

Benefit or Burden?

Attraction in Emerging and Middle-aged Adults' Cross-sex Friendships

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Study 1: Attraction Within Cross-Sex Friend Dyads

Theoretical Background

The degree to which romantic and sexual attraction manifest in cross-sex friendships varies, as do the proffered explanations for the existence of attraction. We propose that, because cross-sex friendships may be historically recent, men's and women's evolved mating strategies are activated in the context of cross-sex friendships and influence, at least in part, men's and women's cross-sex friendship experiences. If evolved mating mechanisms are activated in the context of a cross-sex friendship, then our predictions about interactions between cross-sex friends should follow from research and theory on the structure of men's and women's mating strategies. For example, we expect to see findings among cross-sex friends that reflect men's heightened short-term mating desires: We predict that men will experience more attraction to their female friends than women will to their male friends (e.g., Bleske & Buss, 2000), that men will overestimate how attracted their friends are to them (e.g., Koenig, Kirkpatrick, & Ketelaar, 2007), and that men's sexual attraction to their friends will be similarly strong regardless of their own (or their friend's) current relationship involvement.

Study 1 Objectives

A number of past studies have documented a higher level of attraction among men than among women to their cross-sex friends (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001; Kaplan & Keys, 1997). The existing research devoted to the topic of attraction in cross-sex friendship is limited, however, because most studies do not include both sides of the story, that is, reports from both members of the friendship pairs. Although participants generally are asked to report on a platonic friend of the opposite sex who is neither a dating partner nor family member (e.g., Bleske & Buss, 2000), it is possible that the robust sex difference in attraction may be a product of men and women having a different "type" of friend in mind when they are asked to report on a cross-sex friend. In the current study, therefore, we systematically survey both members of the friendship to remove this possibility.

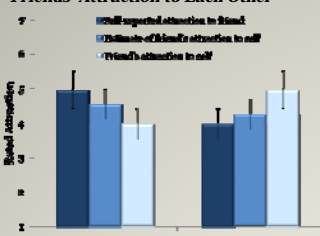
Study 1 Method

Study 1 participants were men and women from the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire who attended a research session. In return for credit toward a course requirement, with a friend of the opposite sex. The typical friendship was 2 years in duration (range: 2 weeks to 17 years). The research participation form requested that participants attend with a friend who was not a family member or romantic partner, and participants' responses on the study questionnaire confirmed that no friendship pairs were dating couples. Upon being placed in separate rooms, participants completed a questionnaire. At various points in the larger questionnaire, participants reported on their own relationship history and current relationship status, their physical and sexual attraction toward their friend as well as desire to date their friend, and perceived level of attraction from their friend toward them and perceived desire from friend to date them.

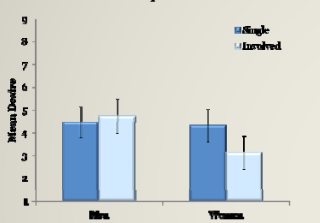
Study 1 Results and Discussion

On average, and as seen in prior studies, men reported more attraction to their female friends than women did to their male friends. This difference remained sizeable and significant after controlling for men's greater interest in short-term sexual opportunities. Moreover, although men apparently were aware that their friend was less attracted to them than they were to their friend, men still overestimated their friend's level of attraction to them. Neither men's nor women's attraction to friend was associated with their own relationship status. Also, as shown at right, men reported moderate desire to date their friend regardless of whether they themselves were involved and regardless of whether their cross-sex friend was already involved. Women, on the other hand, reported a lower level of desire to be involved with their friend if either they or their friend was already involved in a romantic relationship. We speculate that, given sex differences in sexual strategies and in the sexual and romantic opportunities in cross-sex friendship, women in particular may be more likely to develop new cross-sex friendships when single than when involved, whereas men will develop new cross-sex friendships at a similar rate across varying levels of romantic involvement.

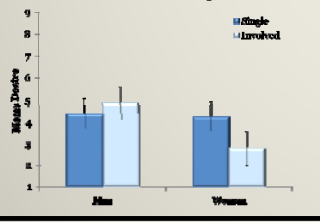
Friends' Attraction to Each Other



Desire to Date Friend as a Function of Own Relationship Status

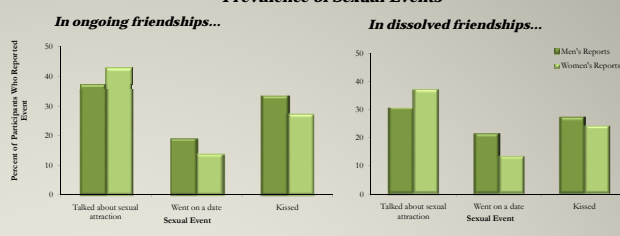


Desire to Date Friend as a Function of Friend's Relationship Status

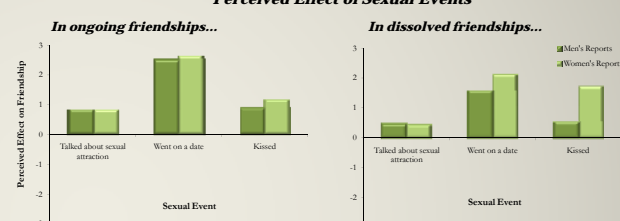


Study 2: Interview Reports of Sexual Events in Cross-sex Friendships

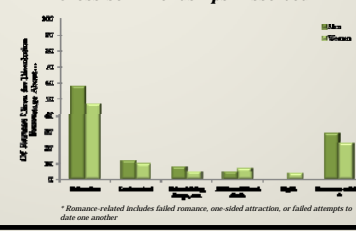
Prevalence of Sexual Events



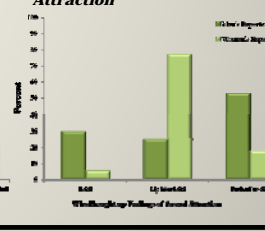
Perceived Effect of Sexual Events



Men's and Women's Reports of Why Cross-sex Friendships Dissolved



Men's and Women's Differing Opinions on Who Brings up Attraction



Study 2 Objectives

Study 1 showed that although men report more attraction to their cross-sex friends than women do, both men and women experience attraction to their opposite-sex friends. Sometimes it leads to sexual activity between friends (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000). How does the occurrence of these events alter the quality of the friendship? Sometimes the event may have positive consequences; in one study, two thirds of subjects who engaged in sexual activity with a friend believed it enhanced the friendship (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000). Conversely, sometimes the changes may be detrimental to the friendship. Friends who engage in sexual activity may not always be clear on its meaning, and when one friend desires more than the other does, relationship conflict may ensue (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). A clear picture of how often sexual events occur and their perceived consequences requires data on both ongoing and dissolved friendships. If sexual events have a negative impact on cross-sex friendship, dissolved friendships should be more likely than ongoing friendships to have involved sexual events.

Study 2 Method

A total of 53 women and 25 men from UWEC participated in this study. All were heterosexual. Participants underwent structured, one-on-one interviews with same-sex student researchers. Participants answered a set of questions about the friendship history, including attraction and sexual and romantic involvement, of two current and two previous opposite-sex friends. Current friendships were randomly selected from a list generated by participants. Past friendships had dissolved within the previous five years. For each sexual event (talking about sexual attraction, going on a romantic date, kissing), participants reported how many times the event occurred (if it had) and the duration of their friendship when the event first happened (and in the attraction discussion, who initiated it). Participants rated the perceived effects of events on their friendships on an 11-point Likert-type scale (-5 = Very negative to 0 = No effect to +5 = Very positive). Participants reported whether their friendships remained intact after the events and if participants felt the events led to romantic involvement.

Study 2 Results and Discussion

In approximately 1/3 of emerging adults' friendships, both past and ongoing, friends had kissed. Even more had talked about sexual attraction, which men and women did not perceive as affecting the friendship as positively as did the other events. Perhaps kissing and dating occur when attraction is mutual, but the discussion of sexual attraction is needed first to determine whether the attraction is, in fact, mutual. Our data from Study 1 certainly suggest that attraction is not always mutual, as do the data shown in the graph at left, in which men and women clearly disagree about how often "both friends" bring up feelings of attraction in their friendship. Although men and women overall do not perceive sexual events as having had a negative effect on their friendships at the time of their occurrence, romance-related issues are the second most commonly cited reason (behind physical distance/relocation) for friendship dissolutions.

Studies 3 and 4: Emerging and Middle-aged Adults' Perceptions of Costs and Benefits

Studies 3 and 4 Objectives

The results of Studies 1 and 2 suggest that attraction is common in emerging adults' cross-sex friendships. Although mating issues were commonly cited as a reason for women ending adult men and women overall did not perceive attraction or sexual events in their friendships as negatively impacting their friendships. These findings are limited to emerging adults, for whom cross-sex friendships may serve as a launch pad for future romantic relationships. For middle-aged adults, who are typically married or at least seriously committed to a partner, attraction may be perceived more as a burden than as a benefit. In Studies 3 and 4, we test the prediction that middle-aged adults will continue to report attraction in their friendships but that they will perceive it as more of a burden than a cost, and that they will perceive it as more burdensome than will emerging adults.

Studies 3 and 4 Method

Participants in the young adult sample were 42 men and 65 women ages 18 to 23 (mean = 19.34 years) from UWEC. The middle-aged adult sample included 52 men and 90 women ages 27 to 32 (mean = 37.37 years). The middle-aged adults represented a 44% response rate from an initial country-wide post mailing.

As part of a broader questionnaire on friendship networks in adulthood, participants responded to several open-ended items about the ways in which their friendships enhanced their lives (or were beneficial to them) and complicated their lives (or were costly to them). On up to ten blank lines, participants provided the most beneficial and then the most costly aspects of their current and recent same-sex and cross-sex friendships. Participants reported in detail about a specific opposite-sex friend, such as how they became friends, reasons for maintaining the friendship, and romantic attraction to the friend.

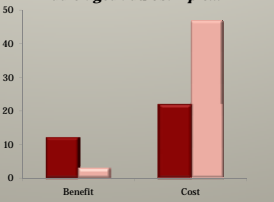
Studies 3 and 4 Results and Discussion

The findings from Studies 3 and 4 highlight the consistency with which men and women – now including middle-aged men and women – report issues of mating and attraction in their cross-sex friendships. Although middle-aged adults reported lower levels of attraction to their friends than did emerging adults, for both men and women in that age group holding feelings of attraction for their cross-sex friend was tied to lower levels of satisfaction with their current romantic partner (typically a spouse). If men tend to experience attraction to their friends and if men also have some idea of how their partner's male friends' minds operate, then cross-sex friendships should be accompanied by jealousy issues (see graph at far right). Finally, in both age groups, men more than women nominated mating desires (e.g., "I feel attracted to my friend") as a benefit of cross-sex friendships; women more often than men nominated mating desires as a cost, and overall participants nominated mating desires as a cost more often than as a benefit.

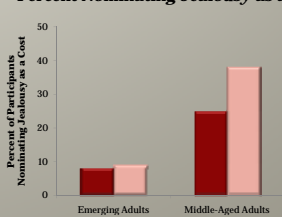
Percent Nominating Mating Desires as a Benefit or Cost In emerging adult sample...



Percent Nominating Mating Desires as a Benefit or Cost In middle-aged adult sample...



Percent Nominating Jealousy as a Cost



Links between attraction to cross-sex friend and (dis)satisfaction in current mateship

	Degree of Romantic Attraction Toward Friend	Importance of Attraction for Maintaining the Friendship	Satisfaction in Current Romantic Relationship
Degree of Romantic Attraction Toward Friend	—	.70**	-.49*
Importance of Attraction for Maintaining the Friendship	.84**	—	.15
Satisfaction in Current Romantic Relationship	-.46**	-.39**	—
	-.25*	-.31**	

Note. Emerging adults are above the main diagonal; middle-aged adults below. In each cell, males are in the top row and females are in the bottom row.

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