Friends as Rivals: Perceptions of Attractiveness Predict Mating Rivalry in Female Friendships

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Background
Substantial research has documented that same-sex friends are similar in their sexual attitudes, social attitudes, activities, and interests and values (e.g., Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006; Kandel, 1978). Limited research also suggests that friends might be similar in physical attractiveness (Feingold, 1988). Our first objective was to test that possibility indirectly by investigating similarity in friends’ perceptions of their physical attractiveness.

Second, we tested the hypothesis that women are positively biased in their perceptions of their friends’ attractiveness relative to other women. To cause women to perceive their friends as more attractive when placed in direct comparison with their friend, women would show less enhancement bias about their friend’s level of attractiveness. Finally, we tested the hypothesis that within a given friendship pair, the less attractive friend would perceive more mating rivalry in their friendship.

Method
Sample
Forty-six pairs of female friends participated. Their mean age was 19.5 years; the typical pair had been friends for 22 months.

Materials and Procedure
Female friends (“Friend A” and “Friend B”) attended the session together, and were then separated for questionnaire completion. As part of a broader questionnaire about themselves and their same-sex friend, participants completed four self-report questionnaires scattered throughout.

- A self-desirability assessment, which included questions such as, “Compared with other women your age, how physically attractive are you?” The nine-point scale ranged from Much Less Attractive to Much More Attractive.

- A friend desirability assessment, which included questions such as, “Compared with other women her age, how physically attractive is your friend?” The nine-point scale ranged from Much Less Attractive to Much More Attractive.

- An assessment of the participant’s perception that various forms of confluence and conflict occur in the friendship. Embedded within eight varied statements were those assessing mating rivalry (e.g., “She flirts with guys I am interested in,” and “It is harder to meet guys when she is around”). The seven-point scale ranged from Disagree Entirely to Agree Entirely.

- A direct comparison of self and friend’s desirability, including the following item: “Which of the following best describes how you and your friend compare in physical attractiveness?” The seven-point scale ranged from I Am Much More Attractive to She Is Much More Attractive.

Results
Our first hypothesis was that female friends would be similar in their level of physical attractiveness. We supported this indirectly: Female friends’ self-perceived levels of attractiveness were moderately correlated, r(46) = .36, p < .05.

The figure at left displays the results of tests of our second hypothesis, that women would be biased about their friends’ attractiveness. We tested mean ratings of self and friend against an assumed population mean of 5.0 (midpoint of the 1-9 scale). As shown in the bars on the left side of the figure, participants were biased about their own attractiveness. As shown in the bars on the right side, participants were even more biased about their friends’ attractiveness, t(46) > 3.00, p < .001. (Note: Error bars in this figure and those to follow represent 95% CI of the mean.)

Our third hypothesis was that women would be less biased about their friends’ level of attractiveness when it was placed in direct comparison with their own. To test this hypothesis, we compared women’s evaluation of their friends (relative to themselves) against a population mean of 4 (midpoint of the 1-7 scale, represented by “We’re the same”). As displayed in the figure to the left, the hypothesis was partially supported. Friend A’s ratings showed a continued bias, with ratings of friend versus self well above the midpoint of the scale (M = 4.65; one-sample t(45) = 3.64, p < .001). However, in support of the hypothesis, Friend B’s ratings of friend versus self no longer held a bias toward friend (M = 4.33; one-sample t(45) = 1.98, p > .05). Thus, although these women perceived their friends as above average compared to other women (as noted in Hypothesis 2), they did not perceive their friends as more attractive than themselves.

Our final hypothesis was that within friendship pairs, the less attractive friend would perceive more rivalry in the friendship. To test this hypothesis, we first recorded participants’ responses to indicate whether they perceived their friend as more attractive, or themselves as equally or more attractive than their friend. Then we looked at the 30 of 45 cases in which the two friends agreed about which friend was more attractive. As shown in the figure to the left, in the 13 cases in which the friends agreed that Friend A was more attractive, Friend B reported more mating rivalry in the friendship (friend A minus friend B rivalry M = .94, SD = 1.60; one-sample t > 2.21, p = .026). In the 17 cases in which the friends agreed that Friend B was more attractive, Friend A reported more mating rivalry in the friendship (Friend A minus Friend B rivalry M = .76, SD = 1.51; one-sample t = 2.09, p = .027).

Discussion
In this study, we documented for the first time that women friends are similar in self-perceived attractiveness. Past research has documented that women friends have similar attitudes about sexual relationships (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006), and that the links between friends’ attractiveness and mating rivalry are apparent in their friends. We also noted that women who perceive themselves as less attractive than their friend experience more mating rivalry in their friendship. Together, our findings suggest that although women friends may be similar in attractiveness, one friend can still be more attractive than the other – and friendship dynamics may be tied to that comparison. In previous studies, young adult men and women reported experiencing mating rivalry in their friendships, and they also perceived that rivalry as costly. Is the cost of rivalry that might go along with having a more attractive friend outweighed by its benefits such as attracting desirable men? Again, one step to unraveling the links between rivalry and attractiveness in friendship will involve comparisons from outside ratings. We expect that for a friend rivalry pair, the woman whose partner perceived as less attractive will be more likely than the other to report experiencing mating rivalry in their friendship.

References

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