

# The challenge of sexual attraction within heterosexuals' cross-sex friendship

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether sexual attraction constitutes a “challenge” in cross-sex friendship, as well as the role and consequences of sexual attraction in friendship development. We present data from two studies. Study I, using detailed interviews, found three patterns of sexual attraction management. Study II, using a questionnaire, assessed important issues from Study I. The findings support the view that sexual attraction is indeed a challenge for cross-sex friends. Nevertheless, when sexual attraction is expressed, the friendship prevails in the majority of the cases. The implications of these findings in understanding the role of sexual attraction in cross-sex friendships are discussed.

KEY WORDS: cross-sex friendship • friendship • relational development • relationship types • sexual activity • sexual attraction

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Friendship between heterosexual men and women was generally considered unattainable and non-existent. In a study from the 1950s the percentage of men reporting having a friendly relationship with women was negligible (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). During the last 30 years, however, cross-sex friendship has emerged not just as a possibility, but as a lived reality for many people (approximately 40% of men and 30% of women; (Maison-neuve & Lamy, 1993; Rubin, 1985)). Many people, moreover, have more than one close cross-sex friend (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Parker & deVries,

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1993). Over the past several decades, the increasing entrance of women in the public sphere, the evolution of the sex roles, and the ensuing waning of stereotypes led to an increase in the functional co-existence of men and women, and to an increased sense that the different-sex other could be viewed not only as a (short-term or long-term) lover, but also as a friend (Maisonneuve & Lamy, 1993; Monsour, 1988).

Several studies identified the advantages of cross-sex friendships. Men and women agree that through cross-sex friendships, they gain a greater understanding of how members of the other sex think, feel, and behave (Sapadin, 1988; Swain, 1992). Moreover, in friendships with women, men discover the possibility of greater intimacy and emotional depth than is typically available in their same-sex friendships – qualities that women have always enjoyed in their own same-sex friendships (Monsour, 1988; Rubin, 1985). In addition, many women find their contact with a more activity oriented male to be a communicative advantage (Rubin, 1985).

### **Sexual attraction as a challenge**

As women and men open themselves to the possibility of cross-sex friendship, they have to contend with the cardinal issue of the relationship's definition. This is because close contact with friends of the other sex involves challenges of sexual and/or romantic attraction, even though such attraction may not actually exist (O'Meara, 1989; Rubin, 1985). Indeed, attraction can be an intense challenge in a cross-sex friendship even when there is no sexual tension between friends, because of the dominant socio-cultural perception that views any close cross-sex relationship as reflecting manifest or latent sexual/romantic attraction (Bern, 1981; Brain, 1976). This common view remains despite research clearly indicating a variety of different types of cross-sex emotional relationships (Rawlins, 1982) and attractions (Reeder, 2000).

What happens, though, when there is a unilateral or mutual sexual attraction? Given the aforementioned common view and since same-sex friendships provide a model for understanding cross-sex friendships, the definition of the latter presumes the absence of this kind of attraction (Rawlins, 1982; Werking, 1997). Therefore, that sexual attraction cannot be the starting point and foundation of a cross-sex friendship is taken for granted. In fact, if the goal of one or both of the members of the dyad is to sexually approach the other sex "friend," then the friendly approach is nothing but a kind of "Trojan horse" for the attainment of the erotic purpose (Rawlins, 1982). On the other hand, we cannot rule out that sexual attraction may emerge as a result of the intimacy that might develop between cross-sex friends. However, for many people the emergence of sexual attraction may jeopardize the friendship as it threatens its integrity (Bell, 1981; Rubin, 1985). Nevertheless, in some cases the friendship may continue to be the primary relational context, with the sexual dimension playing a secondary role (Rubin, 1985). This is consistent with the notions of "friendship love",

(Rawlins, 1982), of “flovvers” (Bradac, 1983), and of “friends with benefits” (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009), as friends who differentiate “romantic” from “friendly” sex (Rubin, 1985; see also Reeder, 2000). Therefore, a tendency to discriminate between friendship, romantic, and sexual attraction becomes evident in cross-sex friendship. Reeder (2000) reports that 90% of her participants who felt some kind of romantic attraction for their cross-sex friend also reported sexual attraction. Only 46% of those who reported sexual attraction also reported feeling romantic attraction.

In his seminal article O’Meara (1989) expressed the same line of thought arguing that “. . . the relationship is non-romantic in the sense that its function is purposefully dissociated from courtship rites by the actors involved. Non-romantic does not mean, however, that sexuality or passion are necessarily absent from the relationship” (p. 526). Thus, sexual attraction represents a fundamental element of a romantic relationship, whereas in a friendship it constitutes an element to be (intrapersonally and interpersonally) managed and not an attribute that necessarily invalidates it. The necessity of such management led O’Meara to argue that the sexual dimension is one of the greater challenges cross-sex friends have to grapple with.

### **Existence of sexual attraction**

Several studies provide evidence of sexual attraction between opposite-sex friends. Sapadin (1988) reported that 66% of men and 46% of women respond affirmatively to the statement “Friends can become my sexual partners”. Bell (1981) found that four out of every ten women in his study wanted a sexual dimension in at least some of their male friendships. Reeder (2000) reported that 30% of the participants in her study stated that they have experienced physical/sexual attraction for an other-sex friend. These findings corroborate the view that sexual attraction poses a challenge in cross-sex friendship, but they provide no data about its importance or its effects on the friendship. On the other hand, Monsour and his colleagues concluded that the sexual challenge does not trouble cross-sex friends. In a preliminary study Monsour, Betty, and Kurzweil (1993) reported that participants rated the sexual overtones in their cross-sex friendships as moderately low. In a follow-up survey, Monsour, Harris, and Kurzweil (1994) found that 20% of the male and 10% of the female participants reported sexual attraction for their cross-sex friend; however, they noted that the low frequency does not necessarily mean that it is insignificant when it does occur.

### **Expression of sexual attraction**

Several studies have also focused on the likelihood that partners have sexual relations with their other-sex friend. Fuiman, Yarab, and Sensibaugh (1997) stated that 14% of their participants reported having engaged in sexual activity (sexual caressing, oral sex, sexual intercourse, etc.) with a cross-sex friend. Afifi and Faulkner (2000) reported that 51% of participants had engaged in sexual contact with a cross-sex friend at least once, whereas one third reported repeated sexual activity with a cross-sex friend. It is

important to consider, however, that Afifi and Faulkner did not define "close" cross-sex friendships for participants. Bleske and Buss (2000) reported that about 20% of the male and 10% of the female participants have occasional or regular sexual contact with a close friend of the other sex.

While research clearly indicates the existence of sexual interaction between other-sex friends, there is also no doubt that the findings vary dramatically. Several researchers have attempted to explain the diversity of the results. Some findings indicate that one's stance towards the sexual dimension of the friendship correlates with one's sex and/or general worldview. Indeed, men, when compared with women, appear more focused on, and are more likely to seek, the sexual dimension of a friendship (Monsour, 1992; Rubin, 1985). There is evidence, however, that an individual's level of conventionality, and not one's sex, determines whether an individual will manage sexual attraction in cross-sex friendship in a functional manner. In particular, Bell (1981) demonstrated that over half of men possessing traditional values and attitudes consider integration of the sexual component into the friendship particularly threatening for the relationship. In comparison, less conventional men believe that sexual interaction may have positive relational outcomes.

The diversity of the findings suggests that people cope with sexual attraction (unilateral or mutual) in many different ways (O'Meara, 1989; Sapadin, 1988). We assume that how sexual attraction is managed emerges from the interaction of multiple psychological, social, and other contingent factors. In other words, the management of sexual attraction will depend on: (i) the idiosyncratic way one perceives a particular cross-sex friendship; (ii) the perceived quality of this relationship; and (iii) sexual scripts, that is, the mental models by which each friend defines acceptable and unacceptable behaviors within relevant relational contexts (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). It is important to note that dealing with sexual attraction within cross-sex friendships is complicated by the lack of pertinent cultural scripts guiding this situation (O'Meara, 1989). With the exception that an intimate relationship between a man and a woman is likely to involve a sexual dimension, people have to construct the rules of a cross-sex close relationship on their own, unlike most other interpersonal relations where an array of available cultural rules or guidelines pre-exists.

### **Sex as a reinforcer or sex as a threat**

Many people manage to integrate sexual activity into a cross-sex relationship defined as a close friendship. In some cases, this activity is regarded as a secondary, non-threatening element that further reinforces their friendship (Bell, 1981; Rubin, 1985). More recently, Afifi and Faulkner (2000) reported that 67% of the participants who had incorporated sexual activity in a cross-sex friendship considered that this had enhanced the quality of their friendship.

For a large number of people, however, the existence and, to a greater extent, the expression of attraction represents a threat. Sexual attraction is a threat because it increases the probability that the friendship will be harmed by the ensuing complications and conflicts. Such fears likely emerge

from cultural rules implying that sexual activity entails commitment, exclusivity, and possessiveness that do not befit a friendship (Rubin, 1985). Hence, the primary reason people avoid getting sexually involved with friends is the preservation of the close friendship and its benefits (Monsour, 1997). What is it, then, that makes some people consider sexual involvement with a close friend as a benefit, while others perceive it as a threat or even a disaster? According to Afifi and Faulkner (2000), sexual involvement will be a positive aspect of the relationship when partners' relational context is explicitly defined as an intimate/close relationship and, at the same time, the partners' cognitive schemes permit incorporation of sexual activity in the cross-sex friendship. Therefore, the management of sexual attraction is related to the projected relational consequences people associate with it (strengthen/weaken). Afifi and Faulkner reported that there were no studies in the relevant literature exploring the consequences of sexual attraction and contact on the advancement of the cross-sex friendship. Some more recent studies, however, pointed to a number of variables that might be related to the management of sexual activity within the cross-sex friendship. For example, Hughes, Morrison, and Asada (2005) indicated that incorporation of the sexual activity in the friendship (i.e., a friends with benefit relationship) may be associated with attitudes about love, and Guerrero and Chavez (2005) have shown that mutual romantic intent is associated with more relationship talk, thus affecting the quality of friendship.

In this article, we focus on the role of sexual attraction within cross-sex friendships. We explore the extent to which sexual attraction constitutes a challenge, that is, something to be constantly managed both intrapersonally and interpersonally by cross-sex friends. Our reasoning is that feeling sexual attraction will affect one's actual definition of the relationship, and expressing this attraction will affect the relationship's development. We investigate the role of sexual attraction in cross-sex friendship on the basis of data collected from one qualitative (Study I) and one quantitative study (Study II). More specifically, the questions we explored were the following: Is sexual attraction a challenge in the context of cross-sex friendship, and if so, why? How do people manage this sexual attraction when it emerges and/or is expressed (one sidedly or mutually)? What is the sexual attraction's impact on relationship development?

## **Study I**

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

This study was part of a wider qualitative project concerning inter-sex relationships in three contexts: couples, friendship, and the workplace (Davou & Christakis, 2006). Participants were selected for semi-structured comprehensive interviews based on two sampling strategies: maximum variation and typical case (Lindlof, 1995). Maximum variation was used for sex (male–female) and age (young, 25–35; middle, 36–45; and late, 46–55

adulthood, e.g., Kimmel (1974)). Given the social changes that have affected sex roles and relationships in Greece during the last 30 years (Igglei, 1995), we considered a “typical case” to be any Greek adult, with an active social life, and whose age falls within the desired range. Those in late adulthood (46–55 years old) witnessed spectacular changes in sex roles and relationships, while maintaining traditional values and attitudes. Young adults (25–35 years old) live in social conditions dramatically different from their parents, where earlier role models likely appear irrelevant, but also constitute a source of friction and dysfunction. Participants in middle adulthood (36–45 years old) are at the epicenter of these changes. In Greek society, these changes can be detected, among other things, in the decrease of reproduction rates, the rise of divorce rates and single families, the increase of the age that people choose to marry, and of the number of people who decide to cohabit or remain single (Moussourou & Stratigaki, 2004). They can also be detected in the rise of women’s employment and education level (Maratou-Alipranti, Bagavos, Papadakis, & Papiakou, 2002) as well as women’s increased participation in academia and research (Karamessini, 2004). Women’s family and social roles, as well as their social and vocational status, have been redefined (Gasouka, 2007; Moussourou, 1995). Although it is often assumed that interpersonal behavioral changes do not necessarily follow progress in women’s social position, role, and legal status (Kyriazis, 1998), there is evidence, at least in large Greek cities, that young women and men are increasingly involved in cross-gender friendships (Gardiki et al., 1987; Teperoglou, Balourdos, Myrizakis, & Tzortzopoulou, 1999). These patterns of cross-gendered relationships are consistent with changes elsewhere in the western world.

The number of participants was determined by the saturation criterion or when additional interviews add no additional information (Cresswell, 1998). In our study, the saturation criterion was met with a total of 33 participants: six men and six women 25–34 years of age, five men and five women 35–44 years of age, and five men and six women 45–54 years of age. All participants were heterosexual Greeks, living in the greater Athens area. Seven were married and 15 had a permanent relationship (of which two were cohabitating).

### **Material and procedure**

We constructed our interview guide from the literature review (Lindlof, 1995). Primary topics included whether the participant had a close cross-sex friendship, in what way it differed from a close same-sex friendship, how it is affected by the social context, if there was an obvious or latent sexual attraction from either or both partners, how they faced it, and what sort of consequences it produced. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on thoughts and feelings about such relationships, focusing especially on the sexual dimension, as well as to give examples of particular relevant experiences.

Participants were approached through researchers’ acquaintances, and none was known to the researchers before the study. They were asked to

take part in an interview study about cross-gender relationships. Participants were told that data will be used strictly for the purposes of the study and were assured of the confidentiality and protection of their personal data.

Thirty-three individual interviews were carried out in participants' homes or offices according to participants' own choice. At first, the interviewer made an initial probe by asking the participant to speak about, by referring to particular examples, his/her experience on friendship and specifically on cross-sex friendship. The discussion revolved around the themes raised by participants, but interviewers were instructed to gently divert the discussion, when necessary, to the topics included in an interview guide. The interviews lasted an average of two hours and were all recorded with the participant's consent.

Five interviewers (three women and two men), trained by senior researchers, performed the interviews. To control for possible effects produced by the interviewer's sex, the interviewer-interviewee genders varied for approximately half of the interviews.

## **Results**

Data analysis was performed on the interview transcripts. The analysis, guided by a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), was based on the detection of meaningful speech fragments and their development into conceptual categories. Some of those categories were predetermined during the literature review while others emerged from the data. Common categories were identified and compared to develop more general overarching themes. Subsequently, general hypotheses were formed and further investigated. The process was inductive in the sense that we moved from the synthesis of small conceptual units to the construction of more general categories of meaning and experience that reflected the individuals' intrapersonal and interpersonal worlds. Qualitative analysis is not based on frequencies, but instead on identifying common themes in the data.

### **The emergence of sexual attraction**

Sexual attraction can exist in cross-sex friendships, but, at the same time, may threaten them. All interviewees discussed close friendships. On the one hand, this implies that the relationships were not initiated with the anticipation of a romantic or sexual liaison. On the other hand, they had been previously tested for quality.

Most participants contend that sexual attraction can emerge at any given time in their cross-sex friendships. As a 45-year-old female noted, "There is always nature, I don't think you can outdo nature." It may surface as a result of several factors. Firstly, it can emerge from intimacy that derives from the friendship. For example, a 25-year-old male indicated that it can occur: "... when you spend a lot of time together." Secondly, sexual attraction can come to the forefront through social pressure. "Even if the two of them don't feel it, those around them will bring it to their attention and influence

them” (female, 37). Finally, attraction can be generated by contingency coupled with an emotional vulnerability of one or both partners. “There will always be some attraction at a moment, a moment of weakness if we could call it that, when one is disappointed, sensitive, or whatever” (female, 37).

### **Sexual attraction as a threat**

For most of the participants, sexual attraction that emerges in cross-sex friendship is described as something that will inevitably devalue the friendship. Therefore, participants compare a close friendship with manifest eroticism to a romantic (or strictly sexual) relationship. They even reach a point where they only see the negative aspects of the latter; that is, they argue that the self-serving elements that are inherent in a romantic relationship are incompatible with the ethical ideal of friendship. They also point out that in a romantic relationship the partners must constantly monitor their behavior so as to be mutually likable, and to monopolize their partner’s attention. Thus, they end up not being as authentic as they think they ought to be in a “real” friendship: “. . . there is always a tendency for the friendship to culminate into a sexual liaison and that compromises spontaneity, compromises the sincerity of what is said” (male, 38). “When there is lust in a friendship you can’t talk about real friendship anymore because the other will always say something that will make you jealous, you’ll always be trying to seduce the other and you’ll only be misled by the fact that the two of you are friends” (female, 28).

Hence, we may conclude that potential or real sexual attraction between cross-sex friends constitutes a challenge to the existence and experience of the cross-sex friendship. This is likely the case primarily because it causes confusion concerning the relationship’s definition and nullifies the benefits of the cross-sex friendship.

### **Managing sexual attraction**

When acting as a threat, sexual attraction creates uncertainty about the endurance of the friendship. The management of attraction represents the cognitive and practical ways an individual uses to shield the friendship against the threatening, latent or manifest, erotic-sexual element. Three patterns of sexual attraction management arose from the interviews:

**“Mental” and/or relational-communicative management.** This form of management is either an intrapersonal process (thoughts, decisions, etc.) or an interpersonal one (explicit or implicit “agreement” between the partners). The main goal here is for the friendship to remain “unadulterated,” and that the relational contexts do not mingle. This form of management presents attraction as a “temptation” that the partners have to prevail over.

. . . because when the person in front of you is a woman and you have drunk a little and you’re in the mood, ok, the sexual component will arise; what will prevail? Will friendship prevail, or, are you going to ruin a friendship? I believe though that those few you have kept as your true friends you also respect them. (male, 45).



I have some male friends that I believe that [desire] has crossed their mind, the same way it has crossed mine, because we have been very close for a long time. I think that something like that isn't to be expressed because the friendship will be ruined so in order to avoid that we never talk about sexual attraction. (female, 37).

**The sexual element emerges and disappears.** In some cases, friends give into sexual attraction, that is, a sexual relationship is formed. Subsequently, as the sexual tension is “discharged,” the prevalence of the friendly context becomes possible:

Eventually, apart from the friendship a sexual relationship was formed . . . this lasted on and off for about a year and we now continue to be friends only. . . . After we went through this romantic phase and each of us made it clear to the other that there's nothing else going on, I think that we will remain friends. (male, 29).

When the erotic aspect is completely exhausted then friends is all we remain. It always gets discharged at some point. (female, 34).

**Integrating sexual attraction and expression into the friendship.** In this form of managing sexual attraction, cross-sex friends engage in occasional sexual relations and the two contexts (friendship and sexual relationship) seemingly co-exist. However, the partners define their relationship as solely friendly:

With some close friends something did happen. . . . Maybe, under different circumstances it would never cross my mind, but being together and feeling warmth may make it come about. But above all, we are friends. (female, 43).

## Discussion

Sexual attraction may surface at any point within a friendship, either because of the intimacy that develops between the two friends, situational contingencies, or social pressure. This attraction is experienced as a challenge because it is inconsistent with the relational frame and places the friendship at risk. In some cases, people manage this attraction through a cognitive decision or an interpersonal (explicit or implicit) agreement. In other cases, they physically discharge it by forming a temporary sexual relationship that eventually stops. Moreover, in a small number of cases, this element is integrated into the friendship.

## Study II

The second study aimed, on the one hand, at a general quantitative recording of friendly relationships. On the other hand, we focused on the relational impact of sexual attraction within cross-sex friendship, based on the sexual-attraction management patterns that emerged in Study I.

## Method

### Participants

Three hundred and twenty-two individuals (162 women and 160 men) from the greater Athens, Greece area participated in Study II. An approximately equal number of men and women were in each of four age groups: 25–29 ( $n = 117$ ), 30–34 ( $n = 58$ ), 35–39 ( $n = 74$ ), and 40–44 ( $n = 73$ ).

### Material and procedure

Participants were initially contacted by phone and asked if they wished to participate in a research project on friendship, which would require approximately half an hour of their time. Upon agreement, a researcher would go to the place of their preference (home or office) and administer the questionnaire. Researchers explained the nature of the study, explained the anonymous and confidential nature of the data, and gained final approval for inclusion of participants' answers in the project.

After providing demographic information, participants were asked four dichotomous (yes–no) questions about cross-sex friendship. First, “is friendship with a person of the other sex possible?” An open-ended follow-up question invited participants to explain their answer. Second, “do you currently have, or have you ever had, a close friendship with a person(s) of the other sex?” Third, “have you ever been sexually attracted to a close friend of the other sex?” Fourth, participants who answered affirmatively to the third question were asked “have you expressed this attraction to this friend?”

Finally, a series of questions probed the relational impact of sexual attraction. Based on the sexual attraction management patterns from Study I, participants who expressed their sexual attraction to a cross-sex friend chose one of the following responses: (i) “The friendship was ruined,” (ii) “The other person did not reciprocate but the friendship was maintained,” (iii) “Our friendship evolved into a romantic relationship,” (iv) “Our friendship was maintained incorporating occasional sexual contact,” and (v) “The sexual aspect was discharged physically and we remained friends.”

## Results

### The possibility of cross-sex friendship

Three-quarters of participants agreed that friendship with a person of the other sex was possible. The results showed that the percentage of women who reported that it was possible (80.9%) was significantly higher than the percentage of men (69.2%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 321) = 5.25, p < .05$  (Yates correction)  $\Phi^2 = .13$ . Age differences were not statistically significant.

In addition, we analyzed participants' open-ended responses regarding the “possibility” or the “impossibility” of cross-sex friendship. Explanations were provided by 200 out of 241 participants who claimed cross-sex friendship is *possible* and 58 out of 80 who claimed it is *impossible*. Using a subsample

of 50 responses, we developed categories explaining the “possibility” and the “impossibility” of cross-sex friendship in a procedure akin to content analysis (Clark, 1985). After generating these categories, we independently categorized responses into these four categories. The inter-coder agreement was computed (by calculating the agreement percentage between coders), which was found to be acceptable (i.e., .86). When there was disagreement between coders, the opinion of a third coder was used.

Based on our analysis, we developed four categories: The first and, by far, most popular explanation (i.e., 96 of 220 valid responses or 43.6%) indicated that cross-sex friendships were possible, because friendship is a matter of personality and character (e.g., “Real friendship is based upon deeper grounds such as character, temperament, ideas etc that do not depend on sex”).

The second category of explanation provided was that cross-sex friendships are possible because, like the first category, friendship is a matter of personality and character; however, these relationships are viable only as long as the erotic-sexual dimension is excluded (e.g., “If you exclude sex, it’s nice to have friends of the other sex”). Forty-five of the 220 (20.5%) explanations fell into this category.

The third explanation for the possibility of cross-sex friendships was that competition and jealousy found in a same-sex friendship do not exist in an other-sex friendship, leading to better communication and understanding (e.g., “It is frequently grounded on stronger foundations than same-sex friendship because of the lack of competition from both sides.”). Nearly one-in-five respondents provided this explanation (i.e.,  $n = 43$  or 19.6%). The large majority of these explanations (i.e., 81.4%) were given by women. This was the only explanation exhibiting a significant sex difference ( $\chi^2(3, N = 200) = 13.88, p < .01; V = .26$ ).

The final explanation for the possibility of cross-sex friendships (provided by 16.3% of respondents) is that they have a lot to offer, such as a better understanding of the other sex and an opening/improvement of the self (e.g., “Because the other sex communicates, thinks, acts, reacts, and appreciates in a different way. That promotes the type of differentiation of ideas and beliefs necessary for the creation of the multifaceted prism called life.”).

Participants provided 66 explanations why cross-sex friendships were not possible. Following the same procedure (inter-coder agreement .91) the justifications provided were classified into two categories. By far the most popular category (i.e., 52 out of 66 justifications, or 78.8%) is that other-sex friendships are impossible because the erotic-sexual element is always implicated (e.g., “It is impossible because there will always be some sexual attraction either physically or in fantasy.”). The other category ( $n = 14$ ; 21.1%), suggested that the differences between men and women are so great that it is not possible for them to become friends (e.g., “I don’t think that women can understand either the problems men face or the male way of thinking and vice versa.”).

### **Experience with cross-sex friendships**

Most respondents (84.7%; or 82.4% of men and 87% of women,  $\chi^2(1, N = 321) = 1.34, p = NS$ , Yates correction) indicated that they either have or have had a friendship with a member of the other sex. Participants in the 25–29 years of age range were significantly more likely to indicate experience (92.3%) than the other age groups,  $\chi^2(3, N = 321) = 8.54, p < .05, V = .16$ . In the other age groups, 79.3% in the 30–34 group, 82.4% in the 35–39 group and 79.2% in the 40–44 group indicated that they either have or have had a friendship with a member of the other sex.

### **Experience and expression of sexual attraction for a cross-sex friend**

Over half of the participants (57.3%) who reported experience with a cross-sex friendship indicated that they have been sexually attracted to an other-sex close friend. More men (68.7%) than women (46.8%,  $\chi^2(1, N = 272) = 12.43, p < .01$ ; Yates correction;  $\Phi^2 = .22$ ) reported sexual attraction. There were no differences by respondents' age.

Of those respondents who experienced sexual attraction, over half (55.1%) indicated that they expressed it to their friend. Although men (60%) were more likely than women (48.5%) to express sexual attraction, the difference is not significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 1.60, p = NS$  (Yates correction). Age differences were not statistically significant either,  $\chi^2(3, N = 156) = 4.69, p = NS$ .

### **The relational impact of sexual attraction**

We are interested in the development of the cross-sex friendship following the disclosure of sexual attraction. Therefore, we compiled participants' responses to the relational change question into two categories: (i) "Cessation of friendship," which includes the subcategories "The friendship was ruined," and "The friendship evolved into a romantic relationship," and (ii) "Continuation of friendship," which includes the subcategories "The other person did not reciprocate, but the friendship was maintained," "The sexual aspect was discharged physically and we remained friends," and "The friendship was maintained incorporating occasional sexual contact".

As shown in Table 1, following the expression of sexual attraction, the friendship is terminated in 16.3% of the cases and is transformed into a romantic relationship in 22.1% of the cases. So, the friendship ceased in 38.4% of the cases (although for two very different reasons). On the other hand, in 61.6% of the cases, the friendship is preserved, although again, it is through different routes. The most frequent outcome is the occasional integration of a sexual element into the friendship. Somewhat less likely is the initial sexual element of the relationship that is terminated in a way that allows the relationship to continue. Finally, the least likely response is that the friendship continues without a sexual component. Neither sex nor age differences reached statistical significance.

In conclusion, we note that friendships were terminated in only 16.3% of the cases. In all other cases, the cross-sex friendship is either preserved in some form (61.6%) or transformed into a romantic relationship (22.1%).

**TABLE 1**  
**Development of cross-sex friendships after the expression of sexual attraction**

	<b>Women (N = 32)</b>	<b>Men (N = 54)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Cessation of friendship			38.4%
Termination of friendship	15.6% (n = 5)	16.7% (n = 9)	
Development of friendship into a romantic relationship	28.1% (n = 9)	18.5% (n = 10)	
Total	43.7%	35.2%	
Continuation of friendship			61.6%
No reciprocation to the sexual element	12.5% (n = 4)	20.3% (n = 11)	
Discharge of the sexual element	25% (n = 8)	16.7% (n = 9)	
Integration of the sexual element	18.8% (n = 6)	27.8% (n = 15)	
Total	56.3%	64.8%	

## Study II

### Summary

Three out of four participants (and more women than men) believed that cross-sex friendships are possible, explaining this belief mainly on the grounds that friendship is a matter of personality and character and not a matter of sex difference. More than eight out of 10 participants stated that they have had or currently have a close cross-sex friendship. Of those, six out of 10 reported that they have felt sexual attraction for a cross-sex friend, while more than half of the latter stated that they have expressed this attraction to their friend. Finally, when sexual attraction was expressed, in most cases the friendship was maintained, whereas, in fewer cases, it either developed into a romantic relationship or it was terminated.

### General discussion

#### The possibility and actuality of cross-sex friendship

Cross-sex friendship is an indubitable reality for three fourths of the participants of our study and is more prevalent for women than for men. Interestingly enough, the only sex difference in explanations for the possibility of cross-sex friendship was that women were more likely than men to claim that competition and jealousy, often found in their same-sex friendships, are absent in other-sex friendships.

The stated possibility of cross-sex friendship is unlikely to be just wishful thinking or manifestation of political correctness, as more than 80% of respondents indicated that they have (or had) a close cross-sex friendship. That there was no sex difference in the likelihood of having a cross-sex friend indicates that men and women share the same reality, but have a

somewhat different representation that explains the likelihood of cross-sex friendships.

### **The challenge of sexual attraction**

The issue of sexual attraction appears to be critically important, leading us to conclude that there is indeed a significant challenge in cross-sex friendship, contrary to the view of Monsour et al. (1994). Several of our findings support this conclusion. Firstly, approximately half of the participants in Study II have reported experiencing sexual attraction for at least one of their cross-sex friends, and approximately half of those participants expressed it. Secondly, in Study II, when participants explained why cross-sex friendships were either possible or impossible, the issue of sexual attraction arose spontaneously in 20.5% of the “possible” explanations and in 78.8% of the “impossible” explanations. In the former case, sexual attraction was described in terms of what must be precluded before a cross-sex friendship could be viable. In the latter case, sexual attraction is the main reason the friendship is rendered impossible. Thirdly, Study I interviewees indicate that the intimacy inherent in a friendship tends to generate the sexual element. Reeder (2000) reported that 20% of the participants indicated that their subjective physical/sexual attraction toward a friend had grown over time. Even when sexual attraction does not grow over time, most participants of our two studies perceive this attraction to be a threat to their relationship. Sexual involvement is a threat to cross-sex friendships because it is associated with negative aspects of romantic and sexual relationships, such as exclusivity, possessiveness, and a decrease of authenticity. Thus, sexual involvement is inconsistent with the idealistic and moral idea of pure friendship. At the same time, involvement of any sexual element may complicate partners’ relationship definition, especially given the lack of cultural scripts regarding cross-sex friendship (O’Meara, 1989).

Consistent with earlier research (Harvey, 2003; Rubin, 1985), the sexual element appears to be stronger for men, at least on the level of experience. Specifically, men, when compared with women, were both more likely to experience and express sexual attraction. This is probably due to the fact that men’s psychosocial role requires or justifies a more assertive sexual pursuit, which results in an ambivalent predisposition toward women friends, revealing a vacillation between viewing women as potential sexual partners, on the one hand, and social companions, on the other (Maisonneuve & Lamy, 1993). From a different perspective, Rubin (1985) argued that men’s stronger focus on the sexual element is due to their relative inexperience in expressing verbal and physical intimacy compared to their female counterparts, which makes them prone to misconstrue their cross-sex friend’s freer expression of intimacy as indication of sexual attraction. Regarding this effect, Abbey (1982) suggested that men’s interpretations of women’s behaviors as sexual is part of a generalized tendency of men to perceive the world in sexual terms.

We also note that the only statistically significant difference across age categories pertains to the number of participants who declared having or

having had a cross-sex friendship. The 25–29 year old participants report that they are more likely to currently have or have had cross-sex friendships, when compared to the three older age groups. This might indicate that younger people are more open to this emergent cross-sex relationship. Younger participants are no different in the extent to which they experience, express sexual attraction, or the way they manage it, within cross-sex friendships. Hence, the lack of cultural scripts regarding sexual attraction within cross-sex friendship likely affects people in a variety of ages. Sexual attraction does not cease to be a challenge even for those who experience more cross-sex friendships.

In conclusion, we consider that the above findings support the view that sexual attraction is a profound and complex challenge in cross-sex friendship. It interferes decisively in the representation as well as in the practice of cross-sex friendship.

### **The management of and impact of expressing sexual interest**

Given that sexual attraction toward an other-sex friend is typically seen as a threat to the friendship, we investigated how such attraction is managed. From Study II data, intrapersonal management appears as almost half of those who indicated having experienced sexual attraction did not reveal it to their friend. This concealment may be motivated by a desire to protect the friendship and/or to avoid possible rejection by the friend. Interpersonal management follows the unilateral or mutual expression of attraction and typically involves an implicit or explicit agreement regarding the emerging relational frame. Thus, even when there is an unreciprocated attraction, some friendships are maintained (17.4%) whereas others are terminated (16.3%). In some cases of mutual expression of attraction the friendly relationship is transformed into a romantic one (22.1%). In other cases, the friendship continues after the sexual element is initiated but then terminated (19.8%). Finally, there are cases (24.4%) in which sexual intimacy is integrated in the friendship as the partners do not obviously perceive it as a threat but rather feel it reinforces the relationship (e.g., Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Guerrero & Chavez, 2005).

Overall, after the one-way or mutual expression of sexual attraction, cross-sex friendships are preserved in over six out of 10 cases. We also observe that after sexual attraction has been expressed, the responses of men and women regarding the friendship development do not differ. Thus, despite the fact that men seem more likely to focus on sexual interaction, both men and women value the cross-sex friendship enough to preserve it. However, we must be cautious regarding this finding, since this lack of difference might be due to the relatively small number of cases in each group (see Table 1).

In conclusion, even though sexual attraction is generally described as a challenge or threat to cross-sex friendships, when it does occur, the friendship is preserved in over 60% of cases. Moreover, given that the transformation of a cross-sex friendship into a romantic relationship (22.1% of all cases) suggests the continuation of interpersonal intimacy, then the expression of sexual attraction has a positive outcome in 83.7% of the cases.

Our results strongly suggest that cross-sex friendships are inherently challenging. Given the lack of operational cultural scripts concerning this relationship, every close friendship between a man and a woman alludes to a latent sexual attraction. Cross-sex friends have to affirm the non-sexual and/or the non-romantic nature of their relationship intrapersonally, interpersonally, and with their social networks. In addition, when sexual attraction is experienced, one-way or mutually, the challenges are even greater. When one or both friends feel it, they are faced with a disclosure dilemma, especially since it might harm the friendship. When it is expressed, however, friends need to explicitly or implicitly negotiate the nature of their relationship: Will the relationship turn into a romantic one, will it become a friends with benefits relationship, or will it preserve its platonic nature? Whatever the case may be, although sexual attraction irrefutably constitutes a challenge for cross-sex friends, from the moment it is out in the open people appear ready to deal with it.

### **Limitations**

When we asked participants whether they ever felt or expressed sexual attraction to a friend of the other sex, the negative responses refer to all their cross-sex relationships. An affirmative response, on the other hand, may refer to one or more cross-sex friendships. Thus, the proportion of the cross-sex friendships that involve the experience and/or expression of sexual attraction remains unclear, nor do we know the impact of sexual attraction in each case when it was expressed. In addition, we cannot determine which particular instances a participant chooses to report or the criteria they use in making that decision (e.g., intent, social circumstances, duration of the relationship, the particular history of the relationship, or even the particular point in one's life). Therefore, we did not consider participants' marital/relation status. A married person or a person in a long, enduring, relationship would likely hesitate more than a single person to communicate or initiate sexual attraction in a cross-sex friendship. Future research on marital/relation status as it relates to sexual attraction in cross-sex friendships should consider cases where these two conditions coincide, as well as evaluate components of both the marriage/relation and the friendship.

Another limitation of the study is that the cases of experience and expression of the sexual attraction are only examined from the perspective of the one partner of the friendship. Hence, in a future study, it would be interesting to further investigate and compare the views of both partners.

In considering the proportion of individuals who reported experiencing or communicating sexual attraction, we must note that we do not know participants' sexual orientation. The possibility of lesbians, gay men and bisexual women or men participants in Study II could influence the percentage of those who have experienced and/or communicated sexual attraction.

Future research should include larger sample sizes, which would allow greater diversity in age and other demographic characteristics. This would also increase statistical power in comparing friendship development after the expression of one-sided or mutual sexual attraction.



## Conclusions

Overall, we observed that sexual attraction is generally considered inevitable and a challenge to cross-sex friendships. Sexual attraction is an inextricable element in every cross-sex relationship and people realize that they will face it. When experienced, some respondents attempted to suppress and/or control it. Contrary to this gloomy view, most relationships where attraction emerged did not terminate. Thus, how is the notion of sexual attraction as a challenge reconciled with the small proportion of terminated friendships? The particular findings lead us to infer that, even though sexual attraction within the context of cross-sex friendship is considered a threat to the friendship, its consequences are generally not calamitous. Evidently, in a large number of cases, preserving the friendship weighs more heavily than enjoying the gratifications of sexual interaction.

Of particular interest are those cases in which the sexual element acquires permanence between the partners while the relationship continues to be defined as friendship. Are we talking about friendship the way we used to define it until recently (that is, based on the same-sex model of friendship), or is this a new kind of cross-sex relationship? The phenomenon of friends and lovers attests to the transformation of friendly relations between men and women through a new kind of processing of the erotic/sexual element, but it probably also attests to the existence of a new model of romantic relations with less polarizing and conflicting characteristics.

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