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'I like you . . . as a friend': The role of attraction in cross-sex friendship

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated attraction in heterosexual cross-sex friendships. Study I used in-depth interviews with 20 dyads (40 participants) to uncover four types of attraction that occur in cross-sex friendships — subjective physical/sexual attraction, objective physical/sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and friendship attraction. These types of attraction are subject to being symmetrical or asymmetrical, and may incur changes over time. Study II ($N = 231$) used a questionnaire to assess the frequency of each type of attraction and the frequency with which types of attraction are perceived to change. The most prevalent form of attraction was friendship attraction, and the least prevalent form was romantic attraction. The implications of these results for understanding both cross-sex friendships and the process of attraction are discussed.

KEY WORDS: attraction • cross-sex friendship • relational development

Little is known about friendships between men and women. In fact, only recently has 'cross-sex friendship' been considered its own relational category (Gaines, 1994). As late as 1986, such relationships were still considered under the rubric of romantic relationships. This is perhaps not surprising given the normative expectation that male–female bonds are primarily romantic and sexual. Indeed, the pervasive norm of heterosexual attraction is likely to influence how men and women experience cross-sex friendship. While many studies have looked at variables related to attraction in general, few have investigated attraction in male–female friendship specifically.

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The assumption that attraction is prevalent in cross-sex friendship is revealed in many sources. Two recent movies (*When Harry Met Sally*, 1989; *My Best Friend's Wedding*, 1997) have sent the message that sexual and romantic attraction is a strong possibility in male–female friendships, and that such relationships cannot stay platonic for long. Similarly, several television shows (e.g., *Three's Company*, 1977–1984; *Friends*, 1994–present) have indicated that romantic attraction underlies male–female interactions, even if the participants are friends or roommates. The media is not the only place, however, that suggests this view. Much of the research on cross-sex friendship tends to take the perspective that attraction is a potential part of the experience. For example, O'Meara's (1989) definition of cross-sex friendship is quite different from the standard definition of friendship, which is assumed to be between same-sex people. O'Meara defines male–female friendship as a:

Nonromantic, nonfamilial, personal relationship between a man and a woman. The relationship is nonromantic in the sense that its function is purposefully dissociated from courtship rites by the actors involved. Nonromantic does not mean, however, that sexuality and passion are necessarily absent from the relationship (p. 526).

O'Meara's definition serves primarily to distinguish cross-sex friendships from the standard of male–female relationships as romantic. He indicates that cross-sex friendships do have the potential for sexuality and passion, but that these features are not emphasized. This is quite different from Rawlins' (1992) definition of friendship. Synthesizing the early studies on friendship, Rawlins asserts that friendship is characterized as a voluntary, personal tie, with a spirit of equality, mutual involvement, and positive affect. This definition does not mention the opportunity for romance or passion. Although not directly stated, Rawlins' definition appears to pertain to friendships between same-sex heterosexuals where the potential for attraction (other than 'liking') is not an issue.

What does it mean that attraction is a potential issue in cross-sex friendship? Does attraction in this context mean 'sexuality and passion,' as O'Meara suggests? Does male–female friendship provide a ripe opportunity for a committed romantic relationship? Or is attraction simply experienced as 'liking,' as it is in heterosexual same-sex friendship? This study seeks to answer these questions by discovering how attraction is experienced subjectively in cross-sex friendships.

Literature review

Men and women in friendship

Friendships during childhood are almost exclusively same-sex. Approximately one-third of friendships in preschool are cross-sex, but by age 7 these relationships are virtually non-existent (Rickelman, 1981). This

may be due in part to the encouragement of same-sex interaction (Rose, 1985). It may also be due in part to the differing interaction styles that typify the sexes. Gottman (1994) found that boys' communication style is characterized more typically by attempts to derail the interaction by contradicting, interrupting, threatening, and boasting. The girls' style characteristically keeps the interaction going by acknowledging one another, and expressing agreement and support. Thorne and Luria (1986) discovered that boys tend to gather in larger groups that encourage group arousal via risk-taking, pushing the limits of the rules, and sexual talk. Girls are more likely to interact one-on-one, encouraging self-disclosure and gestures of intimacy (e.g. touching, braiding hair). Owing to these differences, Gottman (1994) concluded that girls tend to find boys quite annoying, boys tend to find girls quite dull, and the sexes primarily avoid one another during this childhood period. When boys and girls do interact with one another, however, the peer group will typically assume that the basis is heterosexual attraction (Thorne & Luria, 1986). Boy-girl relationships are likely to be called 'crushes' rather than 'friends,' and those who attempt to pursue cross-sex friendships are likely to be teased (Thorne & Luria, 1986).

These beginning childhood experiences may have great implications for male-female interactions later in life. Children are inundated from a variety of sources (e.g., parents, media, teachers, and other children) with information about how males and females are to relate. When the established norms dictate that males and females are expected to relate to one another in a sexualized and romanticized manner, and when behaving otherwise is subtly discouraged, it may ultimately be difficult for men and women to see each other in the friendship role. Cross-sex friendships do become more common in young adulthood, perhaps not coincidentally about the time when men and women begin their search for a mate. Then, after people marry, they have fewer close cross-sex friends (Bell, 1981; Rose, 1985; Rubin, 1985), serving to further reinforce the assumption that men and women have primarily sexual and romantic bonds. Moving into late adulthood, men and women are likely to keep this established trend of sex-segregated friendships (Adams, 1985). Because of these norms, substantial research has been conducted on the difference between men's friendships and women's friendships.

The biggest difference between adult male and adult female friendship is that women's friendships are more likely to be characterized by talk, while men's friendships are more likely to be characterized by activities (Bell, 1981; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Rawlins, 1992; Sapadin, 1988). Caldwell and Peplau (1982), for example, asked male and female college students if they would prefer to talk or engage in some activity with a same-sex friend. Over three times as many women as men selected talking, while almost twice as many men as women selected an activity. Of course, women may be *doing* something while they talk (e.g., taking an aerobics class), and men may be *talking* while they do something (e.g., 'So, how's it going with Mary?'), but the talking or the activity apparently becomes more salient based upon one's sex.

In addition to differences between male friendship and female friendship, some studies have revealed differences in the perceptions of men and women regarding cross-sex friendship. In a study by Rubin (1985), female participants reported that a primary benefit of cross-sex friendship is the opportunity to engage in a more 'masculine' interaction style. Men, however, tended to highlight the opportunity for intimacy, nurturing, and emotional support in cross-sex friendships, perhaps because those qualities are rare in their same-sex friendships. Surprisingly, when Lin and Rusbult (1995) asked men to rate their most serious opposite-sex relationship in terms of centrality to their lives, cross-sex friendships and romantic relationships were rated equally central. Because cross-sex friendships offer more intimacy and nurturing for the male (Rubin, 1985), and because males may be more apt than females to interpret behaviors as sexual (Abbey, 1982), it has been hypothesized that men are more likely to perceive cross-sex friendships as a precursor to romance (Rawlins, 1992).

Attraction in cross-sex friendships

Researchers of personal relationships have identified numerous variables that are associated with attraction in general. These variables include real or perceived similarity between individuals (Simpson & Harris, 1994), proximity (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Nahemow & Lawton, 1975; Segal, 1974), a comfortable physical environment (Griffit, 1970; May & Hamilton, 1980), and physical attractiveness (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Green, Buchanan, & Heuer, 1984; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). What these studies have discovered, in essence, are the variables that lead individuals to report that they feel 'attracted' to a target. Attraction is taken to be a generic, unidimensional experience, undifferentiated by type of attraction or type of relationship. An exception to this trend was a study by McCrosky and McCain (1974). They assessed three types of attraction in their study of strangers and acquaintances: social attraction ('liking'), task attraction, and physical attraction ('respect'). They stated that the most important and obvious conclusion from their study was that 'interpersonal attraction does appear to be a multidimensional construct' (p. 266). Few researchers, however, have sought to discover what these dimensions are, and how these dimensions are experienced in various types of relationships. For example, one might expect that attraction between cross-sex friends would operate differently than attraction between romantic partners. But upon what basis would the process differ? Is there a certain degree of attraction that must be met to have one kind of relationship or another, or are there different *types* of attraction that are important? Would the answers depend on the particular relationship in question?

The few researchers who have investigated attraction in cross-sex friendship have focused almost exclusively on one type of attraction — sexual. Some studies have concentrated on the prevalence of sexual tension, overtones, and expressions in cross-sex friendship. Other studies have focused on whether or not sexuality is a positive or negative experience for cross-sex friends.

Some studies have looked at variables related to sexual attraction in cross-sex friendship. Sapadin (1988) found that the statement, 'Friends can become my sexual partners' was affirmed by a relatively large number of participants — 64% of the men and 44% of the women. However, Monsour, Harris, and Kurzweil (1994) found in their study that only 20% of men and 10% of women reported that sexual tension existed in their cross-sex friendship. Further, Monsour, Betty, and Kurzweil (1993) found that men and women rated sexual overtones in their male-female friendship a mean of 2.5 on a scale of one to seven (1 = *to no extent*; 7 = *to a great extent*), indicating relatively low levels of sexual overtones in average cross-sex friendships.

Monsour (1992) investigated expressions of intimacy in cross-sex friendships. He found that 'physical contact' was mentioned more by women than by men as an element of intimacy in cross-sex friendship. Although this finding may be surprising, 'sexual contact' was mentioned significantly more by men than by women as an expression of intimacy in these friendships. Perhaps, men more readily label cross-sex contact as 'sexual', while women are more likely to label the contact 'physical.' In either case, Monsour (1992) found that expressions of intimacy through physical or sexual contact were significantly more common in cross-sex friendship than in same-sex friendship — an interesting finding in light of the 'platonic' nature of such relationships.

Other studies have investigated whether the potential for sexual attraction is perceived to be a positive or negative aspect of cross-sex friendship. Bell (1981) found that 40% of female respondents wanted a sexual dimension in at least some of their cross-sex friendships. However, 39% of the women and 20% of the men said they abstain from sex with friends because they fear it could ruin the friendship. Several other researchers (Moyer, Hojjat, & Salovey, 1994; Sapadin, 1988) found that sexual tension was the biggest problem or challenge in cross-sex friendships for both men and women. In fact, Werking (1997) found that 24% of terminated cross-sex friendships were due to problems caused by one or both friends' desire for romance/sexuality. Rubin (1985) hypothesized that, while sexual tension can be enjoyable, actually engaging in sex is problematic because it changes the nature of the friendship. Because cultural norms suggest that sexually active parties are supposed to become emotionally involved, possessive, and committed, sexual activity blurs relational boundaries and changes the relationship such that it no longer conforms to the definition of cross-sex friendship.

Despite Rubin's (1985) claim that 'most friends come together out of some form of attraction' (p. 180), the research on cross-sex friendship and attraction thus far is inconclusive and leaves many unanswered questions. We know that some sexual attraction exists in some cross-sex friendships, and that this experience can be a positive and/or challenging aspect of the friendship. But are there different types of attraction, besides sexual, that impact cross-sex friendships? What are the various ways attraction is actually experienced in cross-sex friendship, and what meaning does it hold for the participants?

Study rationale and theoretical framework

Cross-sex friendships are a relatively recent area of enquiry and many gaps in our knowledge still exist. The studies that have been conducted on attraction in cross-sex friendship thus far are limited in several respects. First, previous studies have typically limited their investigations to sexual attraction and have, therefore, overlooked other features of attraction. Second, past research has been criticized for investigating friendship as if there were one standard form. Allan (1989) claimed that a range of elements exist in any given friendship, and what is important in one friendship may not be relevant in another. When this variation is not investigated sufficiently, researchers are likely to gain limited understanding of those relationships. Third, in his review of the cross-sex friendship literature, Monsour (1997) pointed out that most studies investigate the perspective of only one member of the dyad. Researchers of personal relationships (e.g., Duck, 1990) are suggesting that a more complete picture of the relationship is gained from assessing the perspective of both people. Indeed, friends do not always hold the same definition or understanding of their relationship. Fourth, most previous studies have investigated narrow, specific questions with quantitative methods (e.g., 'Are men or women more likely to perceive a cross-sex friendship to be potentially sexual?'). The drawback of studies that begin with predetermined categories or have a very narrow focus is that they may inadvertently overlook other experiences that are significant to participants.

The purpose of this study was to correct these limitations by beginning with a qualitative method to investigate the subjective experience of attraction in cross-sex friendship from the perspective of both friends. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative research is beneficial for providing intricate and varied details about the nature of a phenomenon, particularly in areas where little is known. For Study I, I conducted in-depth interviews with 40 heterosexual friends (20 cross-sex pairs). I looked specifically at heterosexual people because one's sexual orientation was expected to be relevant in an investigation of male-female friendship and attraction. A broad and exploratory research question was proposed in this initial investigation: How is attraction experienced in heterosexual cross-sex friendships?

STUDY I

Method

Interview procedures

Members of close, heterosexual cross-sex friendships were recruited to participate in individual in-depth interviews. A call for respondents was announced in undergraduate communication courses at a large southwestern university. Potential interviewees were told that only those persons who are truly interested in discussing this topic should volunteer. Similar to the snowball

technique, respondents were asked if their cross-sex friend would also be willing to come in for an interview. Only relationships where both friends were interviewed were included in the analysis.

Interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience and were conducted either in my office or in an empty classroom. Friends were interviewed individually rather than in pairs so that they would not influence one another's answers and would feel more free to share private or negative information about the relationship. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality, and are referred to by pseudonyms in the results section to protect their identities. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted 30–60 minutes. In addition to tape-recording, I took shorthand notes to remember the parts of their story I wanted to probe further.

The following process was used to gather participants' in-depth narratives (see Appendix for interview questions). Before each interview, I told participants that I considered them 'co-researchers' and that my questions would simply be used to assist them in describing what they think is important about their relationship. In fact, my first interview question was 'If you were conducting research on friendship between men and women, what would you want to find out? What do *you* think would be important?' Interestingly, half of all participants mentioned 'attraction' as a key issue when prompted with this broad initial question. I then asked them to recall specific events in the friendship, such as how they met and how their friendship developed. Near the end of the interview I asked why they had or had not considered dating or having a sexual relationship with their friend, if they had not addressed this question already. In addition to these guiding questions, follow-up questions were asked as determined by the participants' responses. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked if there was anything they would like to add that had not yet been covered in the interview. The completed interviews were transcribed verbatim, with average transcription containing of 11.5 pages and 5377 words.

Participants

Forty people (20 cross-sex pairs) participated in the study. These friendships ranged in length from 4 months to 7 years, with a mean of 2 years. The sample was primarily European American (36 of 40 participants), with middle or upper-middle class backgrounds (34 of 40 participants), and an age range of 19–36, with a mean of 21 years. Almost half of the interviewees were single at the time of the interview, almost half were in committed but non-marital relationships, and one was divorced. Most of the participants were full-time students, approximately half of whom held outside jobs as well. One interviewee was a recent graduate.

Analysis

While the original purpose of the interviews was to gather narratives that would be used to generate themes of cross-sex friendship in general, for this study I focused specifically on those categories that reflected issues of attraction. As solo-analyzer, I began by using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding process to simplify the transcribed interview data. Open coding consisted of labeling each piece of data, with each distinct idea or concept spoken by the participant as the unit of analysis. For example, the statement, 'Diane's the first girl who's an attractive girl who I actually have no sexual feelings for'

received the code 'thinks she's attractive, but not sexually attracted to her,' which I believed reflected the essential meaning of the participant's statement. Hundreds of codes were acquired in this manner and each one was subsequently placed on an index card so that they could be constantly compared with each other and sorted into categories. Codes with the same meaning (e.g., 'thinks she's cute, but not attracted to her' and 'knows he's attractive, but she doesn't feel attracted') were placed in the same group, and these groupings received category names that reflected their content. Each new code was compared with previously created categories to determine whether the new piece of data should belong in one of the existing categories, or whether a new category, should be created. After placing an item in a category, the other items in that grouping were re-examined.

The purpose of coding and categorizing was to identify meta-categories, or themes, in the participants' experience of attraction in cross-sex friendship. Themes were determined using Owen's (1984) interpretive theme criteria. The first criterion is recurrence. A theme is said to recur when a given meaning can be observed again and again in the data. The second criterion is repetition. This refers to key words, sentences, or phrases that are repeated throughout the data set. The third criterion is forcefulness. A forceful theme is one that stands out in the interview data as a significant descriptive property of attraction in cross-sex friendship. This significance was based on how much importance it was given by the participants. While not every theme was recurring, repetitive, and forceful in each interview, each met these criteria when the data were analyzed as a whole.

Results

Three primary themes emerged that explain both the common and varied experience of attraction in cross-sex friendship. The first theme refers to the types of attraction that are present in cross-sex friendships. In this study four types emerged — subjective physical/sexual attraction, objective physical/sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and friendship attraction. The second theme refers to whether the types of attraction are symmetrical or asymmetrical between friends. The third theme refers to the changes in attraction that may occur over time.

Types of attraction

The narratives repeatedly revealed that participants differentiated between types of attraction. While past cross-sex friendship research has investigated only sexual attraction, these friends took pains to explain that their friendship had one kind of attraction, but not another. It was discovered that there are four qualitatively different types of attraction (see Table 1): subjective physical/sexual attraction, objective physical/sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and friendship attraction. These forms of attraction could exist separately or together, in varying degrees, to create different experiences in friendship.

Objective and subjective physical/sexual attraction. The first two types of attraction occurred when one's friend was perceived to be good-looking or sexy. Physical/sexual attraction could be experienced either subjectively or objectively. Subjective physical/sexual attraction occurred when one found

TABLE 1
Types of attraction

| Types of attraction | Definition | Example |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| 1. Subjective physical/sexual | Feeling physically or sexually attracted to the other. | 'I was physically attracted to Millie. I thought she was very good looking.' |
| 2. Objective physical/sexual | Thinking that the other is attractive in general, but not to oneself. | 'Marylin's really attractive and I see that and I can relate to that, but I just don't feel the attraction myself.' |
| 3. Romantic | Wanting to turn the friendship into a romantic relationship. | 'I still think of her as really cool and so that would make her a good girlfriend.' |
| 4. Friendship | Feeling close and connected as friends | 'I adore the guy and I really value his friendship.' |

oneself feeling physically or sexually attracted to one's friend. For example, Robert said, 'I was physically attracted to Millie. I thought she was very good looking.' Ray said, 'I had some mixed feelings, sexually.' Rena said, 'When I first saw Rob I was like, "Wow, he's cute".' Sean claimed, 'I wouldn't mind going to bed with Dorothy. I mean, she's a good looking girl.' In most cases, these feelings of physical/sexual attraction were strongest at the beginning of the friendship.

Objective physical/sexual attraction occurred when one acknowledged that one's friend was physically attractive in general, but one did not feel the attraction oneself. In these cases, respondents thought their friend was physically attractive, but they did not feel attracted to him or her. For example, Carla said, 'I think Ray is a physically attractive person, I just do not have any level of attraction towards him whatsoever.' Similarly, Greg said, 'Marylin's really attractive and I see that and I can relate to that, but I just don't feel the attraction myself.'

Other participants did not experience either subjective or objective physical/sexual attraction. They did not feel physically attracted to their friend, nor did they suggest that others may find them attractive. Physical attraction was not a relevant experience for these participants in any way. Participants usually explained the non-relevance of physical/sexual attractiveness quite simply. Chuck said, 'I'm not physically attracted to Lily.' Kraig said, 'Beattie's not the kind of girl that I look at in a bar or anything like that.' Even when there was some form of physical attraction, however, a romantic relationship was not necessarily desired.

Romantic attraction. The next type of attraction that occurred in this sample was romantic attraction. Romantic attraction is different from physical/sexual attraction. Romantic attraction occurred when a participant was attracted to the idea of turning the friendship into a romantic relationship (i.e., the partici-

pant believed that his/her friend would make a good boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse). While romantic attraction was rare in this sample, a few participants reported experiencing it. Robert said, 'I was interested in her ... I wanted more than just a friendship.' Tim claimed, 'I thought it was going to blossom into a relationship.' Rob said, 'I still think of her as really cool and so that would make her a good girlfriend.'

What was more typical in these narratives, however, was an acknowledgment of the lack of romantic attraction. Participants often identified many things about their friend, such as being 'wild' or 'anal,' that made them fine for friendship, but unsuitable for romance. Michael said, 'Molly's really wild ... that's not what I'm looking for in a relationship.' Molly's perspective was, 'We could never date because Michael is too serious for me ... I'd kill him.' Carla explained, 'I am not attracted to Ray's personality. We get along real well as people and we relate on the same level ... but he is kind of anal in different ways and there are just things about him that I am not attracted to.' Vanessa said, 'I think Jim is too wild. I wouldn't want somebody in a relationship that was so outspoken and wild.' Eric said, 'I've known Leah for a long time and there are certain qualities about her that I'm not looking for in an intimate relationship ... she smokes, she complains too much, and she's too dependent on people.'

In all of these cases, the participant described the reasons his/her friend was not attractive for a romantic relationship. This did not mean, however, that the friend was unattractive for friendship. In fact, participants often described their friendship attraction by differentiating it from romantic attraction.

Friendship attraction. The last type of attraction was friendship attraction. Most of the friends in this sample had grown to like each other, and sometimes love each other, as friends. They reported that they adored one another, and felt close and connected. Millie said, 'I adore the guy and I really value his friendship.' Jeff said, 'There's definitely a connection there. A certain chemistry. I'd say [friendship] chemistry is where you can sit down with someone and talk.' Nina said, 'We look like we're best friends, it's the cutest thing. I love Austin.' Chuck reported about Lily, 'She's like a best girl friend, like platonically.' Michael said about his friend, 'I love her like a sister. ... There's a lot of care involved.'

Friendship attraction was often described as finding the friend's behavioral characteristics attractive for friendship, but not attractive for a romantic relationship. For example, Greg liked his friend's talkativeness for friendship, but not romance, 'She talks a lot, which I love that as a friend, but not that I'd want that as a girlfriend.' Mae specified Frank's 'spastic' behavior as inappropriate for a romantic partner, but good for friendship:

I could never picture myself coming home and just having a spastic person never letting me get a moments peace. ... But I like Frank because as a friend he can always keep me going, like always keep me in a good mood. I rely on him for that. So it's kind of nice to have a spastic person for a friend.

Friendship attraction was experienced throughout the sample, except in a few cases where the friendship was limited or rocky. In two cases, the friends actually had primarily negative things to say about each other. For example, Dave criticized Suzanne, 'She is really overbearing and she's rather rude. At times she gets on my nerves to where I can't handle to talk to her.' Beattie had

a similar friendship with Kraig. She said, 'I hate him, but he's still like my good friend. He bugs me.'

Overall, however, friendship attraction was the strongest form of attraction experienced in this sample. Even participants who felt subjective physical/sexual and/or romantic attraction explained that those feelings were not strong enough to warrant jeopardizing the friendship. In most cases, friendship attraction was prioritized above the other forms. For example, Michael mentioned that while he had thought of his friend Molly sexually, he would not want to act on his feelings and risk ruining the friendship:

I'm not going to sit here and lie and say I've never thought about sleeping with her. ... But for the most part those are boundaries I'm not willing to overstep just because of the fact that I've got too much invested in [the friendship], she's got too much invested in it, [and] it would just go out the window.

Molly felt similarly. She had put aside romantic intentions in favor of the friendship:

All my girlfriends are like, 'You guys should date' you know, they'll say stuff like that of course. So, you know, I've thought about it, but then I just don't think it'll work. I think we would ruin the friendship. ... I think that it is perfect as it is, and if we even attempted to kiss or anything I think the relationship would probably be doomed.

Summary and integration of attraction types. These narratives revealed that attraction in cross-sex friendship is not a unidimensional variable. Rather, there were many different kinds of attraction. Finding one's friend 'cute' or 'handsome' (objective physical/sexual attraction) did not mean that one was attracted *to* one's friend (subjective physical/sexual attraction). As Vanessa put it, 'I might think [my male friends] are cute, but that doesn't mean I want to sleep with them.' Liking someone's personality for friendship (friendship attraction) did not mean that personality was attractive for a romantic relationship (romantic attraction). In Rona's experience, 'Rob's just a little too immature for me as a boyfriend, but as a friend I love it.' Thinking that someone is attractive as a friend (friendship attraction) is not the same as feeling physically attracted to him or her (subjective physical/sexual attraction). As Lily explained, 'There was never any physical attraction, it was just kind of buddy-buddy.' Being physically attracted to someone (subjective physical/sexual attraction) is not the same as wanting to be in a romantic relationship with that person (romantic attraction). From Mae's perspective, 'We've both admitted that we have found each other attractive ... but we probably couldn't do very well at dating.' These different forms of attraction created qualitatively different experiences in cross-sex friendship. Adding to the complexity, some friendships had symmetrical forms of attraction, while other friendships had asymmetrical attraction.

Symmetrical or asymmetrical

Interviewing both parties revealed that some friends are symmetrical in their forms of attraction, while others are not. Symmetrical attraction occurred when both friends experienced the same type(s) of attraction. For example, in some friendships, both people felt friendship attraction, and no other form of attraction. In other cases, both people experienced friendship attraction plus subject-

tive physical/sexual attraction. Asymmetrical feelings occurred when friends had different experiences of attraction in the friendship. For example, in some cases, one person had friendship attraction and subjective physical/sexual attraction, while the other had only friendship attraction. In other cases, one person felt romantic attraction plus friendship attraction, while the other experienced only friendship attraction. The symmetry or asymmetry of different forms of attraction created varied experiences in cross-sex friendship.

Asymmetrical romantic attraction. When it was experienced, asymmetrical romantic attraction was the most detrimental condition for cross-sex friendships. The pressure of one person wanting to make the friendship romantic often caused these friendships to become strained and ultimately less close. For example, Tim had at one time thought his friendship with Tammy would become romantic, but in the interview he claimed, 'Our relationship is kind of take it or leave it [now], to tell you the truth.' Tammy agreed, 'We're friends, but we pretty much keep our distance now.' Maya, who had thought of Josh as a potential boyfriend, now found herself questioning their friendship, 'I know there have been a couple of times I've said, "Why are we friends?"'. Robert explained that being romantically attracted to Millie without her returning his interest was taking its toll, 'I shouldn't be spending so much time with her because I'm hurting myself by not looking for somebody else.'

Asymmetrical subjective physical/sexual attraction. When it was experienced, asymmetrical subjective physical/sexual attraction was rarely detrimental to these cross-sex friendships because, unlike those with romantic attraction, those with physical attraction did not typically feel a desire to change the friendship. First, there was little motivation to make the friendship into a sexual relationship because without symmetrical subjective physical attraction, the relationship had no 'spark.' For example, although Ray was physically attracted to Carla, the lack of a spark held him back from pursuing it, 'Even though I had some mixed attractions sexually. . . . There's just no spark, no drive. . . . If there's not a spark you can't move on to the next level.' The asymmetrical attraction from Carla explained why this spark was likely missing, 'I just do not have any level of attraction towards Ray whatsoever.' Similarly, Sean couldn't figure out why it didn't 'click' with Jesse, 'I think she's physically attractive, [but] it just doesn't click for some reason.' That 'some reason' may have been Jesse's feelings, 'I mean I think he's adorable, but attracted to him like sex? . . . I couldn't even imagine kissing him.' Without the simultaneous mutual attraction needed to create a 'spark,' the relationship often felt friendly rather than passionate. A second reason participants with subjective physical/sexual attraction were not motivated to alter their friendship, spark or not, is that they tended to value their friendship more than their feelings of physical attraction. They did not want a sexual encounter to jeopardize an important friendship. Vanessa explained, 'I guess maybe if we were really trashed out of our minds we might sleep together. But I would never want to because I really like the friendship that we have.'

Attraction between friends could also be symmetrical. A few friendships experienced symmetrical subjective physical/sexual attraction. This was rarely threatening to the friendship because, again, physical attraction was not perceived to be important enough to risk the friendship. Symmetrical romantic attraction was revealed in a few of the friendships. Participants in this condition

indicated that they were open to the possibility that the nature of the relationship may change in the future.

Changes in attraction

What became clear through the narratives is that the experience of attraction in cross-sex friendship could remain constant, or it could vary. This finding differs from past research on attraction, which has typically measured whether attraction exists at a given point in time, rather than discovering how one's experience of attraction can change. Some participants in this study consistently felt romantic and/or subjective physical/sexual attraction throughout the friendship. Robert said, 'I had strong feelings for her, and in fact I still have strong feelings for her.' Other participants consistently lacked any physical or romantic attraction toward the other. Nina said, 'I have never thought "more than a friend" of Austin.' Kelly said, 'I've never really been attracted to David.' Tammy said, 'I've never had any feelings for Tim.'

In other cases, however, participants experienced a certain form of attraction that later changed. While a few participants reported that their romantic attraction had grown at some point during the friendship, the most common change was dissipating romantic attraction. For example, Diane changed her mind about being romantically attracted to Thomas, 'I was kind of thinking "Maybe Thomas should be more than my best friend," [but now] I know him so well, it's like I know exactly how he would be as a boyfriend and I just know that wouldn't be right.' The same thing happened to Maya, 'When Josh took me to my prom I thought he would be the perfect boyfriend. . . . I considered it once and then it never came up again.' Frank changed his mind on this issue as well, 'Over the summer I had some ideas. I liked Mae, she's very attractive and I was thinking, well maybe I should pursue trying to go out with her. . . . I tried to feel out the situation a little bit. I just realized it was more comfortable with us just being friends.'

It was also possible for the other forms of attraction to change. For example, Nina did not like Austin when they first met, but friendship attraction developed over time, 'I thought he was annoying at first. But later I realized he was caring and funny.' Tim's feelings of subjective physical/sexual attraction changed, 'I don't find her sexually attractive anymore.' For Suzanne, when physical and romantic interest went away there was not much left to the friendship, 'When we first started hanging out together we would go eat and talk and we would call each other on the phone all the time, and it seemed like there was a little bit of a spark there, but there wasn't. . . . Now we never talk just to talk.'

Summary

The themes discovered in this study reveal that cross-sex attraction is quite complicated. There were four different types of attraction (objective physical/sexual, subjective physical/sexual, romantic and friendship) that could be symmetrical or asymmetrical and that could be perceived to change over time or stay consistent throughout the friendship.

Study II was conducted to validate and quantify the qualitative data in Study I. The purpose of the second study was to discover the frequency of each type of attraction, how types of attraction are related to length of relationship, the perceived change in each type of attraction, and the frequency with which participants experienced more than one type of attraction within a given cross-sex friendship.

STUDY II

Method

Participants

Eight instructors in the communication department at a southeastern university agreed to administer a questionnaire during class time to volunteer undergraduates. A total of 231 participants identified as heterosexual (103 males and 128 females) were included in the study. Twenty-six participants were excluded from the analysis because either they, their friend, or both were gay. Another 23 were excluded because their questionnaires were incomplete. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 41 years, with a mean of 21 years. The sample was 72% European American, 23% African American, and 5% other ethnicities. Friendship length ranged from 1 month to 21 years, with a mean of 4 years. On a scale from 1 (*not close*) to 5 (*very close*), participants mean friendship closeness rating was 3.75.

Questionnaire

Participants were instructed to 'think of a friend of the opposite-sex who is not a member of your family, and who is not a past or present boyfriend/girlfriend.' This wording was selected so that participants would think of a specific friendship, rather than a family member or romantic partner whom they also considered a friend. After indicating some demographic information about themselves, they were asked to evaluate the types of attraction, and perceived changes in attraction, they had experienced for that person by checking *true* or *false* for 10 statements.

Physical/sexual attraction. Current subjective physical/sexual attraction was assessed with the statement, 'I am currently physically or sexually attracted to this person.' Objective physical/sexual attraction was assessed with the statement, 'I think this person is physically attractive, but I'm not attracted to them.' Perceived changes in physical/sexual attraction were assessed with the statements, 'I was once physically or sexually attracted to this person, but I'm not anymore' (decreased physical/sexual attraction), and 'I have grown more sexually attracted to this person over time' (increased physical/sexual attraction).

Romantic attraction. Similar statements were used for the romantic attraction category. Participants indicated *true* or *false* to the statements, 'I am attracted to this person for a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship' (current romantic attraction), 'I once considered this person a potential boyfriend/girlfriend but I don't anymore' (decreased romantic attraction), and 'I didn't used to see this person as a potential boyfriend/girlfriend, but now I do' (increased romantic attraction).

Friendship attraction. The following statements were used to assess friendship attraction: 'I am attracted to the qualities this person offers as a friend' (current friendship attraction), 'I once considered this person a better friend than I do now' (decreased friendship attraction), and 'My attraction to this person as a friend has grown over time' (increased friendship attraction).

Results

Data were analyzed via the Macintosh statistical program, STATISTICA. Frequency tables indicated the regularity of each form of attraction in this sample, as well as perceived changes over time (see Table 2). Validating Study I, current friendship attraction was the most common experience, occurring in nearly all responses ($n = 222$, 96.1%). This was followed by increased friendship attraction over time ($n = 165$, 71.4%). The third most common form of attraction was objective physical/sexual attraction, which was reported by just over half of the participants ($n = 130$, 56.3%). Less common were current subjective physical/sexual attraction ($n = 65$, 28.1%), decreased subjective physical/sexual attraction ($n = 67$, 29.0%), and increased subjective physical/sexual attraction ($n = 46$, 19.9%). In terms of romantic attraction, as suggested in Study I, decreased romantic attraction was the most common ($n = 90$, 39.0%). Current romantic attraction ($n = 33$, 14.3%) and increased romantic attraction ($n = 20$, 8.7%) occurred less often. A decrease in friendship attraction occurred in 17.7% ($n = 41$) of the sample.

t-tests were conducted to determine whether different types of attraction varied by length of relationship. Whether the participant answered *true* or *false* to experiencing each type of attraction created the independent groups, and the dependent variable was length of relationship. There were two significant results. First, length of friendship was significantly longer for those participants who reported that they did *not* feel current subjective physical/sexual attraction ($M = 51.46$ months) than those participants who did ($M = 36.35$ months), $t(239) = -2.2$, $p < .05$. Participants who reported that they did not feel physically attracted to their friend were in significantly longer friendships than those who responded that they felt current subjective physical/sexual attraction. Second, length of friendship was significantly longer for those participants who reported that they felt subjective physical/sexual attraction in the past, but not now ($M = 62.45$ months) than those who responded *false* to this question ($M = 40.99$ months), $t(239) = 3.18$, $p < .01$. Participants who experienced a decrease in subjective physical/sexual attraction were in longer friendships than those who did not report a decrease. There were no other significant differences by length of friendship.

TABLE 2
Frequency of attraction

| Type of attraction ($N = 231$) | <i>n</i> | % |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----|
| Current friendship | 222 | 96 |
| Increased friendship | 165 | 71 |
| Decreased friendship | 41 | 18 |
| Objective physical/sexual | 130 | 56 |
| Current subjective physical/sexual | 65 | 28 |
| Increased subjective physical/sexual | 46 | 20 |
| Decreased subjective physical/sexual | 67 | 29 |
| Current romantic | 33 | 14 |
| Increased romantic | 20 | 9 |
| Decreased romantic | 90 | 39 |

The qualitative analysis of Study I indicated that different combinations of attraction could occur, creating variation in the experience of cross-sex friendship. Cross-tabulations and chi-squares in Study II revealed some interesting statistics on these occurrences. For example, of those who were currently romantically attracted to their friend, a significant number (90%) had current subjective physical/sexual attraction as well ($\chi^2 (1, N = 33) = 22.1, p < .01$). However, of those who were currently subjectively physically/sexually attracted ($N = 65$), fewer than half were also currently romantically attracted (46%). Of those who reported more subjective physical/sexual attraction over time, a significant number (91%) also reported more friendship attraction over time ($\chi^2 (1, N = 46) = 31.4, p < .05$). Similarly, of those who reported more romantic attraction over time, a significant number (100%) also reported more friendship attraction over time ($\chi^2 (1, N = 20) = 20, p < .05$). Interesting, but not significant, of those who said romantic attraction or subjective physical/sexual attraction had decreased over time, one quarter said that friendship attraction had also decreased (24% and 25%, respectively). Those with current subjective physical/sexual attraction did not report a decrease in friendship attraction ($\chi^2 (1, N = 65) = 43.2, p < .01$), nor did those with current romantic attraction ($\chi^2 (1, N = 33) = 29.1, p < .01$). Of those who said they had past subjective physical/sexual attraction, 82% ($\chi^2 (1, N = 67) = 27.6, p < .01$) said they now consider their friend objectively physically attractive.

Discussion

While most laypersons, researchers, and media focus on romantic or sexual bonds between men and women, this study of cross-sex friendships reveals that other types of bond can and do occur. Indeed, the majority of participants in this research did not experience romantic or sexual attraction toward their friend (Study II), and even those who did tended to prioritize their friendship attraction and not attempt to alter the friendship (Study I). In addition, these studies reveal that attraction is much more complicated than past research has suggested.

While this study contributes to the literature on friendship, it is also informative about the general processes of attraction. As mentioned previously, attraction is typically treated as a unidimensional concept. Past research has tended to measure whether or not attraction exists and why, rather than attempting to identify different types of attraction. This study of attraction in the context of cross-sex friendship provides evidence that attraction is a multidimensional concept, as McCrosky and McCain (1974) have suggested. There is a qualitative difference between being attracted to someone as a friend, as a dating partner, and as a sexual partner, and these distinctions are very important to many members of cross-sex friendships. Further, these forms of attraction can combine in various ways that create different outcomes in the experience of the friendship, as described in Study I. For example, some friendships had only one form of attraction, while others had multiple forms. It is interesting that (in Study II), of those participants who were currently subjectively physically/sexually attracted to their friend, fewer than half were also currently romantically attracted,

while nearly all of those who were currently romantically attracted also reported that they felt current subjective physical/sexual attraction. This indicates, perhaps, that physical/sexual attraction is a greater prerequisite for romantic attraction than romantic attraction is a prerequisite for physical attraction. Also of note is that, of those participants who reported a decrease in their romantic or sexual feelings, one quarter also reported a decrease in friendship attraction, while those with current feelings of romantic or sexual attraction did not report a decrease in friendship attraction. This may indicate that for *some* people romantic and/or subjective physical/sexual attraction occurs along with friendship attraction, and when these former types of attraction decrease, the friendship attraction decreases as well. Studies that investigate the types of attraction rather than simply the presence of attraction will be more informative about why relationships go on particular trajectories, and what their paths look like on those trajectories.

Another contribution made by this research is illumination of how attraction is perceived to change over the duration of a friendship. Again, previous research on attraction has tended to ask the question 'is there attraction or not?' rather than 'has attraction changed over time, and if so, how?' While this was not a longitudinal study, participants were asked to reflect upon their feelings at different points during their friendship. Study I provides evidence that some cross-sex friends have felt one or more types of attraction consistently throughout their friendship. Others have continually lacked one or more types of attraction toward their friend. In other cases, however, participants experienced a certain form of attraction that later changed. The results of this study indicate that, in addition to a multi-dimensional framework of attraction, a developmental framework would be useful for understanding the process of attraction.

A relatively common change identified in Study I was dissipating romantic attraction, and Study II validated these findings. Overall, research in Study II showed that romantic attraction and subjective physical/sexual attraction tend to decrease over time in cross-sex friendships. Only 8.7% of the sample said their romantic attraction had grown over time while a full 39% said that they once considered this person romantically attractive but no longer do. Similarly, 20% of the participants indicated that their subjective physical/sexual attraction had grown, while almost 40% indicated that their subjective physical/sexual feelings had decreased. Further, longer lasting friendships had fewer cases of current subjective physical/sexual attraction and more cases of past subjective physical/sexual attraction than friendships of shorter duration. Friendship attraction showed the opposite trend — 71% of the respondents said their friendship attraction had grown, while only 18% said it had decreased.

There are several possible reasons why friendship attraction grows while romantic attraction and physical/sexual attraction decline in most friendships. First, it may be that as friends get to know one another over time, they begin to see flaws in one another (either physically and/or in terms of personality) that make the other less physically or romantically ideal.

Indeed, there were illustrations of this in Study I. Second, it is potentially the case that, in order for friendships to be maintained, these attractions must decrease. It is possible that those relationships that sustained high levels of romantic attraction over time would not be included in this study because they would no longer be friendships. Future research could focus specifically on the characteristics of broken cross-sex friendships or romances that started out as friendships to address these issues empirically.

Limitations

The findings of this research must be understood within the context of the study procedures. The parameters affecting this study include the selected sample and the method of self-report.

Because this sample was made up of college students, the results of this study cannot necessarily be applied to other populations. Some of these results may have been affected by the age and marital status of the sample. Many of the participants in Study I, for example, contrasted their cross-sex friendships to dating relationships rather than to marriages. A limitation specific to the sample in Study II was that only one member of the friendship dyad completed the questionnaire. Therefore, the occurrence of symmetrical and asymmetrical forms of attraction could not be assessed in Study II as they were in Study I.

Because interviews and questionnaires rely on self-report, results can be influenced by participants who are not fully self-aware or who chose to be selectively honest and open. However, because the purpose of this study was to describe the subjective experience of cross-sex friendship, even participants who were not highly self-aware were still able to report on the experience as they saw it. Further, the confidentiality of the interviews and the anonymity of the questionnaires were intended to facilitate honest participation.

Conclusion

This research supplies evidence that the bonds between men and women may be changing. That romantic and physical/sexual attraction occurred at relatively low levels compared with friendship attraction reveals that male–female social relationships can indeed be based on something other than romance and sex. Cross-sex friendships may be a place where men and women can see one another not only as mates and objects, but also as comrades and pals.

In addition, this research indicates that attraction is a more complicated and multidimensional construct than past conceptualizations have revealed. While cross-sex friends may be asked by mutual friends and researchers alike, ‘Are you two attracted to each other or not?’, the results of this study suggest that there is not a yes or no answer to this question. Indeed, cross-sex friends would have to reply, ‘Which one of us, at what point in the friendship, and what kind of attraction?’

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Appendix

Study I questions

1. What do you think is important to ask in a study of friendships between women and men?
2. How did you meet?
3. How did the relationship develop?
4. How would you describe this relationship? [Probes: How do you feel toward this person and the relationship? How do you/would you describe it to your friends/dating partner? What activities do you do together? What are the topics of your conversation?]
5. Do you have any same-sex friends? When you think of these friendships, how are they the same/different from your cross-sex friendship?
6. During your cross-sex friendship have you been seeing anyone romantically? How is/was that relationship the same/different from your cross-sex friendship?
7. (If applicable) What does/did your romantic partner think of your relationship with your friend?
8. Have you ever talked about your friendship with your friend? Can you describe what you've talked about in those conversations?
9. Have you ever considered dating/having a sexual relationship with this person? Why? Why not? What about your friend or the circumstances contribute to you not being in a romantic relationship with this person?
10. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered?