Yetty and Matt were a young couple in love. They met at a college in Melbourne where they studied together. It didn’t take long for them to become not just friends, but boyfriend and girlfriend.

Matt was an atheist Anglo-Australian, and Yetty a Muslim ethnic Makasaresse from South Sulawesi. Matt was probably just ignorant about the existence of religion, and Yetty’s religiosity was perhaps a matter of keeping the family religious tradition.

They travelled together to visit various parts of Indonesia, and of course, to Yetty’s home town of Ujung Pandang, previously known as Makasar, the capital of the Province of South Sulawesi. As part of their Sulawesi trip, they also visited Tana Toraja, a place famous for its death rituals.

While in Ujung Pandang, one late afternoon when the sun was slowly setting, Yetty and Matt took a becak (passenger tricycle) from the city centre to Yetty’s family home in Jalan Cendrawasih.

Matt, fluent in Bahasa Indonesia, began a conversation with the becak driver, while Yetty became lost in thought as she soaked in the sights and sounds of the busy streets.

Although Matt and the becak driver were speaking the same language, their conversation, which began with a simple introduction, illuminated an interesting difference in concepts of relationships.

Matt initiated the conversation by introducing himself in Indonesian. ‘Kenalkan, saya Matt, dan ini teman saya, Yetty.’ (Let me introduce myself, I am Matt, and this is my friend, Yetty). Immediately, the becak driver replied in disbelief, ‘Teman?, ndak percaya, ndak mungkin dia teman.’ (Friend?, I don’t believe it, it’s impossible that she’s your friend).

Matt was confused, while Yetty was busy enjoying the slow becak ride with the gentle breeze on her dark long straight hair. The street was filled with becaks and motor vehicles, and at the edge of the street there were people, shops, restaurants and the pedagang kaki lima (the five legged traders).

‘Mengapa ndak percaya? Mengapa Yetty bukan teman saya?’, asked Matt. (Why don’t you believe it? Why isn’t Yetty my friend?). ‘Sungguh, Yetty teman saya!’, affirmed Matt. (Really, Yetty is my friend!). With confidence the becak driver replied, ‘Yetty pacar kamu!, Yetty bukan teman kamu!’ (Yetty is your girlfriend!, Yetty is not your friend!). Matt answered, ‘Ya, Yetty pacar saya, dan Yetty teman saya!’ (Yes, Yetty is my girlfriend, and Yetty is my friend!).

This time the becak driver was very confused, as he simply could not comprehend the idea of a person being both a teman (friend) and pacar (girlfriend or boyfriend), existing together at the same time. It was impossible, but if possible, it was a contradiction, the becak driver seemed to think.

Matt was also confused why the becak driver could not understand, and why Yetty could not be his friend and girlfriend at the same time. To Matt, it
was not only a possibility but a necessity that a partner is also a friend. Isn’t being a pacar and teman the ideal relationship?

Matt was left to ponder, but surely he was not alone to contemplate the significance of the dialogue. The becak driver too sank deeply into his thoughts. There was silence, the conversation ended. The becak continued to travel slowly until it stopped at the front of Yetty’s family’s brick home. The becak driver received his remuneration and left, after offering a good-bye hand-shake, with a smile on his face. Such is the story, and such was the dialogue.

What was really in the minds of these two young men, a Makasaresse and an Anglo-Australian, who were engaging in an interesting dialogue? What did Yetty think of them and their conversation? What did Yetty think of herself and her relationship with Matt? Such an exchange of concepts reflects different realities in different given cultures.

It is clear from the dialogue that the becak driver seemed to think that pacar (girlfriend or boyfriend) is the “opposite sex” of teman (friend). They are different, and thus should be treated differently. Pacar is pacar, and teman is teman. Yetty can only be either one, pacar or teman, but cannot be both, pacar and teman. Matt obviously thinks the opposite.

It is interesting to imagine how both, Matt and the becak driver, felt at the time. Yetty probably did not feel much sense of meaning of such an exchange of concepts, as she sank into her own business of enjoying the ride and the street scenery.

The dialogue between Matt and the becak driver above raises two interesting inter-related questions to explore. What constitutes friendship and relationship? Who can be considered a friend and who a girlfriend or boyfriend?

On the surface the conversation, as narrated above, seems to (re)present two contrasting viewpoints. One inclines to perceive that teman and pacar are of two opposing identifications, while another view identifies both as of the same entity. There is, however, no clear indication in the conversation about the degree and frequency of the differences and similarities of the two socially identified roles and beings. If they are different, are they always different, and to what extent? If they are of the same thing, do they remain unchanged?

It is probable that for practical and psychological reasons a woman may not want to “go out” with a man who happens to be a close friend, in case the “relationship” fails, and the friendship too would be affected. It may also be socially (culturally) conditioned that this woman sees the clear distinction between teman and pacar.

Such a distinction, to an extent exists, and sometimes leads to the belief that the person once called a friend ceases to exist when he or she becomes boyfriend or girlfriend. What then do people think of a “relationship” and friendship?

Certainly the becak driver does not speak on behalf of millions of others in Indonesia, yet there is something that seems common in what some in Indonesia still think today about friendship and “serious” romantic relationship.

It may be common in every society that pacar or pacaran (courtship) is an introductory and preparatory step before the more serious affair of engagement, and leading to a married life. In the context of village adat
(customary law), all the stages, from pacaran (courtship) to the wedding, form an adat passage and package which should be taken seriously. There are adat sanctions too when the parties involved fail the process.

Pacar is a serious business, teman is less serious. Perhaps, this is what the becak driver meant, that Matt cannot be serious and casual at the same time concerning his relationship with Yetty.

It is thus hoped that this writing stimulates some further thinking and research about cross-cultural concepts and issues concerning relationships, in the endeavour to find commonalities between those engaging in a relationship. To say that a girlfriend or boyfriend is not a friend is thus a matter of conceptual interpretation.

Matt and the becak driver may represent different viewpoints that challenge us to reconsider notions of friendships and relationships. Their simple conversation shows that cross-cultural relations can bring surprises, and hopefully open discourse can aid mutual understanding between peoples regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religious and cultural conviction.
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