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RUNNING HEAD: Relational mobility, culture, and self-disclosure

Relational mobility explains between- and within-culture  
differences in self-disclosure to close friends

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INSEAD

## Abstract

The current research proposes a novel explanation for previously demonstrated findings that East Asians disclose less personal information to others than do Westerners. We propose that both between- and within-culture differences in self-disclosure toward close friends may be explained by the construct of “relational mobility” – the general degree to which individuals in the society have the opportunities to form new and terminate old relationships. In Study 1, we found that cross-cultural differences (Japan vs. U.S.) in self-disclosure toward a close friend were mediated by individuals’ perceptions of relational mobility. In Study 2, two separate measures of relational mobility predicted self-disclosure within a single culture (Japan), and this relationship was mediated by the motivation to strengthen interpersonal relationships. We conclude that societies and social contexts high in relational mobility (where relationships can be formed and dissolved relatively easily) produce stronger incentives for self-disclosure as a social commitment device.

As a social species, humans have a fundamental need for the companionship of others. Over our evolutionary history we have faced various adaptive challenges, such as child-rearing, resource acquisition, and protection from predators, challenges better faced collectively than alone. Accordingly, the formation and maintenance of close relationships has been crucial to our development and existence.

But although the need for relationships may be universal, the nature of our relationships with others is profoundly impacted by culture. For example, research has demonstrated that East Asians are less likely than Westerners to disclose sensitive information about the self (Chen, 1995; Asai & Barnlund, 1998; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1983; Kito, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 1991), are often reluctant to seek social support by talking about their problems with close others in times of stress, and receive less psychological benefits from receiving social support than their European American counterparts, even when judged by physiological responses to stress (Kim, Sherman, Ko & Taylor, 2006, Taylor et al., 2004; Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007).

#### *Relational mobility and cultural differences in self-disclosure*

In the current paper, we seek to extend these findings by reinterpreting cultural differences in self-disclosure as adaptive behaviors tailored to incentives created by particular social contexts. We argue that cultural differences in self-disclosure can be understood as strategies adapted to social environments which differ in the degree to which personal relationships are formed through personal choice, or are typically afforded by environment settings (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Adams, 2005; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Such differences in social structure have been encapsulated in the recently introduced concept of “relational mobility,” defined as the degree to which individuals have opportunities to voluntarily form new and terminate old relationships in a given context (Falk et al., 2009;

Schug et al., 2009; Yuki et al., 2007). Although a relatively new theoretical construct in the psychological literature, a variety of studies have provided evidence that relational mobility is lower in East Asian cultures than in North America (for a review see Schug et al., 2009), and perceptions of relational mobility by individuals in Japan and the United States are consistent with this evidence (Falk et al., 2009; Schug et al., 2009; Yuki et al., 2007).

We propose that the amount of effort required to maintain committed relationships is greater in social contexts high in relational mobility (e.g., North America) compared those lower in relational mobility (e.g., Japan). Because of the relative freedom to form new and terminate old relationships, social commitments in high relational mobility cultures are relatively fragile. Thus, individuals must invest time and energy into maintaining their relationships, otherwise they may deteriorate and end. In societies low in relational mobility where relationships are more stable, however, there is less need to actively invest effort into maintaining relationships. Thus, relationship maintenance strategies should have less utility in low mobility contexts.

In general, relationships can be maintained by signaling commitment to one's partners. One way to do this is through self-disclosure, which is known to increase liking and intimacy in close relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Defined as the revelation of sensitive personal information to another, self-disclosure can signal commitment because it indicates a willingness to be vulnerable to the partner, a distinct marker of trust and commitment in a relationship (Mayer et al., 1995). However, the costs and benefits of self-disclosure as a relationship-strengthening strategy should vary with levels of relational mobility. In societies high in relational mobility, relationships may dissolve if not properly maintained; thus it is strategically beneficial to devote time and energy toward their explicit maintenance.

Furthermore, as new partners are generally available in such contexts, the cost of being excluded by current partners is relatively low. In contrast, in societal contexts low in relational mobility where interpersonal relationships are stable and new partners generally unavailable, there is a salient downside associated with disclosing any information which could potentially lead to negative reputation, and ultimately social exclusion. Although social exclusion is a literally painful phenomenon even in high mobility cultures (e.g., Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003) the consequences should be particularly severe in low mobility societies given the difficulty of forming new relationships, and thus the distinct possibility of continued social isolation following exclusion from any relationship or group.

We predicted that previously noted cultural differences in self-disclosure (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1991) would be explained by societal differences in relational mobility. Furthermore, because relational mobility can also vary within a single society, we predicted that relational mobility would impact self-disclosure even within a single culture, with higher levels of self-disclosure associated with an increased motivation to strengthen one's relationships.

### Study 1

In Study 1, we aimed to determine whether cultural differences in self-disclosure observed in Japan and the United States could be explained by cultural differences in relational mobility. We measured self-disclosure toward two critical targets: a close friend and a close family member. While we predicted that increased levels of relational mobility should explain higher levels of self-disclosure to a friend, it may not explain increased disclosure towards a family member because family relationships are generally inherently low in relational mobility, and therefore self-disclosure may have less utility in strengthening these relationships. Thus, we predicted that perceptions of relational mobility in one's

broader surrounding social network would mediate self-disclosure toward a close friend across cultures, rather than mediate self-disclosure to a close family member.

### *Method*

*Participants.* Seventy-four Japanese students (42 men and 32 women,  $M_{\text{age}}=18.98$ ,  $SD=.88$ ) at a large university in northern Japan and 93 students (21 men and 72 women,  $M_{\text{age}}=19.18$ ,  $SD=2.13$ ) at a large university in the midwestern United States participated in the study.

*Procedure and Materials.* Participants were told that the study was a survey on relationships. First, we measured target-specific self-disclosure tendencies by assessing the likelihood participants would disclose certain types of information to their closest friend and closest family member. As different scales have traditionally been used in Japanese and Western research on self-disclosure, we created a new partner-specific measurement based on indigenous measures such as the Self Disclosure Index (SDI: Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983) and the psychological component of the Enomoto Self-disclosure Scale (Enomoto, 1997). We then held focus groups in both countries, selecting items which were consistently identified by individuals in both cultures as likely topics of self-disclosure. The resulting measure asked participants to report how likely they would be to tell their best friend about 1) their biggest secret, 2) their most embarrassing experience, 3) their greatest failure, 4) their greatest worry, and 5) the worst thing that ever happened to them. Response options were provided on 5-point unipolar scales, with options ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 5 (*extremely likely*). Next, participants used the Subjective Closeness Index (SCI: Berscheid et al., 1989) to rate levels of closeness with both targets. Response options were provided on 10-point unipolar scales, with options ranging from 1 (*not close at all*) to 10 (*extremely close*).

We then asked participants to fill out the relational mobility scale (Falk, et al., 2009;

Schug et al., 2009; Yuki et al., 2007), a 12-item measure which asks participants to report their perceptions of relational mobility for people in their immediate environment (school, workplace, neighborhood, etc.) using a 6-point scales (options ranged from: 1 - *strongly disagree*, to 6 - *strongly agree*). Sample items include: “They (i.e., people in my immediate society) have many chances to get to know other people,” and “They can choose who they interact with.” This measure was developed simultaneously in Japanese and English, and has been shown to have similar structural and content validity in both countries (Yuki et al., 2007.)

### *Results and Discussion*

*Cultural differences across variables.* Means and reliabilities of all measures are shown in Table 1. We first conducted a 2 x 2 x 2 mixed-factorial ANOVA with country and gender as between-subject factors, target of self-disclosure (friend vs. family member) as a within-subject factor, and the amount of self-disclosure as the dependent variable.<sup>1</sup> The results showed three significant main effects. Replicating previous findings, Americans were more likely to disclose than Japanese,  $F(1,163) = 22.30, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .12$ . Second, participants were more likely to disclose to a friend than a family member,  $F(1,163) = 33.09, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .169$ . Finally, women were more likely to disclose than men,  $F(1,163) = 6.01, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .036$ . No other significant main effects or interactions were observed. Finally, consistent with previous studies (Falk et al., 2009; Schug et al., 2009; Yuki, et al., 2007) perceived levels of relational mobility as measured by the relational mobility scale were higher in the United States than in Japan  $F(1,166) = 60.83, p < .0001, \eta^2_p = .269$ . Because of the significant main effect for gender, we controlled for gender in subsequent analyses.

*Mediational effect of relational mobility.* Next, we examined the correlations between self-disclosure to each target and relational mobility (Table 2). As predicted,



relational mobility was positively correlated with self-disclosure to a friend in both cultures, but not toward a family member in either culture.

We then examined whether the cultural difference in self-disclosure toward a close friend could, as predicted, be explained by cross-societal differences in the level of relational mobility, controlling for gender and closeness (Baron & Kenny, 1986). First, we conducted a multiple regression analysis with culture predicting self-disclosure toward a close friend, controlling for gender. As noted in the above analysis, the effects of both of culture and gender were significant. However, when including relational mobility in the model, the effect of culture became non-significant, whereas the effect of relational mobility remained significant, indicating that cultural differences in self-disclosure were significantly mediated by relational mobility (Sobel's test:  $z = 2.80, p = .003$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Next, we included the measure of relational closeness into the model, to see if the effect of relational mobility would hold. Although relational closeness was greater in the United States than Japan and significantly predicted self-disclosure ( $\beta = .34, p = <.001$ ), it had no impact on the relationship between relational mobility and self-disclosure, which remained significant ( $\beta = .23, p = .003$ ), nor did it mediate cultural differences in self-disclosure itself. Thus, despite being highly correlated with both constructs, cultural differences in relationship closeness did not explain cultural differences in self-disclosure.

Overall the results of Study 1 supported our theoretical hypothesis that relational mobility can offer a novel explanation for previously demonstrated cultural differences in self-disclosure between friends.

## Study 2

Because our theoretical model proposes that differences in self-disclosure can be explained by the utility of self-disclosure as a relationship strengthening strategy in different

social environments, this finding should not be limited to comparisons between particular cultures. Indeed, there can also be within-culture variability in relational mobility which can in turn impact the function of self-disclosure. Some support for this notion can be found in Study 1, as relational mobility was positively correlated with self-disclosure toward friends within both Japan and the United States.

Thus, in Study 2, we examined the hypothesis that the utility of using self-disclosure as a relationship-strengthening strategy would be determined by the variability of relational mobility within a single culture. Furthermore, because Study 1 examined individuals' *perceptions* of relational mobility, we included a self-relevant measure of relational mobility by asking participants to report the number of new acquaintances they actually had met in the recent past. This measure, which we refer to as "personal relational mobility," is advantageous in the sense that it provides a history of the amount of opportunities individuals had to form new relationships rather than their general perception of the availability (or lack of availability) of new relationship partners in their local society.

Across both measures, we predicted relational mobility would be positively related to self-disclosure toward a close friend, but not a close family member. Furthermore, we predicted that the relationship between relational mobility and self-disclosure toward a close friend would be mediated by the motivation to strengthen relationships through self-disclosure.

### *Method*

*Participants.* Ninety-four Japanese (29 female and 65 male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 18.90$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = .66$ ) students from a northern Japanese university participated in exchange for a monetary reward. As the ability to form new relationships is likely greater at the beginning of a school semester, we collected data near the end of the school year when relationships would be

comparatively stable.

*Measures.* Participants filled out the same measure of self-disclosure used in Study 1 toward both a friend and a family member. Furthermore, in order to measure the motivation to engage in self-disclosure to strengthen one's relationships, we asked participants to rate the importance of several motivations in deciding whether or not to disclose personal information to other people. Response options used a 5-point scale (1: *strongly disagree* to 5: *strongly agree*), with five items including: "Telling others about my problems is a good way to strengthen relationships with others" and "People like me when I trust them enough to tell them about my personal problems." We also included, as in Study 1, the perceived relational mobility scale (Schug et al., 2009; Yuki et al., 2007), as well as a measurement of personal relational mobility. For this latter measure, we asked participants to report the number of new friends and acquaintances that they had formed in the past month, as well as over the past three months.

### *Results and Discussion*

*Relational mobility and self-disclosure within Japan.* Summary statistics and scale reliabilities are presented in Table 3. To assess personal relational mobility, because we had measured the number of new friend and/or acquaintances formed over the past month and past three months, we divided the number of new acquaintances made over the past 3 months by three and calculated the mean of the two variables ( $M = 4.8$  acquaintances).<sup>3</sup>

Next, we examined the correlations between both measures of relational mobility and self-disclosure to each target. Mirroring the results of Study 1, the relational mobility scale was positively correlated with self-disclosure to a close friend ( $r = .23, p = .03$ ), but not to a family member ( $r = .00, ns$ ). Strikingly similar correlations were found with the measure of personal relational mobility and self-disclosure toward a friend ( $r = .22, p = .03$ ), and a

family member ( $r = -.04$ , *ns*), as well as between the motivation to strengthen relationships and self-disclosure to a friend ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) and a family member ( $r = .08$ , *ns*). Finally, both the relational mobility scale and personal relational mobility were positively correlated with the motivation to strengthen one's relationships through self-disclosure ( $r = .22$ ,  $p = .036$  and  $r = .27$ ,  $p = .007$ , respectively).

*The mediating effect of relationship strengthening motivations.* Next, we conducted a series of analyses to determine if the relationship between relational mobility and self-disclosure to a friend could, as predicted, be explained by the motivation to strengthen one's relationships (see Figures 2 and 3). As reported above, self-disclosure toward a friend was significantly predicted by the relational mobility scale ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p = .03$ ) and personal relational mobility ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p = .03$ ). However, when the variable representing the motivation to strengthen relationships through self-disclosure was included in the model, the effect of both the relational mobility scale and personal relational mobility became non-significant, while the motivation to strengthen relationships remained significant. This was true for both the relational mobility scale (Sobel's test:  $z = 1.92$ ,  $p = .054$ ), as well as personal relational mobility (Sobel's test:  $z = 1.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, the effect of relational mobility (as assessed by two distinct measurements) on self-disclosure was mediated by the motivation to strengthen relationships.

### General Discussion

The two studies presented here offer a novel and parsimonious explanation for between- and within-culture variation in self-disclosure toward close friends. In Study 1, we found that between-culture differences in self-disclosure towards close friends in Japan and the United States were mediated by the levels of relational mobility in each country. In both countries, perceived levels of relational mobility in the local environment were positively

related to disclosure to a friend, but not to a family member. This finding was replicated in Study 2 using two different measures of relational mobility in Japan. Even within a single culture, individuals in social environments high in relational mobility reported engaging in higher levels of self-disclosure, and did so in order to strengthen their interpersonal relationships.

We believe the findings and theoretical perspective presented here are consistent with work on how culture impacts social support seeking in times of stress (Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2007). Such research has shown that compared to European Americans, Asians and Asian Americans seek less social support in times of stress due to concerns about damaging existing relationships. The current work hypothesized and found that desire to strengthen relationships was critical to explaining levels of self-disclosure toward a close friend. However, it is certainly plausible that concerns about damaging existing relationships are concurrently activated, particularly at the lower end of the relational mobility continuum. Indeed such a motivation is highly consistent with the current framework, and it behooves future research to investigate the influence of both motivations on personal relationships formed in various socio-ecological contexts.

Interestingly, subjective levels of closeness with one's friend were higher in the United States than in Japan, and although closeness was highly correlated with self-disclosure in both cultures, it did not mediate cultural differences in self-disclosure. *Prima facie*, this result seems to contradict traditional thinking regarding the impact of culture on the self, given that East Asian cultures are seen as more interdependent and relationship-oriented (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). The current results suggest that interdependence is distinct from concepts in the relationships literature such as closeness and intimacy. Thus, our findings add an additional layer of complexity to concepts

in the culture literature by showing that there may actually be greater intimacy in certain types of relationships in independent as opposed to interdependent cultures (e.g., Adams, 2005; Adams & Plaut, 2003).

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

One potential limitation of the current research is that we examined Japanese samples in Hokkaido, thought by some to be a relatively individualistic area of Japan (Kitayama et al., 2006). Although much research has shown reliable cultural differences comparing Western samples with Hokkaido Japanese (e.g., Maddux & Yuki, 2006; Masuda et al., 2008, Yamagishi et al., 2008; Yuki, Maddux, Brewer & Takemura, 2005), and although we believe this sample allowed us to make a conservative test of our hypothesis, it would behoove future research to examine the present findings in other areas of Japan (and North America). Another limitation is that the current study used a correlational paradigm to demonstrate mediation, which does not allow for a precise demonstration of causality. Thus, future studies should use experimental manipulations to explicitly demonstrate the causal role of relational mobility in determining self-disclosure. And although our self-report measure of self-disclosure is consistent with those used past research (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 1998), it would be helpful to try to measure actual self-disclosure in future research, since it is possible that the self-report measures may have created demand characteristics. For example, it may be that individuals in individualistic, self-enhancing cultures like the U.S., self-disclosure and personal mobility are more socially desirable than they are for Japanese, and thus inflated their judgments of both; however, we believe the within-culture findings in Study 2 speak against this possibility. Finally, although we found and controlled for significant gender differences emerged in Study 1, because of the relatively low number of women in our Japanese sample, low statistical power may have prevented the detection of an

interaction effect between culture and gender. Future research should examine gender and its potential interaction with cultural differences in self-disclosure more closely.

*Understanding culture from a socio-ecological perspective*

We believe that the current findings highlight the value of examining cultural differences from a socio-ecological perspective. From this viewpoint, “culture-specific” behaviors are not seen as necessarily arising from differences in predominant values or beliefs (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995); rather, cultural differences are characterized as different adaptive strategies (both conscious and not) tailored toward producing desirable outcomes in a particular social environment. Although largely neglected in the psychological literature, more recent research has seen an increased focus on the impact of socio-ecological factors on behavior (Mastumoto, 2007; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Oishi & Graham, 2009; Oishi et al., 2007; Uskul, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2008; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994; Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008). For example, Uskul and colleagues (2008) recently examined basic perceptual tendencies for different occupations in Turkey (herders vs. farmers) and found that, within a single culture, herding was associated with analytic perception, and farming with holistic perception.

Because our main hypothesis assumed that socio-ecological incentives (rather than individual values) elicit differences in self-disclosure tendencies, the primary scale used to measure relational mobility in Study 1 and 2 assessed participant’s *perceptions* of the opportunities for individuals in their local society to conditionally form new and terminate old relationships. While this scale is not intended to assess individuals’ actual movement between relationships (which could be impacted by many other factors such as the one’s value as a potential partner), the fact that we obtained similar mediational results in Study 2 measuring both perceived relational mobility and the reported number of new acquaintances

which participants formed in the recent past suggests that perceptions and individual behavior are intertwined.

While past research on cultural differences has firmly demonstrated the importance of internalized norms, values, and beliefs in explaining cultural differences (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995), we believe that novel insights can be gleaned by examining how structural incentives elicit strategies necessary to thrive in different cultural environments. This is, however, not to imply that socio-ecological and incentive-based approaches are inherently separate and distinct from cultural approaches. Indeed, the two are likely mutually constructive—different types of ecologies and social structures lead to specific incentives which encourage individuals to behave in a manner adapted to these contexts. This will frequently lead to cultural variation in values and beliefs, which in turn reinforce and shape social and ecological systems, creating a self-reinforcing system of incentives, beliefs, and behaviors (Aoki, 2001; Cohen, 2001; Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008). We believe that by understanding how culturally divergent behavior is adapted to different social ecologies, we can understand the mechanisms behind both cultural differences as well as understand how macro-level level factors exogenous to individuals can impact both individual behavior and psychological functioning.

Furthermore, while traditional cross-cultural research often conflates nation and culture (Georgas & Berry, 1995; Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006), we believe the current approach can offer a novel perspective about the behavior and psychological functioning of individuals in differing social contexts. By examining social behavior in terms of adaptive strategies, we believe that socio-ecological approaches can help facilitate synergies with other disciplines in the natural and social sciences, many of which view the behavior of humans and other species in terms of adaptation to natural and social environments.



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Table 1. Means and standard deviations by country. Italicized F-values control for gender.

Study 1.

	<i>Japan n=74</i>		<i>US n=93</i>		<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$
	<i><math>\alpha</math></i>	<i>m(sd)</i>	<i><math>\alpha</math></i>	<i>M (sd)</i>		
Relational Mobility	.66	3.79 (.48)	.76	4.41 (.54)	60.83***	.269
Self-Disclosure						
Friend	.88	3.46 (.98)	.89	4.15 (.83)	13.39***	.131
Family Member	.86	2.80 (1.05)	.90	3.61 (.99)	19.12***	.136
Closeness	<i>r</i>		<i>r</i>			
Friend	.75	7.64 (1.61)	.80	8.44 (1.44)	5.67*	.066
Family Member	.85	7.56 (1.91)	.70	7.92 (1.68)	1.27 ns	.009

†*p* <.10 \* *p* <.05 \*\* *p* <.01 \*\*\* *p* <.001

Table 2. Intercorrelations among variables, Study 1.

JAPAN	1	2	3	4
1. Disclosure to Friend				
2. Disclosure to Family Member	.38***			
3. Closeness to Friend	.35***	-.08		
4. Closeness to Family Member	.08	.47***	.18	
5. Relational Mobility	.29*	.13	.14	.18
US	1	2	3	4
1. Disclosure to Friend				
2. Disclosure to Family Member	.30**			
3. Closeness to Friend	.43***	.23*		
4. Closeness to Family Member	.06	.60***	.28**	
5. Relational Mobility	.27*	.12	.18†	.07

† $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 3. Means, reliabilities, and intercorrelations among variables, Study 2.

	$\alpha$	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Disclosure to Friend	.84	3.46	.86				
2. Disclosure to Family Member	.86	2.72	.96	.19 <sup>†</sup>			
3. Motivation to Strengthen Relationship	.77	3.11	.82	.46***	.08		
4. Relational Mobility Scale	.76	3.65	.58	.23*	-.00	.22*	
5. Personal Relational Mobility		4.80	5.68	.22*	-.04	.27*	.22*

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

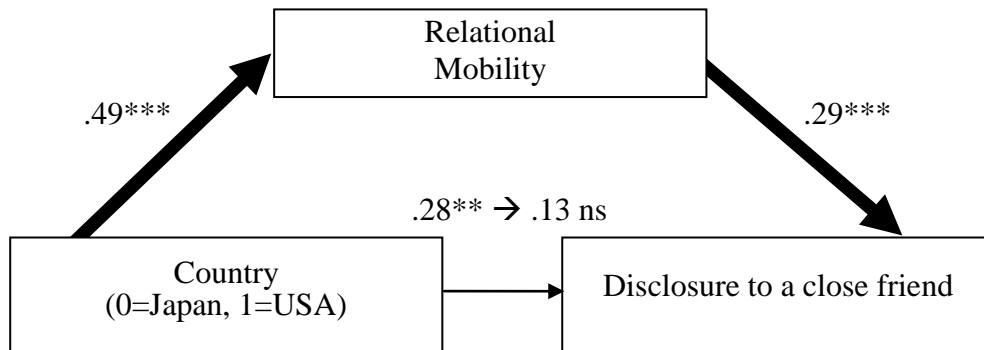


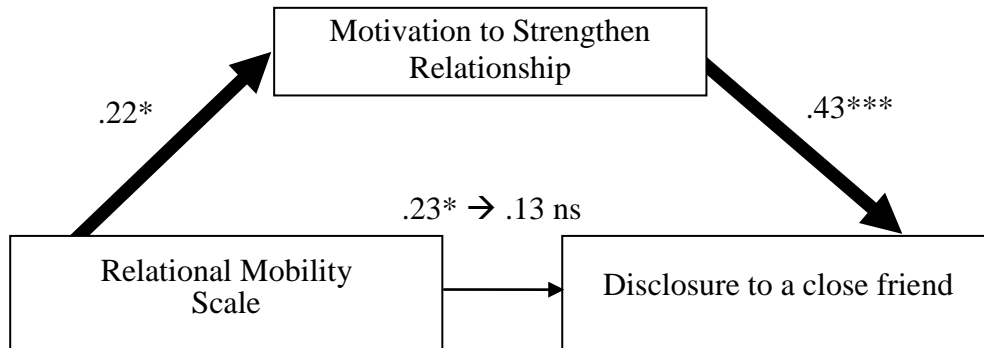
Figure Captions:

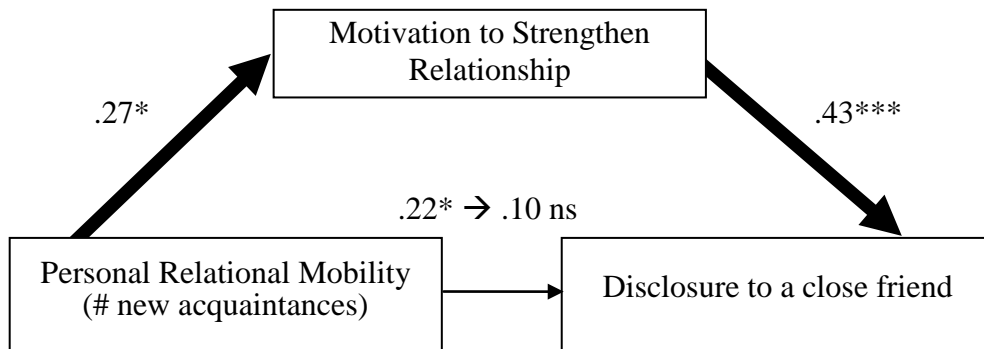
Figure 1: The mediating effect of relational mobility on intimate self-disclosure toward a close friend. Standardized regression coefficients are presented, Study 1.

Figure 2: The mediating effect of relationship strengthening motivation on the relationship between personal relational mobility and disclosure to a close friend. Standardized regression coefficients are presented, Study 2.

Figure 3: The mediating effect of relationship strengthening motivation on the relationship between perceived relational mobility and disclosure to a close friend. Standardized regression coefficients are presented, Study 2.







Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Self-disclosure was higher in the US than Japan ( $t$ 's(165) $>2.29$ ,  $p$ 's $<.02$ ) for all five self-disclosure items; thus; subsequent results were computed using the mean of all items.

<sup>2</sup> Although there was a main effect for gender on self-disclosure, there were no gender differences in relational mobility, and relational mobility did not mediate gender differences in self-disclosure.

<sup>3</sup> As the distribution was positively skewed, we computed a square root transformation to normalize the distribution, and use the resulting variable in subsequent analysis.