Sex Differences in Young Adults' Attraction to Their Opposite-Sex Friends: Natural Sampling versus Mental Concepts

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Background

- Although opposite-sex friendships are often defined as platonic,[1] heterosexual men and women frequently report sexual or romantic undertones in their friendships with the opposite sex.[2,3]
- In several studies in which young adults are asked to report on their friendships[2,4] or select a friend to come into the lab with them[5], men have reported more physical and sexual attraction to their opposite-sex friends than women have. These sex differences have been moderate to strong in magnitude.
- In our first two studies, we approached male-female dyads in their everyday context; we expected to find a statistically significant, moderate-to-strong difference between male and female friends' attraction to one another.

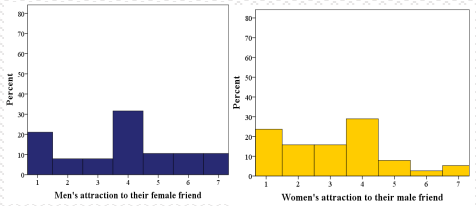
Method

- Study 1 (2013-14) and Study 2 (2014-2015) followed a similar procedure:
  - Researchers approached young adult male-female dyads who were eating or sitting together at a university student union and invited them to participate in a brief "study of dyads."
  - Upon consent, partners were physically separated by the researchers and stood with a clipboard as they completed the questionnaire.
  - In addition to other measures that were included for purposes outside of the current analysis, participants used a seven-point scale to report the degree to which they were physically attracted to their partner (*Not at all* to *Moderately* to *Extremely*).
  - At the end of the questionnaire, participants independently reported their relationship status as "We are just friends," "We are in a romantic relationship," or "Other;" dyads with discrepant viewpoints were omitted.
- For Study 1, the final sample included 40 pairs of opposite-sex friends (mean friendship duration of 99.24 ± 25.61 weeks).
- For Study 2, the final sample included 38 pairs of opposite-sex friends (mean friendship duration of 50.87 ± 9.32 weeks).

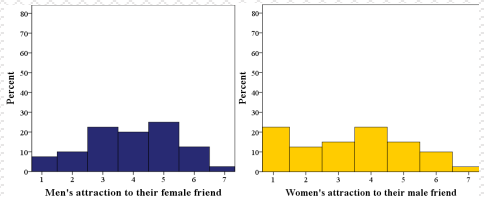
Study 1 and Study 2: Natural Samples of Opposite-Sex Friends

Results

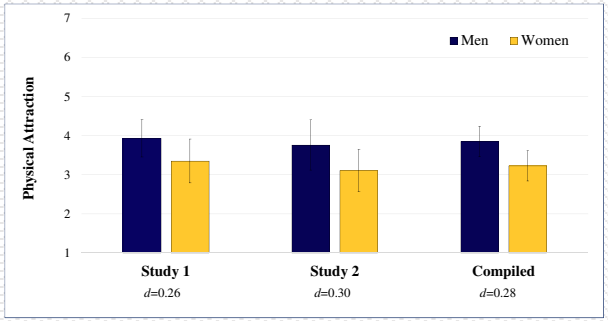
As shown in the histograms to the right, in Study 1, both sexes varied widely in their reported attraction: 8% of men and 23% of women reported they were not at all attracted to their friend, and 60% of men and 50% of women reported at least moderate attraction.



In Study 2, both sexes again varied widely in their reported attraction: 21% of men and 23% of women reported they were "not at all" attracted to their friend, and 62% of men and 45% of women reported at least moderate attraction.



The figure below shows mean differences in male and female friends' attraction to one another. In Study 1, men and women did not differ statistically in their reported levels of attraction, $t(39)=1.64$, $p=.109$ (M_d=0.58 [95% CI -0.13, 1.28]), and the magnitude of the sex difference was weak, $d=0.26$. This pattern replicated in Study 2: men and women did not differ statistically in their mean level of physical attraction to one another, $t(37)=1.83$, $p=.076$ (M_d=0.66 [95% CI -0.07, 1.39]), and the magnitude of the sex difference was weak, $d=0.30$. When we aggregated the two samples, the sex difference was statistically significant, $t(77)=2.47$, $p=.016$ (M_d=0.62 [95% CI 0.12, 1.11]). However, the effect was still weak ($d=0.28$).



Study 3: Mental Representations of Opposite-Sex Friends

Rationale

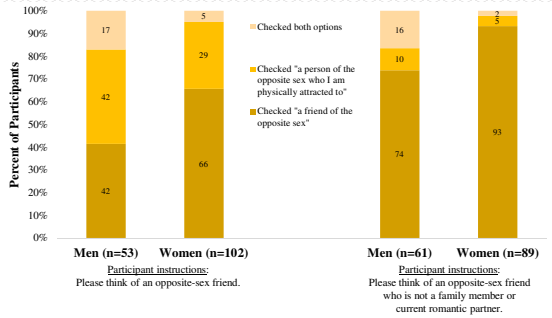
- In Studies 1 and 2, we approached and surveyed male-female friends who were engaged in everyday interactions, and the sex difference we found was weaker than in past studies. We reasoned that in past studies,[2,3,4,5] the strong sex difference in attraction occurred because men and women had fundamentally different types of people in mind when they thought of and then reported their attraction to an "opposite-sex friend." In Study 3, we tested that hypothesis.

Method

- Through social network sites and course research participation subject pools, we invited young adults to participate in an online study of "Friendship Definitions."
- Participants were 114 men and 192 women (M_{age}=19.32, SD=2.11) of heterosexual or bisexual orientation; 38% were currently involved in a romantic relationship.
- We prepared two sets of instructions. One ("general") set of instructions read, "Please think of an opposite-sex friend;" the other ("specific") set read, "Please think of an opposite-sex friend who is not a family member or current romantic partner."
- Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two sets of instructions, and was asked to type the first name of the friend they thought of.
- Then, participants were brought to the next screen and asked, "Which of the following describes the person who has come to mind?" Participants could check one or both: "A person of the opposite sex who is a friend;" and "A person of the opposite sex who I am physically attracted to."

Results

Men's characterizations of the person they had thought of differed from women's (General instructions $\chi^2(2, n=155)=10.71$, $p=.005$, $V=.26$; Specific instructions $\chi^2(2, n=150)=12.21$, $p=.002$, $V=.29$). Fewer men than women characterized the person as a friend, and more men than women characterized the person as both a friend and someone they were attracted to.



Discussion

- In past studies of opposite-sex friendship, men have reported more physical attraction, sexual attraction, and romantic interest toward their friends than women have.[2,3,4,5] However, when we approached and surveyed male-female friends who were engaged in everyday interactions, the sex difference was weak and statistically unreliable. We reasoned that in past studies, the moderate-strong sex difference in attraction occurred because men and women had fundamentally different types of people in mind when they thought of an "opposite-sex friend." In Study 3, we tested that hypothesis by asking men and women about the person who comes to mind when asked to think of an opposite-sex friend. We found that men were less likely than women to characterize the person only as a friend and more likely than women to characterize the person as either someone they are attracted to or as both a friend and someone they are attracted to. This pattern implies that men more often mentally define an opposite-sex friend as "a member of the opposite sex to whom I am attracted and would pursue given the opportunity," and women more often mentally define an opposite-sex friend as "a friend of the opposite sex."
- Our samples were relatively homogenous in both age and ethnicity; it is unclear whether our findings would generalize to a more heterogeneous sample. Future research with participants of varied ages and ethnic backgrounds will provide useful information on the psychological mechanisms underlying people's mental representations of opposite-sex relationships. With this broad caveat in mind, we tentatively conclude that heterosexual young adult men's and women's everyday experiences with opposite-sex friends differ systematically from their mental representations of opposite-sex friends. A deeper understanding of opposite-sex friendship dynamics might be garnered from studying them under naturalistic conditions.

References

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Acknowledgements

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