ATTRACTION AND ATTRACTIVENESS IN MALE-FEMALE DYADS: DO DATING COUPLES DIFFER FROM CROSS-SEX FRIENDS?

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BACKGROUND

- Heterosexual dating partners tend to be similarly attractive.1,2 They are also highly attracted to one another; and both men and women rate their partners as more attractive than they rate themselves.1,4

- Less is known about attractiveness and perceptions of attractiveness among heterosexual cross-sex friendship dyads, although a common finding is that men report more attraction toward their female friends than women do toward their male friends.3

- In the current study, we aimed to (1) replicate the finding that men are more attracted than women are to their cross-sex friends; (2) investigate variability within each sex in attraction to cross-sex friends; and (3) determine whether friends – like romantic relationship partners – rate their partners as more attractive than they rate themselves.

- We also aimed to determine whether discrepancies in friends’ attraction to one another were related to discrepancies in friends’ perceptions of one another’s attractiveness.

METHOD

- Past research on friendship has utilized a “bring a friend to the lab” design; in the current study, we approached male-female dyads in a social environment to increase ecological validity of our data.

- Two researchers, themselves a dyad, approached male-female dyads at the university student union and asked them if they were interested in participating in a study “for the Psychology Department.”

- Upon consent, each member of the dyad independently completed a survey about their perceptions of their own attractiveness relative to others of their same sex and age, their counterpart’s attractiveness relative to others of the same age and sex, and their attraction to the other. All attractiveness and attraction ratings were on 7-point scales, not at all to extremely, and much less to extremely.

- Each member of the dyad also reported the status of their relationship: just friends, in a romantic relationship, or other (e.g., “It’s complicated”).

- Finally, we photographed each dyad and asked for their permission to use their photographs in the research, specifically by having judges from another university rate their attractiveness (data not yet in).

RESULTS

As shown in the figure at right, men in cross-sex friendships did not report significantly more attraction toward their cross-sex friends than women did. (t(39) = 1.64, p = .106, d = .26). Both men and women in cross-sex friendships reported less attraction toward their partner than did men and women in romantic relationships, whose attraction toward their partner was ceiling. (t(38) = 1.14, p = .264, d = .19)

PANEL 1: ATTRACTION

- The four histograms below show that men’s and women’s reports of attraction toward their cross-sex friends varied widely, whereas among dating couples, nearly all men and women reported very high levels of attraction toward their romantic partner.

PANEL 2: ATTRACTIVENESS RATINGS

- In this study, we approached male-female dyads around campus, and then evaluated their attraction toward one another and their perceptions of one another’s attractiveness as a function of whether they were romantically involved or “just friends.”

- Although men trended toward more attraction to their female friends, than the reverse (as found in several prior studies), the difference was not statistically significant. We speculated that because we approached dyads in the field, we captured an ecologically valid sample of friendships among young adults in which the two friends vary widely in their attraction toward one another. Moreover, the friends’ attraction was not at all correlated with the other. Thus, our data suggest that asymmetries in attraction, which have the potential to cause hurt feelings and confusion about the status of the relationship, are quite prevalent in college students’ cross-sex friendships.

- We also found that men and women in both types of dyads gave their partner higher attractiveness ratings than they gave themselves. We are in the process of obtaining outside judges’ ratings of participants’ photos to determine whether participants’ perceptions of each other’s attractiveness converge with “objective” evaluations. We will also use those ratings to examine whether cross-sex friends – like dating partners – are similarly attractive.

REFERENCES


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