messages (Burleson et al., 2011). However, the explanation is likely to be more complex than that. In situations where the problem is perceived as very serious, men do not differ from women in the ways they provide support (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005).

Bodie and Burleson (2008) and Burleson (2009) recently explained that according to the dual-process theory, people also vary in their ability and motivation to process supportive messages. Burleson and Hanasono (2010) found that men think less deeply about situations and messages in support situations. Burleson et al. (2009) detected that when it comes to processing ability and motivation, women tend to have more skills and be more motivated to process messages in support situations. Thus they may receive more benefits out of such interactions. Burleson et al. (2011) further investigated this by testing the processing ability and motivation of men and women as a function of problem severity. As in previous studies, they discovered that men exhibited reduced processing of messages in more and less serious problem scenarios than women. According to the study, the differences resulted from men showing less ability and less motivation to think deeply about the given information. This was true in the less serious and the more serious problem scenarios even when men and women did not differ in their evaluations of realism, seriousness, or grief intensity of the situations.

One of the explanations given for gender differences in the goal attainment and provision of comforting messages, in addition to skill differences, is normative motivation (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005). It refers to a person's attempts to act according to the salient social norms and to say the right things according to one's gender expectations (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005; Soilevuo Grønnerød, 2005). Connell (2001) explains that the concept of 'male sex role' emphasizes norms, which are learnt for the gendered conduct. Yet, it is too narrow a perspective for understanding the diversity of masculinities. For example, there are multiple masculinities in different cultures as well as within a single culture. Individuals and groups construct masculinities in social interaction. Gender

is therefore not something one is but what one does, and how he uses these resources in a particular context. This also means that masculinity is a dynamic concept that can be shaped by relationships and one's goals in life. The dominant masculinity among many possible and co-occurring ones can often be found in cultures' hierarchical power structure. Furthermore, men's bodies are the arenas for various masculinities to represent these structures. Important bodily experiences have a central meaning to the identity and way of being that men are able to construct for themselves (Tiihonen, 2002).

The review above has indicated that gender similarities are greater than gender differences in supportive communication. The review in chapter 2, on the other hand, focused on illustrating the importance of "good" support to an individual and his well-being. Therefore, even the small differences deserve careful inspection. The motivation of this dissertation is to explore what supportive communication situations are like for men and why some support behaviors may be preferred in times of distress and turmoil. Those instances may well reveal both local and global categories of supportive communication. The interpretive approach in this study goes in depth into the experiences of social actors and directs the investigation. Since recent findings on contextual differences have indicated that gender plays a smaller role than ethnicity or culture in determining favored and useful support behaviors (Burleson, 2003b), I shall review these contexts next.

3.3 Culture as context for supportive communication

Culture is the third context under scrutiny in this research in addition to relationship and gender, here friendship and men, respectively. Culture is the production, exchange, and recycling of meanings among individuals and groups. Culture when viewed from the perspective of context in which communication occurs can be described as something of beliefs, values, behaviors and linguistic patterns, which is distinguishable over time and across people's life course (see Spitzberg, 2003). Culture can also be perceived as a system of shared meanings in which the system is aggregated of the signs, codes, and texts that "a social group creates and utilizes in order to carry out its daily life routines and to plan its activities for the future" (Danesi & Perron, 1999, p. 23). It is thus understandable that in the four decades of research on supportive communication the focus has now turned to culture. Cultures are contexts within which other contexts such as relationships and gender are negotiated. Cultural perceptions shape our views on what we, for example, perceive as good comforting (Mortenson, 2005) and appropriate communication in general. The motivation and objective of research is clear: National cultures and ethnicities seem to explain more variance in differences of support evaluations than, for example, gender (Burleson, 2003b). Yet, studies that focus on supportive communication and culture are still small in number.

According to Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994, p. xxvi), "one of the most potent, if unexplored, consequences of the communication of social support may be

the creation of culturally shared value systems that promote supportive, prosocial conduct on a communitywide scale." What is considered prosocial conduct within a particular speaking community may be quite distinct across the globe, even though the need for support would be universal (see also Pines & Zaidman, 2003). Most of the early supportive communication research was done on European Americans and later, on different ethnicities in the US (Samter et al., 1997; Snell, Belk, Flowers, & Warren, 1988). Burleson and his colleagues initiated first the cross-cultural studies on supportive communication evaluations among the Anglo-Americans and the US-Chinese (Mortenson, Liu, Burleson, & Liu, 2006). Studies on national cultures like the British and the Spanish (Goodwin & Hernandez Plaza, 2000), Indonesians (Goodwin & Giles, 2003), the Brazilians (Dressler et al., 1997), and the Chinese (Mortenson, 2006) have found that people evaluate similar types of support slightly differently due to self-construals and cultural value orientations.

The most applied model in the cross-cultural studies on supportive communication is the theory of person-centeredness (see chapter 2.2.2). Studies, which use the theory, seem to generate similar types of results across different nationalities, ethnicities and genders—highly person-centered messages tend to be evaluated as the most helpful and sensitive messages in comforting situations. Nonetheless, there is variance in *how* helpful different nationalities (and genders) evaluate such messages to be.

In a study by Xu and Burleson (2001), Chinese men and women in romantic relationships differed from the American men and women in the support that they reported experiencing from their spouse. Sex differences were also found, which were strongly moderated by nationality: American women reported receiving higher levels of esteem and network support from their relationship partner than did men whereas Chinese men reported being the recipients of such support. Overall, women and men did not differ in the levels of experienced support but in the levels of support they desired from their partner. Even if emotional support and tangible support were the most desired and experienced support types in the relationships, men reported receiving more emotional support, esteem support, and tangible support from their spouse than they needed.

Possibly the most widely used cultural value orientation on cultural and individual level differences has been the individualism–collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 1980). Studies that have used the cultural value system show that people from collectivist cultures, like China for example, tend to evaluate less sophisticated support messages more favorably than individualistic peoples like the Americans (e.g., Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). Many have found, however, that the dimension is an oversimplification or inadequate way to explain the variance because it does not capture the individual differences within the studied culture (Feng & Wilson, 2012; see also discussion on gender in chapter 3.2). Another dichotomy that has been used is high context–low context cultures, in which the USA typically represents a low context culture as the meaning in many communication situations is derived from more explicit than implicit cues (see Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). Feng and Wilson (2012) moved their focus from such dichotomies onto individual

level cultural beliefs. They found that the Chinese used more avoidance support than European-Americans. They conclude that people from traditionally individualist cultures have proven to favor verbal elaboration and 'working through' feelings more than aiming to distract a person from the experienced hurt.

The Finnish culture has not been extensively researched on either dimension. When it has, it has been placed on the individualistic realm of the individualism–collectivism dimension but due to its feminine characteristics and small power differences the position is far from being clear-cut (see Pörhölä, 2000). The Finnish communication culture is known for the value it places on reserve or silence. According to Nakane (2007, p. 1), "silence has often been associated with 'Asian' or 'Eastern' cultures in intercultural communication, in contrast with the association of the 'West' with articulation and volubility." Originally the argument was built on an analysis that Finns have communication reticence in some contexts (Sallinen-Kuparinen, 1986). Finns often compare themselves with more conversational cultures, and may even put themselves down for the lack of talk or lack of skill in small talk. At the same time, Finnish people are proud of their thoughtfulness in interaction situations and careful weighing of words. This refers to the stereotypical idea of other cultures' being more talkative or that the importance of talk is much higher in other cultures (Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009).

There are definitely times in Finnish communication scenes where talk is intrusive (Carbaugh, Berry, & Nurmikari-Berry, 2006) and the desire to be vocal can be irritating (Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). The Finnish communication culture could therefore be well described as listener-centered. This means that the role of the speaker is not emphasized and that participants recognize the importance of a listener role. Lehtonen (1984, according to Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009) has summarized several vital characteristics of Finnish cultural ways of speaking. Among those is implicitness, which refers to uneasiness with expressive communication; respecting privacy shows politeness to the other through respecting another's search for solitude; understanding is a sociality measure, which describes one's ability to understand and interpret situations; message content is appropriate when expressed via an implicit channel; and slow paced communication depicts the value of long turns at speaking with low tolerance for interruptions.

Carbaugh (2009) in his studies on Finnish communication culture has suggested that when there is quietude in Finnish social setting, something important is transpiring. Therefore, being alone in a good way would be a social achievement and a matter of social tact, as one exercises a proper propensity for silence or a proper verbal reserve. Silence would thus be valued and something that does not provoke negative evaluations of a person (Pörhölä, 2000). The conclusions drawn on Finnish communication culture are familiar, especially for those who identify with the cultural group. At the same time it is important to refrain from oversimplification; cultures as contexts like gender and relationships are not fixed categories but rather, they come to the foreground in diverse ways in interaction with others. For example, silence can be given a different meaning depending on who uses it

with whom and where. Nakane (2007, p. 3) defines silence as "inter- and intraturn pauses, general non-participation or lack of participation in conversation, lack of speech on specific topics/matters, or lack of speech specific to interactive situations." The function of not speaking or remaining silent in a situation is an important one to explore in relation to supportive communication in Finnish cultural context.

This dissertation aims to describe what supportive communication, which is intended to show acceptance and care for another, is like for Finnish men. No prior study has focused specifically on the phenomenon in Finnish men's friendships (cf. Soilevuo Grønnerød, 2005). Studies on same-sex friendships in different cultures are needed, since the relationship's antecedents, consequences, nature, and functions may vary among members of different cultural groups (see Samter, 2003 for a review).

Most studies in the past four decades on social support have focused on the face-to-face medium. The channels used to convey supportive intentions and messages have expanded with the use of technology, for example, to online support (High, 2011). In addition to the channel, support setting is significant in the sense that it may influence the inferences made from the provided support (see Kuuluvainen & Isotalus, 2013). Still today, there is hardly any research on physical contexts of supportive communication. Physical context is important both theoretically and empirically (see also Hargie, 2006a); most research on supportive communication has used a trained confederate or scenario-based methodology in which participants are either in a laboratory setting or they are asked to picture an interaction with someone in places like the campus yard (e.g., Lemieux & Tighe, 2004). Such settings may impact supportive communication and thus, the obtained results (see Burleson, Samter, et al., 2005). Yet, studies have not methodically explored this plausible influence on support messages. Naturalistic and qualitative research is useful for eliciting contextual elements that social actors themselves perceive as meaningful in support situations. Settings may add to an individual's motivation to scrutinize messages more carefully or be more critical of their content and execution because of the expectations that he has for participants in the setting. Persons who have experience in supportive communication in particular contexts are thus imperative for research.

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodological choices made in conducting the dissertation. I will first introduce the philosophical and theoretical foundations for the research and how it is positioned within the field of interpersonal communication. The organization of the chapter on methodology will follow Creswell's (2013, p. 44) definition:

> *Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes.*

The chapter states the research questions that are posed for the dissertation as a whole. The research questions have been formulated over the years as a result of the four sub-studies that comprise this dissertation. Accordingly, the dissertation uses multiple methods, which I further explain in this chapter. The reader will also be introduced to the study participants and thereafter the account moves to a more detailed description of data gathering processes and analyses. Even so, the reader is encouraged to turn to the original publications for a more holistic understanding of the research procedures in each sub-study (see Appendices).

4.1 Philosophical assumptions and theoretical underpinnings of the research

Research philosophy—the ontological and epistemological beliefs—are always present in research whether those beliefs are explicated in research reports or not. Since this dissertation is composed of separate pieces—the present thesis and four published sub-studies—, they have slightly different takes on the theoretical foundations of supportive communication research.

A majority of previous studies on social support attest to positivist and postpositivist paradigms and methodological determinism. The theories of constructivism and person-centeredness, which is based on a version of psychological constructivism (Jones & Bodie,

2014), have contributed vastly to supportive communication research. Consequently they have provided important impetus for this dissertation. The aforementioned theories have been used to explain why individuals' supportive behaviors, motivations, and abilities vary. Yet, existing research has not been able to describe with confidence why men tend not to be as discriminative between the more or less sophisticated support messages; or why in some support situations men provide other men with less sensitive support than for women, but in severe problem scenarios the support target's gender has not had such a consistent effect (see chapters 2 and 3 for reviews). For this investigation we need tools that enable deep insight about the qualities of supportive situations.

This dissertation attempts to achieve the objective by taking an interpretive approach to supportive communication research. As a methodological paradigm, interpretivism aims to understand the interpretations of social actions and social worlds of individuals (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). My stance as a researcher is that in order to know what the experiences of support are like for people we need to ask them directly, especially when those contexts may be difficult to access like private conversations among friends about issues that are weighing on their minds. Knowledge about individual experiences is essential to constructing an understanding of the supportive communication phenomenon, and its unique and common qualities in the social world. As a whole, the goal of the dissertation is to achieve a rich and multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon at hand under the rubric of interpretivist-oriented approaches (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

The most insightful research on friendships uses the dialectical perspectives with an emphasis on narratives and dialogues (see Rawlins, 1992, 2009). It has been categorized as following the phenomenological tradition in communication research (see Craig, 1999). The origins of the person-centered theory of supportive communication can be traced to similar thinking, more specifically, to existential phenomenology (Burleson, 2010a). Phenomenological approaches "are not at odds with sociopsychological ones, because many message choices and message design theories, in line with planning, do involve conscious awareness" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 130; see also Perttula, 1998). I share this perspective: Study I has phenomenological groundings, Studies II and IV are interpretivist-oriented qualitative studies, and Study III attempts to interact more directly with the constructivist research approaches by applying both quantitative and qualitative methods to construct an understanding of support episodes.

"Reality" is messy and most qualitative researchers enjoy making sense of the messiness (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). As I perceive that there are multiple realities that social actors subjectively experience while intending to achieve a mutual understanding of present situations one method can hardly unravel all that there is to know about such occurrence. In this research I use multiple methods in order to meet the research goals—to view supportive communication from different angles with different methods—similarly as I intend to make the men's many voices to be heard.

In recent years, the multidisciplinary community of researchers who study experience lead by J. Perttula has been fruitful for developing the ideas in this dissertation. For Perttula (2008) the structure of experience is a relationship that connects the subject and the object in a whole. Therefore one should be hesitant to reduce the structure of experience to just one part—the object of experience or the individual experiencing it. When the research subject is a conscious being that operates in the world with intentional actions, the relationship between the object and the subject and its description categories are called meanings. Meanings then generate experiences.

Intentionality is an essential component in many phenomenologies and in constructivism. According to Rauhala (2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; 2009), human beings are intentional beings who should be viewed holistically. As a whole he is a being with spirit. Rauhala's (2005b) defines a person being in the world as a bodily being (organic existence), a conscious being (psychological–conscious), and a situational being (existence as relation to the social reality). Situation here does not refer only to the physical surroundings but also that an individual's situation is always personal even though others may have same or similar components of a situation in their lives. Therefore it is important to acknowledge that an individual, even though potentially an active creator of his conscious experience, cannot be taken out of the influence of his body and situation—all three aspects are included in the holistic understanding of a human being (see also Tiihonen, 2002).

A situated process like supportive conversation among male friends can be viewed as a combination of contexts that create the unique interaction situation. Varto (1992) affirms that life experiences are gendered differently and one can take this as a starting point for research because it reflects the world of experience and its distribution. For research itself it does not have an impact because the demands for research are the same regardless of gender. My pre-understanding of gender is that human beings are humans first and genders second or later. As a researcher I perceive gender as a social construct that fluctuates in time and sets limits and possibilities for those who identify with or are placed in a certain gender category. Ultimately gender is a personal experience. It is essentially possible to perform gender to the extent that one chooses. One may not always be conscious of the choices he has about conforming or going against social expectations but that does not take away the fact that one has the possibility and innate capacity to do so. Rawlins (1992, p. 8) describes individuals as "conscious, active selectors of possible choices from a field that is partially conceived by them, partially negotiated with others, and partially determined by social and natural factors outside of their purview." Different contexts (the era, social and cultural contexts, etc.) allow more and less flexibility in the enactment of gender.

The focus of this research is on the support experiences of those who identify as men but does not describe the experience of being a man per se. First and foremost, the dissertation is interested in individuals' experiences of *supportive communication*. In order to capture the participants' experiences those experiences need to be described. Manhood in research can be described in different ways depending on how the researcher perceives the world: Is

the reality gendered (a fact), splitting genders (a division created by processes), or gendering (fitting gender contextually) (Ojala & Pietilä, 2013)? Jokinen (2003) summarizes the idea of male gender as the impression of manhood, which is created by repeating actions, gestures, discourses, opinions, ways of doing things as well as by hobbies that are socially and culturally associated with men. Gender would thus be a performance, a set of norms, which exist before the individual and thus overwhelm him or limit him. 'Gender as performative,' on the other hand, means that one can consciously play with and parodize the gender markers. Performing as a helper, or as a male helper, is thus not a set category of being but rather, one of many conceptualizations that an individual can place himself in or find himself in. It is sensible to orient towards research of supportive communication in men's friendships by acknowledging that these perspectives are useful in combination.

4.2 Research objective and research questions

The aim of this dissertation is to describe and understand supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships. The four sub-studies address the research objective differently and as separate publications have their own research questions (see Table 1). This current thesis presents the *uniting* research questions, which align with the goals of the whole research. In other words, the four sub-studies are "the data" for this dissertation, and the thesis ties them together.

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, accomplishing helpful and appropriate support behaviors without imposing on another is a convoluted task. Burleson, Holmstrom et al. (2005) say that representations of social situations lead communicators to generate goals for these situations, and then develop and evaluate behavioral plans in light of these goals. Finally they perform actions that are guided by these underlying plans. The goals individuals pursue when others need support can provide important information about how people conceptualize both support contexts and communication as resources for managing support situations beneficially with friends.

Since support provision targets a need that another person is perceived to have, I argue that we first need to explore how men characterize the friend's need for support. Only by understanding the needs for which support is provided we can make sense of why individuals approach support situations the way they do and why they find certain approaches more beneficial than others. Therefore, the first research question reads:

1. What is the need to which men provide support for their friends?

Burleson et al. (1994, xviii) suggest that social support research should be "studying the *messages* through which people both seek and express support; studying the *interactions* in which supportive messages are produced and interpreted; and studying the *relationships* that are created by and contextualize the supportive interactions in which people engage

[italics in the original]." The remaining two research questions both attempt at describing these tenets in their own way.

People interact with each other for a reason and therefore, their communicative behaviors have a purpose (see Schütz, 1967; Wilson, 2007). Communication research on social support is interested in identifying actions that are taken to accomplish goals for the benefit of another such as solving a friend's problem (MacGeorge et al., 2011). It is only by distinguishing the supportive function that we can understand the intentions of men's support approaches. The second research question adheres to the constructivist terms and accordingly proposes:

2. What function and goals does men's supportive communication have, and how do men aim to achieve these goals with friends?

Not all goal-attaining communication is verbal or direct in character. Tracy (2007) argues that what people say comprises of both the literal content of the utterance and its interactional meaning. Meaning is constructed in relation to contexts. A context is information about the helper, how things were said, where they were said, and all other background features present in shaping the meaning of communication. Burleson (2009) further proposes that both content and non-content elements influence the outcome of supportive messages. Environmental cues like the type of relationship between helper and recipient become more meaningful when support receivers do not process message content deeply.

Because support situations are an intersection of contexts it is likely that certain forms of supportive communication are qualitatively more appropriate and beneficial than others with respect to the particular function, communication goals, and support approaches. Men's experiences of supportive communication with friends are key in discovering the meanings of contexts. Therefore, the last research question inquires:

3. What are the meaningful contexts of supportive conversations for Finnish men and what role do contexts play in supportive communication with men's friends?

The research objective is met with a multiple methods approach that uses different sets of qualitative data, which are analyzed with mainly qualitative approaches but also with a quantitative tool. Qualitative work is important in discovering the activities, goals, and central features around which same-sex friends organize their relationships (Samter & Burleson, 2005). The data and methods are discussed next.

4.3 Multiple methods approach

A common purpose for research is to explore and investigate, and to describe or explain. This process can be achieved with different approaches but also with different approaches

within the same research. When mixing methods the researcher combines methods that may traditionally be considered either qualitative or quantitative (Creswell, 2009; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). The mixed methods approach can also be called the multimethod research (Brewer & Hunter, 2006), which combines different data gathering methods and analysis (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006). Because the data and methods of this research are predominantly qualitative I will refer to the chosen tradition as multiple methods approach.

The methodological richness in this research was motivated by the research purpose to describe *what supportive communication is like in Finnish men's friendships*. The finest evidence of different supportive messages working on people and being implemented by people is best achieved by using multiple methods or triangulation (Burleson, 2003a). Huhtinen et al. (1994) say that even though the ability to follow the process and conclusions is important, one should not tie oneself into certain methods or patterns but rather, give space to applications. The multiple methods approach enables the phenomenon of supportive communication to be investigated from different angles in order to paint a more holistic picture of what the phenomenon is for those who experience it in their lives.

The current research used data and analysis triangulation. The two different interview methods and several approaches to analysis were chosen to comprehensively answer the research questions posed in each sub-study. Furthermore, the data gathering methods, thematic interview and episode interview, place the individuals who experience supportive conversations to the forefront.

The vast majority of supportive communication research is quantitative (see also Jones & Bodie, 2014). Contextual factors are typically predetermined and controlled, which means that their nature and meaning to the lived experience in all its variance is not revealed. In addition, Edwards (2006) says that the critical studies on men and masculinities have mostly failed to "—tell it like it is for men not about men, of men and not at men, and by men—the good, the bad and the ugly." The qualitative data of this research comprises of men's experiences and perspectives on support in friendships, which means that they have also been the likely receivers and perceivers of support and thus, their accounts reflect on support experiences as participants of supportive conversations.

4.3.1 Participants and the interview conduct

The research request "to participate in a study concerning Finnish men's friendships" was distributed via email in my friends', relatives' and ex-colleagues' social networks (see Appendix 1). Voluntary participants replied by sending me an email after they had

come across the electronic request. Altogether 25 men, unknown to me, volunteered and participated, and no compensation was provided.[2]

The Finnish-born and Finnish speaking male participants ranged in their ages from 21 to 67 (M = 41, Mdn = 37). They all lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area in southern Finland during the time of the study. Some of the interviewees had recently moved to the capital city from smaller towns all across the country for work and were not native to the city. The participants represented a heterogeneous group. Their occupations included carpenter, musician, social worker, CEO, IT-worker, journalist, fireman, student, researcher, prosecutor, technician, engineer, teacher, software designer, executive director, retiree, unemployed, actor, and customer servant. Eighteen of the participants were in a dating relationship, cohabiting, or married; seven were single or divorced at the time of the data gathering[3].

The data was gathered between end of 2007 and beginning of 2008. Prior to the interviews the participants and I were in brief contact to decide on the location of the interview. Most correspondence was done via email and with three men, on the phone. The interviews were made as informal as possible by letting the men choose the interview locations. The settings ended up being cafés, participants' homes, offices, or quiet meeting rooms at work. All the participants were informed that the interviewer was interested in his "personal experiences, perceptions, and thoughts regarding your friendships." I paid close attention to revealing the same information about the study to all interviewees prior to the interviews. Only one participant requested further details in order to prepare more fully for the interview. I assured him that no preparation was needed, that I was interested in *his* life experience, and that his *personal* thoughts were the most valuable to me.

I conducted all the interviews face-to-face and one-on-one. When each interview began there was an initial establishment and negotiation of roles: Younger-older, woman-man, expert-layman, researcher-informant. N. Fielding (1993) recommends a full and accurate recording of interviewer-interviewee matching or mismatching in order to enhance the validity of the research. Our genders differed and at the same time we were alike in, e.g., having experiences of friendship in our lives. I am convinced that for the majority of the interviews, my female gender did not play a negative role in creating a dialogue (cf. Pini, 2005). Finland is a considerably gender equal nation (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2012)[4]. It is my experience that I felt treated mostly as a researcher and a conversational partner. I

2 I offered to purchase beverages to participants if we met at a café. On occasions, I was served coffee or even lunch if we had chosen to meet at the participant's workplace. This I took as hospitality and politeness, which is typical of Finnish culture when people come to visit.

3 At the time of publication at least two of the men have got married, two babies have been born, and one of the men has passed away.

4 Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi (2012) rank Finland as the second most gender equal nation in the world (in comparison, the US is 22nd). Finns are altogether a highly homogenous population. According to Official Statistics of Finland (2013), approximately 5.4 million people live in Finland, of whom only 4.7% are born elsewhere, and for 91% Finnish is their first language.

made this inference from participants' remarks such as "as you perhaps know, since you are a researcher."

At times participants in interviews may avoid revealing aspects of their non-desired self-image, be overly polite or attempt to give answers that they presume the interviewer wants to hear (Fielding, N., 1993). I attempted to be open and allow all non-normative accounts. I consider achieving this goal as some men disclosed intimate issues, for example, cheating on their female spouse or perceiving their male friends as more important than their current girlfriend. Two participants raised concerns about my choice of method, since they thought the results of 25 interviews could not be computed and generalized. I explained my stance and goals as a qualitative researcher. These men were further encouraged to share their individual experience of their *own* friendships and that they needed not to represent all Finnish men. I elaborated on the full objective of the research after the interviews if the men wished to hear more.

Occasionally men joked about the topic of my study by referring to or reproducing the male stereotype: "So you studying men's support must be quite a pick-up-line?" or "When you interview Finnish men you are bound to have a lot of empty tape left." A couple of participants referred to emotional support via the gender stereotype, for example, stating that I probably know more what they mean, since women are claimed to talk more about emotions than men. Some emphasized that participating in the study was a chance to tell their perspective and how intimate and meaningful their friendships really were. I considered that for them, partaking in the study meant working against the cultural stereotype of men's non-intimate relationships. Social support ultimately and innately includes others. For the interviewees, those others had been male friends but many times also female friends, spouses, or even strangers. All those experiences were recorded in the material.

Saresma (2010) says that when a participant describes his experience during the research process the study already loses something or the study changes the participant's experience because experiences are modified by relations they have with other people (like the interviewer-interviewee relationship), the surrounding world, and our interpretations. I agree that something may be lost in voicing and recounting of an experience that took place in the past, and yet, it is part of being a person in the social world. Humans are narrating, story-telling, and recounting beings. What is gained in interviews is the meaning-making process that is ongoing and valuable for communication research (see Rawlins, 2009).

4.3.2 Thematic and episode interviews

The two interview methods, thematic and episode interviews, both fall into the semi-standardized tradition (Fielding, N., 1993) in that the interviewer is free to probe more questions from the participants. Yet, the methods differed in the extent to which they followed the pre-designed wording or the order of questions. All the men (N=25)

participated in both interviews, thematic interviews and episode interviews, respectively. The interviews were conducted one after the other and tape-recorded.

The *thematic interviews* lasted from 25 to 81 minutes (M=41), approximately 18 hours in total. The material was transcribed into 337 single-spaced pages. The thematic interviews, or sometimes called non-standardized, in-depth, unstructured or focused interviews (Fielding, N., 1993) had an interview guide, which was a set of questions that were sequentially organized but allowed great flexibility according to the flow of the interview conversation. I formulated questions that were relevant to the purpose of the research. Once I had all the questions, which were generated from previous research, my experiences, and intuition, I grouped them into conversational themes. In other words, the interviews were based on themes that were derived from my pre-understanding of supportive communication, friendships, and benefits of social support to well-being and life satisfaction (see Appendix 2 for full interview scheme). However, the order of the questions was not fixed: The themes had sub-questions that could be asked flexibly in relation to the interviewee-generated talk. I conducted two pilot interviews with men in my own network to detect topics that I had overlooked. The interview scheme was finalized after their feedback.

The interviews centered on men's friendships and the support process. The themes included social relationships and satisfaction in life; characteristics of a good friend; perceived challenges in everyday life; troubles talk in friendships; support seeking; support provision; qualities of good support; gender matters and Finnishness. I asked follow-up questions under each theme and when I hoped the participant would elaborate more on his experience. For example, when discussing the qualities of good support, participants were asked "What do you think are your strengths as a support provider?" The participants were encouraged to give examples throughout the interviews by prompts such as, "Do you recall a specific instance with a friend when that happened?"[5] Lastly, all interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on anything that I had not though to ask or something he felt that needed to be said still. After the thematic interview, I proceeded to the episode interview with each participant.

Episode interview is a form of structured interview with semi-structured characteristics. Similar methods have been applied to episode interviews in various quantitative studies on support provision (e.g., Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge et al., 2003; Samter, 2002). Methods relying on prospective episodes can detect motivations that might not otherwise be recorded (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). 'Eläytymismenetelmä,' or the method of empathy-based stories, is a method that allows people's views, likelihoods of actions, and models of thought to be shown as well as provide examples of processes (Eskola, 1991, 1998).

5 The Finnish language has two most commonly used words to refer to a friend, 'kaveri' and 'ystävä'. Colloquially understood, ystävä is often considered closer than kaveri. Similarly, the English language uses discriminating adjectives, e.g., 'best', 'close', and 'casual' friend (Rawlins, 1992). During the interviews I used the terms that the interviewee initiated about his friends. Since the term support 'tuki' is nowadays used in Finnish everyday lexicon, it was also used during the interviews.

Typically it is used to collect short essays or concise written stories. Episode analysis (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000) and episodic interview (Flick, 2000, 2006) are similar methods. Benefits of the episode interview method include gaining examples of real or hypothetical incidents with real-life like situations, depictions of the interaction process, attitudes and perceptions, intentions and motives, and accounts for chosen actions (see also Goldsmith, 2004). The shortcomings of the method are that the participants do not necessarily create the actual messages they would use, only descriptions of what they would attempt to say and do. However, such data would still be relevant to the objectives of this research (see chapter 4.1).

Episode interviews lasted from 7 to 24 minutes (M=14), six hours in total. They were all tape-recorded and fully transcribed resulting in 119 pages of single-spaced material. The interviews were conducted in a similar manner with all the men: First I explained the structure of the interview and let the participant know that the interview had four different episodes in which I wished he would picture himself providing support to a same-sex friend (see Appendix 3). The episodes dealt with (1) a friend who had been laid-off because of cutbacks in the organization he worked at, (2) a friend who had been laid-off because of drinking, (3) a friend who had been left by his romantic partner because of drinking, and (4) a friend who had been left for another person. The participants produced the contextual elements that they saw meaningful and significant to consider in the aforementioned communication situations.

The purpose of the episode interview method was to motivate the participant to reframe the scene to match authentic situations with his friend. In addition, the intent was to record what he would *say* and *do* in each specific supportive conversation. The participant was able to picture any one of his friends in each of the four episodes. Thus, he could first picture a friend who had encountered the problem I presented or if he knew no one who had experienced such a problem, he could imagine how the interaction would go with one of his friends.

The participant was first asked to describe his thoughts about the friend's willingness to disclose the problem and the way in which he would do so. Some of the participants elaborated on reasons and explanations why the situation would have occurred to a friend or gave concrete examples of situations that had happened. Typically the participant described his first reaction and feelings upon hearing about the friend's problem. The method captured descriptions of support activation behaviors, target reactions, and helper responses. According to MacGeorge et al. (2011, p. 328), this "sequence is a scheme or script that channels actor's expectations, interpretations, and actions in support episodes." The interviewee was therefore free to produce all stages of the episodes that he perceived meaningful in determining the supportive conversation.

It is important to note that the thematic interview, in which the participant and I engaged in an in-depth conversation about friendships and supportive communication, were conducted first. Only after we had discussed all the themes that I had planned in

the interview scheme as well as the topics that arose from our dialogue did we move on to the episode interview. In other words, the participant was not prompted by the episodes and their topics, which took place after he had described his experiences of support with his friends and what he perceived meaningful in supportive conversations. The sub-studies I, II and IV used the thematic interview material and the sub-study III used the episode interview material as data. Let us look at the sub-studies more closely now (see also Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of the research objectives, research questions, and methodology of the sub-studies (I–IV).

I–IV	Research objective	Research question	Research material	Approach to analysis	Results chapter
I	To describe the essence of social support	What is the essence of social support?	Key definitions of social support and thematic interviews (*N*=4)	Imaginative variation and phenomenological reduction	See 5.1
II	To distinguish beneficial and non-beneficial support for Finnish men in same-sex friendships	RQ1: What kind of support do Finnish men perceive as beneficial for their same-sex friends? RQ2: Why are certain forms of support more beneficial than others for same-sex friends according to Finnish men?	Thematic interviews (*N*=25)	Interpretive, qualitative content analysis	See 5.2
III	To identify and explain types of supportive behaviors Finnish men would use when helping their same-sex friends cope with personal and professional problems when alcohol is or is not a contributing factor	RQ1a: What type of support do Finnish men provide for their friends in a personal problem and a professional problem and why? RQ1b: Does support differ, and if so, how? RQ2a: What type of support do Finnish men provide for their friends in a personal problem and a professional problem with alcohol and why? RQ2b: Does support differ, and if so, how? RQ3: How does support differ in alcohol and non-alcohol personal problems and in alcohol and non-alcohol professional problems? RQ4: How does support provided in alcohol-related problems differ from support provided in non-alcohol problems?	Episode interviews (*N*=25)	Inductive, qualitative content analysis and Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995) and Kruskal-Wallis test	See 5.3
IV	To describe Finnish men's troubles talk situations and their meaningful contextual elements	What takes place when a Finnish man talks about troubles and with whom does he talk? Where do troubles talk situations typically happen, and what meanings do men attach to communication in these contexts?	Thematic interviews (*N*=25)	Interpretive, qualitative content analysis	See 5.4

4.4 Analyses in the sub-studies

All the interviews were transcribed fully in Finnish. I transcribed 22 of the 25 interviews and a research assistant transcribed the remaining three. The two interview methods produced altogether 456 single-spaced pages of transcribed data. All pauses longer than 3 seconds were marked as well as laughter, tearing up, and nonverbal stress such as words that were elongated or an ironic tone of voice. I also transcribed all my own speech turns.

I read the transcribed interviews several times on printed-paper. I also drew mind-maps of the participants' experiences to aid my understanding and interpretation. The transcripts were then downloaded as Word documents into qualitative analyses software, ATLAS.ti, for meticulous analyses (e.g., Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Flick, 2006). ATLAS.ti allows the researcher to manually create numerous codes for any size of segment in the material. Since the sub-studies had different research objectives, different approaches to analysis could be carried out with the same material in the same 'hermeneutic unit' as ATLAS.ti calls the project files. ATLAS.ti is practical in that it enables the efficient storing, management, and retrieval of codes, and codes within codes for large datasets. However, the software does not code the data per se (also Manning & Kunkel, 2014). In addition to the inductive coding, the episode interviews were coded with an existing coding system, the Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (ICBCS, Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). The results of ICBCS were quantified and computed with Kruskall-Wallis test in SPSS program.

During the analysis I constantly reviewed my own orientation in interpreting data and while first creating categories and later themes. I paid attention to my reactions to participants' accounts especially from the point of view of stereotypes about gender. I was sensitive in assigning and naming codes and asked myself: Is this relevant because it is against the stereotypical understanding or in line with it; because I can relate to it or because I cannot; or is it noteworthy, since a man says so or does not say so? A similar process needed to take place in relation to the segments of interview talk that expressed cultural and relational understandings about communication. The data from both interviews were analyzed in Finnish. However, after the analysis was completed and the sub-studies were ready to be submitted, I worked with a professional English translator to translate the illustrative quotations for the articles.

The results of coding and categorical analyses in the sub-studies were developed into new themes in the final stages of the research. In other words, the phenomenon of supportive interpersonal communication was first deconstructed and then reconstructed according to the men's experiences in their friendships. The development of themes can be described as moving to theorizing and providing one understanding of what the experiences mean on an enduring, deep and abstract level (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). In the next chapters I will summarize the analysis in each of the sub-studies (see also Table 1). The reader is encouraged to turn to original publications for detailed account of analysis.

4.4.1 Study I

The first sub-study took a phenomenological approach to defining the essence of social support (see Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Perttula, 1995, 2005). The steps of the study were threefold: (1) to discover the essence of social support according to its working definitions; (2) to discover the essence of social support according to the individuals who experience it in their lives; and (3) to form an understanding of both descriptions of the definitions and men's experiences to discover the essence of social support.

The definitions were collected from key literature on social support and supportive communication. The material did not intend to be comprehensive but rather, when I reached a point of qualitative saturation and the imaginative variation did not seem to gain more elements, I formed the depiction. The experience of social support in friendships was reduced from the set of interviews I conducted. The aim of phenomenological reduction was to present the individual's experience as unadulterated as possible and to show what is meaningful to him. I did this with strict reduction. I read through all the 25 interviews several times and listened to the men's narration on tape. I became familiar with their unique characteristics. I made conscious efforts to stay reflective and question my pre-understanding with things familiar and unfamiliar in the material. I kept a research journal throughout the interview and the analysis process. I examined my own world-view and the meanings of my friendships, support, and the beliefs I have about support in men's friendships, and actively let go of value-based listening to the material. Rather, I pursued to listen to it from 'nothingness.'

Phenomenology has not been widely used in researching interpersonal communication even though for qualitative research it has been hugely important (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The paper presents the unique experiences and perspectives on support in friendships from four different interviewees (ages in parenthesis after the pseudonyms): Pasi (27), Sampo (37), Anssi (27), and Seppo (31).

4.4.2 Study II

The second sub-study aimed to describe the beneficial and unbeneficial support for Finnish men in friendships. The study used thematic interviews (N=25) and was analyzed with inductive and interpretive, qualitative content analysis (see Frey et al., 2000). I started analyzing the material by coding each interview according to the themes that were discussed during the interviews. In practice this meant that all participants' *speech turns* were first given a code according to the interview theme under which it was discussed. I also coded my own wording of questions that had provoked the men's responses in order to sustain awareness of my own interview conduct.

Second, I analyzed each interview transcript according to the *utterances* that the speech turns comprised of. This is to say that one meaning unit consisted of a participant's

utterance, which held a single thought, opinion or idea. Silverman (2006) encourages such an approach, since coding data on an utterance level helps the researcher to avoid imputing her fears, pre-understandings, motives, or unresolved personal issues into the categorization of data. This process is called coding *in vivo* (Fielding, J., 1993). *In vivo* coding means that codes are created close to or directly from the participant's own wording. The data concerning support intentions and approaches received 111 codes.

The subsequent step in the analysis was axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Axial coding is linking one code to another within the whole dataset. The initial codes were reviewed and read for recurrence and relatedness to other codes. During the constant-comparative process, codes were combined until a new set of codes was achieved. I grouped the initial *in vivo* codes into 53 combined upper-level categories. The interview material was read through thoroughly before coding, after coding, and while writing the paper. The upper-level categories were then reviewed to achieve the five main categories, i.e., new themes, of men's beneficial support approaches and their qualities. The conversational nature of the approaches was formed according to the participants' descriptions of progress in supportive communication situations.

4.4.3 Study III

The third sub-study aimed to determine what types of support goals and approaches Finnish men would use in problem-specific support episodes with their same-gender friends. The Study III is the most etic of the sub-studies in that it made use of an existing typology and experimented with a novel data gathering method of episode interviews.

The analysis of episode interviews (N=25) involved both qualitative content analysis and a pre-existing coding system, the Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (ICBCS). Interactive coping is a process in which the helper responds verbally and/or nonverbally, and in either helpful or unhelpful ways, to the support target's problem or emotion (Barbee et al., 1993). ICBCS addresses support provision behaviors and is part of Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) interactive coping structure called Sensitive Interaction System Theory (SIST). The theory aims to depict how personal, relational and contextual factors impact support seeking and support providing behaviors and their outcomes. In ICBCS, Barbee and Cunningham (1995) pay attention to the content of communication in supportive interaction situation. The coding system comprises of two dimensions, problem versus emotion and avoidance versus approach behaviors, which make up four main categories of behaviors (see Table 2). Altogether, the four main categories comprise of 28 sub-categories.

Table 2. Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (ICBCS).

ICBCS	Approach	Avoid
Emotion	Solace	Escape
Problem	Solve	Dismiss

Goldsmith (2004, p. 4) says that most coding systems that intend to measure enacted support "focus on frequency of occurrence of various kinds of support. The effect of these measurement approaches is to group together all instances of some type of support, without respect to potential differences in quality of support." Additionally, even though frequently described in comprehensive reviews on supportive communication research the typology has also been criticized. The criticism has dealt with the classification's descriptive power: The given support does not address the elements of support approaches that are beneficial or the important question why they are beneficial. Therefore, the objective of this study was to also analyze the men's intentions and explanations behind the support approaches they would use. The detected purposes for actions were coded inductively.

In the study, the problem-situations that a friend or a hypothetical friend was experiencing represented losses. The *Lay-off episode* (Lo) depicted a friend's professional problem: The support seeker has been made redundant because of cutbacks in the company (low responsibility). The *Break-up episode* (Bu) showed a personal problem: The support seeker's romantic partner has left the relationship because of a third party involved (low responsibility). The *Firing-alcohol* (FA) marked the loss of employment because of his excessive alcohol consumption (high responsibility).[6] *Separation-alcohol episode* (SA) depicted a situation where the support seeker's romantic partner has left the relationship because of the seeker's excessive alcohol consumption (high responsibility).

The material was coded on a sentence-by-sentence level with both inductive qualitative content analysis and ICBCS, respectively. Each interview was coded separately. The unit of analysis was an utterance with a single idea or purpose. I coded the participant's responses to each episode *in vivo*. Following the inductive analysis, I applied ICBCS to the same material. The twenty-five interviews received 430 ICBCS codes. The data obtained with ICBCS were tested with non-parametric Kruskall-Wallis test to best address categorical count data and the small sample size of the episode interviews. The test was corrected for tied ranks in each instance and effect size was computed for each significant result. Finally the results of inductive coding and ICBCS were connected to extend the results of the support approaches with supportive intentions.

6 Alcohol as a moderating factor was chosen because the level of drinking and problems related to it are higher in Finland than in other Western European countries (Knibbe, Derickx, Kuntsche, Grittner & Bloomfield, 2006). The number of deaths from alcohol-related diseases is considerably higher compared to, for example, Norway or Sweden (Østhus, 2012). Work has also traditionally been a central theme in men's stories of a purposeful life (Jokiranta, 2003).

4.4.4 Study IV

The fourth sub-study focused on defining the meaningful elements of supportive conversation environment—the troubles talk situation—for Finnish men. Communication happens in context and thus, the meaning of context to supportive intents and actions are important to distinguish.

The study used the thematic interview dataset (N=25). The data were analyzed with interpretive, qualitative content analysis, which focused on finding descriptive categories (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008). I divided the interview transcripts into meaning units. One meaning unit consisted of a participant's utterance, which held a single thought, opinion or idea. I gave each meaning unit a descriptive code and placed all similar codes under the categories of *when*, *where*, *who*, *what*, *how*, and *what function*. I read through the achieved categories several times and checked the internal consistency of each category. After meticulous checking I continued to make descriptive interpretations of category content and their relationships with other categories. The main results were obtained by categories of meanings such as troubles talk *when* and *where* (the setting), with *who* and *what functions* (the participants), and *what* and *how* (communication). In the process, cultural practices and cultural terms for talk were discovered.

5 RESULTS

This chapter summarizes the main results of the four sub-studies (I—IV) that constitute the empirical portion of the dissertation. The empirical data comprises of two sets of interviews of 25 Finnish men as well as social support definitions. Furthermore, the findings in each individual sub-study inform the discussion of the overarching thesis (see chapter 6). Together the sub-studies answer the general research questions posed for the dissertation (see chapter 4.2).

The study of social support from the communication perspective is the study of intentional responses to presently observed needs (MacGeorge & Burleson, 2002). Interpretivist-oriented approaches are imperative to uncovering an individual's interpretations of support needs, support approaches, supportive conversations and contexts such as friendship, gender, and culture. The reader is encouraged to turn to the original publications for comprehensive body of results (see Appendices, and Table 1 for summary of research questions and methodology).

5.1 Study I: The essence of social support in interpersonal communication

The aim of the study was to describe the essence of social support. According to the imaginative variation social support definitions and the phenomenological reduction of the thematic interviews, the essence of social support was reduced. The essence is the awareness of a real or potential void in a person's life experience, and of otherness that intends to alter the experience to achieve wholeness. Supportive communication is the manifestation of the essence in interpersonal relationships.

The results point to four essential elements in human interaction that need to exist for the phenomenon to be considered social support: (1) a void in one's experience of wholeness, (2) an intended alteration of the void, (3) otherness, and (4) the promotion of good. The essence of social support entails an awareness of an actual or potential experience of a void in an individual's experience of wholeness. The attempt to alter that experience follows the awareness and the acknowledgement of the void. Another entity always contributes to the alteration in either actualized communication (support provided) or by an interpretation

of another's communication (support received or perceived to be available). These actions are ethical in nature and intend to promote good to achieve wholeness or a balanced state in a person's life experience. Being with others in an ethical way is thus being supportive of others.

Those who engage in supportive communication may disagree as to what wholeness or a balanced state in one's life experience is or how it may be achieved. Supportive communication is likely to be more beneficial when the idea of balance or wholeness is shared, and the people involved agree on the appropriate means to achieve it. Therefore, the experience of support is likely to be positive for those who perceive the void and the desired state similarly.

5.2 Study II: A clear mirror on which to reflect: Beneficial supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships

The study aimed at distinguishing the "better" and "worse" support in men's friendships, and to learn why it was considered as such. This allowed men's supportive intentions to be discovered. The results revealed five main support approaches, which would be used in efforts to provide beneficial support to a friend: Listening, compassion, distraction, reassurance, and appraisal.

Listening was the initial stage of supportive communication. Men would communicate attentive listening through quietude. Listening was perceived as more beneficial than verbal support, since it was less imposing. Listening creates interactional space in which the support receiver can vent, contemplate, and elaborate on his problem. Listening is the communication of emotional presence, i.e., being there with another person while refraining from talking. Talking could be perceived as trying to be smart or take charge of the conversation. The purpose of communicating compassion, on the other hand, was to acknowledge the friend's challenging circumstances and his emotional experience. The qualities of helpful compassion were authenticity and subtlety.

Distraction was considered a beneficial approach when the friend was viewed emotionally overwhelmed by the coping process. Distraction aimed to take the friend's mind off the problem momentarily and promote the friend's positive frame of mind and coping with relaxing activities. Distraction would often follow listening, which underlines the importance of listening in supportive communication. Through active and emphatic listening one can choose the appropriate actions to assist another in coping.

Reassurance was described as good support because it provides the recipient with a positive perspective on the future. Men considered it important that the distressed friend moves away from the unhelpful emotions that the problematic situation causes, attains a realistic outlook, and feels empowered by his future. Genuine reassurance was highly valued. Finally, the purpose of appraisals was to contribute to another's cognitive coping

efforts. Men described appraisals as neutral opinions instead of solutions or advice, which they tried to avoid giving. Calm and neutral approaches were preferred because a useful helper functions as a clear mirror for the friend. Men believed that their friends seek support in order to reflect their ideas for solutions. Hence, helpers should consider their words carefully and take their responsibility as support providers very seriously.

The results of the study illustrate that men place great value on communicating motivation and willingness to engage in supportive conversation with a friend. They prefer subtle support behaviors in order to support the friend's autonomy. The more elaborative the comforting message is the more it potentially threatens the friend's autonomy. The results show that supportive communication for Finnish men is other-centered; because it is difficult to fully understand the friend's unique and personal experience the helper needs to be motivated to understand what it is like for another to *need* and to *receive* support.

5.3 Study III: "Offer no readymade solutions": Men's support provision and intentions in specific episodes with an upset friend

The objective of this study was to identify and explain the types of supportive behaviors men have used or would use when helping their same-sex friends cope with personal and professional problems. The problem scenarios in the study were breaking up and being laid off from work. In order to investigate the influence of the hypothetical friend's perceived responsibility for a problem, the two problem scenarios were moderated by alcohol. Alcohol was chosen because it is one of the greatest causes of health and societal problems in Finland. This resulted in four support episodes: Being laid-off from work because of cutbacks, being laid-off because drinking too much, breaking up because one drinks too much, and breaking up because one's partner has found another person.

The results showed that men provide varied forms of support under the main support goals of solutions and solace. Support was given most commonly as perspective, suggestion, reassurance, and support availability. However, the amount of emotional support for a friend was significantly scarcer in alcohol-related problems. In such instances men provided suggestions rather than solutions. Criticism or cold comfort as a way of "leaving him out to dry for a while" was intended to motivate the friend's own reappraisals, which in turn could result in more permanent behavioral changes.

Men focused mostly on solving the friend's problem if he had been laid off from work because of cutbacks. The helpers' intention was to offer the friend a sense of closure about being laid-off. In sum, instrumental support was most readily given in clear-cut problems that were not perceived as highly emotional. When men engaged in solace behaviors like reassurance they aimed to depict possibilities for the friend's future and to have him actively move forward.

In relationship problem scenarios comforting focused more on helping the friend to manage his affects and the present moment whereas solving behaviors took the form of giving perspective. Solace behaviors of availability, empathy, and reassurance were characteristic of support in the 'third-wheel' episode. Typically men said they would be there for the friend, letting him speak, and purely listening. Solace was significantly scarcer in episodes of the friend's drinking but when it occurred it mostly took the form of indicating support availability.

The results show that both solutions and solace are available for male friends but their provision varies according to the problem-type and the friend's perceived responsibility for the problem. Men engage in subtle, indirect support in problems that are sensitive and not in the friend's immediate control. Support availability and empathy communicate care without imposing on another. The challenge for support receivers may be that while helpers express willingness to comfort with availability and listening, they also use similar support behaviors—quietude and few words—when the friend is held responsible for his troubles.

5.4 Study IV: Talking troubles with Finnish men: Meaningful contexts of 'supportive silence'

The fourth study sought to describe troubles talk events in Finnish men's friendships. The goal was to distinguish the meaningful contexts of supportive conversations. The results revealed three meaningful place-settings in which men talk about troubles with others: The sauna, the cabin, and a private niche at a social event such as party or bar. The most commonly used setting for troubles talk was the sauna. The sauna is culturally a meaningful place for relaxation and quieting down for Finns. Drinking was often part of the activities that the friends engaged in in support situations. For some men, alcohol facilitated relaxation and opening up, and for others, having drinks was something that was done because of the setting but it was not considered as a necessity for troubles talk in general.

Troubles talk in specific settings was found to be either (1) *talking serious* (puhua vakavia)—explicit talk about troubles and attempts to understand or solve them—, or (2) *talking deep* (puhua henkeviä[7])—implicit talk about troubles as part of human experience. For both manners of speaking, the culturally meaningful communication scenes were created with quietude and seriousness, or quietude and relaxation, respectively. Men talked serious with a close friend. Even though talking deep also typically took place with a friend, talking deep could also happen between two people that were not necessarily same-gender or familiar with each other prior the conversation. Talking deep encompasses talk about universal issues or existential and philosophical topics, and is a form of self-disclosure that enhances connection. In fact, talking deep had resulted in new friendships.

7 Wilkins (2009) mentions 'puhua henkeviä' as a speech event, which is to speak intellectually or philosophically, and which is not 'asiasta puhuminen', infocentric talk.

Supportive communication in meaningful places for Finnish men is the invitation for and the validation of quiet contemplation. Sharing of a scene is the 'being with' with an intention. Specifically, the sauna and the cabin settings promote quietude and self-reflection. When the settings become scenes of interpersonal troubles talk quietude becomes 'supportive silence.' Implicit communication works together with the environmental cues of the setting to create supportive meaning. Thus, participation in certain settings may be used to convey one's motivation to engage in troubles talk interaction and infer his supportive intentions. The focus on environmental cues could help us explain why in some cultures and in some relationships indirect and implicit supportive messages are viewed more appropriate than in others.

5.5 Summary of the results

The dissertation's four sub-studies approached the research objective of describing and understanding supportive communication by first, reducing social support definitions and men's experiences to propose the essence of social support (Study I). The subsequent studies built on the essence by exploring how men depict the manifestation of the essence—supportive communication—in friendships. The research described the goals and support approaches that men perceive beneficial and unbeneficial for their friends in general (Study II) and in problem-specific support situations (Study III). The final sub-study further distinguished the meaningful settings and modes of being for Finnish men to talk about troubles with others (Study IV).

The main results indicate that the function of Finnish men's supportive communication is to help the friend to move forward. First, the helper needs to become aware of the friend's experience of needing support, and then to acknowledge it with appropriate communicative means. After, the helper can attempt to assist the friend to alter the experience of void to achieve a sense of wholeness. Men's supportive communication entails varied types of emotional support and assistance for the friend to cope and appraise his situation. The provided comfort depends mainly on the individual's characteristics, and the characteristics of the friendship and the problem context. Helpers underline the importance of motivation and are challenges by concerns for their self-efficacy when supporting a friend. Certain elements may lower men's motivation: If the friendship is not close, the friend is perceived as responsible for the problem and yet, he is not making coping attempts even though he is believed to have the resources, or if the problem has lasted for a long time.

The results of the sub-studies show that an individual's experience for which he needs support for is unique and therefore authenticity, availability, and support for one's autonomy are important characteristics in men's support provision. When the problem is emotionally demanding men perceive being available for the friend as the most appropriate way to support—to be authentic with one another and fully present in the moment. In such situations words can be insufficient or unnecessary. Beneficial support approaches entailed

listening, compassion, distraction, reassurance, appraisal and suggestions. As helpers, men try to place themselves in the role of the *experiencer*: Someone with a particular problem who also presently seeks and receives support. This enables men to "lift the problem off of its roots" in communicative ways and to subject the problem to the friends' mutual and universal analysis. A general perspective allows the men to be equals in the support situation without either one imposing on another.

However, if the friend is responsible for the problem or is engaging in destructive behaviors, men may resume to straight talk to state their opinion. Ability to talk straight, to be honest, was viewed as a characteristic of a good friend. Some problems such as drinking are considered to be something one needs to take personal responsibility for and take active measures to alter. Cold comfort, i.e., temporarily withdrawing one's availability, aims to present the friend with concrete consequences of his actions to enforce his reappraisals.

Quietude is a valued approach in some support situations, particularly in culturally meaningful settings like the sauna or the cabin. These are settings in which Finnish men can quiet down, relax, get serious, and contemplate on life. Drinking can have both a facilitating function for opening up and relaxing or a ritualistic role as part of the actions in the setting like "having a sauna beer." Troubles talk in culturally meaningful settings is talk about human experience and life, which add to one's sense of connectedness with others while coping. Meaningful support on an existential level can even be obtained through talking deep with strangers. Those who share the same cultural understanding can use intrinsic verbal and nonverbal communication to facilitate their supportive intentions.

6 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore what supportive communication is like in Finnish men's friendships. Supportive communication is at the core of meaningful ways of being with others that potentially enhances positive experiences and helps individuals cope with challenges in life. Comfort from others adds to one's psychological and physiological health (Jones, 2004) and when the helper is sensitive to the person's feelings, the support receiver has a good chance of receiving affective benefits (High & Dillard, 2012). Traditional masculine ideals, however, tend not to include expressions of overt emotional support in the description of a "real man." When combined with the stereotype of silent and reserved Finns, a hypothesis of supportive communication between Finnish men could read rather grim. Conversely, as the results of this interpretive-oriented dissertation shows the men's experiences of supportive conversations with friends are very meaningful to them and can contain a wide variety of support approaches, including listening, compassion and reappraisals.

The discussion that follows will first respond to each research question posed in this thesis (see chapter 4.2) by building on and further developing the results and conclusions of the sub-studies I, II, III, and IV. I shall illustrate the discussion with the example of 31-year-old Seppo, one of the interviewed men. Because the main focus of the dissertation is on communication intended to assist a friend in coping, the need for support is depicted here as resulting from experiencing a problem. It is important to note that Seppo's specific experiences do not represent the experiences of all the interviewed men but rather, brings forth significant themes in supportive communication. After discussing the main findings in this research, I will propose a trajectory to the person-centered theory of supportive communication. Lastly, I will evaluate the research and suggest implications for future study.

6.1 Supportive communication to address vulnerability

The first research question sought to describe the need to which men's support intends to respond. Men orient towards support provision as something that should be about the other

(see also Bodie, Vickery, et al., 2013; Crocker & Canevello, 2008), not about oneself. The need for support arises from an individual's unique experience and that uniqueness poses challenges for the helper's ability and motivation to provide the most beneficial support.

The conclusions of the four sub-studies confirm that the helper can only ever *assist* another in his attempt to alter his experience (also Burleson, 2003a). In such situations, the obligation of a good friend is to "show up" for the support seeker physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Men expressed that no one can ever know exactly what another person is experiencing. Thus, the helper "should not judge" but instead, try to be "really honest"[8] with the friend (see also Bodie, Vickery, et al., 2013). The beneficial support for friends is thus support that recognizes his needs (Study I–III), communicates availability (Study II & III), supports his autonomy (Study II & IV), and is authentic in quality (Study I, II & IV).

Support is most typically provided in situations where a friend has encountered a problem or a dilemma. Hence, the following discussion will concentrate on supportive communication for friends who are trying to cope with something undesired that they need support for. The sub-studies together reveal the nature of support needs, which I refer to as *void*. A void is more than a problem. It is made of three components: (1) a lack of something in one's sense of wholeness, (2) a meaning given to lacking something in one's sense of wholeness, (3) and the negative emotional reaction to the meaning given (see Figure 1). The experience of void is personal and unique, and, at the same time, it is fundamentally human. A problem can thus be viewed as something that generates the experience of void, that is a *lack*, but which is not the void itself.

Figure 1. The elements of a void.

According to the results, a typical lack and for which men's friends seek support is a relationship problem (Studies II & IV; see also Day & Livingstone, 2003). However, friends seek support for a wide variety of everyday concerns such as work dilemmas, health issues, and family matters. Sometimes more devastating things happen, which challenge the friends' coping, like being laid off from work, being diagnosed with a serious illness, or bereavement. The friend's *reaction* to the problem, including the meanings given to it personally and socially and the emotions that it raises, creates the experience of void. As Rauhala (2009) and Perttula (2008) point out, a meaning relation is formed when the

8 The Finnish translation for the main themes, and consequently the titles of chapters 6.3.1, 6.3.2, and 6.3.3, are "sä meet paikalle," "sä et tuomitse," and "sä oot tosi rehellinen," respectively.

subject orients to an object in an experiential way. Furthermore, the experience of void is always a social phenomenon because it happens in the 'situationality' of life either by revealing the void to others or keeping the void from others. Both alternatives confirm and sustain the void's existence in one's life experience.

When a person discloses a void to another he can be perceived as seeking support (Study I). Subsequently, when a helper becomes aware of another person's need for assistance he has a chance to respond to it with the intention to help (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). According to the results, a supportive communication process (1) begins with the helper's *awareness* of another's experience, (2) continues with an *acknowledgement* of the other's experience, and (3) results in an *attempt to assist* the other in altering the experience. The means to provide support vary according to individual and contextual factors. These elements create each unique supportive communication situation.

I propose that by definition a lack (a problem) creates uncertainty: Something that was or something that should be, is not. What it means to have a lack, then results in a void. According to Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003, p. 265), "social support is verbal and nonverbal communication between helpers and recipients that helps manage uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience." I argue that by needing another's assistance to alter the experience of void, a person is disclosing more than uncertainty. The act of revealing uncertainty to others is the communication of *vulnerability*. In other words, a void is vulnerability in relation to the social world, and thus having a void is a vulnerable experience. When a person seeks assistance in altering the void he makes his vulnerability be seen. Individuals' interpretation of what uncertainty about a particular problem means in contexts (e.g., what it means when a man does not know what to do, or he does not have the skills or emotional resources to do it) and who the helper is to him (e.g., stranger, colleague, close friend) impacts the extent of his vulnerability. Revealing vulnerability, however, does not automatically result in more vulnerability. In fact, I will continue to show that vulnerability is a necessary component in both seeking and providing beneficial support in men's friendships.

During the research interview, Seppo disclosed that he was unemployed and lacked money (see Study I), which was a problem for him. However, the lack of money does not disrupt Seppo's sense of wholeness. It is only when the lack of money stops him from achieving things that are meaningful to him, challenges his social status, or interferes with his desired social participation, that it becomes a problem and disrupts his sense of wholeness. If Seppo makes the lack of money and the reasons for the lack (e.g., not having a job, which may be another lack) mean something about him that is negative (e.g., his abilities, self-acquired resources, self-concept, masculine identity) it creates the experience of void. The lack in itself is meaningless. What Seppo makes the lack mean in his life results into an experience of void that ultimately he created and thus only he can alter. In other words, a helper can both attempt to make Seppo's lack disappear and assist him in

altering his interpretation of what the lack means. Nonetheless, a helper cannot *decide* on the meaning of the lack for him. Only the individual can determine the meaning he gives to the lack he is experiencing. The key to beneficial supportive communication thus lies in motivating another to appraisals that are empowering and enhance his coping. Others not knowing, others suspecting or others finding out his void make him experience vulnerability. Therefore, the extent of one's void also depends on the responsibility for and controllability of the lack that prompted the void in the first place (Study III). As importantly, contexts like relationship, gender, and culture shape the individual's experience of void through the expectations that he interprets these contexts posing on him.

6.2 "Moving forward" as a supportive function

The second research question aimed at describing Finnish men's main supportive function, the types of supportive goals men have, and how they attempt to accomplish these goals with friends. The results showed that the main function of men's support provision was to help the friend *move forward* (mennä eteenpäin). Inline with this dissertation's terms for coping, moving forward can be thought of as altering the void to achieve wholeness. To assist in accomplishing this male helpers aim to *be with* (olla kanssa), *be for* (olla varten) and *reflect with* (peilata) the support receiver (see also Bohart & Byock, 2005).

Being with, being for, and reflecting with aim to authenticate the friend's experience by listening actively and emphatically, to add to his coping resources by promoting positive affects, and to assist him in situational reappraisal, respectively. The communicative means to accomplish these goals are listening, distraction, compassion, reassurance, appraisal, and suggestion (see Figure 2). Supporting a friend in his experience of void thus results in a complex support sequence or *supportive conversation* (see also Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Lacks that are easily altered can benefit from straightforward suggestions after they have been attentively listened to. The obligation of a good friend is also to have the courage for straight talk if the friend is perceived to not be moving forward (also Goldsmith, 2004). The purpose of straight talk is to promote the friend's personal control in his life experience (Virtanen & Isotalus, 2010). Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) note that assisting another in his cognitive reappraisal is typically an extended process, not something one could accomplish with a single message. In other words, supportive conversations in friendships are multiturn or even multiepisode processes. Let us look at men's support provision in these conversations more closely next.

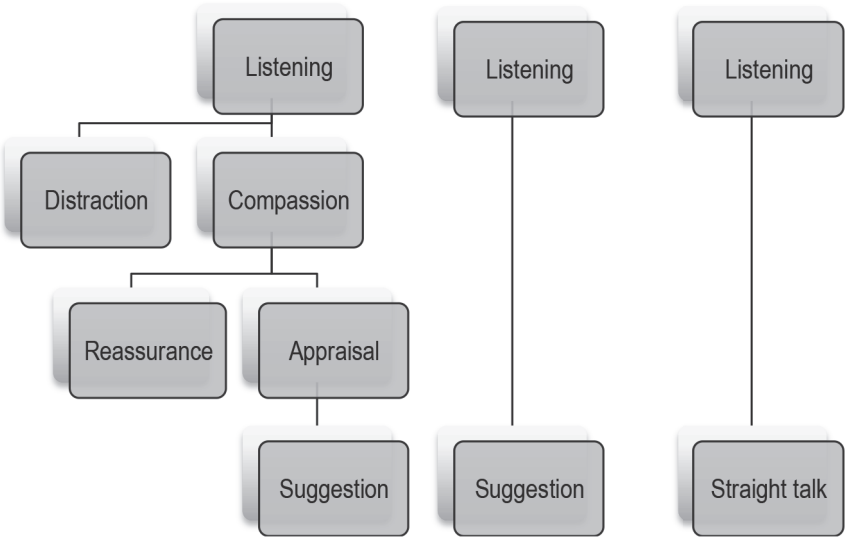

Figure 2. Men's supportive conversations and support approaches with friends.

6.2.1 Men's support provision as *Being with*

Supportive communication process in men's friendships begins with *being with* another. Being with (kanssaoleminen) is accomplished by listening and showing compassion. Attentive listening aims to comprehend relevant information, show acceptance for the friend's disclosure, let the friend vent, acknowledge the existence of his void, and be sensitive to his vulnerability. Listening is listening to the various components of a void: Allowing and accepting emotions, making sense of the friend's meaning-making process, and trying to distinguish the lack that the friend has given meanings to (see also Gearhart, Denham, & Bodie, 2014; Jones, 2011). However, listening for Finnish men is not claiming to know the friend's exact experience. Listening is intended to allow the friend's experience to be heard.

Genuine compassion communicates acceptance for the friend's experience of vulnerability (see Brown, 2006; Rogers, 1980). Since vulnerability can be an isolating experience, supportive connection may be achieved if the helper is willing to show his own vulnerability in situ or disclose prior personal experiences of vulnerability. The helper's vulnerability may result from having an experience of not knowing what to do or say, which may be true for the helper in the support situation (Study II; see also Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998).

Being with accepts the friend's emotions. According to men, emotions need to be dealt first in order to move forward. Because emotions are an outcome of the friend's meaning-making process emotions are ultimately in his control. When negative, emotions

can challenge the capacity to reflect on possibilities to alter the void because they can be volatile, exacerbate, or divert the person's attention from the root of the problem—the lack. Negative emotions raise unhealthy reactions in the body and there is a real risk in ruminating on a problem and sustaining the emotional arousal (e.g., Afifi et al., 2013). The continual contemplation of negative emotional experiences appears to be less typical for men than for women (Kokkonen & Kinnunen, 2008) and the results of this research help to explain why this may be.

Emotions are important for both the seeker and the helper to deal with. People who are feeling good are more likely to provide support whereas those with negative affect states tend to reduce the importance of their friend's problem and constrain effective approaches to support (Barbee et al., 1998). The results showed that men perceive emotions as (a) a person's own "property," (b) a by-product of one's meaning-making process (see Figure 1), (c) standing in the way of appraisal clarity and therefore hindering the restoration of wholeness, and (d) being potentially contagious or uncontrollable. Similarly, the helper's negative emotions can taint the supportive process and therefore the helper should refrain from expressing strong emotions.

Migliaccio (2009) argues that being stoic is fundamentally expected in men's friendships. Yet, the results of this research should not be taken to mean that emotions are not allowed in the context of close male friendships. They only need not to be placed in the center of supportive communication because they are viewed as transforming and passing by-products of problems. In fact, there is research to support the less emotionally engaged approaches (see also Planalp, Metts, & Tracy, 2010 for emotion expression and regulation). Helpers who subject to emotional contagion and feel worse as a result of the support receiver's negative emotion state do not contribute to the emotional recovery of the receiver (Magen & Konasewich, 2011). Even though comforting messages, which help the support receiver to articulate his feelings and to elaborate on the reasons why those feelings might be felt, have been found sophisticated in support situations (Burleson, 2003b), they may not be the most helpful messages in all situations. Afifi et al. (2013) noticed that those support recipients who verbally ruminated on a problem, even with a helper who provided them with "good support," also brooded more after the conversation. It is likely that in some supportive conversations not talking about feelings is actually beneficial.

When the helper listens to the friend's experience, he is allowing the contextual elements to show their unique meaning. Being with can be considered active-emphatic listening (AEL). According to Wiseman (1996, in Brown, 2006) empathy is the ability to see the world how others see it, being nonjudgmental, understanding another's feelings, and communicating one's understanding of those feelings. Bodie, Gearhart, et al. (2013) explain that at the first stage of AEL, the listener attends to both the explicit and implicit features of the person's message and is sensitive to his emotional needs. When entering the processing stage, AEL comprises of acts such as understanding, comprehending, and remembering the content of the interaction, and combining the information to make

a concise picture of it all. Responding active-emphatically is the process of using verbal and nonverbal back-channeling and more elaborate responses to communicate one's attentiveness.

Finnish men appear to communicate empathy with attentive quietude. They stressed the importance of refraining from talking while being with a friend during a supportive conversation. Rawlins (2009, p. 59) says that "dialogical partners embrace the potentials of silence in each other's presence. [...] Being able to be silent together is part of being able to talk together." Knowing how and when to be silent in support situations points to active and emphatic listening rather than to avoidance of supportive communication. Nonverbal immediacy is an appropriate communication approach when the goal is to be with another when he is coping with a unique set of challenges (Jones & Wirtz, 2006). If empathy is the willingness to be vulnerable with someone (Brown, 2006), I argue that empathy is recognizing the unequivocal nature of voids in people's lives, also in one's own experience of life. Empathy is being part of the experience of another's coping and thus, the vital attempt at connection.

6.2.2 Men's support provision as *Being for*

Even though negative emotions were found unhelpful in supportive conversations men perceived positive emotions as beneficial resources to promote the friend's positive affects. Reassurance and distraction were both perceived as beneficial support approaches. Reassurance is the more direct communication of positive affirmations whereas distraction redirects the friend's attention to positives. These approaches form the goal of *being for* another (vartenoleminen).

Neff (2003) proposes three self-compassion components, which are to extend kindness and understanding towards oneself, mindfulness that keeps emotions and events in perspective to their significance rather than letting them be emotionally exaggerated, and seeing one's pain as part of human experience rather than something which isolates and separates him from others. Reassurance in Finnish men's supportive communication contains assurance for positive outcomes in the future and aims to promote self-compassion. Holmstrom and Burleson (2011) explain that esteem support is provided for friends with the intention of enhancing the way they feel about themselves and their abilities, accomplishments, and attributes. The results indicate that Finnish men may not habitually reassure friends with verbalized and direct esteem support messages (e.g., "You are a skillful guy, I believe in you") as much as with messages that assure the improvement of matters (e.g., "Things will work out in your favor, I'm sure").

The lack of direct esteem support and praise in men's friendships can be an indication of a certain masculine code influencing men's communication while providing encouragement and assurance of worth. It is also possible that verbalizing assertions that the friend does in fact have positive attributes could imply that he appears *insecure* about himself, which

could underline or intensify his vulnerability. Therefore, many of the men's support approaches were subtle in character. Howland and Simpson (2010) found that gender was not a statistically significant factor when individuals were provided invisible practical and emotional support in romantic relationships. However, when men were experiencing anxiety over a matter that made them vulnerable their anxiety levels lowered when they were given invisible support. The researchers suggest that invisible support preserves men's sense of independence and agency.

Distraction is a support approach that aims both to help the friend release his negative emotions and replace them with positive emotions. This is achieved by activities (e.g., accomplishing a building project at the cabin), joking around and laughing together, doing sports, relaxing (e.g., going to the sauna), or going out for drinks. Distraction has three purposes: First, accomplishing things together reminds the friend about his personal strengths and abilities, the multidimensionality of his character, and the things that he is *not* lacking. He can thus have the experience of purpose, able self, and being needed. Second, distraction communicates acceptance and belonging because the helper is willing to provide his time. Third, men acknowledge that doing or making things together gives the friend a chance to contemplate autonomously without the pressure of disclosing his thoughts and feelings, which may be in process still. Previous research has shown that support receivers want to be in control of whether their problem is discussed or not (Clark & Delia, 1997). In a friendship of mutual commitment and freedom to be independent, being indebted to another for his support provision could also threaten one's sense of autonomous self.

Poignantly, distraction has received criticism in social support and supportive communication literature. For example, in support typologies avoidance and escape strategies often encompass distraction behaviors (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Barbee et al., 1998). The results of this research show that when negative affect states have been neutralized men believe that better solutions are found and decisions made. There is of course a risk of misinterpretation when helpers suggest distraction; the friend may feel that the helper is unwilling to support him, the helper may not reappraise the situation in a helpful way, or he is suggesting avoidance of the issue. Yet, some studies have detected the positive influence of directing the support receiver's attention from the burdensome situation (Clark et al., 1998; Constanza, Derlega, & Winstead, 1988). Future studies need to consider distraction also as an approach that may be beneficial for men as part of the coping process.

In Mikkola's (2006) dissertation on supportive communication between Finnish nurses and patients the participants also used the Finnish terms 'olla kanssa' and 'olla varten' (being with and being for). In her study, the meanings that patients gave to being with included opportunities to make sense of one's thoughts and feelings while with another. Being for referred to the sense of continuation on secure, relational level. The results of this research in part resemble her findings. Men intend to be with a friend in order for

him to receive validation for his emotional experience and "to get it out." In order to move forward, being for the friend is the expression of staying available for him even if the friend is not going to be "his usual self."

6.2.3 Men's support provision as *Reflecting with*

An important function of men's supportive communication is to be a mirror for the friend. Reflecting with (peilata[9]) has the direct function to assist the friend's attempts to alter the experience of void. *Reflecting with* typically assists in reappraising the meanings given to the lack. The finding is consistent with the appraisal theory of stress, which proposes that occurrences per se do not create the stressful experience but rather the interpretation of the event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When the helper intends to assist the friend in altering the lack, for example, not having a job, the helper can offer to ask around.

In addition to appraising the meanings given to a lack (a problem), which contribute to the experience of void, the experience of void itself can be a target of helper's appraisals. However, the direct appraisal of a void is risky and therefore often avoided. Men typically stated that one should keep away from giving advice. Especially with emotion-focused coping, advice-giving can be perceived as a quick and unmotivated effort to fix the negative experience and for the helper to reduce his own uneasiness rather than focus on the needs of the other (e.g., Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). The verbal reappraisal of the friend's void is avoided for the same reason that men's support approaches are subtle: One cannot know exactly the nature of the individual's experience because of each person's unique circumstances. Therefore, the risk that is involved in appraising the void—the lack, the friend's given meaning to the lack and the possible emotions raised by the meaning-making—comes from all the elements and actions that the friend has taken becoming the subject of scrutiny. The men's subtle support approaches are likely to be attempts to detect, which of the aforementioned elements of the void are beneficial to address in a given moment.

Rawlins (2009) offers means to understand identities through individuation and participation. Individuals become who they are in relation to others. Individuation depicts individuals as separately embodied experiences of self and others. Participation, on the other hand, and at the same time, underscores the significant similarities of a self among other selves. Persons are communicatively linked with others and connected via interaction, as they are relational beings. Dialogue is an essential communicative tool for experiencing others (also Schütz, 1967). According to the results, assistance is best communicated by neutral appraisals and non-personal suggestions for solutions (Study II). A person who

9 'Peilata' literally means to mirror and a mirror is 'peili' in Finnish. The men commonly used this particular verb to describe the supportive action they found beneficial. Occasionally the activity was also depicted as "functioning as a sounding board for the friend to bounce ideas from." The verb *reflect with* was chosen as a translation here in order to best capture both meanings: Reflect back the sound or reflect like a clear mirror.

is supportive of another's autonomy does not attempt to control the partner's behaviors, reactions, or feelings but rather is attentive to and interested in the partner's perspective and frame of reference (Ryan, 1993 in Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005).

Reflecting with is different from being with and being for. Being with intends to enhance connection and being for aims to add to one's affective resources for coping. When the coping process has advanced to a stage in which a person is ready to appraise changes to make, the helper can function as a mirror from which the friend can reflect his ideas in moving forward. Now the management and reduction of uncertainty rather than vulnerability becomes a likely goal. This is achieved by viewing the problem and possible solutions from a third party -perspective (Study II) and the void as a philosophical and existential matter (Study IV). The lacks are discussed matter-of-factly or as objects to save face, support self-efficacy, and not to undermine the coping efforts of the friend. At the same time, such processing of options enables a greater participation and contribution of both friends on an equal level.

The most direct, beneficial support approach according to men is giving suggestions. Suggestions require facework and the embeddedness of other support types, mainly emotional support (see Feng, 2009). At best, the willingness to participate in problem solving with a friend can signal care (Goldsmith, 2004). Rauhala (2005c) says becoming supported is also 'new knowing.' In that moment, however, becoming supported is not so much of self-reflection as it is a form of knowing something other than known before (toisintietäminen). This way one can at least temporarily be released from the burdenness knowing, which can be his worry, concern, or brooding over the issue. What then takes place is the reorganization of one's worldview. In order to understand the reorganization the person is required to analyze the constitution of his meaning relations (see also Kuuluvainen & Isotalus, 2014).

Seppo's distress about unemployment and having little money is personal to him. His experience of void is unique to his experience of life as it is a result of his meaning-making process, i.e., his appraisals. If Seppo's friend was to support him in restoring his sense of wholeness in life, what the friend could do is to (1) acknowledge that Seppo is *experiencing* a void, (2) address the lacks, and (3) assist him in reflecting on the meanings he has given to the lacks. By doing so Seppo could perceive the components of the void—the lacks and the given meanings—in another way and thus make a new interpretation of what they mean to him in his experience of life. By altering the meanings he has given to the lacks, the experience of void can then be reappraised.

6.3 Negotiating contexts in men's supportive conversations

The third research question aimed at understanding the meanings that different contexts have in Finnish men's supportive conversations with friends. The supportive communication situation exists in the intersection of several contexts (Burleson, 2010b). For Finnish men, supporting another is to show *availability*, maintain the other's *autonomy*, and conveying *authenticity* while doing so. Men's goals and approaches to supportive communication with friends seem to reflect many of the components of Albrecht and Goldsmith's (2003, p. 265) definition: "Social support consists of reassurance, validation, and acceptance, the sharing of needed resources and assistance, and connecting or integrating structurally within a web of ties in a supportive network." Friends do so in their own unique way: Men attempt to assist the friend to more forward from the problem he is experiencing by using both relational and communicative means to facilitate the friend's coping efforts (see Figure 3).

Rawlins (1992) suggest that four interactional dialectics form and reflect the contradictory demands and communicative challenges of friendship across the life course. He sums up the ideal-typical characteristics of friendships:

> *the freedom to choose and maintain one's bonds with others voluntarily, the personalized recognition of and response to particular individuals' intrinsic worth as human beings, the pursuit of equality based on the corresponding validity of friends' subjective experiences, a shared orientation of mutual good will, understanding, trust, support, and acceptance, and heartfelt feelings of platonic affection and concern* (p. 271).

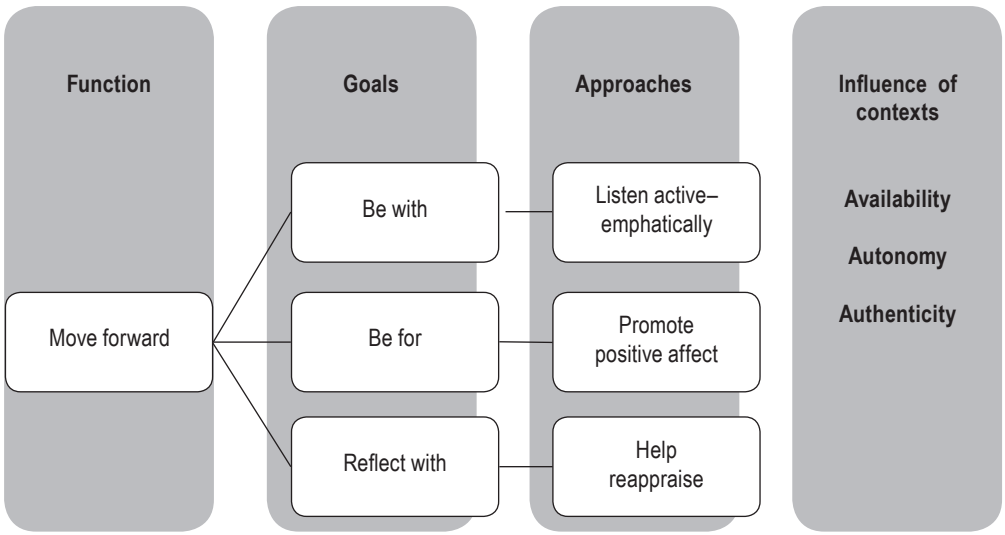

Figure 3. Summary of men's supportive function, goals, and approaches in friendship, and the influence of contexts—relationship, gender, and culture—on supportive communication.

The negotiation and influence of contexts—relationship of friendship, male gender, and Finnish culture—on supportive communication are discussed next.

6.3.1 Availability: "You show up"

Showing up is the helper's willingness to engage in the supportive process, the enhancement of belonging, trust and reliability, and acceptance for expression of emotions and another's self-disclosure. Availability is a core concept of social support in interpersonal relationships. Perceptions of support availability have been shown to impact on health and psychological well-being (Uchino, 2009). This research clearly shows that support availability is a relational concept that is constructed with communicative means. According to Rawlins (1992), the ongoing dialectical tension in friendship is the freedom to be dependent and independent of others. The dialectic is one of availability and absence. The obligation to be present for a friend when in need may in itself be supportive when voluntarily enacted.

The interpersonal supportive communication between men takes place in various settings, for example, in the sauna, at the summer cabin, on a walk to the forest, in a car, in a pub, or in a quiet niche at a social event (Study IV). Certain settings are culturally more meaningful for engaging in supportive actions. Supportive conversation benefits from undisturbed environments, which also allow relaxation, quieting down, and serious or deep contemplation. Therefore, settings that are culturally known for the quiet communication code (e.g., Puro, 2009) give also interactional space for the support seeker to disclose problems that weigh on his mind. Distinguished settings for such modes of being can call for and give meaning to particular actions (see Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2012). According to Nakane (2007, pp. 2–3), "at times, 'culture' may play an important role, while an emerging local context of interaction may affect choices between talk and silence." Persons from the same communication culture or those who are familiar with it can enter a specific setting with supportive intentions and shared knowledge of the modes of being in the setting.

A typical place in which men can quiet down is the sauna. In the sauna, social roles are actively diminished and openness for and authenticity of an experience is anticipated. The custom is to undress completely and enter the sauna naked (Puro, 2009). Karhunen (2014) discerned that the activity of going to the sauna has had a spiritual and even a sacred dimension for Finns. It is one possible ritual for people to move from previous social action to another such as from everyday or mundane to something meaningful. The sauna is predominantly a place where silence is appreciated (Puro, 2009) and 'listening' for bodily sensation makes possible a deep reflection of self and other (see also Tiihonen, 2002). Bodie and Crick's (2014, p. 107) phenomenological approach to listening suggests that hearing provides the "behavioral context in which cognition occurs, while sensing often gives us the emphatic connection to what people feel so that we know what we are listening for [italics in the original]."

The physical bareness and the bodily and psychological relaxation during the activity of going to sauna facilitates openness to experiencing oneself and others holistically. When individuals allow themselves to be seen they allow others to be seen too (Brown, 2006). "Feeling and emotion resound in social worlds in an interpretive process that allows meaning to be constituted via places, worlds, objects, bodies, and even spirits" (Manning & Kunkel, 2014, p. 20). Going to the sauna with a friend is considered intimate, common, appropriate, and valued among men and women in Finland. Wright (2006) says that the essential, interrelated themes that would make up sex differences in friendships have been reduced to the level of intimacy, self-disclosure, mere talk, and expressiveness. These matters, however, are not as clear-cut as it might seem. Even though women's friendships have been regarded as stronger in intimacy than men's, the reasoning should not be reduced to an argument that talking about undertakings or engaging in mutual activities among men would not promote closeness.

Spending time together makes opportunities available to gather important information indirectly about the friend's well-being when engaging in leisurely activities. Fun and humor have not been part of the conventional measures of supportive communication research (see Jones & Bodie, 2014). Humor as an effort to cheer up a friend could be counted as a supportive action. Communality in friendship is developed and expressed both by activity-centered and conversation-centered interactions (Wright, 2006). When we consider men's engagement in activities with friends it is likely that getting together, i.e., becoming available, is intended to lift spirits, connect and enhance belonging, and when provided with the opportunity for interpersonal contemplation supportive conversation can take place.

During the interview Seppo described how he and his friend drive to a mutual hobby each week. He disclosed experiencing shame about his economic circumstances like the fact that they always have to use the friend's car, since he cannot afford one. Even though Seppo's friend was vocal about the dissatisfaction with his stressful job Seppo said he did not have the courage to open up to his friend about his own vulnerabilities. I argue that both Seppo and his friend were experiencing voids. However, only the friend was actively and directly seeking support for his from Seppo. In other words, the friend showed his vulnerability but Seppo did not reciprocate the disclosure. Therefore, Seppo did not experience the shared trips as scenes of supportive conversations. Because Seppo did not share the vulnerability he was experiencing, the friends' potential for deeper connection was yet to be realized.

I asked Seppo why he had not talked to his friend about his feelings. He replied: "I don't know why, I guess I'm ashamed. But then again, he has talked to me! I definitely should talk to him. I think I could." In order to engage in a meaningful supportive conversation, one needs to be willing to show vulnerability. Because of the unique nature of voids, accepting vulnerability and normalizing the experience is at the core of supportive communication. The more acceptance friends communicate to each other the less vulnerability there may be in the relational context. While telling the story of their friendship Seppo constructed new

meanings for the relationship: "I think I've been hesitant to disclose my personal matters to him because we met through my girlfriend and he is good friends with her ex-boyfriend, you know. But the fact that he goes [to the hobby] with me every week and has been doing so for a long time now is actually quite something." In recounting the temporal context of their relationship and their conversations Seppo became aware of the availability, the supportive element of their friendship.

6.3.2 Autonomy: "You don't judge"

The alteration of one's experience from void to wholeness is ultimately the task of the person who is coping (see also Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Men perceive it to be the friend's wish to control his coping process. Thus support for autonomy is a core instrumental function in men's supportive communication (see Deci et al., 2006). Autonomy is important in all friendships (Rawlins, 2009), in most masculinities (Connell, 1995), and in Finnishness (Poutiainen, in press). For example, Maslow (1971) described a dialectical relationship between the autonomous person and his culture. Culture is a condition without which the actualization of humanness is impossible. However, ultimately individuals have to be fairly independent from culture to become who they are. In the end, autonomy is a necessary human condition.

The dialectic of freedom to independent and the freedom to be dependent is also one of autonomy (Rawlins, 1992). The freedom of independence means that one is autonomous in his pursuits of personal interests and life without the interference of others. In the freedom of being dependent on friends one can rely on others to be there to support him if a need were to arise. A person can be autonomously dependent or reliant, as when he willingly turns to others for support, or autonomously independent, as when he reflectively decides not to rely on others (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). Because support for autonomy is valued in men's friendships, the subtle and indirect support approaches maintain the heuristic. The context of friendship and supportive communication in it are constitutive in nature. Rawlins (1992, p. 17) states, "the privilege of depending on someone is prized when one's autonomy is also preserved. [...], sharing these two freedoms in combination serves to connect." Thus, men's friendship is used as a framework to both fit the appropriate support strategies and to have the provided support be shaped by the friendship qualities.

According to the results of this dissertation, men intentionally divert from the goal of supporting the friend's autonomy only when they perceive his behavior being harmful to him or others. Men call the supportive behavior straight talk (Study II & III, see also Holmstrom, Burleson, & Jones, 2005; Rawlins, 1992). This challenges the friend role—not just because the friend might be offended but also how it affects the helper's identity as a friend. If the helper is forced to enact in a way that challenges his role as an equal and autonomous social actor it may also pose threats to the voluntary friendship. A support needing friend who is acting in an unreliable and unpredictable way makes the trust and

solidarity of the friendship vulnerable. Helpers may struggle with their feelings of blame when the friend is responsible for a problem that he could have controlled. However, the perceptions of controllability and responsibility are very much contextual (Study III). In addition to freedom, Rawlins (1992) distinguishes a dialectic of acceptance and judgment that is ever present in friendships. He says that "[when] persons view each other with compassionate objectivity, they often synthesize the contrasting reactions of evaluation and support in their friendships as constructive criticism" (p. 272).

The results show that alcohol is often part of Finnish men's supportive communication situations. I propose using caution in making conclusions about this finding. Drinking could have at least three different functions in men's supportive conversations: (1) Drinking is generally acceptable when a person struggles to cope with a problem. It is one strategy to regulate emotions (Planalp et al., 2010); (2) it is also perceived as more acceptable for men to express their emotions when drinking because alcohol allows opening up in Finnish culture. It sometimes enhances men's positive mood and provides distraction from burdenness contemplation. However, drinking may result in negative occurrences of drinking too much or acting foolishly; and (3) alcohol allowes men socially to let go of control and show vulnerability, especially in a group where others do it too. Having drinks is not a requisite for having a supportive conversation with a friend but for some, the connection of the two is stronger than for others.

Hirschovits-Gertz et al. (2011) have researched Finnish people's relationship with and perceptions of alcohol addiction and recovery. Finnish men highlight individuals' own responsibility and capability for change. This belief is in line with the traditional views of Finns being self-sufficient and tough who need no support (see Kortteinen, 1992). Yet, at the same time, Finns report that alcohol is the largest societal problem in the country. According to the results of this research, drinking can at times facilitate connection through self-disclosure and sharing. However, after being unusually disclosive, for example, in a group of people that are not one's close friends, there is a risk of embarrassment or shame for the individual because of relational, cultural, and masculine ideals.

Brown (2006) makes a distinction between shame and guilt. A guilty person attributes consequences to *behavior*, and by changing behavior can recover and move on from guilt. However, shame is something rooted in one's *self-conception* and if socially unaccepted behavior is attributed to one's identity, coping may be more difficult. The more personally responsible a person believes he is for the lack of coping resources the likely he is to experience shame. Shame has been linked to addiction, aggression, and suicide among many other typical male stress reactions. Shame is absolutely organized by gender: It feels the same for men and women but is organized differently, at least in the US population. It is therefore particularly important to support a friend who is experiencing shame—the feelings of powerlessness, isolation and being trapped.

Manning and Kunkel (2014) argue that logic and emotion are both valuable ways of knowing about the social world. In the emotional-rational attempts at meaning-making feeling as a way of knowing may assist in exposing spaces between normative and interpretive

research findings. For example, Virtanen (2013) found that Finnish men describe 'a man' and his goals in life rather normatively and similarly irrespective of age. After going to the army, which is compulsory for men in Finland, a man's goal is to get an education or a profession and to try to be successful at it. When a satisfying romantic relationship has been found then building a family becomes a goal. Typically when children are small it is also the most hectic time in a man's career. He does not have a lot of time to meet with his friends, which he is unhappy about. Financial stability continues to be important. When children grow up, there is more time for social life with one's partner and with one's own friends (see also Grief, 2009). Retirement is challenging for a man but a purpose is often found from projects such as working on the cabin and socializing with other couples. The normative man, however, is not every individual man. The results of this dissertation suggest that men's supportive function of moving forward may make use of these norms to varying degrees. It is of significance to contemplate on who maintains these norms, what functions do the norms have, and how restricting or flexible they are in the social world for men. According to the results of this research, the everyday experiences of individual Finnish men both do and do not reflect the aforementioned cultural narrative (see also Perttula, 1998). How much of these goals are realized or how flexibly one can negotiate them is likely to impact on one's life satisfaction, on unique and autonomous self, and thus possibly on his emotional well-being.

Rawlins (2009) summarizes that as we select, negotiate, and co-construct the possibilities that our actions have in varying degrees in the contexts that emerge in life; our choices are constrained and enabled by natural, social and historical factors that are beyond our control. Vulnerability, for example, is weakness in some masculine cultures (Seidler, 1994) and not acknowledging vulnerability is thus one type of masculinity enacted. Since the void results from a lack and its given meanings, if the lack is something that hinders an individual from accomplishing his desired masculine identity, then the failure or shortage of options to perform a desired gender identity can result in severe distress. A close friendship is a context in which an individual is viewed as unique and with a multi-dimensional identity. Gelfer (2012, p. 133) confirms:

> *It is only through the acknowledgement of multiple masculine selves that something resembling the truth can be revealed. If my multiple masculine selves are silenced—either by the pressures of my environment or a lack of self-awareness—I am forced to retreat into and perpetuate a caricature of a mono-dimensional masculine self; I am also forced to inhabit a similarly caricatured political and ideological position that is unlikely to accurately represent the nuance of my worldview.*

The shortcomings of support for identity performances is likely to influence the experienced closeness between two people, the extent of their experienced similarity and understanding, their capabilities and influence over one another, and the autonomy they grant with each other (Goldsmith, 2004). According to Chirkov, Sheldon, and Ryan (2011), social contexts are highly significant for people to discover, appreciate, and employ their capacity for autonomous actions. Being unimposed, autonomous, and having one's privacy protected

are intrapsychic and interpersonal needs. They are also particularly important for Finnish people who value self-direction and the capacity and duty to cope on one's own (pärjätä yksin) (see Poutiainen, in print). Finns do not want to be disturbed and they protect each other's privacy to a large extent. According to the cultural narrative, people should not burden others unduly (Kortteinen, 1992). A close friendship is a relational context in which one's unique experience of life can be made known to another person and to become accepted by another. Close friends can support freedom from masculine, social, and cultural expectations when those expectations hinder the expression of one's full self.

6.3.3 Authenticity: "You're really honest"

Authenticity for Finnish men is *rehellisyys*. It means honesty, genuineness, sincerity, being real, and authentic. This quality of supportive communication is meaningful for all contexts of friendship, gender performance, and Finnish culture. Isotalus (2009) found that for Finns themselves, the best and the most important national characteristic is honesty. She found that honesty extended to reliability, directness, avoiding strong or exaggerated verbal expressions of emotions and commitment to words—meaning things one says. The helper's efficacy can be "not knowing what to say," which is authenticity enacted rather than masking his lack of self-efficacy into a performance or pretence of a skillful support provider. Rogers (1980) stresses the need to be real, genuine and congruent when engaging with another person in coping. The results of this dissertation closely resemble his client-centered approach of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy in therapy settings. It is likely that the helper also experiences at least some amount of vulnerability and discomfort in supportive communication situation (see Perrine, 1993). The helper's honest disclosure of his self-efficacy, or the lack of it, validates the friend's experience because if the friend knew what to do with the void, he most likely would have already done it.

Rehellisyys builds reliability. The results showed that for Finnish men, the ideal, supportive friend is someone who does not escape support situations, shows up when needed, and shares his resources in, for example, time and knowledge. A rehellinen helper is a clear mirror on which to reflect. Clarity in reflection requires a calm helper who is strong for the friend when he is not. The ideal helper is sincere in his reassurance and encouragement, is honest in his reappraisals, gives his trustworthy opinion, and sugarcoats nothing. Rawlins (1983) has shown that honesty is key in friendships and an obligation of a good friend. Helpers benefit from being mindful about the offence or upset that their point-of-view might cause. On the other hand, "tough love," the hurtful sounding messages that are interpreted as well-meaning and encouraging one to do better may result in positive outcomes for the support seeker (Vangelisti, 2009). The expectation for honesty (Study II & III) overrides the requirement of autonomy in an ideal close friendship (see chapter

6.3.2). Being authentic is a desire for both the provider and the receiver of support in order to beneficially process the situation (Virtanen & Isotalus, 2010).

The results show that men are mindful about the risks of verbalizing their interpretation of the friend's experience. People with self-image goals want to construct, sustain, and defend desired private and public image of the self in order to gain or obtain something for the self, including recognition of their qualities (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). A verbose helper can place himself in the center of the communication situation, which may give an impression that he is engaging in support provision for the benefit of himself rather than the friend: "I provide good support" as opposed to "I want you to receive good support." In Finland, speaking is granted for those who are experts (see Wilkins, 2009). Supportive conversation should thus be about the one who is the 'expert' in his own void (Study I) and therefore men attempt to let the support seeker control the amount of talk in supportive conversation. Finnish men as helpers wanted to also avoid performing: Performance can be juxtaposed with authenticity. Support that is adjusted to the individual who is the target of support means that the messages are created in situ and not rehearsed or recycled from other support situations because they previously had produced a desired effect. The more cognitively complex or skilled individual, the easier it is for him to produce messages that meet several social goals in a supportive communication situation (Hargie, 2006b) such as being authentic, supporting one's autonomy and reassuring availability.

Rawlins' (1992) last two interactional dialectics in friendships, the dialectic of affection and instrumentality and the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness resonate with these findings. An affectionate friend engages in supportive conversation not to gain but to give, and the caring he communicates is an end-in-itself rather than a means-to-an-end. The freedom to confide in others and openly express one's thoughts and feelings are important elements of friendships. Revealing private information creates vulnerability, and the tensions that arise from disclosing sensitive information and imposing an expectation on another for support, or the demand for oneself to then cope with the help of another, is central in the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness.

The results showed that authentic and honest support intentions were considered helpful, which underlines the importance of motivation in supportive communication. Without motivation, even the most skillful support provider is assumed to fail. Lack of motivation can be detected from the provider's failures in nonverbal immediacy (see Jones, 2004; Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Nonverbal immediacy has been found to positively influence the evaluations made of the helper's ability and quality of comfort. Burleson (2007) says that people communicate based on their perceptions of a person's qualities, roles, conduct, intentions, and dispositions. The challenge is to maintain motivation to support a friend if he is not making progress in coping (Study III). The willing helper may tire or become frustrated in attempts to assist the friend if the alteration of his void takes a long time or his coping efforts are continuously insufficient. This is surely problem-specific and depends on individuals' history with the coping process (Study III; e.g., McNess, 2008; Vangelisti, 2009). Being honest about tiring to support may not help the support receiver

directly but it may give perspective on his coping, and on occasion, signal commitment to the friendship as in "we need to do something about this."

6.4 Vulnerability in person-centeredness

As the theory chapters demonstrated (see particularly chapter 2.2.2), currently the most widely applied model on supportive communication is the theory of person-centeredness (e.g., Burleson, 1994a, 1994b). It is now time to review the results of this research together with the assumptions of the person-centered theory. Most importantly I shall assert what the research results of this dissertation can do to advance the development of the theory mainly by underlining the experiential nature of supportive conversations. Very recently Jones and Bodie (2014) also proposed trajectories to the person-centered theory, which they perceive as having high potential to be a heuristic one. My propositions are based on the conclusions of the four empirical sub-studies (I–IV) and this current thesis.

The dissertation's results describe an experienced problem as a lack of something or something that one needs to not exist in his life experience. The ways a person appraises the lack, i.e., the meanings he gives to the lack, and how he reacts to it emotionally create the experience of void. When one's attempts at coping enter the social world and become more than his cognitions—become known to others—his coping is susceptible to more meanings. The added meanings can be given by those who are aware of his coping, but also by the person himself; what it means that others know and what it means that they have the possibility of telling some others who will then know, and so forth. This is likely to create a network of meanings within the void, which potentially requires high cognitive and affective effort and skill to manage. To seek support, for example to disclose one's troubles or his coping attempts and to risk them being revealed, is inherently a vulnerable endeavor. I define vulnerability in the social world as *an individual's experience of uncertainty that others may recognize or do recognize him having*. Accordingly, the extent of one feeling vulnerable depends on how socially invested he is. In other words, what being uncertain means in the contexts that create his situational life experience (see e.g., Rauhala, 2005c).

In a similar manner, Burleson (2003a) has conceptualized that affective upsets take place when a person appraises a meaningful situation to him as being incongruent to his present life goals. Change in his emotional state can happen when he alters features of the problem situation or modifies appraisals or his goals about the distress-causing circumstances. Therefore, both problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches are possible even though the functions that the latter approach fulfills have been emphasized. Emotion-focused support messages express care and compassion as well as assist a person in alleviating his negative emotions (Jones & Bodie, 2014). Inline with this dissertation's theorizing, useful approaches could include solving the lack and reassuring one's worth. Thus, the role of the helper becomes important in facilitating the distressed individual's

cognitive reappraisals about the situation he is in, which can be outlined as altering his meaning-making in relation to the lack.

Person-centeredness in the person-centered theory means the extent to which messages "reflect an awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational aspects of communicative contexts" (Burleson, 1987, p. 305). Stated differently, person-centered messages consider and adapt to the relational, subjective and emotional aspects of communicative contexts, and thus can be most efficient in accomplishing their intended functions (see Burleson, 2007; MacGeorge, 2009). Highly person-centered support acknowledges multiple goals in supportive interaction and is consequently the most verbose approach to comforting in the hierarchical model of message person-centeredness. When a comforting message is highly person-centered it explicitly recognizes and legitimizes the other's feelings, helps the other person to articulate those feelings, elaborates reasons why those feelings might be felt, and assists the other to see how those feelings fit in a broader context (Burleson, 1994a). It also intends to be neutral and listen to the other. The sensitive and sophisticated supportive messages emphasize the role of feelings.

High and Dillard (2012) assert that the nine levels of the model have for the most part produced distinct and linear relations with support outcomes. However, the hierarchy could be more accurately theorized and operationalized with only six or even three levels. Even though highly person-centered messages (HPC) have been evaluated as most sensitive, effective, helpful and sophisticated messages by various populations (Burleson, 2003b), moderately person-centered (MPC) messages seem most commonly used (Jones & Burleson, 2003; see also Lemieux & Tighe, 2004, and the rebuttal by Burleson, Samter et al., 2005). Men in particular have been found to use MPC messages more often than women (Jones & Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999). MPC messages communicate acceptance and condolence. They seek to distract the person's attention from the upsetting event and the feelings it causes. The helper acknowledges the other's emotional reaction by providing compassion and concern. The focus is typically on lessening the person's negative emotional state by offering possible explanations of the circumstances he is in. Yet, the helper does not initiate talk about the reasons why those feelings may have occurred or how to cope with the feelings. Next I propose an explanation why male helpers may find approaches that reflect the MPC comforting strategies beneficial.

The highly person-centered messages require strong interpersonal skill from the helper. Research on person-centered comforting has proposed that men have lesser ability and motivation to provide the most sensitive and sophisticated support (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005; MacGeorge et al., 2003). According to men, the support receiver's situational appraisal, i.e., what the problem is and how he perceives it, is more relevant in achieving the supportive function of moving forward than focusing on the feelings that the seeker is perceived to be having, the seeker has, or is trying to conceal. Finnish men perceived emotions as a byproduct of one's meaning-making process (see chapter 6.2.1). If men perceive negative emotions as unhelpful in coping, then time spent on talking about

those feelings may seem irrelevant or insufficient; the seeker may experience the helper's support as unbeneficial, patronizing, belittling, or even dominating (see also Bolger et al., 2000). Focusing on something that seems unbeneficial may convey nonlistening, lack of motivation to engage in beneficial supportive communication, suspicious or selfish goals, or inauthenticity in the helper's support efforts.

If the goal is not to define the friend's experience for him, then listening and nonverbal communication may be appropriate and less risky approaches than verbal and explicit approaches to comfort. Words are arbitrary symbols in a language, which carry meaning. Those meanings are value laden, and often connotative when uttered in context. Words are also relationship bound and individually valued. The results indicate that talking meaningfully or 'deeply' (Study IV) is valued more than talk about 'surface' things or talk for talk's sake (see Wilkins, 2009). Deep contemplation appeared to take place in contexts in which verbosity was not typical. According to Carbaugh et al. (2006), quietude is characteristic of Finns when making decisions effectively. It respects the proper contemplation of matters that are believed to result in creative and deeply processed outcomes. The results of this research thus encourage a reassessment of the role of *talk* about feelings and emotions in the theory of person-centered supportive communication.

Being autonomously dependent in men's friendships is a desired goal, which may be best achieved by listening. Listening facilitates another's contemplation and coping, both of which lend to the helper being a source of clarity and strength. Neutral stance and composed supportive communication intends to represent (1) an emotionally and psychologically strong helper who represents the exemplar state which an individual is expected to also want to regain, and (2) a reliable source from which to mirror one's unique situation. Even though a calm and strong helper may sound like underlining masculine and stoic characteristics in men, they are in fact desired qualities from most support providers. Ryan et al., (2005) conclude that individuals rely most preferable to those who are perceived as supporting another's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Even if emotional reliance may vary across gender and culture, persons who describe more willingness to turn to others for emotional support also report greater well-being. Furthermore, the helpers who provide autonomy support to their friends disclose great contributions to their own experience of relationship quality and well-being (Deci et al., 2006). Mindfulness, the nonjudgmental and dispassionate communication of kindness and compassion from the helper, "may be all that's needed to activate person-centered constructs and thus the use of person-centered strategies" (Jones & Bodie, 2014, p. 380). The results of this dissertation offer building blocks for the development of such support concept.

According to this research, the most beneficial support may be achieved if the helper can acknowledge not only what it is like for a person to have the void but also what it might be like for another to cope interactively. This is what I have called 'other-centeredness' (Study II). Similarly, Jones and Bodie (2014) introduce the idea of position-centered talk as a second possible dimension within comforting contexts. The researchers impliment Bernstein's sociolinguistic code theory to better understand supportive talk. In addition

to elaborated code (person-centered talk), the restricted code (position-centered talk) may more "effectively express the unique, shared reality of two or more people who have developed a close-knit relationship. In that relationship, intimate information "lives on" in people's idiomatic talk. Details of past shared experiences become socially-shared markers that characterize the intimate nature of the relationship between people" (p. 376). The acknowledgement of 'other' as different and support as 'uniting' as experiences in people's lives, we could call the supportive communication for vulnerability as *experiencer-centered* support.

Experiencer-centered support requires high levels of functional communication skills. Skilled individuals are, for example, able to do preventive facework and maintain other's esteem (Hargie, 2006b). Active-emphatic listening is skilled behavior, because it listens to the support seeker's experience. This research, however, did not aim to evaluate the skills of male support providers in same-sex friendships. More important than measuring the differences in abilities or comparing them to the comforting skills of women is to describe the experiences of support that social actors perceive meaningful in contexts. At the same time, the results of this research clearly indicate that Finnish men's experiences of meaningful support approaches in friendships are very similar to those captured by the hierarchical model of person-centered comforting strategies. This is a clear testament to the theory's applicability and soundness.

Today, we should direct out attention to supportive conversations more than uttered messages because the conversations people have with each other and their relationships are what sustain their sense of perceived support, which in the end contribute to their well-being (Jones & Bodie, 2014). Goldsmith (2004, p. 85) encourages that we "view the situational definition as a potential feature of *any* supportive message and we should examine the interrelationship (rather than the oneway match) between situational features relevant to adaptation and message features relevant to situation appraisal." The good news is that as a research community we can confidently affirm that. The challenge, however, is that the influence of contexts makes the interaction of needs and support a complex phenomenon to describe. From the constructivist perspective, Burleson (2010b, p. 157) says that the

> *[a]spects of context affect what people do and the form and content of the messages they produce. The roles people play with each other in a particular situation (along with the channels, norms, rituals, rules, codes, etc., associated with particular situations and roles) shape and may even mandate the pursuit of various goals, the strategies used in pursuing particular goals, the manner or style in which these strategies are instantiated (e.g., language styles, communication channels), the competencies needed to realize particular goals, and criteria for effective performance.*

Even though previous research on supportive communication has acknowledged support receiver's face concerns (Caplan & Samter, 1999; Goldsmith, 1994, 1999) and secondary goals such as identity management (e.g., Goldsmith, 2004), the concept of individuation (see Rawlins, 2009) could be a useful addition to the theory.

Considering the arguments above I propose vulnerability as an essential element of experiencer-centered support and thus valuable to the person-centered theory of supportive communication. Experiencer-centeredness acknowledges what it means to have the void be seen in the social world. Vulnerability may therefore be viewed as the social in the need for social support. Listening is an experiencer-centered phenomenon (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011) and thus an integral part of supportive communication.

6.5 Evaluation of the research and future implications

This dissertation has described a phenomenon that is fundamental to social beings—support—and aimed at understanding the elements that are meaningful in communicating it in Finnish men's friendships. The critical evaluation of the research is as important as the choices made and results achieved. Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006) recommend that one looks into 'a full-size research mirror' to reflect on her decisions and actions during the process. I am further encouraged by the results of this dissertation, which propose that a clear mirror is key to useful appraisals. To ensure clarity I will use established criteria for qualitative (e.g., Cresswell, 2009) and interpretive (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014) research evaluation. Lastly I will suggest future directions for study.

Evaluative criteria for qualitative research are not as clear-cut as in quantitative research even though the terms validity and reliability are sometimes used. Because the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to describe the lived experience of social actors, the usefulness, applicability, and confirmability are meaningful criteria to meet (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Furthermore, one has to elaborate critically on the amount of data, the quality of the data, on the representativeness and meaningfulness of the data as well as on the susceptibility of the analysis (Mäkelä, 1990). Last but not least, the object of study and its significance in the field is a significant measure of its value. The expectations for research on supportive communication are pragmatic, theoretical, and moral (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; MacGeorge et al., 2011) and I will address these qualities as well.

Because the phenomenon is understudied in the Finnish cultural context and many questions have remained unanswered in the body of deterministic research on social support, I chose the interpretive-oriented approach for this dissertation. The research followed the multiple methods tradition and comprised of four empirical sub-studies and an overviewing thesis. In other words, I used several approaches both in data collection procedures and data analyses (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The multiple methods or mixed methods approach is "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry" (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). However, the application of multiple methods needs to be well argued and the merits of using more methods as opposed to a single method need to be stated (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The empirical data for this research was gathered with two different interview methods, thematic and episode

interviews. The interviews focused on the participants' experiences and perceptions of supportive communication with friends in retrospective and prospective situations. Triangulation was motivated by the commitment to the research purpose—to shed lights (in plural) on the complex phenomenon of supportive communication in Finnish men's friendships. The intent of triangulation was to add to the reliability of the research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002).

Interview is a legitimate method for gathering data on communication intentions and behaviors that the social actors use when natural settings for such situations are inaccessible. The choice of method is further supported by the fact that the activities, which make up a personal friendship, take place for the most part in private settings (Rawlins, 2009). The results of this research showed that most of the communication situations and settings in which Finnish men talk about personal issues such as the sauna are in fact interpersonal and private. Interestingly, a documentary film 'Steam of Life'[10] on Finnish men talking about troubles in the sauna was released in 2010. The interview data for this research, however, were already gathered at the time. A careful analysis of the discovered place-setting finding of the sauna was conducted (Study IV) instead of including the interactions on film as additional data. The aforementioned implication for further research is nonetheless highly encouraged.

Huhtinen et al. (1994) say that the validity of many methods and applications should be estimated on the basis of the researcher's accuracy of description about the process and its logic. Out of the four sub-studies, one study made use of the episode interview data (Study III); three studies used the thematic interview dataset (I, II, IV), and one study also combined key definitions of social support with the empirical data on men's experiences (Study I). The thematic interviews produced a large and rich dataset that enabled a deep interpretive and inductive analysis. The phenomenological approach (Study I) was chosen because phenomenology is a valuable tradition that can lead to the formation of new theories (see Puro, 1996). This research has not followed one orthodox phenomenology in the most philosophical sense of the term. The chosen approach of interpretivism attempts to connect approaches in interpersonal communication research, which benefit from phenomenology and hermeneutics, and language as central to opening of world to experience (see Deetz, 1982).

The episode interview was a method I adapted from the methods of empathy-based stories (Eskola, 1991, 1998) and episodic interview (Flick, 2000, 2006). The participants were asked to picture themselves in four different episodes that were designed for the study. The method did not succeed in producing a consistently rich material on support

10 Miesten vuoro ['Steam of Life'] is a documentary film released in 2010. The film was directed by Joonas Berghäll and Mika Hotakainen. It is 81 minutes long and was chosen as the Finnish entry for the category of Best Foreign Language Film at the 83rd Academy Awards. The producer's website describes the documentary film as follows: "Naked Finnish men sit in the sauna and speak straight from their heart. In the warmth of rusty stoves these men cleanse themselves both physically and mentally." http://oktober.fi/films/steam-of-life/

behaviors. There are at least three critical points to be made: (1) the episode interviews were conducted after the thematic interviews, which may have influenced on the participants' motivation to engage in the second task; (2) in order to generate support behaviors that the participants would use with a friend they needed to switch roles between themselves and the friend in an hypothetical conversation. The first episode ('being laid-off from work because of cut-backs in the company') was commonly the most elaborated one but for the three remaining research scenarios the interviewer had to encourage and probe some of the participants to produce further support messages; (3) with a few participants, the task seemed uncomfortable and they produced mostly descriptive or short answers rather than placed themselves in the imagined support scene.

Nonetheless, I encourage viewing the shortcomings of the original method alongside with its accomplishments: The episodes that were created for data gathering strongly align with the results of the thematic interviews, which were conducted *prior* to presenting the participants with the specific episodes. That is to say that the results of this research (Studies II & IV) show that the topics of men's supportive conversations commonly concern relationship problems and that the situations in which support is provided many times involve alcohol. Similarly, the episodes that were used in the interviews concerned problems with a partner and drinking too much. Drinking as part of a social scene does not mean that alcohol is a problem for the individual. The argument here is merely that the research appointed episodes in Study III reflect situations that were the results of the dataset that was collected separately and previously for Studies I, II and IV.

The ethical considerations were an integral part of the research from the very beginning. With the episode interviews, the problem scenarios that were presented were kept to a moderate level of stress for the hypothetical friend (e.g., breaking-up, getting fired, having a problem with drinking). Nonetheless, the participants did mention that they would feel bad for the friend or that the problematic situation would be very tough if it or when it had happened in real life. When doing research on coping with stressful events, even if they concern a third party, special care and attention need to be paid in order not to inflict stress on the participants.

I conducted inductive analyses for both sets of data, which were the primary methods of analysis. In addition, I applied a coding scheme for the episode interviews. For the Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (ICBCS, Barbee & Cunningham, 1995), the interview data was a small dataset. A form of secondary analysis of interview data was conducted to increase reliability (see James, 2013); another communication researcher crosschecked the coding. She was not part of the research design team and she was trained to use ICBCS. She crosschecked twenty percent of the data. The inter-coder consistency that was reached was 97%, which can be considered reliable.

In interpretation paradigm reliability commonly refers to the agreement of the scientific community about the "realness" of data and acceptability of claims. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) remind us that qualitative studies are culturally and historically situated, which has to be taken into consideration when viewing similar cases or scenes. Because interpretive

studies commonly view realities as changing and the researcher's own understanding as something that keeps developing, the replication of a specific study's results in the traditional sense of reliability is not feasible or possible (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Since the beginning of the research process, I have presented my data, analyses and the results in numerous international and national conferences. The sub-studies have also all gone through a rigorous peer-review process in the journals they were published. This has made it possible for the wider scientific community to discuss, problematize, and criticize the inferences made from the data, and helped me to further recognize my pre-understandings and view the material from new angles.

Huhtinen et al. (1994) assert that research reporting has to paint a picture of the process through which the researcher ended up with the results she did and how her thinking evolved. I have provided direct quotations from the participants in all of the sub-studies as well as illustrated the final conclusions (chapter 6) with an example of one of the interviewees. The purpose of the data examples is to make the steps of analysis and the researcher's interpretation of the data transparent and believable to ensure confirmability. Furthermore, I have described the process of inductive analysis, qualitative content analysis and coding from the smallest unit of analysis to the main categories achieved in the subsequent studies. Researchers can, however, interpret data differently because they have diverse backgrounds, theoretical perspectives and interests, which does not make the research unreliable (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006).

Transferability is sometimes used as a criterion for qualitative research. The results of this dissertation may be generalized on a conceptual level (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008). It was one of the purposes of the research—to discover the essence of social support (Study I). It does not, however, make generalizations about all Finnish men as support providers. At the same time, the support approaches presented here are useful for understanding supportive conversations among various groups of people. The conclusions reached also validate the current movement in supportive communication research to study different national cultures (e.g., Burleson & Hanasono, 2010; Feng & Wilson, 2012). Finns are said to be a rather homogenous population with distinctive cultural ways of communicating and therefore they are an interesting people to study (see Carbaugh, 2009; Poutiainen & Gerlander, 2009; Wilkins, 2009). The results of this dissertation together with the body of previous research on supportive communication reveal unity in the experience of support in individuals' life and as such, direct future development of theory.

The dissertation took a novel approach to the study of supportive communication by looking at contexts—including physical contexts—that are meaningful in message production and reception in interpersonal communication situations (see Bodie & Burleson, 2008 for environmental cues). The research has ecological validity in terms of describing men's lived experiences. Most studies on supportive communication have focused on the college student-body in the USA (see High & Dillard, 2012). This research succeeded in gathering a dataset, which included men in most adult age-categories (21 to 67 years of age).

However, adolescents and the elderly were not represented in the data. This was not a result of my narrowing of age categories but rather a natural occurrance (see Appendix 1). In this research the support goals and approaches between different aged men were not compared, which in future studies would be of both pragmatic and theoretical interest (see Rawlins, 1992). The research request was intended to reach men throughout Finland. Yet, mostly men currently *living* in Helsinki volunteered for the interviews. This is not to say that they were necessarily from the capital city. In fact, many had moved from small towns to the city because of work, studies, or relationship. The most likely reason for the participants volunteering from the metropolitan area is because the researcher's contact details also referred to the southern location. The differences in dialects and registers and the pace of life in cities and countryside could provide us with even a wider range of narratives on supportive conversations. At the same time, every interpretive research is different in that it takes place in life filled with occurring moments, unique individuals, and changing time and space.

There are certainly other limitations and shortcomings in the present research. Because of the choice of interviews, the research was unable to detect detailed descriptions of nonverbal communication behaviors in supportive conversations. By detailed descriptions I mean accounts of, e.g., gaze, gestures or smiles. The data did include, nonetheless, references to intonation, touch and hugs. The results of this research query the usefulness of separating verbal communication from nonverbal communication. Based on the findings I recommend developing models that would incorporate both forms of communication. The task is without a doubt inspiring as well as demanding. Since the main results show that active-emphatic listening is central to men's supportive communication, future research should attempt to create research opportunities for such communication behavior to be scrutinized. Laboratory environments could ensure that some of the contextual variables stay fairly consistent. Yet, such research designs do create a serious challenge for replication of real-world interactions, especially in sensitive topics, which usually take place in private locations (MacGeorge et al., 2004). The complexities of contextual elements and their influence are almost impossible to control in any setting. Furthermore, the results of this research show that the setting in which supportive process takes place is used as a source for interactional meaning (see also Tracy, 2007). More research needs to be done on environmental cues in supportive communication as they clearly are used to enhance and to interpret the meaning of messages, especially subtle messages like "that's pretty bad; you have a lot to work on there" accompanied with a silence in a supportive conversation with a friend (Study II).

The friendship closeness or duration was not investigated in this research when men disclosed their experiences of supportive communication with their friends. This was a conscious choice because of the nature of thematic interviews: The conversational characteristics of the method could have been jeopardized if the interviewee would have been asked to assert the closeness of each friendship he mentioned during the interview interaction. At the same time, closeness emerged as a important indicator for talking

serious between friends (Study IV). Friends, who have known each other for long and who are close, have more information at their disposal when planning their supportive actions. The participants did elaborate on the goal attainment with friends and their plans to accommodate their behaviors according to different individuals. Qualitative methods are important in bringing forth such differences that matter in the communication process. The research focused on supportive communication directed at helping a friend with problems. We need to bear in mind that not all supportive interactions deal with negative occurrences, though (see also Jones & Bodie, 2014; Vangelisti, 2009): Friendship is also a relational context, in which sharing good news with a friend doubles the joy.

The data were gathered in 2007 and 2008 within a six-month period. Some time has passed since the materials were acquired. The findings are unlikely to differ significantly in time in relation to being available for friends, supporting autonomy and being authentically present for another. The means to do so may, however, have expanded with technological innovations. Facebook, for example, was common already in 2007. Yet, only one of the participants mentioned providing emotional support via the Internet. According to the results, face-to-face interpersonal situations were the most valuable scenes for conveying at least emotional support, and are beneficial to remember even in times of heightened technological innovations. High (2011) found that men appeared as more skillful support providers when they were able to write supportive messages online. Future research should explore and further this important discovery in different relational and problem contexts.

There are several avenues which research on supportive communication among men could, and should take next. I encourage the reader to turn to each sub-study for more suggestions. Relational dialectics theory has been previously and successfully applied to the study of friendship (Rawlins, 1992, 2009). Future studies could look further into the independence–dependence dialectical tension of men's friendships and incorporate interpersonal ideology of autonomy into the research designs of supportive conversations (see also Poutiainen, in press). The negotiation of public and private dimensions of friendships and its influence on friends' enactment of support is an important research avenue especially for those interested in explaining the gendered worlds of relationships from a more sociological perspective. The canon of Anglo-American studies on supportive communication would also benefit from the interpretive approach in order for us to describe and compare the complexities and nuances of support contexts like gender, culture, and relationship.

Another theoretically intriguing possibility is imagined interaction (Honeycutt, 2008)—the mental representations of interpersonal communication. Because perceptions of support availability have been shown to most consistently have positive benefits for individuals (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000), imagining interactions in which others are providing support could produce positive outcomes. Such experiences may be valuable in self-appraisal, and could be incorporated into education and health services. Interpersonal communication is message production, message processing, interaction coordination, and social perceptions that are interrelated processes (Burleson, 2010b; Hargie, 2006b).

Imagined supportive interactions could produce benefits also for those who imagine their roles as support providers (see Deci et al., 2006).

The research assists theoretical progress on supportive communication by underlining the significance of motivation in supportive interactions. The conclusions recommend the development of models for supportive communication that would (a) recognize the influence of contexts, (b) their impact on individuals' sense of vulnerability, (c) expand on supportive listening, and (d) discern the value of implicit support, invisible support, autonomy support, and distraction as support. This will open new avenues in understanding why certain support behaviors that are deemed fairly minimal or straightforward may sometimes or among some people be considered helpful. Finally, the theory of cognitively induced reappraisals (see Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998) deserves further application.

A conclusion of my earlier study on Finnish middle-aged single women and men found that it was more difficult for the men to seek support from their network of close persons, and that the men desired more emotional support than they were currently receiving (Virtanen, 2005, 2009). The noticeable lack of Finnish studies on men's supportive communication and the gender similarities and cultural differences all motivated the current research. The results of this research show that Finnish men do talk about issues that worry them and they do provide comfort and emotional support to their friends. At the same time, individuals and relationships differ. What I can say with confidence is that trust and relationship closeness increase the possibility for supportive communication among male friends who value honesty and respect for one's autonomy in support situations. Ryan et al. (2005, p. 326) state that to receive autonomy support from a friend is "every bit as important in female-female pairs as in male-male pairs, indicating that autonomy is indeed critical for high quality relationships for women as well as men." There is no reason to question whether the general issues of coping, the concept of void, and vulnerability would not concern all individuals irrespective of gender, ethnicity and nationality. The obtained results are of pragmatic value to professionals working with men as well as to those who desire to create, understand, maintain, and enhance close relationships with men.

The moral merits, consequently, are manifold. Because supportive communication enhances individuals' well-being, sense of worth and quality of relationships, the ways to support them most skillfully and beneficially is fundamentally important. It is well worth mentioning that in many men's stories the support that was most readily available and which was found most beneficial was provided in friendships that were created during childhood, predominantly at the elementary school age. From this we can extrapolate two important suggestions: First, we should support boys befriending each other from an early on, and second, family members and spouses benefit from supporting boys and later men in sustaining their valuable and unique relationships throughout their lives. This is best achieved by enabling friends to spend time together.

Supportive communication is the ethical way of being a person in the social world, and by understanding the intentions of support approaches that various people use we may increase the perceived availability of support in our lives. It begins in listening.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

TUTKIMUSPYYNTÖ

Teen puheviestinnän väitöskirjatutkimusta suomalaisten miesten ystävyyssuhteista ja sosiaalisesta tuesta. Tutkimustyötäni ohjaa professori Pekka Isotalus Tampereen yliopiston puheopin laitokselta. Kerään alkukevään 2008 aikana aineistoa haastattelemalla eri-ikäisiä miehiä eri puolilta Suomea ja toivoisin, että Sinä voisit osallistua tutkimukseeni.

Haastatteluun ei tarvitse valmistautua millään tavalla: olen kiinnostunut Sinun näkemyksistäsi ja kokemuksistasi. Haastattelu kestää noin 1 tunnin ja se nauhoitetaan. Käsittelen nauhoitukset itse[11] ja säilytän ne luottamuksellisesti.

Missään tutkimuksen vaiheessa Sinun nimesi tai muut tunnistettavat tiedot eivät tule esille: annetut vastaukset muutetaan niin, ettei niistä voi päätellä haastateltavan henkilöllisyyttä. Vaitiolovelvollisuus sitoo tutkijaa väitöskirjan jälkeenkin. Haastatteluun osallistuminen on täysin vapaaehtoista. Halutessasi voit myös keskeyttää haastattelun.

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tuottaa tietoa, jonka avulla voidaan edistää ihmisten hyvinvointia. Mikäli voin haastatella Sinua, pyydän, että ottaisit minuun yhteyttä puhelimitse tai sähköpostilla. Tapaamispaikka ja -ajankohta ovat joustavasti sovittavissa Sinun aikataulusi mukaan. Alla on yhteystietoni. Jos Sinulla on kysyttävää tutkimuksestani, vastaan erittäin mielelläni.

Ystävällisin terveisin,

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11 Tutkimusaineiston keräämisen loppuvaiheessa tutkijalla oli mahdollisuus palkata tutkimusavustaja litteroimaan kolme viimeistä haastattelua. Haastattelujen litterointiin pyydettiin ja saatiin kirjallinen lupa haastateltavilta.

Appendix 2

Haastatteluaineisto Ira Virtasen puheviestinnän väitöskirjaan: Suomalaisten miesten tuen antaminen ystävyyssuhteissa

Haastateltavalle kerrotaan etukäteen, että haastattelu käsittelee
- ystävyyssuhteita
- ongelmatilanteita elämässä ja niiden käsittelemistä

Miesten tuenantamista käsittelevä haastattelurunko

Yleistä
- Kerro hieman itsestäsi.
  - Mitä teet päivisin?
  - Elätkö itsekseen vai jonkun kanssa?
- Oletko tyytyväinen elämääsi? Mihin olet tyytyväinen? Mihin et ole tyytyväinen?

Ystävät
- Miten jaottelisit tuttavapiirisi?
- Kerro hieman perheestäsi.
  - Ketä perheeseesi kuuluu?
  - Miten te pidätte yhteyttä? Miten usein te tapaatte?
  - Miten kuvailisit välejäsi perheenjäseniin?
- Millaisia ystävyyssuhteita sinulla on? Montako ystävää sinulla on? Voit nimetä ystäväsi, jos niin on helpompi kertoa.
  - Miten te pidätte yhteyttä ystäviesi kanssa?
  - Miten usein te tapaatte?
  - Näettekö enemmän ryhmässä vai kahden kesken?
- Millainen on hyvä ystävä?
- Onko sinulla naispuolisia ystäviä? Millaisia ystävyyssuhteita sinulla on naisen kanssa? Jos sinulla ei ole naispuolisia ystäviä, kerro mielikuvastasi.
- Miten tärkeinä pidät ystävyyssuhteitasi? Miksi?
- Oletko tyytyväinen ystävyyssuhteisiisi? Miksi? Miksi et?

Ongelmat ja niistä puhuminen
- Mitkä ovat mielestäsi suomalaisten suurimmat ongelmat nykyään?
- **Millaisia ongelmia ystävilläsi on ollut?**
- Puhutteko te yleensä sinun ystäviesi kanssa mieltä vaivaavista asioista tai ongelmista? Millaisista asioista te puhutte? **Kerro jokin esimerkki tilanteesta, jossa ystäväsi haki sinulta tukea. Miten te puhuitte siitä?** Missä ja milloin?
- Mitkä ovat vakavimpia ongelmia, mistä ystäväsi ovat sinulle puhuneet?
- Miten olette puhuneet ongelmaan liittyvistä tunteista vai onko niistä puhuttu?

Tuen antaminen

- Mitä sinun mielestäsi on tuen antaminen ystävälle?
- Minkälainen tuki on sinun mielestäsi hyvää tukea?
- Miten arvioisit itseäsi tuen antajana? Millaisissa asioissa olet mielestäsi hyvä antamaan tukea ystävillesi?
- Mitä sinä pidät vaikeimpana tai haastavimpana tuen antamisessa ystävälle? Onko tuen antaminen vaikeaa?
- Onko siinä mitään eroa, että antaako tukea naispuoliselle vai miespuoliselle ystävälle? Miksi tai miksi ei?
- Millaisissa asioissa et voisi tukea ystäviäsi?

Tuen saaminen

- Oletko itse saanut sinun ystäviltäsi tukea? Oletko ollut siihen tyytyväinen vai tyytymätön? Miksi?
- Koetko sinä, että olet saanut tukea ystävältäsi yhtä paljon kuin olet antanut?
- Millainen merkitys tuella on ylipäätään ystävyyssuhteissasi?

Suomalaisuus

- Suomalaisista miehistä on joskus sanottu, että he eivät puhu tunteistaan. Pitääkö se sinusta paikkansa? Miksi tai miksi ei?
- Onko henkilökohtaisista ongelmista puhuminen sinun mielestäsi tarpeellista ystävyyssuhteissa?
- Millaisia suomalaiset ovat sinun mielestäsi yleensä puhumaan ongelmistaan? Miksi sinä ajattelet, että se on niin?
- Onko naisten ja miesten puhumisessa eroja? Miksi tai miksi ei?
- Eroavatko sinun mielestäsi naiset ja miehet siinä, millaisesta tuesta he pitävät tai tarvitsevat ja millaista tukea he antavat?

Lopuksi

Kiitos kovasti vastauksistasi!

Onko sinulla jotakin, mistä haluaisit vielä puhua tähän aiheeseen tai haastatteluun liittyen? Vastaan mielelläni, jos sinulla on kysymyksiä tästä haastattelusta tai tutkimuksestani yleensä.

Appendix 3

Episodihaastattelu

Luetaan tilannekuvaukset ja kannustetaan puhumaan ajatuksia ääneen.

A. Ajattele jotakuta ystävääsi. Kuvittele tilanne, jossa ystäväsi olisi juuri tullut irtisanotuksi työstään henkilöstövähennysten takia. Kerro, mitä ajattelet. Kertoisiko ystäväsi sinulle asiasta? Mitä hän sanoisi? **Mitä sinä sanoisit ystävällesi?**

B. Ajattele jotakuta ystävääsi. Kuvittele tilanne, jossa ystäväsi olisi juuri tullut irtisanotuksi työstään runsaan alkoholin käytön takia. Kerro, mitä ajattelet. Kertoisiko ystäväsi sinulle asiasta? Mitä hän sanoisi? **Mitä sinä sanoisit ystävällesi?**

C. Ajattele jotakuta ystävääsi. Kuvittele tilanne, jossa ystäväsi olisi tullut jätetyksi, koska hän juo liikaa. Kerro, mitä ajattelet. Kertoisiko ystäväsi sinulle asiasta? Mitä hän sanoisi? **Mitä sinä sanoisit ystävällesi?**

D. Ajattele jotakuta ystävääsi. Kuvittele tilanne, jossa ystäväsi olisi tullut jätetyksi, koska hänen kumppaninsa on löytänyt toisen kumppanin. Kerro, mitä ajattelet. Kertoisiko ystäväsi sinulle asiasta? Mitä hän sanoisi? **Mitä sinä sanoisit ystävällesi?**

Ongelmatilanteiden omakokemukset

Oletko joutunut itse tilanteeseen, jossa joku on kertonut sinulle vastaavankaltaisen asian (vaihtoehdoista A, B, C tai D)? Miten reagoit? Kerro omin sanoin, mitä tapahtui ja mitä puhuttiin.

Mikä näistä tilanteista oli sinusta realistisin?

Taustatiedot
Syntymävuosi: _____
Siviilisääty: _____
Asuinpaikka: _____
Ammatti/koulutus: _____

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The essence of social support in interpersonal communication

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Abstract

The amount of social support literature in the field of interpersonal communication has increased steadily. In the last decade, however, no one has pushed for a conclusion as to what kind of *phenomenon* social support is. This article aims to describe the essence of social support. The essence is what must be present in all the phenomena that claim to be social support. The study uses phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation (1) on social support definitions and (2) on the empirical material of support in men's friendships. The synthesis of the two sets of material deduces the essence of social support both theoretically and empirically. According to the phenomenological reduction *the essence of social support is the awareness of a real or potential void in a person's life experience, and of otherness that intends to alter that experience to achieve wholeness*. Supportive communication is the manifestation of the essence of social support in interpersonal relationships.

Keywords
social support
supportive communication
interpersonal relationships
phenomenology
essence

Social support is one of the most unifying and healing expressions of human existence. Quite justly, it has received attention from scholars in various fields who have attempted to capture the nature of social support. For example, we now know for certain that social support affects people's emotional well-being (Burleson and Goldsmith 1998), physical health (House, Landis et al. 1988), relationships (Xu and Burleson 2001), job satisfaction (House 1981) and academic success (Thompson 2008). In fact, it generally affects individuals because of the contribution that people make to others in interpersonal relationships.

According to Burleson (2010: 151), communication in the interpersonal context is a complex, situated social process in which people who have created a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to generate shared meaning and accomplish social goals. Supportive communication is such an expression of intentional human behaviour, which has both everyday and situation-specific functions. The field of communication is vital in explicating the fundamental processes of forming and developing supportive relationships, exploring the transactions of social support that produce health-related outcomes and discovering the nature of moral action (Burleson et al. 1994). Due to its involvement in diverse contexts, social support is an important phenomenon, which continues to deserve our methodical exploration**.**

Attempts at distinguishing what social support is have been manifold. Scientific interest in the phenomenon mounted already in the mid-1970s. But by 1988, House, Umberson and Landis wondered, quite reasonably, why interest in social support had not yet produced a clear definition of it. The question remains, have we yet? Recently Vangelisti (2009) proposed that communication scholars need to consider several matters when conceptualizing social support, since, e.g. support is not necessarily always wanted or successful in generating the desired outcomes and it may also be given in positive instances. However, Vangelisti also hesitated to suggest that researchers find a universal definition.

Earlier scholars have done a commendable job of explicating the numerous elements at play when social support is communicated but many of the efforts to explain the outcomes of supportive communication in interpersonal relationships have done so with limited sets of factors and narrowly focused concepts (Burleson 2009). The most recent theory on social support is the dual-process model of supportive communication outcomes introduced by Bodie and Burleson (2008). The aim of the theory is to broadly summarize the variety of factors in the support process and how these factors interact. This has been the attempt of many definitions and theories of social support: To capture most or everything that the phenomenon is and in so doing have pragmatic utility.

Our objective is slightly different. We do not aim to distinguish all the possible elements influencing supportive interactions. Our goal is rather to describe what in social support is the same across different contexts, cultures, stressors and individuals. The guideline we follow is from Husserl (1931: 43) who stated that that which is common or universal to some thing, a condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is, is the essence of that thing. In order to find the essence of social support, we need a specific method for the study of phenomena – phenomenological reduction.

The steps of the study are threefold: First, to discover the essence of social support according to its working definitions. Second, to discover the essence of social support according to the individuals who experience it in their lifeworlds. Lastly, we form a synthesis of both descriptions of the definitions and empirical material to discover the essence. The synthesis will tell us what supportive communication in interpersonal relationships is the communication of in its various goals, motivations, plans, behaviours and outcomes.

Various perspectives on social support

The experience of social support is familiar to most people. We can fairly easily recall an interaction in which we received comfort or assistance from another or when we did not and how it made us feel. Research on social support has focused on capturing such experiences and instances between people. Studies have traditionally viewed acts of social support as seeking, providing or enacting, receiving and perceiving support. This has laid the foundation for the *different perspectives*. For example, perceived support and cognitions of support availability are important for individuals' experience of health (see Cunningham and Barbee 2000). The naturalistic paradigm has depicted enacted support in real-life situations and shed light on the types of support people consider helpful in times of distress. Goldsmith says that '*enacted social support* (the things people say and do for one another) and how it can *buffer* individuals from the negative effects of stress by facilitating coping' (2004: 3, original emphasis) are central to the wider social support construct and shows that it serves multiple purposes.

Indeed, communication research has shown that social support has *various functions*. Such functions may be informational support, emotional support, esteem support, tangible support and social network support, among others (Cutrona and Suhr 1994). Emotional support and comforting appear to be most frequent of those purposes and are the expressions of care, concern, empathy and reassurance (Burleson 2003). Recently esteem support, a particular form of emotional support, which is provided to others in an attempt to enhance how they feel about themselves (Holmstrom and Burleson 2011), has gained leverage. The cognitive functions of social support come into light sometimes in concepts like identity support, autonomy support and cognitive reappraisals (Jones and Wirtz 2006). Among the common functions are also informational support or advice (MacGeorge et al. 2008) and instrumental support (Tardy 1994), which is sometimes referred to as tangible support.

Some of the support functions have been found more effective in relation to different stressors. In other words, support has been distinguished as the *property of problems*. Since social support has the capacity to influence health and well-being, such situations when challenged are frequent contexts for social support research. Studies have been done on support and depression (Bolton and Oatley 1987), bereavement (Lehman et al. 1986), rheumatism (Lanza et al. 1995), HIV (Wrubel et al. 2010) and women's midlife period (Dare and Green 2011) among others.

Support can certainly be viewed as part of the *property of context*. For example, relational (Walen and Lachman 2000), ethnic (Samter et al. 1997), cultural (Burleson and Mortenson 2003), institutional (MacGeorge et al. 2005; Mallinckrodt and Fretz 1988) and gendered (Burleson et al. 2005) contexts have been distinguished and proven to have scientific relevance. As an extension of the former perspective, support expands to the *property of relationships*. Supportive behaviours are found in various formal and informal relationships between, e.g. family members (Gardner and Cutrona 2004), siblings (Voorpostel and Van der Lippe 2007), spouses (Cutrona 1996) and friends (Leatham and Duck 1990). These studies have shown that some relationships are more supportive than

others, and certain people may be better sources of support for particular problems than others.

The different functions of support have both specific and shared outcomes, depending on the situational features. According to the dual-process theory, the factors that affect the outcomes of supportive interactions are both message content and non-content message elements; features of the helper and the helper's relationship with the support recipient; features of the recipient; and features of the context (Burleson 2009). Findings on contextual features, for example, have indicated that gender plays a smaller role than ethnicity or culture in determining preferred support behaviours (Burleson 2003).

As a result, we know relatively much about support functions in different context with different people from different perspectives. This knowledge is crucial in designing interventions and support applications, and as a consequence it has great pragmatic value. Yet at the same time it is as if we had achieved a more fragmented than coherent understanding of what social support is and laid aside the discussion of what it is essentially. Without a core description we are forced to question if the phenomenon we are talking about is the same in the face of all the variance. We believe that parameters can be set and that the objective at hand can be achieved through a phenomenological method.

Methodology

The philosophy of phenomenology seeks to remain faithful to the lived, historical and practical nature of human experience (Moran 2000). Phenomenology as scientific investigation is appropriate when the knowledge sought is achieved through descriptions, and the descriptions make it possible for an understanding of the experience's meanings and essences to emerge (Moustakas 1994: 84). We have seen that social support is closely linked to the social world of communicative human beings but this does not yet confirm that communication is where social support initially comes into existence. The essence of social support can be the cognitions of support, which would make communication a manifestation of such cognitions. Our goal is to reduce the essence of support so as to learn which experience supportive communication stems from in interpersonal communication.

Giorgi (2009) maintains that in order to define an essence scientifically we need to modify the pure philosophy of phenomenology to suit our needs. This is necessary, since there are several phenomenologies. We chose to use phenomenology more as a method rather than philosophy. The method we use is that of Juha Perttula (1995, 2005) who has followed Lauri Rauhala's (1993, 2009) writings on Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Perttula's phenomenological method follows existential phenomenology and is an extension and a more detailed version of Amedeo Giorgi's method.

The material in the study comprises of (1) previous social support definitions and (2) empirical data on men's experiences of social support in their friendships. Definitions are explications of the terms with which scientists do different things. Social support definitions also reflect the theory they are based on and often further tested with empirical material. It is important that we concede that definitions do not tell us as much about the experienced world as they do about language. Therefore we will apply the method of free imaginative

variation to social support definitions in order to describe the essence accordingly.

> *The task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of references, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles and functions. The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words the 'how' that speaks to conditions that illuminate the 'what' of experience. How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be we what it is? Describing the essential structures of a phenomenon is the major task of Imaginative Variation.* (Moustakas 1994: 96–97)

Subsequently, first-hand data on the lived experience of social actors will tell us about the phenomenon's existence in the world. For this part of the study we use data on friendships and individuals' accounts on support in them.

Accurate description is crucial in phenomenological reduction. The researcher may add or subtract nothing that is present even though the inclusion of co-present absences is allowed when those absences are constitutive of the essence (Giorgi 2009). Moustakas (1994: 96) states that pre-reflective and reflective components of phenomenological reduction allow an uncovering of the nature and meaning of experience. This brings the experiencing person to a self-knowledge and to knowledge of the phenomenon.

To further clarify our method, let us use Giorgi's (2009) interpretation of Husserl's example about colour. Colour cannot exist without an extension of colour in space, since its perception is essentially linked to extensiveness or spatiality. If these elements are removed, colour ceases to exist. Other variables may be conditional or dependent on the essential relationship of colour and space but they will not affect the very perception of at least some colour. A similar argument can be evinced about social support. For example, evaluations of support effectiveness vary according to the severity of the problem (Burleson et al. 2008). However, low estimates of certain message effectiveness detract nothing from the fact that at least some support is perceived. The goal is to find what in essence that 'some' is.

Social support according to previous definitions

In the early definitions of social support a person's perception of acceptance and care from others was elemental (Albrecht et al. 1994). Social support was described as individuals' subjective sense of belonging, being cared for and accepted and as their holistic sense of being needed (Moss 1973: 237). Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003: 265) later specified the elements further by saying: 'Social support consists of reassurance, validation, and acceptance, the sharing of needed resources and assistance, and connecting or integrating structurally within a web of ties in a supportive network'. The same sentiment is heard in Cobb's (1976: 300) classification according to which social support is information about being cared for, that people are respected and valued, and that they belong to a network of communication and mutual commitment. Social support thus embodies an idea that a person's way of being in the world is something that is accepted by another or others, and that the particular way of being influences or is influenced by others. In other words, one has the experience of being connected to others and being meaningful to others.

Experiences of acceptance and belonging are generally positive and emotionally rewarding. Burleson (1985) defined emotionally oriented acts of support as comforting behaviours. Comforting is messages having the goal of alleviating or lessening the emotional distress experienced by another. Since such acts signal care, commitment, interest, compassion and even love they are relationally significant behaviours (Burleson 1994). The aforementioned definitions underline individuals' positive perceptions and experiences of their relationships with others.

In addition to social relationships, these definitions echo the actions of another person. For example, the sense of being needed is based on actions that others direct towards oneself or actions that are interpreted as being directed towards oneself. We can say that someone is providing something to someone else, which may lead to that person experiencing the receiving of something positively. According to our phenomenological reduction social support is the experience of receiving something that others have or only others can give, or enhancing something that already exists or has the potential to exist, and therefore, creating or strengthening a connection to others outside of one's experience of oneself. In sum, social support is something that is a result of experiencing another person's way of being that benefits oneself in some form.

The definitions so far have given us evidence that the experience of social support includes the sense of being connected to others. Social support is a core element of close relationships and often, but not always, support is received due to strong network ties (Adelman et al. 1987). In cases where support is experienced but the relationship is not close or is non-existent, e.g. between strangers, social support has to exist in something that occurs in or between the two people. That something is communication and the individual's interpretations of that communication.

Since social support was proven by early researchers to have a positive impact on people's well-being (House, Landis et al. 1988) it was only natural that the field of communication wanted to know how social support was best directed at others. It became evident that not all support attempts were necessarily successful. Cohen and Syme (1985) viewed multiple perspectives, definitions and outcomes before forming their broad definition of both social support and health: '*Social support* is defined as the resources provided by other persons. By viewing social support in terms of resources – potentially useful information or things – we allow for the possibility that support may have negative as well as positive effects on health and well-being' (Cohen and Syme 1985: 4 original emphasis). The effects are outcomes of behaviours and cognitions about those behaviours. If supportive communication can be of assistance to others, it follows that behaviours in support situations often have a supportive intention. Burleson and MacGeorge's definition accordingly describes supportive communication as 'verbal and nonverbal communication behaviour produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid' (2002: 374). This leads us to explore whether intentions are part of the essence of social support.

One of the best-known functions in interpersonal communication is uncertainty reduction (Berger and Calabrese 1975). Its influence can be seen in some of the early definitions of social support as well. Albrecht and Adelman's claimed that 'social support

refers to verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience' (1987: 19). This definition has been further modified to state that social support helps manage uncertainty rather than necessarily reduce it (Albrecht and Goldsmith 2003: 265). Behaviours that aim to reduce, manage or enhance something suggest an alteration of that something. According to Albrecht and Adelman's (1987) summary, people look for human contact in order to discover the meaning of their life events. Meanings that are attached to communicative circumstances become support if in the interaction those meanings reduce uncertainty both about the situation and the relationship. However, the support giver or the helper cannot dispel another person's uncertainty about something but rather, the support recipient is in control of that experience. In other words, the alleviation of uncertainty ultimately takes place via the receiver's appraisals of the experience (Jones and Burleson 1997). Similarly, a surgeon can remove a tumour but it is not the removal of the tumour that is viewed as supportive but rather what the patient makes of that experience.

In conclusion, social support has to have an element of *altering* a certain way of being about something. The helper may have an intention to alter another's experience but the experience cannot be altered without the efforts of the experiencer. The alteration thus requires the participation of more than one person and at least one person's intention to alter the experience. The description of definitions provides further evidence that the essence of social support requires an element of *otherness*. Gottlieb stated: 'in the coping process, it is the behavioural manifestations of support expressed by my close associates – its materialization in interpersonal transactions – that has the greatest significance for the course and outcomes of my ordeal' (1985: 361). The alteration of one's experience of something is thus augmented by something outside of oneself. To frame it differently, we propose that another person functions as someone who facilitates change in another's perception or experience of the current state of existence.

Constructivism has had a marked influence on the supportive communication research. Studies on individual differences in supportive communication skills and phenomenological approach share the same premise that intentions are important elements of phenomena. Intentions are always relational, since intentions are directed towards someone (Husserl 1931). According to constructivism, the intent of a supportive act and its outcome make it possible for the appropriateness or effectiveness of certain supportive messages to be evaluated. In supportive communication, support seekers may intentionally communicate their emotional state to another: 'I am so upset!' If the seeker expects to receive support from the interlocutor then when they respond: 'Oh, why?' the seeker/receiver may interpret the helper's response as caring. This is subjectively real for the seeker/receiver even though the helper's reply may have been an act of social compliance more than a goal-motivated comforting message. From the perspective of phenomenology, the seeker/receiver still experiences social support. The subjective experience, however, needs to be understood or inferred as interpersonal, involving two people, in order for it to be part of the essence of social support. That experience causes the interlocutors to feel, act, communicate and be in a certain way in a particular interaction.

The essence according to imaginative variation

We have now reduced the principal definitions of social support and applied imaginative variation to the process. The more recent support definitions have focused on the helper's intention to contribute to a person's need for something. Typically therefore, support provision is a response to a perceived lack of something that another person is experiencing. Let us use an example to clarify: Anna seeks support for a concern she has about her grandfather, who lives out of town and has fallen ill. Her friend, Allan, wants to help and he offers to take care of Anna's dog while she visits her grandfather. If we apply the concept of lack to a typical supportive communication situation we can say that

- Anna, the support seeker, turns to others because something is either lacking or has the potential to be lacking and thus could be ameliorated or altered by experiencing another's way of being, here Allan's assistance.
- Allan, the helper, provides his assistance because something is perceived to be lacking or is potentially lacking, which here is Anna's possibilities to both care for her grandfather and manage her responsibilities towards her dog.
- Anna, the recipient, may experience support because Allan is addressing her lack of something or the potential lack of something in order to prevent such lack.

Therefore the description of the essence has to include something that is the source of the support experience. This is best described with the concept of *void*.

The essence of social support is not the outcome of supportive interactions, i.e. the experience of acceptance, care, belonging or love. Rather, the essence of social support acknowledges the lack of such an experience. The essence, however, must also include an element of intent to transform the void into something that is considered 'better' or more preferred than the experience of a void. In both western and eastern philosophies a desirable state a state of well-being and mental and physical balance is to be content, whole and complete, or healthy. If we consider the experience of void as being something that is perceived to be subordinate to the experience of wholeness, then the essence of social support should capture the element of alteration from one to the other. Social support is thus the attempt to alter a void to achieve wholeness.

It is apparent that in order to distinguish the essence we need to locate the experience. The phenomenological 'special science' as Perttula (2005: 116) calls it, sees experience as a relationship between the conscious subject and his actions, and the target towards which that action is oriented. Seeking, giving, receiving and perceiving support are all experiences of social support and thus the essence should be found in all of the aforementioned experiences. In reviewing the concept of void according to participant roles in supportive interaction we may formulate the following descriptions: For the *seeker* social support is the experience of void which, it is hoped, another person's way of being will serve to alter. For the *provider* social support is the acknowledgement of the void experienced by another that the provider's way of being is intended to alter. For the *perceiver* social support is the experience of void that another person's way of being could serve to alter. For the *recipient* social support is the experience of void that another person's way of being serves to alter. Whatever part of the experience is shared (among those who share it), even if from different

positions, that is the part of the experience that is of the essence of the phenomenon.

Social support in friendships

The experience of social support in friendships is described from a set of interviews conducted by the first author with Finnish men. The interviews were qualitative and carried out with 25 men of different ages in the period of 2007–2008. The objective is to describe the men's experiences as they showed themselves to them. The primary goal of phenomenological reduction is to present the individual's experience as unaltered as possible in order to describe what is meaningful to him. Therefore, strict reduction, freeing oneself from an unreflective attitude and putting insignificancies aside took place during the process. In practice, the female researcher, familiar with supportive communication research for eight years and a member of the same culture as the interviewees, kept a research journal. She reflected on her experiences, beliefs and presuppositions about friendships, support and support in men's friendships, and actively sought to view the material from the position of 'nothingness'.

The men's descriptions of their experiences of social support are reduced from men's accounts in their own language, however here translated from Finnish to English. We avoided replacing men's descriptions with idioms from English language in order to capture the authentic experience. First we will present the experiences of two men, called here Pasi and Sampo, of social support in their lives, and then illustrate how two other men, called here Anssi and Seppo, describe the existence or emergence of social support in their friendships.

Pasi

Pasi is a 27-year-old man who says self-improvement is most important in life. His perspective on problems is that whatever happens needs to be taken as it comes and reacted to accordingly. Friends are important to Pasi but not indispensable, since everyone's life is ultimately his own to determine. However, being in contact with others develops a person spiritually through testing his own ideas about life and the world. Support from friends can provide new angles on issues. Yet, one cannot put oneself a 100 per cent 'into another person's situation' but through empathy one can 'find into' the state where the other person is. In problem situations, a helping friend brings his own perspectives to the conversation but in a nonjudgmental way. The helper is responsible for the support he gives and similarly, the support recipient is responsible for the actions he takes.

The benefits of talking about issues depend on the 'level' at which they are talked about. In other words, are they being talked about for real or is the talk more trivial. Pasi says that mundane and shallow topics can create artificially produced 'bad condition' and dwelling in on problems. Self-scrutiny is crucial: People often repeat the same mistakes in life because of lack of self-scrutiny. A solution adopted from 'outside of yourself' will not help to effectively move forward in life.

From Pasi's description we can interpret that the human experience of otherness and individuality are important in dealing with problems. Other people give something to reflect

on but an individual must know what is best for him in order to move forward from an undesired state of being. When seeking support from others it is beneficial to talk about the experience as authentically as possible in order to really alter the situation. Thus, addressing the authentic self and other is most advantageous in supportive communication.

Sampo

Sampo says he may be a restless soul. He is 37 years old and both satisfied and dissatisfied with his life. He is unhappy because he is still single but wants a family. Sampo says that he would become insane without friends. For him, good support depends on the issue at hand. Support is anything that is needed and what he has resources to provide. According to Sampo, support provision is addressing emotions because problems bring them out and they need to be dealt with. The helper's role is to listen and not become the recipient of support in the interaction. On another occasion the roles can be reversed.

Support is about 'being present'. Sometimes during difficult times one needs to be alone or in one's own thoughts, yet surrounded by others. The problem may have been considered enough, something else may be aspired to and therefore it may be supportive to do something in a group. According to Sampo, this may be the most valuable type of support, since it 'releases the problem from its roots'. Good support can even be of a 'motherly or fatherly type': Instructions or even orders can be good and Sampo has felt the benefits of such support. The most challenging task is when a friend needs to be 'shaken'. But this must be done if necessary. It should be done so that the other's selfhood is not crushed or that he does not become anxious about how he will get through the situation.

From Sampo's talk we can distinguish the following: Instructions and orders convey one's opinion about the friend's problem and what should be done about it. When helpers perceive a void in another's life experience they can realize their potential in helping the other to regain a balanced state. In Sampo's description we discern that the essence is the foundation for support manifestation – communication that addresses the friend's emotions or gives direction acknowledges his experience of void, an insufficient state of being.

If nothing ever disturbed a person's balanced state or sense of wholeness, helpers would not need to be concerned about augmenting the void by voicing their concerns or opinions. Sampo said he finds it challenging to know if he views the void or the experience of void similarly as his friend or if the friend is ready to face the void or the emotions that its acknowledgement might cause. Addressing a void can make it more visible or vivid, which in turn can call for more actions to alter it. According to Sampo, the helper needs to put his own self-concerns aside. Yet, the effort to alter a void and achieve wholeness challenges one's skills and resources and therefore Sampo may perceive not talking about the problem and just being with others as good support. For him, it is supportive that a person allows the one who is experiencing the void to respite from being actively reminded about the void that needs to be altered. As we saw earlier with Pasi, it is everyone's own duty in life, the purpose of our being in the world, to become more able to confront matters, accept them and deal with them. Emotions are the by-products of the experiences of void and the attempts to alter it on the path to achieving wholeness. Let us now look at the experiences of void and wholeness more closely.

The first example is from the 27-year-old Anssi, who described a support incident he had experienced a year back.

> Anssi: *One fun example of support [that I have been satisfied with] is when I broke up with my fiancée last spring. It was funny because it was such a comical situation. My ex almost immediately hooked up with this fellow who'd been around for a little while before we broke up. And then it was somehow so heart-warming when it really wasn't a big of a deal for me, I mean 'whatever works for her'. But my friend was very vocal about it like 'Oh my god! How can someone do that to someone else?' and then I heard that several men had offered to drive a van to take him across the national boarders. [Laughs]. Like 'Let's get that man and dump him in the snow!' And I was like, okay, it was partly a joke.*
>
> Interviewer: *Sure, sure.*
>
> Anssi: *But I felt warmth that they were willing. Not really a big deal for me, the break-up. But still, that they'd offer this type of help. It's a funny story. Of course we didn't do anything!*

In Anssi's case something that previously existed no longer exists – his relationship with his girlfriend who possibly left him for another man. The event could create an experience of void and something Anssi could seek support for. By expressing his astonishment, Anssi's friend may have intended to support him. Similarly, the friends' suggestions about teaching the other man a lesson may have been motivated by an assumption that Anssi was experiencing a void, e.g. emotional distress. The possible void in such a situation was enough for the helpers to suggest taking action to alter his experience. Anssi described a feeling of warmth as an outcome of his friends acknowledging that.

The warmth that Anssi felt was a positive feeling that resulted from experiencing others' willingness to participate in the alteration of his experience. It is immaterial whether Anssi actually experienced the void or just its potential. The feeling of warmth may have resulted from Anssi not experiencing a void but perceiving how he might have experienced it due to the break-up. The friends' contribution to alter the void could in itself enhance Anssi's sense of wholeness. Consequently, the sense of wholeness is a person's subjective experience. Before we heard Pasi suggest an individual's responsibility for actively working through issues. Such efforts may mean that the experience of void will ultimately be managed best when the alteration of the void is not expected from outside, but managed by the experiencer himself. Therefore, attempts at altering the void are *coping*, and with an element of otherness the alteration of a void becomes *social support*.

The second example further demonstrates how the contribution of another person has an impact only when the otherness is acknowledged. The 31-year-old Seppo elaborates on the experience of his relationship with a fairly new friend. They met through their partners and now the two men engage weekly in the same leisure activity. However, Seppo feels they are still not very close.

> Seppo: *I was thinking just now what it is that keeps me at arm's length. I somehow feel ashamed about my life situation, being unemployed and all. I don't have the courage to open up to him. Maybe it's jealousy too. We are from such different worlds: He has a job and a lot of money and I have no job and little money. Maybe I expect him to look down on me. I don't know if that's true but somehow.*
>
> Interviewer: *Has he ever talked to you about his problems or sought support from you for anything?*
>
> Seppo: *Well, as a matter of fact he has. He speaks rather openly about his present circumstances at work and that he's very anxious there, at work. [Seppo starts to laugh]. Yes, he speaks very openly about his frustration. And it's funny because I'm anxious about the fact that I don't have a job and he's anxious because he has a job that he doesn't like. Yes, he does speak openly about it! I haven't really responded to his talking in any other way than 'I understand'. But it's a good point that there's a lot of opportunities for conversation but they've all been a bit locked. Maybe those locks could be picked a little and the relationship could get better that way. […] It seems that we have our own problems that we're dealing with. Even though we've talked to each other we may not have been supporting each other enough. Yeah.*

According to Seppo, both men lack something in their lives, i.e. employment and job satisfaction, which may create an experience of void. The fact that we can discern that the two men are aware of the voids in each other's lives does not yet confirm that social support exists. Towards the end of Seppo's description he realizes that his friend may have been seeking support from him by openly disclosing his feelings of dissatisfaction with his job. Seppo becomes aware that the other, he for his friend and his friend for him, might serve to alter the voids. In other words, by viewing the potential of the friendship Seppo starts to see how allowing otherness to enter into the subjective experience and communicating that awareness to his friend could bring positive change. Seppo says that they have 'talked but not supported each other enough'. It is therefore possible that what has been lacking in the communication is the intention to facilitate the alteration of each other's experiences.

Summarizing the findings of the interviews we can say that the essence of social support indeed has the elements of intention and otherness. The phenomenological reduction further shows that the meaningful experiences of social support for men in their friendships comprise of both otherness and individuality, the experience of mutual trust, putting one's self-concerns aside for another, and communicating the authentic self.

Discussion

This study endeavoured to describe the essence of social support – what is universal to it and without which social support would not be the phenomenon that it is. In this attempt, the article first looked at seminal definitions of social support and supportive communication. Second, we described individuals' experiences of social support in the interpersonal relationship of friendship. It is from the synthesis of these findings that we

conclude what social support essentially is.

By phenomenological reduction we initially discerned that the essence of social support is the acknowledgement of the experience that something is lacking and the intention to alter that experience. Thus the essence has the elements of *void* and *intended alteration*. The experience of a void, the lack of something, may result from anything that an individual perceives to have challenged or potentially challenge one's way of being. However, if the essence of social support were solely to alter something then persuasion and social influence (e.g. Dillard and Marshall 2003) would also constitute social support. Interpersonal influence resembles social support in that it is symbolic in its efforts to preserve or change another person's behaviour, or to maintain or modify some aspects of the person like their emotions and cognitions (see Dillard et al. 2002). When we compare influence goals with, e.g. advice goals, we encounter a difference. Both can contain the goal of alteration, yet advice, the recommendations about what might be thought, said or done to manage a problem is considered social support (MacGeorge et al. 2008). The difference is in the person whose goal achievement is primary. For example, someone is experiencing a problem that they want to manage. Even when the helper's goal is to be supportive and help the other to manage the problem their goal is still subsidiary to the experiencer's goal, even though they aim at the same outcome. Whoever is experiencing the void ultimately determines when that void no longer exists. However, the alteration always needs to be contributed to by another entity in order to be considered social support.

The mere intention of altering something, the outcome of having something altered, or the alteration itself does not yet suffice to describe the essence of social support. The alteration has to include an element of *otherness*, the third component of the essence. It is the seeker's intent to have a void altered with the contribution of another, the helper's intent to alter another's experience of a void, the receiver's experience of the alteration of a void with the contribution of another, or the alteration of a void due to two people's intentions that is essential to social support. This confirms that social support is fundamentally an interpersonal phenomenon.

The essence of social support also consists of human beings' capacity for morality. Attempts to provide support sometimes fail and support may be communicated in an undesirable way. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is social support when the intention is to promote goodness and well-being. According to Rauhala (2009), ethical dispositions and decisions are realized mainly in relation to other people and circumstances in their lifeworlds. The essence of ethics for human beings is in their way of 'existing by being with others'. The common outcomes of supportive communication are feelings of being accepted and cared for by others. These characteristics are generally considered ethical and positive. Thus being with others ethically is being supportive of others.

As shown above, alteration without ethical intention and the element of otherness do not constitute the essence of social support. The description must also include an element at which the intention is targeted, which is the experience of void and its alteration to *achieve wholeness* – the fourth and the final element of the essence. Following the previous arguments, we describe the essence of social support as the awareness of a void in a person's life experience and the acknowledgement of another person's potential to alter the void from

outside the immediate experience. After the reduction of both the definitions and empirical material we propose that:

> *The essence of social support is the awareness of a real or potential void in a person's life experience, and of otherness that intends to alter that experience to achieve wholeness.*

It has been argued that social support is fundamentally a communication process: 'Conceiving of social support from a communication perspective casts it as a transactional, symbolic process of mutual influence occurring between two or more individuals that alters their affective, cognitive, or behavioural states' (Albrecht and Adelman 1987: 20). People exist for others in interpersonal relationships through past, present or future communication events. The essence of the phenomenon of social support is the foundation for its manifestations, of which communication and cognition are the most important.

Not all attempts at social support are helpful in altering the void and achieving wholeness. From a helper's perspective, unsuccessful attempts at social support are likely to result from failure to identify the void, or addressing the void in a manner that the recipient does not agree with, or the given support ignores the recipient's emotional experiences of the void. The recipient may not be ready to experience the void in its authentic form, i.e. not acknowledge the quality or extent of the void. As indicated, the opposite of void is wholeness. The provider and receiver of support may disagree as to what wholeness or a balanced state in one's life experience is and on how these may be achieved. Support is likely to be more successful when the idea of wholeness is shared and/or the people involved agree on the appropriate means to achieve it. Therefore, the experience of support, the alteration of void, is likely to be positive for those who perceive the void and the desired, altered state similarly.

The power of the essence lies in its simplicity and certainty; the essence is always present in the phenomenon and should thus be discernible in all previous and future research results, conceptualizations and definitions of social support. In our attempt, we did not seek to produce a new working definition as much as a core description to which other perspectives and research could be connected. Our aim was to contribute to the field of interpersonal communication and make connections between significant but somewhat scattered perspectives. A discussion on the fundamentals of social support enables us to talk about it as universal phenomenon, quintessentially humane in nature, with all the similarities and differences of its manifestations in various contexts.

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A Clear Mirror on Which to Reflect:

Beneficial Supportive Communication in Finnish Men's Friendships

Ira A. Virtanen and Pekka Isotalus

This study aimed to distinguish beneficial and non-beneficial support for men in same-sex friendships. The empirical material was gathered using thematic interviews with 25 Finnish men. Two supportive sequences and five beneficial support approaches were identified. These approaches were listening, compassion, reassurance, appraisal, and distraction. Men described the quality of beneficial support as subtle, authentic, and honest. The results showed that men favored implicit, responsive support over initiated verbal behaviors. The purpose of such support was to be supportive of the seeker's autonomy and to represent an emotionally solid friend who is unbiased but motivated to support. To determine beneficial support to a group of people, studies need to consider situational factors such as relationship and culture. The results are discussed in light of previous research on supportive communication.

Keywords: supportive communication; male helpers; friendship; quietude; listening; Finnishness

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A common interpersonal need is spending time with friends, sharing personal experiences, and laughing about them together. Ideally, friends understand each other and know appropriate or effective things to say or do when the other is feeling down or distraught. Such experiences are typical in close friendships because they are maintained through interaction, support, self-disclosure, entertainment, and conflict and affect management (Samter, 2003). These observations are not to say that support provision is always a manageable communicative task. Advice can be helpful, or it can be intrusive (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010), and straightforward suggestions can threaten another's face and autonomy (Goldsmith, 2004). Further, supportiveness is sometimes best achieved by being honest and other times by agreeing with the support seeker's point-of-view (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). Nevertheless, helpers need to choose from different communication strategies (direct and indirect, nonverbal and verbal) if they want to create beneficial outcomes for their friends (for a review, see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

Emotional support—the expression of care, concern, empathy, reassurance, and even love—has been found to be a fairly reliable strategy for alleviating another's distress (Burleson, 1994, 2003a). Numerous studies have established the specifics of comforting messages (Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005; Burleson, Samter et al., 2005; Jones & Burleson, 1997; Jones & Guerrero, 2001) and assessed the *perceived* appropriateness, effectiveness, helpfulness, and sensitivity of such messages (e.g., Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; Jones & Burleson, 1997). This perspective indicates that emotional support is very much a verbal art: What people *say* to each other—verbal person-centeredness—determines the helpfulness of comfort (see High & Dillard, 2012). If individuals provide highly person-centered comforting messages, their messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the distressed other's feelings and perspectives (Burleson, 2003b). Highly sophisticated support could generate better outcomes (Jones, 2004; Jones & Burleson, 2003), but the actual support behaviors that helpers use are not at all times consistent with the scholars' recommendations (Vangelisti, 2009). The reality is that supportive communication takes place in multiple contexts according to time, place, relationships, and culture, and it is thus a complex phenomenon. These contexts set different expectations for the role of talk.

One meaningful contextual element is gender. Even though the validity of portraying men and women as opposites has been widely

questioned (Burleson, Kunkel, Samter, & Werking, 1996; Canary & Hause, 1993; MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004), male friendships keep appearing—at least in popular literature—as distant, unsatisfying, and instrumental (see Wright, 2006). What we know about men's support provision is that men from the US may be hesitant to respond to another man's emotions (Jakupcak, Salters, Gratz, & Roemer, 2003) and may attempt to engage in problem solving more commonly than women (Burleson & Gilstrap, 2002).

On the other hand, Burleson, Holmstrom et al. (2005) found that young men and women from the US both prefer to receive sensitive, person-centered support rather than support that is not considerate of their emotions. Even though similarities outweigh differences in gender-based studies (MacGeorge et al., 2004) on support perception, not all message features are viewed similarly. Men have been found to rate less sensitive comforting messages as more appropriate than women do (Jones & Burleson, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999), and they like other men who provide such support more than women do (Burleson, Holmstrom et al., 2005, Experiment 1). Cognitive complexity and instrumental orientation have explained why men do not discriminate as strongly as women between support that is sophisticated and support that is not (e.g., Burleson et al., 2009), but this is not true in all conditions (Burleson, Holmstrom et al., 2005, Experiment 4). Global notions of supportive communication are thus yet to be distinguished (Burleson, 2003b; Burleson et al., 2009).

A recent investigation from gender-focused studies to ethnic and cultural comparisons has shed more light on the variance of support evaluations (Burleson, Liu, Liu, & Mortenson, 2006; Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Mortenson, 2002, 2006: Mortenson, Liu, Burleson, & Liu, 2006; Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997). These studies show that what is considered helpful emotional support between friends varies according to national and ethnic background (Samter, 2003; Mortenson, 2005). Such findings call for in-depth investigations of culture-specific supportive communication. Even though important and pioneering, the majority of studies on sophisticated supportive messages have focused on college students from the US and among these, the young Caucasian population. Therefore, research from the message-centered perspective has been limited because the studies employ either a scenario-based or trained confederate methodology to examine people's perceptions of message

qualities and outcomes when receiving support (High & Dillard, 2012), and the findings predominantly concern the US population (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003).

This study investigates the types of support that Finnish men find most beneficial to *provide* for their friends. In 2013, approximately 5.4 million people lived in Finland, of whom only 4.7% were born elsewhere, and for most of them (91%), Finnish is their first language (Official Statistics of Finland, 2013). Therefore, Finns can quite rightly be described as a highly homogenous population. Additionally, Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi (2012) list Finland as the second most gender equal nation in the world (in comparison, the US ranks 22nd). Finns are also highly educated and have a 99% literacy rate. The Finnish school system produces globally recognized learning results in reading, mathematics, and science, and thus ranks top three in the world after Shanghai (China) and South Korea (OECD, 2010). Yet, it is the Finnish communication style that has led to a specific stereotype: The Finnish way of speaking has been labeled particularly shy and non-expressive (Carbaugh, 2005), and such behavior is held accountable for the myth of a silent Finn.

Perhaps due to its peculiar flavor, Finnish speech culture has been of interest to a number of scholars (Carbaugh, 2005, 2009; Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985; Poutiainen, 2007; Sallinen-Kuparinen, 1986; Wilkins, 1999; Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). Studies agree that Finns value silence or quietude. According to Carbaugh, Berry, and Nurmikari-Berry (2006), the "natural way of being"—being silent with others—creates an important setting for Finnish social life where talk is needless, even intrusive. The discourse of quietness and being alone has specific meaning for Finns because it is linked to considerateness and strength of character (Carbaugh, 2009).

Berry, Carbaugh, and Nurmikari-Berry (2004) studied the implicit cultural meanings embedded in Finnish about quietude. They compared American and Finnish students' interpretations of social silence and found considerable differences. For Americans, talking is healthy social *doing*, and they perceive repeated advances towards silence as personally and socially unhealthy. Finns, on the other hand, believe that quietude and quietness are natural and comfortable ways of social *being*. Particularly in new or in sensitive situations, Finnish people choose to refrain from talking. Carbaugh et al. (2006) maintain that quietude is also an essential part of effective decision-making processes. It enhances the quality of later social actions because quietude offers means of respecting

others. It gives them the proper time to reflect in peace, contemplate creatively, concentrate deeply, or simply relax while being with others.

Therefore, the negative connotations of silence, which for Americans may mean not behaving appropriately and speaking in interpersonal communication situations, are not as relevant to Finns who share the cultural understanding of quietude. Being quiet while present with others is—as Carbaugh et al. (2006) define it—"being alone in a good way." Such contemplation is a cultural form of practice that shapes, for example, friendship interactions, and it is key to one's sense of well-being (adults) and proper development (children). Carbaugh et al. summarize that when Finns "are being undisturbed together and thinking, important messages are activated about the communicative event, the proper acts that compose it, the proper places for quietude and speaking, and the relation of the one to the other" (p. 14). Thus, Finns nonverbalize togetherness (Berry et al., 2004).

Very little research has looked at social support among Finnish men (see Virtanen, 2009; Virtanen & Isotalus, 2010). Therefore, in this study, we use in-depth qualitative interviews to examine Finnish men's support preferences. The aim of the study is not to define the effectiveness of different support approaches in terms of outcomes, but to describe carefully the support approaches that the men perceive as most beneficial in their friendships. The beneficial qualities of supportive communication are further defined by the purpose men have in communicating. Thus, the following research question is posed:

> RQ1: What kind of support do Finnish men perceive as beneficial for their same-sex friends?

Second, Finnish speech culture has reserved communicative characteristics; men in particular are perceived as taciturn and unwilling to engage in emotional talk (Virtanen, 2009). From this stance, Finnish men's emotional support for their male friends might be interpreted as limited. However, not all support approaches are verbal (Jones, 2011). For example, listening is an important part of the supportive communication process (Bodie & Jones, 2012), but the theoretical models to detect supportive listening are not yet developed (see Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008). Because little research exists regarding culture-specific social support, this study endeavors to define beneficial support from the perspective of Finnish male helpers. The second research question asks:

RQ2: Why are certain forms of support more beneficial than others for same-sex friends according to Finnish men?

Method

Participants and Interview Data

A request to participate in a research project was sent via email to the first author's friends, relatives, and ex-colleagues who were requested to forward the email to their own mailing lists. The Finnish-born male participants (N=25), all of whom were unknown to the researcher, contacted her through email and volunteered to participate in the study. The men's ages ranged from 21 to 67 ($M = 41$, $Mdn = 37$), and they all lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area in southern Finland during the time of the study. Some of the interviewees had recently moved to the capital city for work.

The participants represented a heterogeneous sample. Their occupations included carpenter, musician, social worker, CEO, IT-worker, journalist, fireman, student, researcher, prosecutor, technician, engineer, teacher, software designer, executive director, retiree, unemployed, actor, and customer servant. Eighteen of the participants were in a dating relationship, cohabiting, or married; seven were single or divorced. The participants were informed that the interviewer was interested in their experiences, perceptions, and thoughts regarding communication in men's friendships. The first author, a female researcher, conducted the thematic (semi-structured), one-on-one interviews in Finnish.

The interviews were made as informal as possible by letting the men choose the interview locations. The settings ended up being cafés, participants' homes, or quiet meeting rooms in offices. The interviews were based on themes chosen by the authors and covered a wide range of topics on both men's friendships and support provision (full interview design available from the first author). The themes were discussed in the order that was most natural to the interview interaction and included "social relationships and satisfaction in life," "characteristics of a good friend," "perceived challenges in everyday life," "troubles talk in friendships," "support seeking," "support provision," and "qualities of good support." The interviewer asked the participant several questions under each theme. For example, when discussing the qualities of good support, participants were asked, "What do you think are your strengths as a support provider?" The participants were encouraged to give examples

throughout the interview by prompts such as, "Do you recall a specific instance when that happened?"

The interviews were recorded and lasted from 25 to 81 minutes ($M = 40$). The material was transcribed verbatim in Finnish resulting in 337 single-spaced pages. Pauses, laughter, and other nonverbal actions such as strong stress on words and notes on prosodic irony were included in the transcripts.

Analysis

The first author, a native Finnish speaker, analyzed the interview data. The analysis was conducted in Finnish. After the analysis was completed, the first author, who has lived in New Zealand and the US collectively for over 3 years, worked with a professional English translator to translate the main results and the quotations illustrating them.

The analysis was conducted methodically. First, all transcribed interviews were downloaded as Word documents into the qualitative analysis software, ATLAS.ti, and approached through inductive content analysis. ATLAS.ti allows the researcher to create numerous manual codes for any size of a segment in the material. No parts of the analysis were computer-generated.

Second, the first author openly coded all speech turns under each theme that was discussed during the interview. A speech turn represents the participant's whole response to an interviewer's question. These responses were assigned a broad code that described the content of his answer. For example, when 31-year-old Tapio was asked what he thought was good support for a friend who has troubles on his mind, he replied: "If someone really is down, then you are ready to listen to what he has to say and then give advice if you can or like comment on it in general." His speech turn received a general category code of "beneficial support." Next, Tapio's particular speech turn was analyzed according to utterances carrying a singular meaning. In this case, the speech turn was divided into three meaning units, which were coded as "readiness to listen," "giving advice if one can," and "commenting in general." The code name was retained as close as possible to Tapio's own vocabulary: This procedure is called coding *in vivo*. The benefit of coding data on an utterance level is that it helps to avoid imputing one's motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues into the categorization of data (Silverman, 2006).

The first author analyzed each individual interview transcript according to the speech turns and their utterances. The data concerning support approaches received 111 *in vivo* codes. The meaning units most commonly depicted beneficial support as (a) something one aims to provide, (b) something one has found beneficial to provide, (c) something one enjoyed personally receiving, and (d) something that differed from unbeneficial or inappropriate support. The meaning units described as unbeneficial support (a) failed in quality, (b) were the wrong choice of behavior in response to the seeker's needs, or (c) the helper lacked motivation to support.

Third, the analysis continued with axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), which is linkage from one code to another within the whole dataset. ATLAS.ti software allows efficient storing, handling, and retrieval of codes, and codes within codes. The initial codes were reviewed and read for recurrence and relatedness to other codes. During the constant-comparative process, codes were combined until a new set of codes was achieved: The first author grouped the initial *in vivo* codes into 53 combined upper-level categories. For example, the category that was created from Tapio's original meaning unit designated as commenting in general was joined with similar meaning units from other participants' transcripts such as Kari's "giving various outlooks" and Niilo's "giving some opinions." The result was an upper-level category named "offering perspective." Categorizing the coded meaning units continued until the final five categories of support approaches were established. In this process, Tapio's initial commenting in general utterance found its place in the final result of "Appraisal."

The interview material was read through thoroughly before coding, after coding, and while writing the research report. When we reviewed the categorized material as a totality, we detected the sequential nature of the approaches to support that we were able to distinguish. The results are illustrated next with direct quotations translated from Finnish to English with men's pseudonyms and ages in parentheses.

Results

RQ1 aimed to distinguish beneficial support in Finnish men's friendships, and RQ2 to determine why support was considered as such. The analysis focused on two sets of factors: (a) communication and its quality and (b) the purpose of such communication. Those who receive support

recognize and hold others accountable for behavioral qualities (Goldsmith, 2004), and the men's self-reports reflect this awareness. We apply Goldsmith's (2004) use of the term "purpose" in enacted support as something located in the social practice rather than generated by a person's cognitive or motivational state. When we view the results from the perspective of what the particular support approach does or aims to do, we distinguish beneficial support approaches for Finnish men. The beneficial approaches that the men said they used when supporting a friend were *listening*, *compassion*, *reassurance*, *appraisal*, and *distraction*. These approaches were used in two different supportive sequences that could be distinguished from one another according to the contribution that the men tried to make to the friend's coping efforts.

Sequence 1: Enhancing a Friend's Coping by Acknowledging Uniqueness

Listening. Listening was the most commonly mentioned beneficial support approach (24 of the 25 men), and the initial stage of Supportive Sequence 1. Listening was necessary to accurately detect a friend's needs. Additionally, participants chose listening over verbal engagement because they considered the possible consequences of enacted support. For example, making a joke or changing the tone of the conversation would in most cases be considered inappropriate and insensitive because it would not show understanding for the friend's needs to disclose a problem or emotional hurt.

The data indicated that listening meant physical and emotional presence: in a word, *attentiveness*. Finnish men communicate attentive listening through quietude. The participants would know how and when to be quiet by inferring the emotional state and needs of the friend from his verbal and nonverbal communication. Topi explains:

> Extract (1): It may be difficult for some to even express exactly what it is they need. But that's actually where the precise job of listening lies: reading the facial expressions, gestures, that you can use them to figure out. (Topi, 67)

One important quality concerning listening was being sincere about attentiveness. In other words, the men referred to *really listening*, not only pretending to do so.

> Extract (2): Listening is the starting point. That you really listen. And you particularly avoid trying to be witty or something. You listen specifically, and you try to understand. (Santeri, 31)

The purpose of listening was to communicate respect towards the support seeker's desire to share and open up.

> Extract (3): In my opinion, the first and main point is that you know how to be quiet enough, and you listen to what the other person has to say if he has something to open up about. (Kari, 39)

Refraining from talking was used to convey interactional space in which the support seeker could elaborate on his problem. The participants further depicted cases where one had become overconfident in his ability to support the other and turned the focus on himself during the interaction. This occurrence could happen if one was too engaged in talking.

> Extract (4): I can come up with smart ideas. Sometimes too much so. When I should be listening and just *being*, I still try to tell him something smart. . . . I should really take a role of a listener rather than an adviser. (Kalle, 26)

Compassion. The choice of further support was made on the basis of having listened. The subsequent aspect of the beneficial support approach was to show the friend compassion. The prerequisite for compassion was that the friend wanted to talk about his distress. The participants said that providing comfort, sympathy, empathy, and expressions of being there for the other would be beneficial.

The purpose of communicating compassion was to acknowledge the friend's challenging circumstances and his emotional experience. Yet, compassion was often communicated with few words. Visa explains:

> Extract (5): You don't necessarily always need words either. The fact that you're present, and you hear him, and you care about the other. It carries through a long way, I think, in many instances. That you don't have to verbally slice it or analyze it to pieces, but just say, "That's pretty bad; you do have a lot to work on there." That you're present. (Visa, 49)

The qualities of beneficial compassion were authenticity and subtlety. Authentic compassion recognizes the uniqueness of the friend's experience.

> Extract (6): Positive listening is listening with compassion. You avoid trying to solve your friend's problems because you cannot. But you listen compassionately so that you ease his elaboration. (Einari, 63)

It seemed particularly important for the men to stay calm and communicate compassion in an emotionally neutral way. As Kari notes below, not knowing what to say may be more authentic and thus more appreciated by the support-seeking friend:

> Extract (7): You don't have to force yourself to come up with things to say just for the sake of saying something, but like if something comes to mind, then you say it, and if nothing comes to mind, then you don't say terribly much. (Kari, 39)

Compassion could be deemed inauthentic if the helper used recaps from previous support interactions. Finnish men indicated that a helper who uses clichés might want an easy way out of the support situation. Such a helper could attempt to define the other's feelings, talk more than the seeker, or show more overt emotionality than the other.

> Extract (8): When you notice that you've been good at something in the past, then you fall into the trap of thinking, "Maybe I am good at that." And that can turn into something like, "I've noticed that this does the job, and this has worked before too. They've also liked this, so I'll try to be like that again." That's when you start to pretend to be a listener instead of being one. (Kari, 39)

It is noteworthy that inauthentic and inattentive support often stems from more, not fewer words.

The other important quality was subtlety. In addition to being less verbose, Finnish men said that compassion should not be *watery* or *soppy*, or a situation where the helper starts *to weep*.

> Extract (9): [Support] should show compassion but without being soppy. I mean, it should really matter. If something has happened to another person, you show him that you care and that you are here now. (Kevin, 21)

Compassion can be distinguished from listening behaviorally. Listening is predominantly communication of intentional quietude, such as being there *with* the other while refraining from talking. Compassion, on the other hand, is either direct or indirect verbal acknowledgment of

another's challenging circumstances and personal experience. Finnish men see compassion as communication of being there *for* the friend.

Reassurance. Reassurance exhibits a move toward a more verbal response to the friend's support needs. Participants described reassurance as beneficial support because it provides the recipient a positive framework for viewing himself, such as giving affirmations. The purpose of reassurance was to assist the friend in moving forward in life and away from the unaccommodating emotions that the problematic situation caused.

Optimally, the helper himself communicates emotional strength through integrity. Honesty and authenticity were important qualities when Finnish men described beneficial support approaches, particularly reassurance. They talked about the need to be honest using forms of the Finnish word *rehellinen*. *Rehellinen* applied to the helper's personal characteristics and to his communication. This is how Sami described the important qualities of support provision:

> Extract (10): *Rehellisyys* [honesty]. That you are really able to be authentically present in the situation and to listen to the other. Just being there for him. Because one so easily tries to give answers to something that won't lead to anything. (Sami, 37)

Rehellinen has a variety of meanings and can be translated as *sincere*, *honest*, *authentic*, and *genuine*. Finnish men emphasized the need to be honest and not say things that were untrue or unrealistic. Great care was taken not to sound *fake*: One should not say things just for the sake of saying something or use clichés because such support would be considered insignificant and unbeneficial.

> Extract (11): If you yourself don't have any idea about what you are going on about—just as long as you say something so that you'll look smart—then that is not fair in my opinion. It should be an honest conversation. (Pasi, 27)

Participants perceived skillful but habitual supportive communication as fake because it did not acknowledge the uniqueness of the individual and his circumstances. Fake support would sound rehearsed (see also Extract 8). Honest support was described as being ad hoc.

For Finnish men, listening attentively is being emotionally present in an authentic manner. Sincerity in compassion is truly meaning what

one says. Similarly, genuine reassurance means that the helper does not ameliorate things for his own comfort. All the above qualities were characterized as *rehellinen*.

Appraisal. The most verbal of the beneficial support approaches involved giving appraisals. Finnish men described appraisals as neutral opinions rather than solutions, which they tried to avoid giving. The participants said that beneficial support did not suggest that the friend should act the way the helper says. Therefore, the men viewed advice as inappropriate. Advice—much like excessive talking—could incorporate an idea of knowing better, having higher status, or trying to be smarter about another's problem (see also Extracts 4 and 11). Santeri explains:

> Extract (12): You don't necessarily need, and you shouldn't give any answers, but it's more about mirroring. That the other person gives his own thoughts on how it all sounds. (Santeri, 31)

The purpose of appraisals was to contribute to another's coping efforts but, again, preferably implicitly rather than explicitly. Finnish men indicated that it was better for the friend if the helper distanced himself from the friend's emotional experience. This strategy would allow the helper to stay objective and validate the friend's coping efforts.

For a few participants, appraisal meant speaking matter-of-factly: The purpose was for both parties to make sense of *a* situation, not *the* situation. The difference is that the helper does not take part in discussing the specific details of the friend's problem but talks about similar cases he knows of. This distinction allows both men to protect their dignity because impersonalizing the problem puts the interlocutors on the same level. In other words, both men are challenged by the problem in the abstract and can work on it together. However, one should avoid making direct references or links to the actual situation because "no one can know exactly how the other person feels." Pasi adds:

> Extract (13): For example, with a certain problem you cannot even give detailed instructions on how to operate. It's the kind of support that "if you want to talk about it I can, and I can then give you my opinion on it." Exactly like conversation and the type of support that you can bring your own point-of-views to the table but without heat. . . . Especially if the person is fragile, he may believe you if you go and suggest something. (Pasi, 27)

Calm and neutral approaches were preferred over emotional and heated responses. One of the main reasons the participants believed that their friends sought support was to test or reflect upon their ideas for solutions. Hence, helpers find it important to be unbiased and calm when giving appraisals and therefore take great care in choosing their words.

Sequence 2: Enhancing A Friend's Sense of Autonomy

Listening. Listening was the initial support approach in the second supportive sequence as well. The decision on how to provide further supportive communication was made based on an assessment of the friend's emotional state. The men claimed that sometimes it was better not to talk about the problem that was on one's mind. At times a friend wanted to allow the other to know that something has happened, but he did not want to discuss the issue further. If the helper perceives that the friend is disinclined to elaborate on his problem, then it is the obligation of a good friend to take his mind off of it. This observation makes topic avoidance intentionally supportive behavior.

Distraction. According to the participants, a beneficial distraction is appropriate when it suggests an outing or playing sports together. The purpose of distraction was to promote the friend's coping by providing him with an emotional break. The men saw it beneficial for the friend to forget about the distress for a moment. Finnish men believe that the helpfulness of distraction lies in the consideration displayed towards the friend's emotional exposure.

> Extract (15): Support isn't necessarily getting close to the other and all dramatic. As a matter of fact, in some cases you shouldn't even. . . . I mean, when you're down, your friend gets you to forget about it, or gives you actual support. But it doesn't have to be other than compassion. (Kevin, 21)

Unlike the more verbal support approaches, such as reassurance and appraisal, distraction facilitates coping by focusing on activities through which the friend could be reminded of other things in his life. Taking a break from contemplation could enforce a positive frame of mind.

> Extract (16): Being there with the other is really important. If you're having a hard time, then you need to be alone or alone in quietude with

Table 1

Support Approaches, Purposes, and Qualities that Distinguish Beneficial and Unbeneficial Support

Approach	Purpose	Beneficial	Unbeneficial
Listening	Facilitate contemplation	Silent, attentive	Verbose, inattentive
Compassion	Validate emotion/ experience	Subtle, authentic	Overemotional, inauthentic
Reassurance	Restore confidence	Genuine	Disingenuous, overly concerned, clichéd
Appraisal	Provide perspective	Neutral	Judgmental, imposing
Distraction	Relief from distress	Appropriate/ Efficient	–

> others. You get to do things in a group, and you don't necessarily have to think about the particular thing. "I've been contemplating on this by myself enough; now I want something else." Such support lifts the matter off its roots and is, in fact, the most valuable type of support. (Sampo, 37)

Distraction implicitly communicates understanding and acceptance because it complies with the friend's preference of not disclosing the problem details.

Table 1 summarizes Finnish men's preferred support approaches, behaviors, their preferred qualities, and purposes. The purposes of the distinguished approaches were to facilitate the friend's contemplation and revelations, validate his emotions and experience, provide relief from distress, restore his confidence, and offer perspective on the problem.

Discussion

This study investigated support that Finnish men find beneficial to provide for their friends. Men have been found to differ in some degree from women in their evaluations and approaches to supportive communication (Burleson et al., 2009; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003). These differences may result from men's greater adherence to gender normativity and lower level of social perception skills (Burleson, Holmstrom et al., 2005). However, research so far on men's supportive communication has primarily concerned men from the US. We know

that members of different ethnic groups and nationalities vary in their judgments on helpful supportive messages (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Samter et al., 1997), but no research has previously looked at the support advances of Finnish men. This issue was approached through qualitative thematic interviews.

Five significant support approaches in Finnish men's friendships were distinguished: listening, compassion, reassurance, appraisal, and distraction. The men's decision about which approach to use depends on the friend's desire to elaborate on his experience. When a friend discloses a problem about which he is not yet ready to elaborate, a good friend attempts to take his mind off the problem. The beneficial support approaches in this scenario are to listen attentively and provide efficient distraction.

When a friend prefers to talk about his problem, supportive communication aims to recognize the unique qualities of the friend, his circumstances, and the overall experience. The beneficial approaches are thus listening attentively, providing subtle compassion, genuine reassurance, and neutral appraisals. The significant, common qualities of these approaches are authenticity, subtlety, and honesty. The benefits lie in being supportive of a friend's autonomy.

Autonomy support seems to motivate most of the men's accounts for beneficial support. It manifests in sensitive responses to the recipient's needs. Following the analogy of Santeri (Extract 12), the function of Finnish men's support provision is to be a mirror for the support seeker. A good mirror is available for friends to reflect on their feelings and actions but is neutrally responsive. The results show that support in Finnish men's friendships needs to communicate emotional strength and balance. Letting emotions gain ascendancy could impair the helper's ability to perceive emotional cues and problem characteristics clearly. The requirements for beneficial supportive communication are at the same time to be unimposing and thoughtful—but also truthful—by providing support that is transparent in motives and straightforward in message content (see also Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997).

Burleson, Holmstrom et al.'s (2005, Experiment 4) study on normative motivation in support provision suggested that men in the US may use lower quality emotional support because, to some extent, men want to maintain a masculine role identity when interacting with other men. At the same time, men produce highly sophisticated comforting messages to both men and women when their goal motivation is high.

Gender normativity did not play a large role in Finnish men's own accounts of beneficial support. Rather, the male helpers thought about their personal self-efficacy and the overall extent to which a person can even assist another in coping. The men found it important to recognize that emotions that a problem causes are *unique* to the individual. Therefore, if a helper conveys the idea that he knows exactly how the other person is feeling, it could be seen as undermining the uniqueness of another person and his experience.

Identity and relationship management are important in support provision (Goldsmith, 2004), and such conduct is usually a result of complex cognitive planning (Meyer, 1997). Trying to communicate multiple interaction goals at the same time is likely to increase the verbal content of supportive messages, which would be in contradiction to subtlety and autonomy support. Carbaugh (2005) states that Finns try to avoid saying things that are obvious. Sometimes this tendency requires considerable thought, perhaps in the form of quietude, prior to speaking. When met, these conditions certainly constrain the production of talk, making it something that is both considerate and thoughtful. Such communication behavior can lay cultural grounds for rather effective forms of conversation. Therefore, what appears to be simple, novel, and subtle still requires plenty of consideration and active cognitive work.

On the whole, Finnish men aim at supporting a friend's ability to cope with distress by not *performing* the role of good helper but rather by *authentically being for* the friend. Authenticity also means being honest about one's ability to support another. Because Finnish men seem to perceive the possibility of understanding emotional experiences of another person as unlikely, they place great value on support *motivation*. The communication of motivation to comfort another is a standpoint that is used to assess the benefit of the chosen support approach.

This observation suggests the prominent finding of the study: Men's ideas of beneficial support for a friend are fairly sophisticated. Consideration for another's autonomy and pursuit of communicating motivation to help requires considerable planning. To evince equally complex strategies for communication, a person has had to be socially engaged and an active participant or perceiver in supportive interactions. Accurate perceptions about a person's emotional support needs require active listening. This, then, requires that we distinguish silence from quietude. Silence can be perceived as negative in interpersonal encounters (Berry

et al., 2004) if it means "refusal to communicate." Quietude, on the other hand, appears to be "communication without speaking."

Quietude and implicitness are particularly meaningful for Finnish men and are intended to allow them to approach rather than avoid support situations. Men have previously been shown to approve avoidance behaviors in helping situations (for review, see Goldsmith & Dun, 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1998), which is generally thought of as unhelpful (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Yet, withholding one's own judgments and attending fully to a person's situation on his or her own terms is essential to active listening (Rogers, 1955). Genuine listening is being affectively, motivationally, and cognitively present, which is more than using appropriate behavioral cues (Jones, 2011). We found several components of cognitive, affective and behavioral processes that are inherent to listening (Halone, Cunconan, Coakley, & Wolvin, 1998): Finnish men's purpose was to communicate understanding, motivation, message attendance, and autonomy support by responding with nonverbal and subtle verbal feedback. Our findings are also warranted by the recent developments of supportive listening theory. Jones (2011) describes nonverbal involvement as an important means to convey relational information, which is "particularly important during the emotional support process because it provides information for the support seeker that the supporter is willing and motivated to comfort" (p. 88).

The results on Finnish helpers' preferences for subtle support behaviors rather than verbal engagement differ from the research on highly person-centered support. Highly person-centered messages explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings, help the other to articulate those feelings, elaborate on reasons why those feelings might be experienced, and assist the other in seeing how those feelings fit in a broader context (Burleson, 1994). As both men and women, and individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, have been shown to evaluate such support as most useful (see Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; MacGeorge et al., 2004; Samter et al., 1997), what accounts for the findings of this study? First, the variation in our findings can be explained by the fact that our study used self-reports and did not distinguish between researcher-generated options for more and less useful, helpful, effective, or sensitive support. Our goal was to reveal the general qualities of support *provision* and its purpose. Self-reports provided an understanding of what participants typically do or say they do. Individuals use interaction goals to

judge the appropriateness and suitability of their support behaviors (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). Such a focus uncovers characteristics and qualities of behaviors that are relevant to a certain group of people (see also Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997) in unique relationships.

Second, social skills-based approaches may, on occasion, be unsuccessful in capturing the potential of indirectness and thus overlook how individual behaviors (skilled or not) must be coordinated with each other in the context of an ongoing relationship (Röhrle & Sommer, 1994). The men in our study expected their friends to want to maintain control over the issues they were dealing with. Even though words are helpful when apt, saying too much or the wrong thing may have more dramatic consequences than saying very little or nothing at all. Therefore, the more elaborate a comforting message is, the more it might threaten a friend's autonomy. High and Dillard (2012) found in their meta-analysis that messages that are considered high in verbal person-centeredness contain an average of 83 words, whereas low level messages have an average of 35 words. Finnish men intend to provide sensitive emotional support, but their approaches are not highly verbose.

In fact, our findings are very similar to Burleson's (1994) classification of messages that show a moderate degree of person-centeredness. Such communication provides an implicit recognition of the other's feelings by distracting the other's attention from the troubling situation, offering expressions of sympathy, or presenting non-feeling-centered explanations of the situation intended to reduce the receiver's distress. Previous research has shown that men evaluate messages that are low in person-centeredness as somewhat more helpful than women do (e.g., MacGeorge et al., 2004, Study 3). Finnish men use verbal reserve to acknowledge their friend's uniqueness while sustaining his autonomy and to communicate calmness to depict themselves as reliable sources of support. Together these findings show that supportive communication for Finnish men is *other-centered*: It is more beneficial to put oneself into the friend's position as a support receiver than to identify with him as a person experiencing the distress.

Third, interactional contexts have a strong influence on the appropriateness of chosen comforting strategies (see also Bodie & Burleson, 2008). Culture is one of these meaningful contexts. Carbaugh (2009) notes that several situations in interpersonal life in Finland conform to being appropriately reserved. The interactional objective is to maintain quietude while being attentive to others. Therefore, one defining feature

of Finnishness is knowing both what is being "said" without words and the significance of those unspokens. For Finns, silence often contains the most important cues for the meaning of the message, and therefore, much can be said by keeping quiet (Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985). In light of these arguments, it is plausible that listening and being there with and for the friend make cultural sense for Finnish men. The results of this study thus concur with the previous findings on quietude in Finnish discourse. However, indirect support has the potential to be unsatisfactory or go unnoticed (Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998). It should be noted that implicit support was important in the initial stages of support provision. As supportive interaction evolves, support recipients may interpret quietude in more negative terms.

Limitations and Future Implications

The primary limitations of the study concern the lack of comparative data and the data-gathering method. We found evidence for cultural influence on Finnish men's support approaches. Similar interview data with Finnish women would allow us to expand on the results. It is important to remember, however, that the Finnish society is strongly gender equal (OECD, 2010), and we would expect that gender differences may not be as prominent as the similarities. Additionally, the research design did not address any specific problem situations; thus, the extent of imagined distress to which support responses were anticipated might have varied among the participants. Even though the interviews examined the quality of support behaviors, they provided limited opportunity for describing the actual verbal messages or methods of nonverbal involvement.

Some problem situations leave those who experience them with no immediate options for action. In such instances, *not* disguising one's sense of helplessness as a support provider may well be comforting because it validates the support receiver's similar experience. Consequently, nonverbal communication and supportive listening deserve greater attention within the supportive communication research (see Bodie et al., 2008; Bodie & Jones, 2012; Jones, 2011). Words can be just words, whereas attentiveness and sincerity may communicate more reliably one's motivation to comfort (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). The ways in which helpers convey their motivation to support and how receivers perceive and interpret such communication is an important

direction for future studies (see Bodie, 2011; Burleson, 2009, 2010; Burleson et al., 2009).

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"Offer No Readymade Solutions": Men's support provision in specific episodes with an upset friend☆

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ABSTRACT

This study describes Finnish men's support provision for same-sex friends. Two main problem scenarios—break-up and sudden unemployment—were used, which were moderated by alcohol abuse. These data consist of 25 episode interviews and were analyzed with qualitative and quantitative methods. Results showed that men provide support by giving *perspective*, *suggestion*, *reassurance*, and support *availability*. The amount of solace for a friend was significantly scarcer in alcohol-related problems. The study found that indirect support aims to motivate self-realization and thus, result in more permanent and positive change. Such interactions can also lead men to give "cold comfort."

Human life is filled with diverse interpersonal relationships with colleagues, family members, romantic partners, neighbors, and friends. At their best, relationships bring joy, comfort, and support for men and women. Emotional support—the effort to assist another in coping with a perceived upset (Burleson, 2003a)—is especially important in close relationships because it provides reassurance, validation, and acceptance to a person (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Common interpersonal goals in friendships help individuals manage emotional distress, dissolve conflicts in manners that preserve relationships, and make friends feel good about themselves (Samter, 2003). In face of hardship, supportive communication is particularly important from trusted friends. However, a friend's motivation to help may vary according to perceptions of problem severity and who is to blame for trouble. Unmotivated or unskillful support may lead support receivers to reject providers or intensify uncertainty about the situation (see Burleson, Samter, et al., 2005). Consequently, successful and unsuccessful supportive communication can have substantial long-term impact on relationships (Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998).

Social support, when appropriate, has important effects on individuals' psychological well-being (for review, see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002) and physical health (for review, see Reblin & Uchino, 2008). According to MacGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011), communication is the key mechanism through which social support is experienced. Supportive communication is produced, perceived, processed and received commonly in interpersonal encounters. The communication perspective thus argues that positive effects of support take place through communicatively induced reappraisals of one's stressful situation and affect state (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). But do men provide such support for their same-sex friends? The popular beliefs contest that men are less willing and less able to talk about their upsets than women, and they provide solutions rather than solace to those with hurt feelings. Some findings concur that female spouses often provide the most emotional support for men (Ojala & Kontula, 2002; Paajanen, 2003). A study by Burleson, Holmstrom, and Gilstrap (2005, Experiment 2) showed that men were significantly less likely to pursue the goal of solace when providing support for a male target than for a female target. Similarly, when the support targets were viewed as highly responsible for their problems, men produced less sensitive messages to other men than to women (Experiment 4).

This qualitative inquiry investigates support provisions of differently aged Finnish men to their distressed same-sex friend. We further scrutinize support attempts for two different types of problems—a friend's relationship and work problems—and how the

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friend's accountability for these situations may or may not influence support he is given. Drinking works as a moderator of the friend's responsibility and controllability for problems.

1. Gender and culture in supportive communication

Most studies today agree that gender differences in evaluation of effective support messages are small (Goldsmith & Dun, 1997; Samter, 2002), yet existent (see review by Burleson & Kunkel, 2006). For example, men evaluate messages that explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize another's perspective and feelings—i.e., high person-centered messages—somewhat less favorably than women and do not judge low-person-centered messages as critically (e.g., MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004, Study 3). Recent development in supportive communication research has focused on detecting and explaining gender differences in message reception. Burleson et al. (2009) found clear and consistent evidence that cognitive complexity and expressive orientation explain gender difference in comforting message discrimination and in elaboration of support situations. Their results indicate that men would be less able and less motivated than women to process supportive messages. Researchers prompt further investigation on ability and motivation to also *produce* messages across various support situations, not just everyday upsets or bereavement experiences.

Furthermore, it is likely that cultures differ with respect to value their members attach to providing emotional support (Mortenson, 2002). Intercultural studies on sensitive emotional support do in fact report differences in support goals and message strategies; for example, between Chinese and Euro-Americans (Mortenson, Liu, Burleson, & Liu, 2006). It is particularly noteworthy that ethnicity has been found as a stronger predictor of variability in emotional support evaluations than gender (Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997). When it comes to support provision, results have predominantly been gained from comparative studies between genders and mainly on different ethnic groups of US college students (Burleson, 2003b). Even though further research has been encouraged to detect the quality of these differences, very little investigation to date has described them in detail.

This study focuses on differently aged Finnish men and their support provision for friends in various problem-situations. Finns are a highly homogenous: Among the 5.4 million citizens, only 4.7% are born elsewhere (Official Statistics of Finland, 2013). Finns are listener-centered people who appreciate matter-of-fact talk, honesty and autonomy in their interpersonal relationships (Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). Carbaugh (2009) says Finns sometimes differentiate themselves from US "talking culture." For them, careful weighing up of words and speaking truthfully, briefly and to the point is valued. These communication values may also influence characteristics of supportive messages.

2. Support recipient's responsibility for a problem

Helpers adapt messages according to situational appraisals (see also Goldsmith, 2004). They pay attention to information about the seeker's responsibility for problems and this knowledge has considerable impact on supportive intentions and behaviors (Jones & Burleson, 1997; MacGeorge, 2001; MacGeorge, Gillihan, Samter, & Clark, 2003; Weiner, 1995). Therefore, in respect to support for problems in friends' lives, effective messages are produced not only because of helpers' skills and knowledge but also the *motivation* they have to exercise these abilities (Burleson, Holmstrom, et al., 2005). In other words, friends do not always approach problems or emotions of distressed others with comforting efforts and assistance (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Excessive drinking may be one such problem.

Across cultures, men tend to drink more heavily than women and more frequently report various alcohol-related experiences (Mäkelä & Mustonen, 2000). In Finland the level of drinking and problems connected to it are higher compared to other Western European countries (Knibbe, Derickx, Kuntsche, Grittner, & Bloomfield, 2006). Consequently, substance use impacts not only lives of those who drink but also people around them (e.g., Caldeira & Woodin, 2012). Research on support providers of alcohol abusers has largely focused on organized peer groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA; for review, see Kaskutas, 2009) and social/health care systems (e.g., Thevos, Thomas, & Randall, 2001). However, close people are the most emotionally invested and thus likely to suffer from and attempt to change alcohol abusers' behaviors.

Hirschovits-Gerz et al. (2011) explored Finns' relationships with and views on alcohol addiction and recovery. Finns rank alcohol as the biggest societal problem in Finland. Yet in comparison to Swedes, Russians and Canadians, Finnish people have a significantly higher confidence in the chances of self-change and in individuals' capacities to solve drinking problems without organized help. Finnish men in particular emphasize individual accountability and the capacity to cope. This belief reflects traditional perceptions of Finns as tough and self-sufficient people needing no outside assistance. People are responsible for their own drinking and it is not anyone else's place to intervene (Raitasalo, 2008) unless another's behavior has become clearly disturbing (Piirainen, 1993).

3. Research design

We selected relationship termination as the personal problem and sudden unemployment as the professional problem for this study. The chosen research scenarios have commonly been used in social support research (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Cutrona & Russell, 1990) but never examined with Finnish men. Burrell (2002) suggests that men may perceive divorce as failure, disconfirmation of self-worth and hence, may shut down communicatively when faced with such distress. Even though men may prefer not to talk about a break-up, it does not mean they do not wish to receive support from others. Similarly, various components of social support may need to be used in addressing uncertainties that a stress-like unemployment may cause (e.g. Cutrona & Russell, 1990).

In sum, previous research has shown that perceived problem controllability sometimes affects support provided. However, poor handling of controllable events may increase blame assigned to support seekers. Perceived responsibility for problems does impact more consistently on support approaches helpers take. Because friendships entail sustenance and management of conflicting interpretations in manners that preserve relationships (Samter, 2003), helpers may have to choose words carefully. Because drinking plays a big role in Finnish social life (Mäkelä & Mustonen, 2000), it was chosen as a moderator of controllability of the problem and as a factor increasing a friend's responsibility.

The study has four episodes (see Appendix): *Lay-off episode* (Lo), which marks the friend's professional problem, being laid off from work. *Break-up episode* (Bu) illustrates a personal problem, in this case being dumped for another person. Both personal and professional episodes are modified with alcohol: *Firing-alcohol* (FA) and *Separation-alcohol* (SA) episodes depict situations where loss of job and relationship are caused by excessive drinking. Alcohol-episodes have higher perceived target responsibility and controllability to non-alcohol episodes. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1a:	What type of support do Finnish men provide for their friends in a personal problem and a professional problem and why?
RQ1b:	Does support differ, and if so, how?
RQ2a:	What type of support do Finnish men provide for friends in a personal problem and a professional problem with alcohol and why?
RQ2b:	Does support differ, and if so, how?
RQ3:	How does support differ in alcohol and non-alcohol personal problems and in alcohol and non-alcohol professional problems?
RQ4:	How does support provided in alcohol-related problems differ from support provided in non-alcohol problems?

3.1. Participants and method

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

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

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

3.2. Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

4. Results

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

> *There's work in this country for those who are willing to do it.* (Sami, 37)

Table 1
Occurrence of support behaviors in each of the four episodes in percentages (*f*).

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

Solutions and reassurances did not occur as frequently in any other episode (see Table 2).

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

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

RQ2a sought to describe types of support men give for friends in personal and professional problems with alcohol, and why. Solace was very infrequent in both being fired—the FA-episode (7.7%)—and in being separated with one's partner—the SA-episode (12.7%); in fact, only seven men out of 25 used comforting. When it did occur, solace behaviors mostly took the form of indicating support availability.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Behavior	Lay-off	Firing alcohol	Break-up	Separation alcohol
Solve				
Perspective	15.8 (12)	15.7 (11)	52.9 (27)	30.2 (16)
Suggestion	18.4 (14)	34.3 (24)	15.7 (8)	18.9 (10)
Solution	36.8 (28)	8.6 (6)	11.8 (6)	7.5 (4)
Cause	11.8 (9)	17.1 (12)	7.8 (4)	20.8 (11)
Questions	9.2 (7)	20.0 (14)	7.8 (4)	20.8 (11)
Tangible	7.9 (6)	4.3 (3)	3.9 (2)	1.9 (1)
Total solve	100 (76)	100 (70)	100 (51)	100 (53)
Solace				
Reassurance	62.7 (32)	25.0 (2)	25.6 (11)	20.0 (2)
Available	11.8 (6)	62.5 (5)	41.9 (18)	50.0 (5)
Empathy	15.7 (8)	0	27.9 (12)	10.0 (1)
Lift mood	7.8 (4)	12.5 (1)	4.6 (2)	20.0 (2)
Compliment	2.0 (1)	0	0	0
Total solace	100 (51)	100 (8)	100 (43)	100 (10)

Uncertainty may have decreased blame and the friend's perceived responsibility for the matter. All in all, helpers perceived excessive drinking a difficult problem to handle and ultimately one could only help oneself.

RQ3 appraised whether support helpers provided for their male friends differed between whether or not alcohol was involved in discussion of personal or professional problems. In personal problems, median change in number of support behaviors was significant in only one case: Solace behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=25)=9.77$; $p=.002$). Solve, Dismiss and Escape did not display significant effects. Proportion of variability in the dependent variable accounted for by solace behaviors was .41, indicating a moderate association. For support that helpers provided in alcohol and non-alcohol professional problems we detected two cases in which median change in number of support behaviors was significant: Solace behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=25)=17.39$, $p=0.0001$) and escape behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=25)=4.26$, $p=0.04$). Proportion of variability in the dependent variable accounted for by solace behaviors was .73, indicating a strong relationship. Proportion of variability in the dependent variable accounted for by escape behaviors was .18, indicating a small, yet noteworthy, connection. Solve and Dismiss were not significant.

RQ4 asked whether support Finnish men provided for male friends in alcohol-related problems differed from that provided in non-alcohol episodes. Regardless of scenario, alcohol differentiated median change in behaviors only in the instance of solace behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=50)=26.86$, $p=0.0001$, $\eta^2=.55$). Qualitative analysis on solace in alcohol-episodes revealed mainly behaviors of support availability. Availability was also the most common solace approach in Bu-episode.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Discussion

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

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

the same reason, men preferred to give suggestions rather than quickly handed solutions to the friend's drinking problem. Availability and suggestions are implicit ways of encouraging the friend's own reappraisal of his situation, and such support behaviors were frequently described as being a mirror for the friend.

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

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

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

Results suggest that not only are words considered valuable but also that being physically and emotionally present is perceived as conveying meaningful care and solace. In fact, helpers criticized more verbal support approaches one could take to comfort and made it a case of communication norms of culture or gender. Some support behaviors are likely to be culturally and relationally more meaningful than others. For example, Finns have been shown to value quietude—"positive silence"—very highly (Carbaugh, 2009). It should be noted still that implicit communication has its risks. Indirect messages can go unnoticed or be misunderstood (Barbee et al., 1998), and this risk in turn may leave a friend feeling upset and unsupported. Subtle ways of providing comfort have not received enough scholarly attention and need to be an integral part of social support research (see also Bodie & Jones, 2012).

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

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

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Talking troubles with Finnish men: meaningful contexts of 'supportive silence'

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This study focuses on Finnish men's talk about troubles and on contexts that shape the communication situation. The data consists of 25 thematic interviews with Finnish-born men of varying ages. We found that men talked about their troubles in face-to-face settings that enabled them to relax. Two specific cultural terms for talk about troubles were distinguished: Talking serious (puhua vakavia) and talking deep (puhua henkeviä). Alcohol was involved either as part of the activities of the physical setting, or as a facilitator of particular modes of being. Within the most common places for troubles talk – sauna, cabin, or a quiet location of a social event – culturally meaningful scenes between two men are created, in which silence can also be supportive.

Keywords: troubles talk; supportive communication; Finnish men; physical setting; scene; talking serious; talking deep

Introduction

In 2010, a documentary film *Steam of Life*, about Finnish men's troubles talk in the sauna, filled movie theatres in Finland and abroad. Global audiences were both moved and perplexed: One man discloses a personally meaningful event while the other listens quietly. Even after disclosure only few words are exchanged, if any. A similar episode occurred repeatedly throughout the film. What exactly was taking place?

This study aims to shed light on communication situations in which Finnish men talk about their troubles with other men. Troubles talk is a self-disclosive sequence of talking (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003; Goldsmith, 2004; Michaud & Warner, 1997). It is typical in informal and close relationship, such as friendships: Friends share emotional upsets with each other and are expected to receive understanding or agreement from others (Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998). Self-disclosure of both positive and negative experiences is commonly credited with improving interpersonal closeness, making people feel better, and deepening their relationship (e.g., Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008). However, it is not the act of telling about their troubles but the responses to such disclosures that potentially make supportive difference.

The essential matters when scrutinizing gender and friendships are the value placed on self-disclosure, talk or activities, intimacy or non-intimacy, and expressiveness or inexpressiveness (see Wright, 2006). Nonetheless, in terms of relationship closeness and emotional talk men are often thought to fall short (Rawlins, 1992; Thurnell-Read, 2012; Whitehead, 2002). Men are claimed to be less self-disclosive to other men than to women

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(Snell, Belk, Flowers, & Warren, 1988) and to avoid or escape support situations more commonly than women (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Even though talking about emotions and comforting others have typically been perceived as feminine practices men cannot be discounted as support providers. The issue is multifaceted for the following three reasons.

First, men are a social category that is formed by the gender system but they are also a collective of social practices as well as individual agents (Hearn, 2004). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) acknowledge that masculinities and femininities cannot be unequivocally placed on single continuum of power. Hegemonic masculinity as something that guarantees the dominant position of men over women, children, and subordinate groups of other men (Connell, 1983, 1995, 2002) is therefore not static. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has unarguably furthered discussion and development of theories on gender and revealed additional complexities in defining men and masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2004; Hearn et al., 2012) – individually, contextually, situationally and culturally. Pietilä (2008, p. 46) asserts that hegemony is 'not a state of stable and fixed conceptions but, rather, a point of comparison which alternative discursive practices are positioned to'. Thus, even if disclosure of troubles was not widely characteristic, for example, to traditional masculinity, other forms of manhood may also include the communication practice. Hearn et al. (2012) encourage studying masculinities in specific national contexts to offer new insights on men's practices and hegemonic masculinities. The interest of this study is Finnish men's disclosure of troubles and consequently, potential vulnerabilities to others in meaningful contexts.

Second, studies on sex/gender differences in supportive communication and comforting have predominantly used quantitative methods and the biological category of men rather than acknowledged multiple masculinities (cf. Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005). Even when gender is used as a factor without variation, differences between men and women's communication are not vast. Winstead, Derlega, Lewis, Sanchez-Hucles, and Clark (1992) propose that gender differences in talk about emotions may reflect more stereotypical notions than real gender differences. Kyratzis' (2001) longitudinal study found that young boys' emotion talk – references to feeling states and contextual cues like prosody – changed over time and masculine emotional qualities were heavily influenced by context. When certain children were or were not present, the group altered rough talk, there were downgradings of the emotion 'scared', and references to female characteristics. Jokinen (2000) questions the idea that men and women are clearly separate and that two different bodies produce two different categories of humanness. Rather, gender is something that exists in body as well as in discourse, thought, and on bodies' 'surface' – in clothes, gestures, facial expressions, and movement (Ojala & Pietilä, 2013).

Third, supporting another emotionally – communicating empathy, care, comfort or reassurance – is central to both individual and relationship wellbeing (Burleson, 2003). However, the aforementioned outcomes of supportive interaction have not been typically linked with traditional masculinity. According to Ojala and Pietilä (2013), common criteria for masculinity are activeness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, independence, rationality, self-control, and strength. In Whitehead's (2002) words, 'whether it be fear of rejection, vulnerability, wariness, guilt, lack of self-esteem or simply emotional illiteracy, many men appear unable to expose their inner selves to the outer world' (p. 157). However, masculine practices often refer to actions of male

groups or certain categories of men in the plural. Construction of masculinity or masculinities is likely to occur when public interaction circumstances pose – or are perceived to pose – expectations of such practices. But do men compromise on gendered self-identification needs and self-presentation functions to accomplish communicative goals for the benefit of *another*? What meanings would be given and what means would be used to construct masculine self-identity in such interactions? Put differently, altruistic and intimate functions of communication between social actors may influence 'doing' gender in troubles talk and supportive communication situation. Even if close friendships for men are not as disclosive, emotionally involving, or affectionate as female friendships (Rawlins, 1992) men still have close friendships throughout their lives (Samter, 2003; Virtanen, 2013).

Men's coping with troubles with or without others

When individuals respond to others' troubles talk with supportive intentions they are, deliberately or not, creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Burleson's (2010, p. 151) message-centered definition outlines interpersonal communication as 'complex, situated social process in which people who have established a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to generate shared meanings and accomplish social goals'. Relationships like friendships that encompass supportive interactions are highly important: Social integration, quality of social networks, and available support impact positively on both people's mental and physical health (e.g., Reblin & Uchino, 2008). These beneficial outcomes of social support can only be achieved through communicative means – by producing, receiving, processing, and responding to supportive messages.

Talk about troubles as coping strategy varies according to individuals and contextual factors such as nature of relationship and problem type. McNess (2008) researched support experiences of Australian bereaved young men. He found that men who had lost a sibling were worried about burdening others with their grief and being ostracized if they continued to express negative thoughts and feelings for more than six months. This resulted in sustaining control in social situations, which some men compensated with alcohol usage. Drinking was a way to escape the sense of social separateness that grief-related feelings caused. The study found that men hoped to receive support that was 'meaningful', wide-ranging, and ongoing, and which would make possible social connectedness and esteem support. Men perceived presence-support – staying in contact and including the bereaved into activities – typical even though it was not always truly meaningful. It could, however, reassure that emotional disclosure and reflective talk could be possible in the future.

Communication is constitutive in a sense that verbal and nonverbal message exchanges create experiences of interactions, which then call for specific modes of being to be recreated or negotiated in future interactions. Philipsen (1975) distinguished in his famous study on Teamsterville men that to speak 'like a man' required knowing when and under what circumstances to speak at all. He asserts that talk is not valued equally everywhere nor is it valued across all social contexts. Features of context influence what people do and the 'what and how' of messages they use (Burleson, 2010). Virtanen and Isotalus (2013) found that Finnish men perceive listening as essential in providing good quality support for other men. In fact, they did not intend to avoid supportive interactions with unvocal and subtle behaviors but rather to support friends' autonomy by being there

with and for them. Implicit responses to troubles talk are likely to be motivated by cultural and individual differences (see e.g., Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). Yet, very little research to date has focused on elements other than verbal messages in troubles talk situations (Bodie & Jones, 2012). This is problematic, since the use of words and expression of emotions can have different social meanings in different situations and speech communities (Philipsen, 1975). Therefore, it is also important to focus on matters beyond sequential organization of troubles talk such as micro and macro-dimensions of social context (Grainger, Atkinson, & Coupland, 1990) as well as on components that create and sustain supportive conversational environments, which allow participants to feel secure and comfortable to talk about troubles and related feelings (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998).

Method

Research design

This study aims to describe the meaningful elements of where, when, what about and with whom Finnish men talk about their troubles. Specifically: what takes place when a Finnish man talks about troubles and with whom does he talk? Where do troubles talk situations typically happen, and what meanings do men attach to communication in these contexts?

Communication always happens in context. From an interpersonal communication perspective the most pertinent contexts of interest are functional settings, which refer to social goals of communication such as being supportive; institutional settings; social or relational settings; cultural settings; and physical settings such as place or location (see Applegate & Delia, 1980). Carbaugh and Cerulli (2012) state place-setting function of communication is profoundly and fundamentally cultural. Place is central to communication and likewise, communication is seminal and constitutive in creating individuals' sense of place. Hymes (1974, pp. 55–60) provides us with tools for making distinctions between settings and scenes as physical and psychological-cultural circumstances, respectively: setting captures time and place of speech acts, and scene is 'psychological setting' or 'cultural definition' of what takes place and with what characteristics of communication.

Philipsen (1975, pp. 22–23) advises that search for when and where speech is used 'should not end with the discovery of speaking locations but should uncover what, in the native view, makes a place fitting for talk'. Socially and personally meaningful communication situations like troubles talk can be viewed as sets of actions and events, which are understood as giving assistance within a particular culture (see also Goldsmith, 1992; Hymes, 1972). In Carbaugh and Cerulli's words (2012), communication is 'emplaced action that is culturally distinctive, socially negotiated, and individually applied' (p. 5).

Pietilä (2008) perceives literature on masculinity and construction of masculine self in interaction context to be a 'highly ideological and moral enterprise with strong normative expectations structuring and setting limits for gendered positions available for situational identity work' (p. 50). Discursive studies can reveal culturally relevant struggles between 'old' and 'new' values in masculine self-presentations. Research can do more than differentiate categories such as women, men, and certain groups of men in order to construct theories on masculinities. We propose moving beyond, or deeper into, studies of discourse to highlight men's lived *experiences* as close others in relationships that are

maintained through one of the most ethical and moral human actions – being supportive of another (Virtanen & Isotalus, 2011). It is in men's own accounts of their experiences that meaningful social actions, positions, and contexts are revealed, through which to allow a full expression of self.

Thurnell-Read (2012) encourages research on men's friendships and homosocial bonding in ways that perceive masculinity as situational and plural, and constructed in different ways at different sites, locations, and times in men's lives. We perceive gender as communicatively manifested and constructed in social situations. Methodologically, gender discourses reveal gender as sets of context-bound strategies that work in part together and against each other (e.g. Pietilä, 2008; Tainio, 2001). In our study, instead of focusing on just discourse, we look at contexts that shape discourses, such as the lived experiences of communication events that are meaningful to men in their own accounts.

Interviews and the analysis

We conducted qualitative thematic interviews with Finnish-born men to gain their perspective on troubles talk situations because activities that create personal friendships – like self-disclosure – occur most commonly in private settings (Rawlins, 2009). Altogether 25 heterosexual men volunteered to participate in one-on-one interviews after encountering our research request that was distributed in emailing lists. All participants were unknown to the interviewer. Their ages ranged from 21 to 67 (M = 41), and they lived in the capital region even though some had moved to Helsinki from smaller towns. They represented various professions such as fireman, IT-worker, CEO, attorney, journalist, graphic designer, teacher, artist, student, and retiree. Eighteen men were dating, cohabiting, or married; seven were single or divorced.

A female interviewer (first author) met with participants in locations of their choosing, most commonly in quiet cafes or in the privacy of their offices. Gender difference between interviewer and interviewees was generally not marked in conversation (cf. Pini, 2005). First, participants were asked about their everyday life and friendships. The interviewer then asked what types of difficulties participants' friends had encountered in their lives. Men disclosed troubles they had talked with friends about and provided support for. Participants were invited to elaborate, and their descriptions entailed both their own struggles and friends' difficulties.

Interviews resulted in 17 hours 28 minutes of tape-recorded material. The first author transcribed all interviews verbatim and entered them into ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis program. She coded the material manually with descriptive content analysis, which meant dividing it into meaning units. One meaning unit consisted of an utterance, which held a single thought, opinion or idea. First, she gave each unit in vivo codes, which closely followed participants' original wording. Second, she placed similar codes under thematic categories *when*, *where*, *who*, *what*, *how*, and *what function*. Third, she carefully studied all achieved categories and conducted axial coding in which she added, deleted and combined codes to finalize analysis.

We will elaborate on results and present direct quotations from interviews. Finnish extracts have been translated into English. Men's pseudonyms, ages, and descriptive Finnish terms for talk are given in parenthesis. The interviewer is referred to as IV.

Results

Men's troubles talk requires similar mode of being

'A Finnish man' both talks and does not talk about his troubles: participants frequently juxtaposed younger generation and urban men who talk, with older men or men from countryside who do not. Notions of traditional masculinity were evident in men's descriptions, with which they did not identify. A person's socialization with his family and examples he gets from male relatives was said to impact the way men talk about troubles. Participants acknowledged prominent individual differences among men:

> … caricature of Finnish man is not used to talking and he shares only when drunk. But sadly it's like that with some. First you have to drink heavily before bringing things up. But it's a generalization because there are both types of men among my friends. (Marko, 27)

Interviews showcased men's meta-cultural commentary (see Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2012) on stereotypes. Participants produced culturally shared narrative on 'how Finns communicate' more often than comparing their ways of communicating to women (cf. Pietilä, 2008). Men made discursive efforts to distinguish the Finnish communication culture especially from the American, which they viewed as 'more talkative' and 'superficial'.

> If Finns talk they talk in seriousness compared to surface talk of some other nationalities. I'm referring to American style for example. (Veijo, 51)

Comparisons rely on stereotypical notions of other cultures' talkativeness or the value talking is presumed to have in them (Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). Tracy (2002) says that Americans *do* their contemplation through speaking. For Finns, to contemplate is to be in one's own thoughts (Carbaugh, 2009). The influence of cultural setting on communication was apparent in men's descriptions. Finnish men disapprove of 'just talking', using clichés or performing a provider role in support situations (Virtanen & Isotalus, 2013).

Troubles talk functioned as communicative context to share and vent. Most commonly, talk was about things related to personal relationships, particularly one's romantic relationship. Men disclosed hardships such as getting divorced or laid off from work, and mournful events like a son's suicide (see also Pietilä, 2008). Troubles talk could also include more philosophical topics like making drastic changes to the direction of one's life; or light everyday topics such as twin babies throwing up on dad's shoulder minutes before leaving for work. Some men mentioned that they had noticed occasional hesitation in friends before disclosing troubles and thus paid extra attention to his feelings.

Participants indicated that a troubles talk situation most commonly takes place between two close friends. Beneficial functions of supportive communication were to gain another perspective, feel connected to others, or even form a new friendship. On occasion, two people who were unfamiliar to each other could engage in troubles talk and connect with each other. We will later elaborate on this further.

The findings showed that relational context of troubles talk is preferably nonhierarchical, informal, or devoid of 'obligated' supporter role. Additionally, the interactants' mode of being is reciprocated and shared. This was uncovered when two interviewees

questioned the usefulness of talking to psychologists. Troubles talk with friends was viewed differently from talking with mental health professionals:

> People don't talk to each other but they go to therapy. Wouldn't it be better therapy if you had a couple of trusted friends with whom you could talk? Because in therapy you just say how you feel. I don't downplay people's emotional problems, but these Western influences come here a little bit too strong, too fast. (Veeti, 58)

Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, and Hunt (2007) discovered that depressed men tended to value professionals who acquired skills that helped them to talk. They stressed the importance of getting practical results from talking in therapy rather than 'just talking'. It is likely that close relationships provide more wide-ranging and on-going support, and friends are more personally invested in each other's well-being (see also McNess, 2008).

Places and modes of being for men's troubles talk

Analysis revealed three distinctive and typical physical settings in which men's troubles talk often occurs: the sauna, the cabin, a quiet corner of a bar or party. Talking about troubles could also take place between friends while on a walk in the forest or in a car driving to shared hobbies. However, a sauna was by far the most commonly mentioned place-setting. Men described going to sauna with a friend as being a calm, serious, relaxed, or balanced event. The function was to meditate (meditoida), be in deep thought (pohtia syvällisiä), or tune in on one's spirit (henkistyä):[1]

> …conversation ends up with things that are important when you have time to relax. They are dealt with the instrument of humor, joking, and sometimes getting serious too. In my social circle guys do talk about troubles. At least amongst each other in sauna. (Visa, 49)

Researchers have distinguished that sauna is culturally very meaningful for Finns (Kivimäki & Laiho, 1996). There are more than 1.6 million saunas in Finland (The Finnish Sauna Society, 2012) and they exist at Finnish cabins, homes, and in many city apartments. There are also public saunas. Puro (2009) found that a third of all sauna events in public saunas were silent. The lower the number of people in a sauna, the less talk there was. Quietude is a meaningful part of Finnish communication culture in general (Carbaugh, 2009) and it expands to saunas during attempts at peace and contemplation.

Ari was recollecting on troubles talk events when he suddenly recognized the role of sauna in his interpersonal life:

> Ari: We were in public sauna and came outside to cool down. And that's when there was a place for serious talk last.
> IV: How did it begin? Did your friend say something or you noticed something about him?
> Ari: No, he said straightforwardly that he'd been thinking about this and this in a leisurely fashion, it wasn't that serious. Then there was another time in sauna setting. Actually that was during cooling down time too! I haven't realized that they're pretty often related to that! It's an optimal place for such talk. (Ari, 30)

Cabins and summer cabins are also very popular in Finland. Most of them reside near a forest, lake or sea. According to Poutiainen and Toiskallio (2012), the cabin experience is the opposite of the city experience, which is filled with pollution, noise, crowds, and rush.

When talking about going to the cabin, Finns underline quietude, selective sociability, nearness to nature, and unaffectedness. Important elements of a cabin are thus peace, freedom, nature, water, and sauna, which encompass the idea of relaxation or rejuvenation (Alasuutari & Alasuutari, 2010).

Men described going to the cabin with a friend or bunch of friends to relax, do handiwork, and have fun around activities. For some, annual trips entailed humorous competitions. Games were a tradition that men treasured and looked forward to organizing and participating in. Games made it possible to spend time with friends chatting, laughing, and having drinks. Sometimes talk moved to more serious and sensitive topics. In Thurnell-Read's (2012) study on British men, homosociability aimed at fulfilling relationship goals more than competitiveness and exclusion. During their stag tour to Eastern Europe, male friends pursued connectedness, security, and group cohesion, and exhibited overt displays of affection and emotions. The researcher summarizes that the 'stag tour offers, in its simplicity, a reassuring space in which strong ties of friendship are expressed and reasserted without inhibition' (p. 265). Going to a cabin with friends had similar functions for Finnish men and created an optimal scene for troubles talk. However, disclosure of troubles and supportive messages were communicated when interacting one-on-one:

> We were at cabin one weekend, going to the sauna and having beers with a friend. During the second evening he cautiously approached the topic how my life has picked up after divorce. He told me he has also considered divorcing for quite a while. He asked me what I thought about it, since I've known him for long. I recommended that he think about it still. Well, he did divorce and said afterwards: 'You think I'd talked about it if it had still been unresolved in my head?' So my advice didn't affect his decision at all but at least he had the chance to resonate with someone. (Kauko, 46)

A third distinguishable setting for troubles talk was at parties or nights out. On occasion men wanted to escape the loudness or celebratory mood of others to contemplate in peace. The act was depicted as withdrawing (vetäytyä), quieting down (rauhoittua), or being in deep thought (pohtia syvällisiä):

> We have a mutual friend through whom we met, and always at this friend's birthday party we withdraw from crowd to sit outside. If there are worries, we talk about them. We just talked about why it's so easy for us to talk to each other, and I guess it's because we didn't know each other at first. We had fun and then just went to talk and opened up about everything in life. Like, 'have you had things that have been heavy on your mind?' And then it stuck with us. We've talked about our friends that have had it bad, and we've thought about how we could help them. (Kevin, 21)

Chosen physical settings for men facilitated the preferred mode of being: Relaxing, tuning in on one's spirit, and becoming sensitive (herkistyä). Sometimes drinking activity assisted in accomplishing the described modes or loosening up.

Communication practices and their places provide contexts for each other (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2012). Burleson (2010, p. 158) explicates that 'contexts are both mutable and fluid, which means that communicative practices can modify or even transform contexts through a variety of means (e.g., changing the physical or institutional setting, altering the relationship between participants, shifting the functions pursued, and modifying the relevance of particular cultural rules and understandings)'. Our results confirm that culturally meaningful settings, which call for relaxation and peace, create meaningful

ways of communicating for Finnish men. Equally, cultural ways of communicating contemplation with quiet-valuing behaviors transform physical settings into places for mutual contemplation.

Finnish cultural terms for troubles talk

Finnish men's talk about troubles was described either as: (1) talking serious (puhua vakavia); or (2) talking deep (puhua henkeviä). Terms and phrases, which are used prominently and routinely by people to characterize communication practices that are significant and important to them, can be referred to as cultural terms (Carbaugh, 2009). Talking serious took place between friends and began when the other explicated an issue he was dealing with. When speaking about troubles, men said one should not make another feel uncomfortable by probing him unnecessarily but rather, focus on listening:

> I've talked about troubles, probably with all of them [friends]. We have a similar code of behavior that you don't start poking even if you know that something's going on. He's allowed to tell you if he feels like it, when he feels like it. For example, if we've been boozing together then we might finish the night with a hug, nothing more peculiar than that. (Kauko, 46)

Soilevuo Grønnerød (2005) stresses that mutuality and resonance is possible for Finnish men without confiding and revealing talk about personal issues. There is evidence also to suggest that firm relationships between Finns, men and women, are not brought about by exchanged words but by way of shared unspoken gestures (Koivusalo, 1999).

Alcohol was not uncommon to troubles talk situations. Also in Pietilä's (2008) study on Finnish paper mill workers' health, alcohol was among the most extensively elaborated and joked about topic. For Finnish men, alcohol acted as bonding ploy, culturally shared male practice, topic of humor, and 'forbidden fruit'. According to our data, drinking was not a necessity for men's troubles talk but common contextual element of activities in certain physical settings:

> Without exception we're in a bar and, I don't know the cause-and-effect but, when you go to a bar or to have dinner, you drink some alcohol. In a sauna or in a bar, you start talking about deeper issues. Typically it's a group of guys and then you go talk one-on-one. (Ari, 30)

Alcohol was a way to achieve a relaxed mode of being, which had its time and place, and drinking allowed particular communication of opening up.

> IV: If troubles have raised some emotions, have those been discussed?
>
> Kari: Yes, of course but you don't start the conversation with 'let's talk about emotions and open up'. The smaller the gang the easier it is, and maybe with couple of beers in the belly. It can provide a sense that now this is a moment when we can talk about things that are on my mind. But a friend of mine will come over at 11 am to work on computers with me and hang out; I don't think either one of us will say 'by the way, I have this emotion' because it's middle of the week, sun is shining, etc. (Kari, 39)

In some situations, talking deep was a way of communicating troubles (see also Hymes, 1972). It encompasses an idea of meaningful talk. Deep talk is the opposite of

small-talk, talk for talk's sake, or talk about shallow and superficial topics. In men's troubles talk, talking deep began from shared, affirmative silence:

> I was thinking that with some men it's hard to talk because there haven't been many silent moments initiated by them. There are couple of people, men, with whom I've talked deep (henkeviä). (Kevin, 21)

Deep talk required a mode of quietude and relaxation, and was communicated with subtleties and calmness. Conversational topics were philosophical and addressed troubles in non-personal, yet collective way. Men's examples of talking deep also included such talk with people they did not know well or at all prior to interaction. Because talking deep was contemplation of universal challenges of being in the world, it could also be shared with strangers if they entered the contemplative scene.

Conclusions

This study sought to describe Finnish men's troubles talk as a communication situation. We discovered three typical and culturally meaningful physical settings in which men talk about troubles. These places are the sauna, the cabin, and quiet niches of social events. Settings and actions shared there facilitate relaxation and calming down, which in turn create a mode of being – a scene of quiet connectedness – which is fitting for men's disclosure of troubles.

The sauna was the most commonly used setting for men's troubles talk. Both saunas and cabins for Finns are places in which to achieve harmony with one's body and mind, or with nature, respectively, and culturally shared experiences depict them as spaces where one can be with others but also in one's own thoughts (Alasuutari & Alasuutari, 2010). The purpose of sauna activity is to unwind and contemplate essentially in quietude (Puro, 2009). Such culturally meaningful places permit freedom of surface structures and discursive performances, and as communicative scenes they direct attention to essential concerns of *being*. Interpersonal troubles talk situations are scenes for mutual contemplation in peace in which culturally recognized, subtle communication acts can become 'supportive silence'. While the need for support is likely to be universal, what prosocial means within particular speaking communities may be quite distinct across the globe (see also Malach Pines & Zaidman, 2003).

The study confirms that men's troubles talk takes place in equal, nonhierarchical relationships. We propose that men's troubles talk and supportive communication is shaped by the functional context of acceptance and connectedness, which manifests itself most naturally in a relational context of close friendship. Furthermore, social contexts of peaceful contemplation facilitate such connectedness and interpersonal closeness even among strangers when the scene is culturally recognized. The interactants, therefore, do not always need to be close or even same-sex.

Even though it has been claimed that men disclose less personal issues to others, troubles talk as a purely gendered practice of reserved or disinclined sharing seems weakly supported in Finnish men's close relationships. Interpersonal closeness is achieved with self-disclosure and expressions of vulnerability (see Brown, 2006), which call for authentic being and revealing one's 'spirit', i.e., inner self. Studies on gender as discourse reveal *doing gender* communicatively, which is construction of social and cultural category on the surface of *a being*. Because Finnish men define authentic, honest,

and sincere support as beneficial to their friends (Virtanen & Isotalus, 2013), doing gender in troubles talk situation could encumber helpfulness. Rawlins (1992, p. 15) reminds us: 'Culturally patterned set of expectations is associated with friendship. But these patterns are produced and reproduced through a dialectical interplay of ideal conceptions and real constraints across a continuum of private and public discursive realms in the actual communication of a variety of types of friends'. Soilevuo Grønnerød (2005) discerns that even though closeness, openness, emotional talk, self-disclosure, and mutual resonance are against the masculine stereotype, they are common in Finnish men's friendships.

Troubles talk was found to be either *talking serious* or *talking deep*. Talking serious is talking openly about matters that are troubling a friend. When men talk serious with each other, another person's perspective is beneficial in dealing with specific problems. Talking deep is more implicit talk about troubles as part of human life. Men could talk deep with both friends and strangers. Talking deep expands personal experience to include topics that are universal to human beings. Speech communities have their own terms for speech acts (Hymes, 1972) and we encourage further research, especially ethnography of communication, on troubles talk situations to increase ecological validity of cultural terms discovered here.

Disclosure of personal issues and subsequent responses depend on individuals, their interpersonal ideologies, cultural values and mutual relationship (Diaz-Perelta Horenstein & Downey, 2003). Even though friendship does not mechanically amount to intimacy, it is important to widen the outlook of men's more obvious homosocial bonding through competitiveness and to acknowledge occurrences of intimacy and emotional expression that male friendships present (Thurnell-Read, 2012). At the same time, Wright (2006) maintains that unequivocal self-disclosure is only a small part of talk between friends in their everyday interactions. In fact, intimacy that manifests itself through activities is a more sensitive indicator of friendship closeness. For both men and women, friendships are valued relationships also because they comprise of fun, relaxation and talking for talk's sake.

Distinguished physical settings for Finnish men's troubles talk included drinking as social behavior and a means to relax: Beers after or in sauna, beverages accompanying activities at cabin, drinks in bars or parties. For some men, alcohol facilitates opening up and eases the achievement of togetherness. This is likely to be more significant for those who associate talk about personal troubles as loss of social control (see McNess, 2008). According to our findings, drinking is typical in troubles talk situations among Finnish men. Yet, in some relationship contexts alcohol permits troubles talk and in others, it does not play an important role.

In sum, gendered ways of communicating and doing gender in close relationships is contested by cultural ways of communicating, relational ways of communicating, and ways of communicating one's individual experiences. For example, among Finnish men, sharing quiet moments can build connection rather than prevent it; and saying little versus elaborating on troubles requires drawing from relational knowledge and is thus meaningful between friends. Within speaking communities, connectedness can be achieved in intricate ways and modes of being that may not be immediately apparent to outsiders. At the same time, underlying is the 'spirit' of a human being, which penetrates through all contexts – including gender – and can be tapped into by meaningful communication like *talking deep*. Gelfer (2012, p. 127) recommends: 'By acknowledging multiple masculinities with the self (or multiple masculine selves), we can achieve greater subtlety and nuance in our representations of masculinity'. We encourage

taking on the challenge of viewing construction and representation of masculinities as practices that vary contextually and thus according to interaction situations, relationships, and individuals.

Note

1. 'Henkevä' has been translated here as deep. Literally translated from Finnish to English it means spiritual or being of spirit. It is different from 'hengellinen', which means religiously spiritual. A spirit in Finnish is 'henki' and a person is 'henkilö'. Thus, 'puhua henkeviä' is to speak of personal matters or of the issues of one's inner world. In Finnish language, one's emotional burden is literally referred to as spiritual burden 'henkinen taakka', which means that something is heavy on one's spirit rather than on one's physical body. This work was supported by Finnish Cultural Foundation.

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