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## Being a *droog* vs. being a *friend*: A qualitative investigation of friendship models in Russia vs. Canada

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** A substantial body of work has established that friendship is an important non-kin interpersonal relationship, with many positive outcomes. An issue with this literature is that it originated primarily in anglocentric Euro-American societies, when several studies have shown that the meaning of friendship varies across cultural settings. In particular, linguistic analyses advance that the meaning of friendship in Russian is quite different from that in English. The goal of this study was to seek psychological evidence of these linguistic findings by documenting similarities and differences in people's understanding of friendship in both cultural contexts.

**Methods.** The research consisted of a qualitative investigation of friendship cultural models among Russian migrants to Canada, through semi-structured interviews that were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis, whereby data segments are coded and codes are gradually refined and streamlined in order to identify the main themes that emerge from the data.

**Results.** Participants' depictions of friendship in Russian vs. Canadian contexts were largely in line with semantic analyses of friendship in Russian vs. English, with friendship being described as a stronger and deeper bond, but also more demanding in Russia than in Canada.

**Discussion.** The findings support Wierzbicka's proposal that key terms in a language encapsulate cultural models prevalent among its speakers. The results are also consistent with the existence of close parallels between people's cultural models and the linguistic ecologies in which they live.

### Keywords

friendship, friend, droog, cross-cultural psychology, qualitative research, thematic analysis, cultural models, immigration, Russia, Canada

### Highlights

► People's cultural models of friendship differ between Russian and Canadian cultural contexts.





- ▶ Russian-Canadian biculturals describe friendship in Russia as a stronger and deeper, but also more demanding relationship than in Canada.
- ▶ Cultural models of friendship in Russian and Canadian cultural contexts largely reflect Wierbicka's semantic analyses of differences between the terms friend and droog.

### For citation

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### Introduction

*There is nothing on this earth to be more prized than friendship*

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

Heeding the famous theologian's words, psychologists have extensively documented the characteristics and numerous benefits of friendship. One issue with this academic literature on friendship is that it was generated almost exclusively in North-American/European, primarily English-Speaking, societies (hereafter, anglocentric Euro-American), thus reflecting culturally specific values and ways of conceiving relationships. This is problematic, as several studies have shown that friendship can look and function very differently in other cultural settings [1–3]. Practically, relying on the wrong understanding of friendship can also increase loneliness among migrants who try to form new relationships in their new society.

Linguistic evidence suggests that the meaning of friendship in Russian cultural contexts may also be quite different from that in anglocentric Euro-American settings [4], but very little empirical work has focused on whether these linguistic distinctions are reflected in actual psychological differences in how people understand friendship in both contexts [5–7]. The present work targets this issue. We document cross-cultural differences and similarities in the meaning of friendship in Russia vs. Canada by conducting a qualitative study of Russian migrants to Canada, who have experienced friendship in both cultural contexts.

### **Friendship: A mostly anglocentric Euro-American field of research.**

Psychologists define friendship as an informal and voluntary interpersonal relationship, not bounded by institutional ties, formal rules, and tasks [8]. For example, if



two colleagues become friends, their friendship stems from their mutual interests and wishes, rather than work obligations or pressures. Essential features of friendship include enjoyment of being together, sharing activities and interests, and the mutual provision of personal growth [9]. Intimacy, self-disclosure, practical aid, and reciprocity – which involves emotional support, loyalty, affiliation, and acceptance – are also defining characteristics of friendship [9]. Specific informal rules exist to help maintain a friendship, such as voluntary assistance in times of need, or respect for each other's privacy [2].

This unique relationship plays a multitude of beneficial roles in everyday life, allowing us to engage in enjoyable activities and helping us through loss and misfortune. Friendship also facilitates transition through life stages, for example by fostering social adjustment during adolescence [10], by alleviating the negative impacts of physiological changes and losses during old age [11], and by lessening stress associated with widowhood [12]. Friendship can also be a protective factor against both physical and mental health problems [13–18]. Overall, friendship contributes to our happiness and life satisfaction [19] by satisfying our basic psychological needs [20].

One caveat associated with this definition and these positive findings is that the vast majority of theoretical and empirical work on friendship has been conducted in English-speaking Euro-American countries, thus reflecting culturally specific conceptions of what relationships and life more generally should be. Yet, a few studies have shown that people's friendship models – i.e., their understanding of what it means to be a friend, what to expect from a friend, how to behave with a friend, etc. – differ across cultural contexts. For example, Argyle and Anderson found people in the U.K. tend to give priority to emotional support and intimacy but that these characteristics are less central among Japanese [2]. Another study showed that in a Japanese cultural context, friendship originates from mutual sympathy, compassion and support [21]. Also in East Asia, Chen found that the Chinese friendship model tends to neglect the notion of self-disclosure and places more emphasis on the implicit transmission of personal experience and on the ability to identify each other's needs and emotions without verbal communication [3]. In Ghana, Adams and Plaut demonstrated that people expect and value friends' provision of material support more than emotional support [1]. This body of work, although admittedly limited, cautions against blindly generalizing anglocentric Euro-American friendship research findings to other cultural contexts. Actually, it is even unclear to what extent this friendship research applies to non-English-speaking European countries. Unfortunately, there is not enough research to determine how widely applicable is the anglocentric Euro-American model of friendship, and whether it would be meaningful in countries such as say, Italy or Hungary.



Not only would generalizing this model to all cultural contexts be theoretically inappropriate, it might also have negative practical implications in the context of migration. Upon settlement in a new society, migrants need to reconstruct their social network [22], and their friendship models are likely to influence how they go about forming new social relationships. Gaps between friendship models culturally dominant in the new society and their own models may hinder the formation of close interpersonal relationships and increase the risk of loneliness among migrants [23].

**Friendship in Russian vs. English.** Wierzbicka's influential linguistic work suggests that people's understanding of friendship in Russian cultural contexts may also differ from the dominant anglocentric Euro-American friendship model. She argues that key terms in a language come to encapsulate what is believed, valued, or promoted in the cultural context where that language is dominant [4]. In other words, terms such as *friend* or *друг* (*droog*) become shorthands for entire cultural models of friendships that are understood and meaningful for English and Russian speakers. Based on these ideas, Wierzbicka used linguistic methods to characterize the cultural models underlying friendship words in Russian vs. English [4]. By examining words' synonyms, antonyms, collocations, and their contexts, she drew a semantic map of friendship in these two languages. She concluded that the Russian language has more words to describe friendship than English and that friendship models vary on several dimensions (help/support, obligation in adversity, trust, intense positive emotion, enjoyment/pleasure and self-disclosure). Specifically, she determined that for Russian speakers, friendship implies complete trust, almost boundless support and readiness to assist in difficult times, positive feelings and regard for one's friend, and a great deal of self-disclosure. On the other hand, for English speakers, friendship is characterized by enjoyment of spending time together ("fun"), sharing common interests and activities, as well as validation of each other's needs.

As persuasive as Wierzbicka's linguistic analyses are, whether her semantic conclusions reflect actual psychological differences between Russian and English speakers' friendship cultural models – i.e., cognitive structures organizing friendship related cultural knowledge and mediating our navigation of the social environment [24–26] – is a crucial question. We are aware of only three empirical studies that can be brought to bear on this question. They also have a number of limitations that we will review shortly. Searle-White found that Russian participants were more likely than American participants to allow friends to enter their personal sphere by accepting, e.g., advice, money [5]. Also using samples in both countries, Sheets and Lugar found that Russians were less tolerant of violations in their friendships: i.e., a more extensive range of issues would prompt them to end a friendship compared to Americans. Russians were particularly sensitive to betrayal in a friendship, whereas Americans found keeping secrets from a friend



more problematic [6]. In a different study (using the same participants), the same research team focused on gender and self-disclosure, showing that Russians had fewer friends and tended to self-disclose less than Americans [7].

These studies are essential first steps, but they all focused on a single aspect of friendship using simplistic quantitative indices rather than on whole friendship models. Also, comparing Russian and American samples would have required testing measurement equivalence and controlling for potential cross-cultural response biases in order for the results to be dependable [27] – which were absent from these studies. Sheets and Lugar’s studies were particularly vulnerable to reference effects [6, 7]. They measured self-disclosure with a single Likert-type item ranging from “sharing nothing” to “sharing everything,” which are very subjective anchor points. If disclosing a lot about oneself is the norm, if it is valued and promoted in my context, if everyone around me shares very private information with their friends, my responding “sharing a little” is likely to index higher levels of self-disclosure than in a context where people are normatively and typically very private in their interpersonal relationships. To use a visual analogy, “being tall” means something very different in Sweden and Japan. These potential reference effect problems may explain why their results on self-disclosure seemed at odd with Searle-White findings that Russians are less sensitive to interpersonal boundary crossing than Americans. We seek to address these issues here.

**The present study.** This study documents cross-cultural differences and similarities in friendship cultural models in Canadian vs. Russian contexts, thus building upon the preliminary work reviewed above (although it should be noted that Canada is a different Euro-American context that the U.S., where the research reported above took place). With the goal of addressing some of this work’s shortcomings, three features of our research are noteworthy. First, we seek to characterize friendship cultural models in general, rather than focus on specific friendship features predetermined by the researchers. To do so, we adopt a qualitative approach, which is particularly well-suited to yield rich data about sparsely documented cultural models. Second, to address issues of cultural equivalence such as reference effects, we concentrate on people who have lived and experienced friendship in both Russian and Canadian contexts, rather than inquiring from separate samples in both countries. Third, in order to gather information about culturally prevalent friendship models, we investigate people’s perception of generic friends rather than their own friends. This approach is consistent with an inter-subjective perspective on culture [28]. To summarize, we seek psychological evidence for Wierzbicka’s semantic analysis of friendship models in Russian and English by asking whether people who have had experience with both models spontaneously describe them as different.



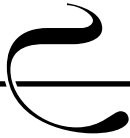
Epistemologically, we adopted a pragmatic perspective, whereby we see cultural meanings of friendship as based on the reality of the cultural contexts that participants experience and navigate, and as verbally emerging in the context of participants' interactions with the researchers [29]. Our approach to qualitative inquiry was also phenomenological, as we seek to understand the cultural meanings of friendship from the lived experience of participants.

## Methods

**Participants and procedure.** The sample included 8 Russian native speakers (7 females), who were born in Russia or the former Soviet Union, and who had immigrated to Canada as adults. The study was conducted in English, so participants had to be sufficiently proficient in that language. Although small, this sample size allowed us to reach a reasonable level of saturation in our qualitative analyses [30]. Participants were all highly educated, with highest degree completed ranging from college degree to PhD. Except for one participant who was single, all were either married or in a stable relationship. Two participants were students, and the rest were employed in a variety of professions (e.g., research associate, chemist, instructional designer, daycare provider). We did not obtain participants' exact ages, but most were in their thirties (one participant was in his fifties, and two participants were in their late twenties). Regarding origins, three participants came from Russia, three from the eastern (more Russotropic) part of Ukraine, one from Belarus, and one from Uzbekistan. Their length of stay in Canada ranged from 1.5 to 19 years, with an average of 10 years. Information about the study was disseminated through websites for classifieds and the personal network of the first author. Interested and eligible participants took part in audio-recorded semi-structured interviews that lasted one hour on average. Participants received 20CAD as compensation for their time, and both universities' ethical review board approved the study.

**Materials.** Our semi-structured interview protocol comprised open-ended questions on how participants understood the meaning of friendship. We asked participants to describe briefly their own friendship circle, and then to describe key characteristics of friendship in Canada and Russia (or their country of origin). They were also asked to comment on similarities and differences in what it means to be a friend in Canada vs. Russia. The interviewer stressed the importance of participants' perspective as they had had the opportunity to experience friendship in both cultural contexts, and used probing questions such as "*could you expand on that point?*", "*do you have further examples of this?*", or "*could you say more about that?*" to facilitate the interview.

**Analysis.** We conducted an inductive thematic analysis of the data [31], with the goal of identifying similarities and differences in friendship meaning



that are grounded in the data. As such, our analysis bears some resemblance to grounded theory [32], both in emphasis and steps. The analysis proceeded as follows, with all steps (except transcription) conducted by the first author. During (1) *transcription*, audio recordings were first transcribed by research assistants, with instructions adapted from Hsiung's conventions for transcribing interviews [33]. (2) *Familiarization with the data* involved the careful reading of the transcripts, with note taking on the side. The goal was to obtain a first sense of the topics and themes discussed by participants. (3) *Open coding* consisted of going through the data segment-by-segment and assigning a brief label describing what participants talked about to each segment. (4) *Revising code* involved modifying and/or rewording the initial codes generated in the previous step by merging similar codes or clarifying ambiguous ones. This process created focused codes that were more conceptual and less descriptive than initial codes. (5) *Focused coding* consisted of assigning one of the revised focused codes to all data segments. Finally, (6) *categories and themes generation* involved examining how focused codes would fit into broader conceptual categories, by looking for links between codes and common themes across codes. The goal was to identify coherent themes with high internal homogeneity (consistency across codes within themes) and external heterogeneity (clear differences between themes). The analysis iterated between steps (2) and (6), using the method of constant comparison, whereby segments being coded are compared to other segments, and codes are constantly compared to other codes in order to refine them [34]. This process also allows codes to gradually become less literal and more conceptual [35].

## Results

We identified five broad themes in our data that provide a narrative of how friendship shares common characteristics, but at the same time differs between Russian and Canadian contexts. These themes are: (1) commonalities; (2) Russian friendship is deeper; (3) Russian friendship is more demanding; (4) Canadian relationships are "friendlier"; and (5) critical stance and explanations.

**Commonalities.** Participants described friendship as something common and similar across cultural contexts: "I think it is the same, like, it doesn't matter where you are" (female, 3 years in Canada). In this view, personal rather than cultural considerations influence friendship: "My strong belief is that perception of friendship is rather personal than cultural defined" (male, 17 years in Canada). Participants describe friendship as sharing time and experiences – "from my personal experience it's sharing some experiences" (male, 17 years in Canada) – and as being on the same wavelength "it's like people you're comfortable to be quiet with" (female, 19 years in Canada). Trust is also an important component



of friendship in general, as a friend “cannot turn his or her back at you, and/or babble your secrets away” (female, 17 years in Canada). Participants also recognize friendship as a relationship that may not last permanently:

friendship may just fade away [...], because of the distance, because of much less frequent contacts. And people acquire more and more other relationships, and obligations, and duties, so that with time, unless something happens, you just lose it. Because it's a natural process of drifting apart (male, 17 years in Canada).

Thus, participants describe friendship as a universal, intentional, close, positive, and potentially transient interpersonal relationship.

**Russian friendship is deeper.** While they mentioned commonalities across contexts, several codes reflected participants' perception that friendship is deeper in Russian than in Canadian contexts: *droog* has obviously a stronger meaning [than *friend*]; its kind of deeper inside (female, 17 years in Canada). Russian friendship is described as a very close and intimate relationship, compared to friendship in Canada. A participant pointed out:

I'm not sure if in Canada people, like, keep friends. I didn't see, like, real examples about that. [...] They will not talk about really something personal stuff. Really, for me, friendship in Canada and Russia is absolutely different. Like, I cannot talk to my friend here everything that happens in my life (female, 1.5 years in Canada).

In a similar vein, another participant highlighted differences in emotional investment in friendship. Describing friendships in Canadian contexts, she said: “I don't know how much intimacy and supporting is going on inside of it, this relationship you can call friendship. [...] I think they spend a lot of time together. Going out, you know. [...] I think it's more like investment in time than emotional. (female, 3 years in Canada). Another participant elaborates on this “fun” aspect of friendship in Canadian contexts: “I would say that Canadian people are friends who have a lot of fun together. Probably what would end a friendship, if it gets not fun. Like, it stops being pleasant and fun, probably that would stop a friendship” (female, 3 years in Canada).

This description of friendship as “light and fun” contrasts with this elaboration on emotional investment in the Russian model of friendship: “For [Russian friends], you're invited, like, into the most intimate depths of everything [...] We tend to open our souls, [...] there's a very deep connection. Crazy. Crazy I mean, the level of openness. Like, like your soul is open.” She then wonders whether some Canadian friendships should really be called friendship: “Here I can contact them, or they can contact me, we be glad to have drink together. But I still not sure if I should call that friendship or just very good relationship” (female, 19 years in Canada). Another way to illustrate this difference in depth and closeness is





by comparing Russian friendship to family ties: “if I say friend, it means that it’s a part of the family” (female, 1.5 years in Canada).

In participants’ accounts, concrete practices such as frequent communication contribute to the perception that Russian friendship is deeper. Talking about her Canadian friends, a participant laughingly reports “I’m not sure that they’re waiting for my call”, which she contrasts with how frequently she talked with her Russian friend: “usually, I call every day, and this person called me, like, at least, at least once per week” (female, 3 years in Canada). Another participant mentions differences in “mentality” between Russians and Canadians. He explains: “that’s related to the frequency of meeting. I feel that here, I cannot come to someone’s place as often as maybe I would want to” (male, 10 years in Canada). Other participants echoed this distinction in how frequently friends are expected to communicate: “it’s different expectations, probably, yes. For someone it’s enough to talk once a year, once a month, I don’t know, like. But I don’t think it’s good. Like if you’re friend, you should know, like, the news, what is happening in the life” (female, 1.5 years in Canada).

Hospitality and spontaneity in getting together are other concrete aspects that participants related to differences in friendship depth in Russian vs. Canadian contexts. With a certain bashfulness, a participant lowered his voice and explained:

there [in Russia] you don’t need, I don’t know how to say that, I might be, you know, rude or something... There you don’t need an appointment to see a friend. You don’t need to discuss the best time, you just give a ring to the door: “Hi, how are you?” You have time, it’s OK. Don’t have time, it’s more than OK. All right, I’ll pass by maybe later today. [...] There it doesn’t matter when you come to visit. You don’t need to dress, somehow, you don’t need to cook something special, or something like that (male, 10 years in Canada).

In parallel to informality and spontaneity, hospitality is also expected: “you have to be able to feed them [friends] when they need to eat. And expect the same from them. If you feed somebody, and you don’t go with the visit to eat everything from their fridge, they’ll be offended” (female, 19 years in Canada).

In short, participants describe friendship in Russian contexts as a very strong and very close relationship, which ideally achieves “the highest degree of mutual understanding” (male, 17 years in Canada). In contrast, they view Canadian friendship as more reserved, with people spending time together, but less open about their emotional world and their “soul”. Different practices reflect these differences. Participants highlighted the importance of very frequent communication, of spontaneous getting together, and of outright hospitality among friends in a Russian context.

**Russian friendship is more demanding.** As a flip side to its intensity and depth, Russian friendship comes with more expectations and obligations than



Canadian friendship, in participants' view. A participant describes the main characteristic of friendship in Russian contexts as responsibility. Cause when you make friends with someone, your kind of take responsibility for that person. So when you say: 'that is my friend', that means that [...] you declare that you are ready to invest in that person. So you wouldn't say that easily that you can't do something. [...] Because you decided for yourself that this is the person you are going to invest in (female, 3 years in Canada).

In a related vein, another participant emphasized strong expectations:

you have to be crazy enough. Again, to be expected to do crazy things for your friend if he or she asks you. [...] Most of Russian friends, they'll be expecting you to ask some crazy things from them (too), and if you don't, then, they will feel a little offended (female, 19 years in Canada).

These strong expectations and sense of responsibility in Russian friendship translate into a perceived obligation to help, to do what it takes for one's friend, as one participant sums up: "if someone asks you something that you don't like, as a Canadian friend, you refuse to do it. But as a Russian friend, you do it. And then you feel uncomfortable, but you do it" (female, 10 years in Canada). This perceived obligation applies in all cases, from mundane to severe situations. A participant illustrates the former:

I had the situation that like, for example, I need to go. I just really need to go. I need to leave in ten minutes. And [that Russian friend] gives a call, and he or she says have a problem, like, with relationship or something like that. And ten minutes is definitely not enough to solve it by phone. If after ten minutes I say 'I really need to go', the person will feel offended, they are just simply disappointed. Even if we discuss, 'yea let me give you a call later or call me back later'. That probably wouldn't be (ok). Here [in Canada], if I say 'I need to leave in ten minutes, sorry let's talk later, call me let say at six', no problem (male, 10 years in Canada).

At the other end of the spectrum, participants underscore that friendship in Russian contexts entails unfaltering obligation to help in adversity, "to be with you when you are in trouble" (female, 3 years in Canada). As a friend in a Russian context, "you have to like, help anytime, like during the night, when, whatever" (female, 1.5 years in Canada). In other words, "from traditional point of view, you're ready to give your last T-shirt to the person" (female, 19 years in Canada). Another participant echoes the T-shirt image: "the [Russian] friend is somebody who will give you his or her last shirt when it comes to the difficult times" (male, 17 years in Canada). He adds that ideally, "in difficult times you can rely, and the response would be extreme degree of altruistic behaviour, at expense of, almost, friend's own life".

As a corollary to friendship in Russian contexts being more demanding and coming with many more strings attached, participants mention being more



selective: “year after year, I chose the friends with whom I created strong friendship. And we’re friends for more than ten years. [...] I didn’t take wrong people in my circle. [...] Maybe it was very selective.” As a result, a participant notes differences in friendship circle sizes:

even the average person from [Russia], like, not considering the extra-version/introversion thing, would not call as many people their friends as an average Canadian would. I wouldn’t call them friends, I would call them acquaintances. [...] So yeah, I think that the number of people that you would call friends in Canada and [Russia], that’s different (female, 3 years in Canada).

In short, participants describe friendship in Russian contexts as a responsibility, with strong expectations and obligation to help in all situations. As a result, people are very selective in whom they call friends, and their friendship circle is, therefore, smaller than in Canadian contexts [7].

**Canadian relationships are “friendlier”.** While participants described Canadian friendship as less intense, both in terms of depth and responsibilities, they commented on the general openness and “friendliness” of relationships in the Canadian context. One participant noted:

in Canada, like everybody is more open for communication. And it’s not a problem even to talk to the persons staying and waiting for the bus, for example. [In Russia], it is like ‘oh wow, what do you want from me?’ and ‘I don’t wanna talk to you’. [...] Here it’s completely different (female, 3 years in Canada).

Another participant expanded on that general “friendliness” in Canadian interactions:

I find [Canadians] very friendly, very gentle to each other. Russians are not gentle, we don’t love each other. You can actually see the difference right you (when) your plane is landing. [In Canada], you step out and custom officers, they are not *glad* to see you, but they don’t mind. Right, they smile at you, they talk to you, they make you feel very easy. In Russia you land and you feel like... cause everybody is like... it’s like Soviet face. Nobody smiling. [...] With people here [in Canada], I admire the gentleness and their kindness towards each other (female, 19 years in Canada).

**As a result, it is very easy to approach new people:**

People [in Canada], they are very easy to make contact with strangers. Which is very hard for Russians, like, we’re strangers, we’re strangers. Here people are very open to any stranger, like anybody is approaching you. [...] Here people don’t mind strangers. There [In Russia] people do. Stranger is some intruder (female, 19 years in Canada).



Interestingly, that same participant then points out that paradoxically, the flip-side of this Canadian openness is a greater reserve in friendship than among Russians:

anybody is approaching you. [...] But the same time, there is some... I don't really know what to do, like which next step you have to make in order to become deeper friend. [...] You are in very good terms with everybody, but at the same time, I couldn't really find what to do in order to get a little bit deeper. I still don't know. That's a mystery to me. People [in Canada], they're so friendly, they're so nice, they're open. But there's some limit after which, I guess, it is getting too personal maybe to them. [...] For Canadians I think the private territory is very important thing. The private distance (female, 19 years in Canada).

**Critical stance and explanations.** As participants discuss the intensity of the general Russian friendship model, they also adopt a critical stance towards it. One participant notes that this ideal of “giving one’s last shirt to a friend” is a:

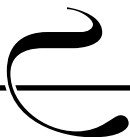
most widespread belief about friendship [that] I was hearing from early childhood [... and that is...] repeated throughout the literature, throughout movies, drama. [...] It's like ideal belief and maybe some people are lucky to have friends like this. [...] That's one of the basic labels, one of the basic stereotypes. [...] In reality, I wouldn't say this stereotype is met as often as it's depicted (male, 17 years in Canada).

**Another participant describes the high Russian friendship expectations as “insane” and the Canadian model as more reasonable:**

[At a Russian friend's house], if there is one room, you'll be given the main sofa, and everyone is going to find another way, somehow. I mean it's a little bit crazy. I think it's a little bit obliging, right, cause you don't feel like the grandmother sleeping on the floor instead of you. [In Canada], if you have extra sofa, of course, I guess they accommodate you, like I had some Canadian like close friends. And I think it's normal, I don't think everybody should be completely insane and giving everything to everybody. I think Canadians are more normal in this matter (female, 19 years in Canada).

**In a similar vein, another participant prefers some aspects of the Canadian friendship model:**

If you're really tired during the working week, just want to relax during weekend, so you just not want to see anyone. And that really works [in Canada], because none of the friends we have would come just spontaneously passing by. They would give us a call. And even during the call, for example if I'm really tired, I can easily say so 'yea I'm not feeling like talking too much now, so let's talk later'. And that's OK. [In Russia], such an ending of the conversation might



lead to certain misunderstanding, because like, you're too tired to talk, so probably there's something wrong. [...] It's not what I meant, it's just I can be really tired. And that's what I like [in Canada], cause here, I really can be tired and say that. And no one will think something additional (male, 10 years in Canada).

Besides, another participant points out that these high expectations from friends might be changing in the Russian context:

I feel it also depends on generation. Because for younger generation, for Russian friends, it is also easy to say no if you feel uncomfortable. Now we say 'if you feel uncomfortable, say no, it's ok.' In Soviet Union, it was a rule that you must think about community first, and about your personality last (female, 10 years in Canada).

Outside of Soviet influences, participants also make connections between features of Russian friendship models and low levels of residential mobility: "once you buy a house, then we stay and we live there all our lives. [...] So if you are living in the same place almost all your life, you have friends who are living together. So you have the same people around you" (female, 10 years in Canada). The stability in social relationships actually extends all the way to childhood:

it's a very typical thing, we have many friends from even elementary school or those we grew up together with, like same apartment building. [...] So it's become quite uniform circle of connections, and we retain these relationships for many years. I would say it's very typical to have relationships friendship with old friends throughout the life [...] And it's related to low level of mobility in society (male, 17 years in Canada).

Although here too, things may be changing. As this participant points out, residential and social mobility may be on the rise in Russia:

maybe not now, the population becomes a little bit more mobile. But it only applies to big cities, or it's like one-time life change in decision. People from small villages or small places decide to move to the capital, to the big city. And it changes for them a lot of stuff, including relationships with other people (male, 17 years in Canada).

## Discussion

Our primary goal was to examine whether Wierzbicka's semantic analyses about friendship in Russian and English [4] were reflected in actual psychological differences in people's friendship cultural models. The results of our qualitative interview study of Russian-Canadian biculturals largely supported Wierzbicka's linguistic conclusions. Indeed, participants described friendship in Russian contexts as deep, very close, and a strong bond, with frequent communication and (almost unconditional) help in adversity as essential features. In contrast, they saw Canadian friendship as a lighter relationship, with greater emphasis on



congeniality and the sharing of pleasant activities, or “having fun.” The importance of self-disclosure advanced by Wierzbicka featured in participants’ testimonies as well, especially in the mention of “opening one’s soul.” This aspect of friendship also echoes Searle-White’s finding that people’s boundaries around the self were more permeable to friends among Russians than among Americans [5]. The notion of “open soul” runs counter to Sheets & Lugar’s results on self-disclosure [7], but as mentioned earlier, cultural reference effects may account for this discrepancy.

In contrast, the importance of trust featured less prominently in participants’ responses than Wierzbicka’s analyses would have suggested. Trust was depicted as a friendship characteristic common to both Russian and Canadian contexts. As such, participants may have considered trust to be an implicit component of friendship, taken for granted to such an extent that it does not require further elaboration. The increasingly distant influence of the Soviet period is another possible explanation of these results. In contrast to a time when trust was a matter of life and death, it may have become a less critical friendship quality as the Soviet era recedes into distant collective memories.

As a side note, participants’ drawing on Soviet history and societal changes in mobility to explain cross-cultural differences in friendship are important reminders that cultural meanings are situated not only in space, but also in time. This dimension of cultural variation is in line with a burgeoning body of work on cultural change phenomena and underlying mechanisms [36–38].

Interestingly, the theme of responsibility and the onerous nature of friendship emerged from participants’ responses, but was not present in Wierzbicka’s theorizing. Friendship in a Russian context was described as demanding, bordering on burdensome in the case of participants who mentioned preferring some aspects of the Canadian model. Such a reaction may actually be specific to migrants, reflecting their continuous engagement with two sets of cultural norms. In such life situations, people can compare and contrast different ways of being and behaving, and select those that fit best their personal preferences. This meta-perspective on one’s cultural make up [39] may come less easily to people who are fully immersed into a single cultural setting.

Nevertheless, depicting friendship as demanding is consistent with Sheets and Lugar’s findings that Russian friendship networks are smaller than American networks [7] (something participants also mentioned here) and that Russians have a lower tolerance for violations in their friendships [6]. To the extent that friendship represents a high emotional and practical investment, keep such an investment manageable requires that one chooses wisely and bestows one’s friendship on a small and select group of people. To repeat the words of one participant, it is important to “be selective”, and not “take the wrong persons” into one’s circle. Interestingly, this notion of balance between investment and



size also appeared in Plaut and Adams' investigation of friendship in Ghana [1], a very different cultural context.

More broadly, beyond their immediate significance for friendship cultural models, the present results support Wierzbicka's theorizing on the existence of cultural models underlying key terms in a language. For speakers of English and Russian, the words *friend* and *droog* do seem to call to mind different mental models of what being a friend entails. People then rely on these culturally-specific intersubjective mental models [28] to guide how they interact with friends-to-be, what they expect from a friend, what behaviors they find offensive, etc. The fairly close correspondance between linguistic structure and people's cultural models of friendship is consistent with Semin's proposal that people may extract and internalize cultural meaning through repeated engagement with their linguistic ecology [40].

Beyond their theoretical import, cultural models also have practical implications, as suggested earlier. For migrants, insufficient knowledge of local friendship cultural models may translate into unrealistic expectations from relationships or awkward interactions. In turn, these violations of friendship cultural norms may hinder the formation of lasting and fulfilling close interpersonal relationships. One participant talked about her difficulties in making close friends in Canada, which she explained as follows: "I feel like I am getting too much for them, like I'm getting too close, I'm getting too open. Or like I try to insist to invite them too much. [...] I guess sometimes I have this feeling that I'm making them scared a little bit" (female, 19 years in Canada). Her struggles poignantly illustrates the negative consequences of using the wrong cultural model in daily interactions.

**Limitations and future directions.** This study was based on the introspections of a small bicultural sample, which limits the generalizability of the results. Confirming the present findings in larger scale quantitative investigations would be an essential next step. Future research would also need to estimate how consensual friendship models are in both cultural contexts. Questions such as "to what extent do people agree on a common friendship cultural model?", "are there one or several friendship models in each cultural context?" will need to be answered.

Relying on a bicultural sample addressed issues such as cultural reference effects, but also presented some limitations. Several participants mentioned having few Canadian friends, or difficulties forming closer and more lasting friendships with Canadians. In addition, participants' length of stay in Canada ranged between 1.5 and 19 years. This may have limited their experience with the Canadian friendship model and colored their responses. Future quantitative research could address this issue by controlling for participants length of stay in the country or acculturation to the mainstream cultural context.



Finally, this study was purely descriptive, which was appropriate as a first step, but future research should look into the mechanisms underlying the differences documented here. The Canadian reserve with friends vs. Russian opening of one's soul to friends that participants described parallels the distinction between independent vs. interdependent self-construals, where sharp boundaries are drawn around the self vs. around the ingroup, respectively. These findings, which also echo Searle-White's results on personal boundaries in friendship [5], suggest that self-construals may be an interesting mechanism to probe, in order to understand what mediates the relation between cultural context and friendship models. Meanwhile, this study provided initial evidence that people's models of friendship differ between Russian and Canadian cultural contexts, in ways that are largely consistent with Wierzbicka's semantic analyses. This work thus points to a close correspondance between people's psychological cultural models and the linguistic ecologies in which they live.

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