

### **Cross-gender friendship: The troublesome relationship**

Roger Baumgarte  
Winthrop University

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There is something inappropriate about cross-gender friendships. They can incite jealousies in a romance or a marriage, confuse friends and family members, and be emotionally perplexing to the partners themselves (O'Meara, 1989; Rawlins, 1982). Relationship researchers disagree on whether men and women can truly be "just friends" (Werking, 1997a). Most societies find such friendships "inappropriate," discouraging them in anyone past the age of puberty. This discouragement often takes the form of gossip, direct expressions of disapproval (Allan, 1989), or clearly understood cultural norms, as in societies with high levels of gender segregation. Even in societies with fluid boundaries regarding gender and relationships, there is often the suspicion that at least one of the partners in a cross-gender friendship is harboring, consciously or unconsciously, romantic or sexual aspirations for the other, rendering the relationship something other than simply friendship.

This chapter reviews the recent literature on cross-gender friendships and, consistent with the theme of this text, highlights the difficulties posed by this form of relationship. Rawlins (1982) and O'Meara (1989) wrote convincingly about the challenges presented by cross-gender friendships, but direct tests of these challenges have led at least one group of researchers to question whether they are "much ado about nothing" (Monsour, 1992; Monsour, Harris, Kurzweil & Beard, 1994). Other researchers of close relationships have, until very recently, simply avoided the study of cross-gender friendship (Werking, 1997b). Those who have focused their professional energies on these relationships have tended to cast them in a rather positive light. In fact, recent reviews of the literature on this topic have emphasized the advantages of cross-gender friendships, citing such benefits as doubling one's potential number of friends, gaining insider information about the opposite gender, improving understanding and acceptance across the genders and thereby reducing sexism and sexual harassment, validating oneself as attractive to someone of the opposite gender, breaking down the old boys' network in the workplace, and gaining the enrichment that stems from having a friend who is different than oneself (Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Monsour, 1997; Werking, 1997a). Although it is true that the difficulties and risks of these relationships have been addressed, they are typically viewed as "challenges" (O'Meara, 1989; Rawlins, 1982) or "impediments" (Werking, 1997a), which can and must be "managed." The use of such terms, and the general tenor of the writing in this field, have tended to understate the potential problems that can occur when a man and a woman try to develop a friendship.

This chapter takes the position that the difficulties of cross-gender friendships are significant enough to deserve a closer look. Sufficient data exists to suggest that cross-gender friendships have a dark side that needs to be understood and appreciated more fully. The focus of this review is on the initiation and maintenance of the relationship itself, rather than on the public scrutiny that cross-gender friends face from romantic partners, family, work colleagues, and other friends. Because of pervasive prior cultural conditioning about gender and romance, a man and a woman trying to develop a friendship must negotiate a minefield of potential hazards even beyond society's tendency to disapprove. A number of recent studies shed new light on these risks.

The definition of friendship employed here reflects the thinking of Fehr (1996), Rawlins (1992), and Wright (1982), who saw it as a close personal relationship between equals characterized by reciprocal caring, openness, and a desire to enjoy each other's company. Two individuals engaged in a friendship have agreed on the nature of their relationship and what this commitment implies. Key elements of this definition, equality, reciprocity, openness, and mutual agreement about the nature of the relationship serve to focus our discussion about the

nature of cross-gender friendships. Following the lead of O'Meara (1989), cross-gender friendships can be defined as a "non-romantic, non-familial, personal relationship between a man and a woman." To distinguish them from romantic relationships, the latter are characterized by exclusivity and fascination. As shown later, in addition to these distinguishing characteristics, these three forms of relationships (friendships, cross-gender friendships, and romantic relationships) have much in common.

Although some of the studies include adults of varying ages, this review of friendships between men and women focuses primarily on young adults, because it is during this time period when such friendships are most frequent, and the data are the most available and insightful. Cross-gender friendships hardly exist, at least overtly, during the grade-school years, and tend to taper off in importance in middle and later adulthood (see Monsour, 1997). During young adulthood, especially for those who attend college, cross-gender friendships are more common, and social sanctions against such relationships are weaker. As one commits to marriage, children, and career, one has less time for friends in general, and the social pressures of spouse and family make the cultivation of cross-gender friendships even more difficult. Yet despite their relative acceptability during young adulthood, social pressures create tensions and problems between cross-gender friends, rendering these relationships as something other than friendship (as the term has been defined earlier). Stated briefly, this chapter concludes that cross-gender friendships often lack key characteristics of a genuine friendship. Each of these missing elements is examined in turn.

#### **Lack of a cultural script for cross-gender friendships:**

Rawlins (1982) was the first to outline the challenges one encounters in a cross-gender friendship. Much of the difficulty, he pointed out, stems from the close similarity between romantic relationships and cross-gender friendships. In both cases, key aspects of the relationship are negotiated in private, both are pursued to meet social and intimacy needs, and both require an emotional investment and a high degree of loyalty. In addition, both are characterized by caring, trust, enjoyment, mutual respect, enhanced self-esteem, and companionship (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Helgeson, Shaver & Dyer, 1987). Furthermore, the norm for many, especially those of middle-class socio-economic status, is to think of one's romantic partner as one's best friend (Allan, 1989). All of these similarities blur the distinctions between friendship and romance.

However, society holds a rather clear definition for romantic relationships. Well-defined cultural scripts serve to guide the behaviors and destinies of those who fall in love (Rose & Frieze, 1993): A heterosexual man and woman who find themselves attracted to each other begin by dating, and then fall in love. The dating becomes more exclusive as they present themselves as a "couple" to friends and family, they become engaged, and eventually they marry in a ceremony full of ritual and symbolism recognizing their love and commitment, and the culturally defined position they will take in society.

By comparison, friendships of any sort represent a very weak set of cultural norms. Only very ill-defined scripts exist for this type of relationship. Especially in U.S. culture, for example, the term friend itself can be used in a variety of contexts and can mean almost anything, from a new acquaintance one met at a convention last week to a person one has held dear since early childhood (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). As for cross-gender friendships specifically, literally no such cultural script exists (O'Meara, 1989; Rawlins, 1982). There are no cultural icons, no cinematic or literary models of cross-gender friendship that don't evolve into romance or failed attempts at romance. The idea of a man and a woman being close friends without a romance looming over the horizon has not been conditioned into our cultural consciousness (Booth & Hess, 1974; Rawlins, 1983). The dominance of romantic notions of these relationships can even be detected in the descriptors used by relationship researchers for friendship. Reeder (2000) cleverly pointed out that common definitions of friendship tend to stress notions of equality,

mutuality, and positive affect whereas definitions of cross-gender friendships attempt to differentiate them from romance by referring to them as nonromantic, nonsexual, or nonpassionate. (The definitions offered earlier reflect this common practice.)

Blurred distinctions between romance and heterosexual friendship—and the lack of a cultural script—result in an uncharted path for partners pursuing this sort of friendship. From society's perspective, the way is clearer for those who confine their friendships to the work context (Lobel, Quinn, Clair, & Warfield, 1994); for those who are single, because their friendships can be conceived as precursors to the romantic script (Booth & Hess, 1974; Rawlins, 1993); or for friendships between married or committed couples (Allan, 1989). Others are left on their own to define the nature and boundaries of their relationships (Rawlins, 1982; O'Meara, 1989): Is this love? Is this friendship? Is this sex? Given that these three concepts are anything but mutually exclusive (Cupach & Metts, 1991), people engaged in a cross-gender friendship are faced with a very difficult task. This task is more difficult in cultures that have traditionally espoused separation of the sexes in public institutions. In a cross-cultural study involving university students from five countries, Baumgarte, Lee, and Kulich (2001) found that cross-gender friendships were most common in the European countries of Romania and France and least common in South Korea. Respondents from all five cultures reported being less acquainted with the family members of their cross-gender friends compared to their same gender friends, a pattern of results undoubtedly reflecting societal pressures to keep cross-gender friendships out of public scrutiny (Baumgarte, Lee, & Kulich, 1999).

The salience and dominance of romantic conceptions of cross-gender relationships suggest that there will be a natural tendency for the friendship to take on features of romantic relationships. These may consist of superficial gestures reflecting societal customs about gender roles, such as who opens the door or who pays for the dinner. But each partner's perceptions of the relationship could be influenced by romantic norms in more subtle and profound ways. The partners could come to see each other in ways that resemble the "couple identity" of romantic relationships more than friendships. Resisting the romantic script for partners in a cross-gender friendship would require a clear understanding of each other's intentions and a strong commitment to friendship.

### **Lack of meta-relational talk in cross-gender friendships**

Complicating this task is the fact that, for most couples, broaching these topics in casual conversation is not easy. Afifi and Burgoon (1998), Baxter and Wilmot (1985), and Swain (1992) have found that meta-relational discussions—or discussions that attempt to clarify the nature of their relationships—represent the most taboo and avoided topics between cross-gender friends. An established principle in social psychology is that people seek to reduce uncertainty in their lives. This principle applies, in most cases, to reducing uncertainty between partners in close relationships (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). People in romantic relationships, for example, want to feel that they know their partners well, that their behaviors are predictable, and that they feel some certainty about the state of their relationship. Relationship maintenance consists primarily of reciprocal expressions of love that serve to reassure each other regarding the state and the future of their relationship.

This desire to reduce uncertainty does not seem to apply to cross-gender friendships (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Swain, 1992). Perhaps it is better not to know than to have one's perceptions and expectations violated. Partners tend not to engage in meta-relational talk or directly seek information to clarify the state of their relationship. Despite the common stereotype about women's expertise in the maintenance of relationships, women—even more than men—find direct talk about these issues difficult in their cross-gender developing relationships (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Instead of directly addressing these critical issues, Baxter and Wilmot (1984) found that partners in uncertain cross-gender friendships—which most are—often resort to "secret tests" to determine the nature of their relationships. These researchers have identified

several of these tests, such as the “endurance test” (acting in an obnoxious fashion to see if the friendship survives), or the “triangle test” (arranging for the friend to be in the company of someone with romantic intentions to see how they react). Far from clarifying the state of their relationship, such tests seem counterproductive and antithetical to notions of openness, trust, and caring, which are thought to characterize the nature of true friendship.

To summarize the arguments thus far, a man and a woman attempting to pursue a friendship are venturing into uncharted territory, without cultural norms or models to guide them about what could be considered normal or appropriate for this type of friendship. The close similarity between cross-gender friendship and romance leaves lots of opportunity for the friendship to take on romantic characteristics, because cultural norms for that style of relationship are quite well conditioned into everyone’s expectations about cross-gender relationships. The tension produced by trying to forge a friendship from the materials typically used to construct a romantic relationship leave the partners with a great deal of uncertainty about the nature of their relationship. This uncertainty could be relieved by candid, self-disclosing conversation that attempts to clarify the feelings of each partner and the state of their relationship. Yet, research suggests that partners in these uncertain relationships typically avoid such clarifying meta-relational talk. In general, they lack both openness and a mutual understanding about the nature of their relationship—key characteristics in defining a friendship.

### **Lack of agreement about the nature of friendship**

People pursuing a cross-gender friendship often discover that men and women have differing expectations about the nature of friendship itself. In describing these gender differences, researchers have referred to men’s tendency toward agentic or instrumental friendship and women’s preference for intimacy and emotional exchange (e.g., Canary, Emmers-Summer, & Faulkner, 1997; Fehr, 1996). Expressed more graphically, Wright (1982) suggested that men cultivate “side-by-side” friendships, whereas women cultivate “face-to-face” friendships. Some researchers, noting the persistent findings of lower levels of satisfaction attributed to male friendships compared to female friendships, have referred to men as “deficient” (Huyck, 1982, p. 480) or “impoverished” (Tognoli, 1980, p. 273) in their friendship skills. Others have warned against overstating these differences, arguing instead that intragender differences are sufficiently great to render cross-gender differences as relatively insignificant (e.g., Burleson, 1997; Canary et al., 1997). Recent studies, however, suggest that these gender differences are rather large and pervasive, especially in the realm of established friendships (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Dindia & Allen, 1992; Schneider & Kenny, 2000). Regardless, all theorists working in this field acknowledge that gender differences in close relationships are far more complex than what appears on the surface.

To clarify these gender differences, it is important to acknowledge first of all that men and women hold very similar ideas about what it means to be close to someone, to have someone as a close friend (Helgeson, Shaver, & Dyer, 1987; Monsour, 1992). Both men and women prefer friendships that are characterized by emotional expressiveness, unconditional support, trust, shared activities, and so on. Research suggests, for example, that both men and women find their friendships more satisfying when they are characterized by greater self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness (Fehr, 1996; Reisman, 1990). However, although men prefer these elements in their close friendships, they typically don’t report experiencing them in their friendships with other men (Bank & Hansford, 2000). Communication among male friends tends to be more group-oriented and to revolve around matters external to the relationship: sports, cars, and activities. Men are comfortable talking about themselves, but only as these self-references pertain to things such as achievements (Hacker, 1981). The competitive world of male society prevents them from speaking about vulnerabilities or failures (Hess, 1979). By contrast, communication among women friends tends to be more dyadic in structure, and more intimate, expressive, and supportive in content.

Interestingly, existing data suggest that men are capable of being emotionally expressive if the situation calls for it (Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995; Reis, 1988). Leaper et al., for example, found that when close friends were asked to discuss how their relationships with their families had changed since coming to college, the men in this study actually self-disclosed more than did the women. Thus, it is clear that men are capable of intimacy, but simply do not always exhibit it. One reason for this reticence is that they typically don't talk about issues that lend themselves to self-disclosure (Martin, 1997). Another reason could be that, respecting the masculine stereotype, listeners do not reinforce men when they do self-disclose (Leaper et al., 1995). Other reasons have been delineated in a recent study by Bank and Hansford (2000), that focused on male friends. Bank and Hansford found that men inhibited expressions of intimacy and support because of homophobia and personality factors related to parental modeling. That is, men with emotionally expressive personalities and less masculine self-identities, who were not afraid of appearing homosexual and who had fathers with close friendships, were more likely to be intimate and supportive with their male friends. These same factors are likely to determine their tendencies toward intimacy and support in cross-gender friendships as well. In fact, a rather extensive literature suggests that androgynous men tend to have more intimate and satisfying interpersonal relationships than do typically masculine men (see Fehr, 1996, pp. 142-148 for a review).

So what happens when these two styles of friendship meet in a cross-gender friendship? How does the agentic, side-by-side male style of friendship mesh with the more emotionally expressive, self-disclosing, supportive female style of friendship? Most of the literature suggests that men find friendships with women more satisfying than their friendships with other men, especially when these studies focus on the dimensions of intimacy and emotional support (e.g., Canary et al., 1997; Fehr, 1996; Rawlins, 1992; Werking, 1997a). By contrast, women in these relationships often end up disappointed. For example, Buhrke and Fuqua (1987) found that women do not feel that the men in their close relationships understand them as well as do the women with whom they are close. When under stress, men will often seek out the company of their cross-gender friends and receive emotional support. Women in the same situation typically find that men often do not reciprocate this support. Before concluding this discussion, it is worth noting that there are women who prefer the activity oriented friendship style stereotypically attributed to men, and there are men who prefer the intimacy and supportive exchange that tend to characterize the friendships of women. Although men's appreciation of their friendships with women has been rather thoroughly explored, no one has as yet examined why some women prefer the male style of friendship.

In summary, men and women typically carry very different expectations and predispositions into their cross-gender relationships. Although both genders agree on what defines a close relationship and rate a relationship as more satisfying when these elements are present, women are more likely to bring these characteristics to their friendships than are men. One of the defining characteristics of friendship proposed earlier was that both partners have agreed on the nature of their relationship and what this commitment implies. The data reviewed in this section indicate that cross-gender friendships often do not meet this criterion.

### **Lack of clear motives about friendship versus romance**

As heterosexual friends attempt to sort out the nature of their relationship, one area that often presents the greatest difficulty is determining whether or not they will eventually become romantically involved. Afifi and Burgoon (1998) concluded that most cross-gender friends think of their relationship as having little romantic potential. In this same study, however, only 18% indicated "no" romantic interest. On the other end of the continuum, 28% indicated more than just a mild romantic interest in their friends. Reeder (2000) found that the desire to be friends with someone of the opposite gender was correlated with romantic and sexual interest in that person. Thus, there is sufficient data to suggest that romantic interests play at least some role in most of these friendships.

There are a number of findings that make this fact troublesome. For one thing, Afifi and Burgoon (1998) found that the level of romantic interest of one partner in a cross-gender friendship is uncorrelated with the interest of the other. This finding suggests that cross-gender friendships can be one-sided affairs with respect to romance. For many cross-gender friends, the reason they are labeling it a friendship instead of a romance is probably because their romantic overtures have not been reciprocated. What makes this arrangement more problematic is that these same researchers have found that romantic interest is correlated with relational state certainty. That is, the more one is romantically interested in a cross-gender friend, the more certain one is about the definition of the relationship. Given the tendency of people to idealize romantic relationships (Martz et al., 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), it is likely that the partner with romantic interests feels relatively certain that the relationship is moving in a romantic direction, regardless of the reality of the situation. The flip side of this correlation is also relevant to this discussion: those who are not romantically interested are more uncertain about the definition of their relationship. The romantically uninterested party is receiving a variety of verbal and nonverbal signals from the romantically interested party, leaving the former confused and the latter frustrated.

Recent studies reporting both interview and survey data reinforce this assertion. Reeder (2000) found that one-sided romantic feelings were far more detrimental to a cross-gender friendship than unreciprocated feelings of physical or sexual attraction. Schneider and Kenny (2000) found that friendships between men and women who were formerly lovers tend to involve lingering romantic interests on the part of at least one partner. The greater the romantic interest, the more likely they were to report jealousy, criticism, and nagging. Friends who were formerly lovers also reported greater costs and fewer benefits in their friendships compared to those who had purely platonic relationships.

Harboring romantic interests in one's cross-gender friend seems to characterize men more than women (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Bleske & Buss, 2000; Schneider & Kenny, 2000). In fact, men in general hold stronger ideological beliefs about romance. On measures of romanticism, men are more likely to agree with such ideas as "love overcomes all" (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). Furthermore, Rawlins (1982) showed that although men make clear distinctions between their male friends and their female friends, they tend to make only very weak distinctions between their female friends and their romantic partners. For women, this pattern is reversed. In other words, for a man, the woman he is in love with has much in common with the woman he sees as a friend. For a woman, these are very distinct relationships with much less in common. More recent research has reinforced these findings (See Rawlins, 1993; Werking, 1997a, chapter 2). Men's tendency to romanticize relationships with women and their inability to distinguish between friendship and love suggest that they bring a great deal of motivational and romantic confusion to their cross-gender friendships.

To render this scenario in the form of a typical example, the man's romantic interests and overtures to a female acquaintance are not reciprocated. Attempting to find a compromise, they agree on a "friendship" instead, although he is certain all along that this is merely a step on the path to genuine romance. Accustomed to greater intimacy in her close relationships, the woman offers him a version of friendship that feels much warmer and supportive than what he is accustomed to associating with friendship. This warmth and acceptance further increases his romantic desire, and he begins to feel more certain about the eventual outcome of his efforts. She, meanwhile, finds his mixed signals perplexing. He speaks of friendship, but acts too possessive and romantic.

Given the lack of meta-relational talk (as reviewed earlier) and the mixed messages that are being expressed, more attention is drawn to interpreting each other's nonverbal cues. Guerrero (1997) found that partners in cross-gender friendships attempt to monitor the nonverbal cues they are projecting to each other more than do same-gender friends or romantic partners. When

the respondents were interacting with their cross-gender friends they were more anxious and concerned about making a good impression. Although there were some differences in the types of cues participants projected to their romantic partners (e.g., more touching, longer silences) compared to their cross-gender friends, the results were dominated by similarities of the nonverbal behaviors displayed in these two contexts. Hence, rather than clarify the romantic intentions of the cross-gender friends, these nonverbal cues are likely to be a source of confusion and misinterpretation. This tendency for miscommunication is likely to be greatest for each other's gestures of affection (Maltz & Borker, 1982), the aspect of nonverbal communication of greatest importance for partners trying to sort out each other's romantic intentions. The context in which the cross-gender friends typically spend their time may also contribute to the confusion. Rather than cultivating their friendships as part of larger groups, Werking (1997a) found that most of her respondents reported meeting face to face, often eating meals together, a context that is typically associated with romantic dating.

The example given earlier describes a man pursuing his romantic interests and a woman wanting platonic friendship, because that is the pattern found to be more common. Yet the roles can be reversed. Regardless, most cross-gender friends report at least a minimal degree of romantic interest in each other. Disparate motives regarding romance are not uncommon in cross-gender friendships. The more a friend experiences romantic feelings, the more that person feels certain about the romantic potential of the relationship, whether justified or not. These one-sided romances are also associated with more conflict and greater costs, leading both partners to find the relationship frustrating and unsatisfying. Their inability to discuss these issues openly and the potential for confusion in the realm of nonverbal gestures, simply amplify the inclination for miscommunications. Hence, there are a variety of factors that coalesce to produce a relationship that is ripe for difficulty. It should not be surprising that across cultures, cross-gender friendships tend to be of shorter duration and reflect a higher degree of conflict than do same-gender friendships (Baumgarte et al., 1999).

### **Lack of clear motives about sexuality**

These difficulties in communication are revealed in a more concrete fashion in the realm of sexuality. A number of studies have attempted to investigate how sexual interests and behaviors evolve in cross-gender relationships, including friendships. First of all, it would be unrealistic to think that sexual issues and tensions do not play a role in cross-gender friendships. Kaplan and Keys (1997), for example, found that 58% of their sample of college students had at least some sexual interest in their cross-gender friend. Roughly two thirds of Sapadin's (1988) sample of professional adults reported sexual tensions and feelings in their relationships, with over three fourths saying that sexual feelings complicated their friendships in a negative fashion. For 23% of their respondents, it was the thing they disliked most about their cross-gender friendships. In another study of adults in the workplace, half admitted some level of sexual attraction to their friends (Lobel et al., 1994).

Studies have also looked at the frequency with which cross-gender friends, in otherwise platonic relationships, actually engage in sex. Specific estimates have been made for college populations in the United States, and they vary widely depending how the questions are posed. In studies where respondents were asked about a variety of issues in addition to sexual activity within a specific nonromantic friendship, Bleske and Buss (2000) found that roughly 15% of their respondents had had sex. In a study aimed explicitly at the impact of sexual activity in cross-gender friendships, where respondents were asked whether they had ever had sex with someone they had no intentions of dating at the time, Afifi and Faulkner (2000) found that 51% of their sample had done so. Of these, less than half reported that the sexual experience was a prelude to the subsequent development of a romantic relationship. Two thirds who had sex saw it as beneficial to the relationship regardless of its romantic outcome. Afifi and Faulkner did not expand on the remaining one third of their respondents, who evidently did not find these sexual experiences beneficial.

Some theorists have considered the possible benefits of sex in cross-gender friendships. Afifi and Faulkner (2000), for example, claimed that engaging in sex could be seen as helping relational members overcome “the sexuality boundary that often stunts friendship development” (p. 208). Rubin (1985) suggested that, for a few cross-gender friends, having sex would reduce the tension and liberate their relationship, with the idea of “getting it over with” and helping them to move beyond this “distraction” (p. 150). However, most theorists, including Rubin, generally see it as detrimental, at least as far as the friendship is concerned (Allan, 1989; Cupach & Metts, 1991; Eglan, Spitzberg, & Zormeier, 1996; Lamp, 1985; O’Meara, 1989; Rawlins, 1982; Werking, 1997a). Messman, Canary, and Hause (2000) found that most cross-gender friends avoid sex as a way of maintaining their relationship.

To highlight the potential damage that can result from sexual engagement in a cross-gender friendship, it is important to note that the act of having sex by itself is probably not as critical as the meaning that each partner assigns to the act (Duck, 1994). Here, again, gender is often cited as an issue, because men and women tend to assign very different meanings to sexual encounters. To begin with, men tend to have a higher degree of sexual interest in their cross-gender friends, and see having sex with them as more beneficial to themselves, than do women (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Rose, 1985). Kaplan and Keys (1997) found that not only do men report greater current and past sexual interest in their supposedly platonic cross-gender friends, this interest is greater in men who are already in committed romantic relationships. That is, sexual interest in his cross-gender friend is not just the province of the single, romantically “available” male.

Monsour (1992) found that men were more likely than women to see sexuality as a way of expressing intimacy to their otherwise platonic, cross-gender friend. Although other factors in this study were rated as more important than sex for expressing intimacy, this gender difference suggests that men, more than women, find sexuality as more acceptable outside the context of an exclusively romantic relationship. Thus, for the man, feelings of sex tend to be intertwined with feelings of intimacy, which can provide a rationale for or perhaps some confusion about becoming sexually involved with one’s cross-gender friend. Men are more likely to initiate sex in a cross-gender relationship (McCormick & Jesser, 1982), and are more likely to start a friendship out of sexual motivation (Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Rose, 1985). However, men’s tendency to harbor sexual feelings for their cross-gender friend appears to be more relevant at the beginning of their relationship compared to later on. For the woman, similar feelings, when they occur, seem to be unrelated to the length of their relationship (Kaplan & Keys, 1997). A woman’s interest in having sex with her cross-gender friend may continue for years.

So how do these sexual interests get expressed and negotiated in the context of a cross-gender friendship? The explanations offered earlier in the context of sorting out romantic feelings apply to the realm of sexuality as well. Cross-gender friends are reticent to discuss relationship issues directly, and thus resort to a variety of “secret tests,” flirtations, innuendo, and jokes to communicate their intentions. These forms of communication are intrinsically ambiguous, and rendered even more so by the fact that research in naturalistic settings suggest that they do not distinguish between romantic relationships and friendships (Afifi & Johnson, 1999; Eglan et al., 1996). Further complicating this issue, evidence also suggests that men tend to interpret the friendly behaviors of women in a sexual fashion, often seeing seduction where none is intended (Shotland & Craig, 1988).

Although both men and women report enjoying flirting and teasing in their cross-gender friendships, men report enjoying this game more than do women (Sapadin, 1988; Swain, 1992). More often than not, women are in the position of interpreting these intrinsically vague cues. They must decide whether to play along and reciprocate, or reject the supposed advances and risk inappropriately dampening the ongoing ambiance of the friendship. The enigmatic nature of flirtation allows the flirter to claim that he was only joking and to accuse his friend of being



too defensive or prudish. In addition, despite their fear of embarrassment and losing face, men do not find sexual rejection in the context of a cross-gender friendship to be terribly discouraging (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Metts, Cupach, & Imahori, 1992). Women in these contexts tend to prefer only moderately direct forms of rejection, such as “I don’t think I am ready for this right now” (Metts et al., 1992, p. 8). But because men are less upset and deterred by this form of rejection compared to more direct forms, their sexual ambitions may not be sufficiently constrained.

Metts et al. (1992) suggested that one disturbing implication of this pattern of findings is that some men may perceive women’s initial resistance as “token” and feel less inhibited to continue their advances because ultimately they expect to succeed. Although accurate statistics on the frequency of unwanted sex or sexual assault in the context of “friendship” are difficult to determine, such outcomes represent a real risk that should be acknowledged (Murnen, Perot, & Byrne, 1989; Sorenson, Stein, Siegel, Golding, & Burnam, 1987). It is worth noting that in Afifi and Faulkner’s (2000) study, 55% of those who had sex with their otherwise platonic cross-gender friend did so while under the influence of alcohol.

But, one could argue, can’t sex between two friends simply remain as “friendly sex”? Does it have to be dichotomized between romantic sex and unwanted sex? In his typography of cross-gender relationships, Rawlins (1982) considered this possibility and labeled it “friendship love.” Bradae (1983) created the term “flovors” to refer to friends who occasionally or frequently have sex but prefer to think of their relationship more in terms of friendship than romance. Empirical support for the existence of flovors can be seen in the work of Afifi and Faulkner (2000), who found that of the 51% of their respondents who had sex with their otherwise platonic friends, 34% did so on multiple occasions either in the same friendship or in a number of friendships. The authors noted that this phenomenon might be a direct result of the lack of a cultural script or a set of societal mores concerning what is appropriate and normal in a cross-gender friendship. Given the lack of “rules,” these friends construct their own “knowledge structure” (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000, p. 218), which reflects how each person conceptualizes the nature of his or her cross-gender friendship. For some, this conceptualization included an open attitude about sex.

However, it is important to note that most theorists and researchers have argued that a flover-type relationship is easier to effect for men compared to women (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Helgeson et al., 1987; Rawlins, 1982; Sapadin, 1988). Rawlins (1982) argued that this form of relationship is inherently unstable and not likely to survive for long. Rubin (1985) concluded that it produces possessiveness that is antithetical to friendship. Bleske and Buss (2000) found a high correlation between the situation in which a female friend was interested in moving toward a romantic relationship but the man wasn’t, and the man having sex with that woman. Stated more directly, this finding implies that men will take sexual advantage of women who are romantically interested though the men have no romantic interest themselves. This correlation did not exist for women in the study, suggesting that women are less likely to engage in sex with a man who is romantically interested when she isn’t. Taken together, these findings suggest that men are more likely than women to exploit a flover-type relationship for their own sexual benefit (Lampe, 1985).

To summarize, sexual tensions tend to complicate most cross-gender friendships. For those who do engage in sex and the relationship does not develop into a romance, most theorists predict a negative outcome for the friendship. Men tend to sexualize their relationships with women, a tendency that may apply especially to their cross-gender friendships. Findings suggest men are more likely to initiate a cross-gender friendship out of sexual interest, more motivated to have sex with their friends, and more likely to initiate sex, yet are less clear about their motives and feelings about the relationship. The role of sexuality in their relationship is often not discussed. Rather, it often takes place in an atmosphere of unclear motives, confusing nonverbal cues, and alcohol, resulting in an experience that could be considerably less than

consensual. Even sex that is kept at an entirely friendly level has the strong potential of being exploitive.

### **The lack of equality**

Most relationships are inherently hierarchical, and this principle applies to cross-gender relationships as well. Various analyses of romantic relationships, for example, have concluded that they tend to reflect a differential of power and control (Argyle & Furnham, 1983; Cates & Lloyd, 1992). By contrast, friendship, as defined earlier here and by most theorists, is a relationship between equals (Allan, 1989; Rawlins, 1992; Werking 1997a). Even when friendship occurs between people of widely different ages or statuses, some elements in the relationship serve as levelers to compensate for these inequalities (Rawlins, 1992). The issue for this section is whether cross-gender friendships reflect the equality assumed to define friendship, or whether they experience the inequality typical of cross-gender relationships. Monsour et al. (1994) found that most cross-gender friends do not see themselves as unequal. However, power differentials are complex and subtle forces in close relationships and are not always evident to the partners themselves (Winter, 1973).

McWilliams and Howard (1993) provided an analysis of how masculine and feminine stereotypes might influence the perception of power in cross-gender friendships. They argued that status differences arise from the differing stereotypes society holds for men and women. For example, when a man gives advice, it is assumed to stem from his stereotype as agentic and instrumental. This tendency toward activity is perceived as expertise and authority, which in turn promotes a sense of hierarchy in the relationship between the giver and the receiver of the advice. By contrast, a woman's advice giving, based again on commonly held stereotypes, is seen as stemming from her nurturant and communal orientation, which in turn promotes a sense of solidarity between advice giver and advice receiver. McWilliams and Howard asserted that hierarchy (inequality, authority) and solidarity (feelings of closeness) are inversely correlated, working as opposing forces. When a man and a woman are in a close relationship, her solidary style (reflecting closeness and nurturance) and his hierarchical orientation (reflecting inequality and authority) will typically result in an unequal relationship. Although intriguing, this is an idea that needs to be tested empirically.

Along a similar vein, Maccoby (1990) maintained that girls are socialized to be enabling—agreeing, taking turns, acknowledging, and so on—a strategy appropriate for communal, dyadic relationships. Boys, by comparison, are socialized to be restrictive—derailing interactions by boasting, contradicting, shortening, and so on—a strategy suitable for large, hierarchically organized group activities, like sports. Helgeson et al., (1987) found that when a distancing experience such as conflict occurs in cross-gender relationships, men tend to pursue arguments that end in victory, self-justification, or dominance, compared to women who think more often in terms of restoring closeness. Both of these findings—being socialized in hierarchical activities such as sports and employing conflict strategies aimed at winning—suggest that the relationship styles of men and women tend to reinforce a higher status for men in cross-gender relationships.

Others have looked more specifically at cross-gender friendships. In Sapadin's (1988) study, the patronizing attitude of their friend was a complaint received only from women in the context of a cross-gender friendship. This response was never given by men or by women in same-gender friendships. Most of the friendships studied by Booth and Hess (1974) reflected a high degree of equality in terms of age, education, status, and so on. But when cross-gender dyads were not equal, they tended to follow the same pattern as romantic relationships, with men being older and of higher status than their cross-gender friends. Men who had higher educational status than their cross-gender friends were more willing to confide in these friends than when the friends were of similar or higher educational status. This implies that the cross-gender friendships are seen as most comfortable, for men at least, when they reflect the same

status hierarchy typically found in romantic relationships. The pattern of an older male and a younger female in cross-gender friendships also seems to cut across cultures. In a study involving university students in five cultures, only 18% of cross-gender friendships involved an older woman with a younger man (Baumgarte et al., 1999). Taken together, these theoretical arguments and empirical data suggest that there tend to be status differences in cross-gender relationships in general, and cross-gender friendships in particular.

Other studies have focused more specifically on the inequality of the exchange processes in cross-gender friendships. Hacker (1981) and Swain (1992) noted that men will self-disclose and seek consultation more from female friends than women will from male friends. They also found that, relative to each other, men will hide their weaknesses and women their strengths in cross-gender friendships. These patterns of exchange suggest that men expect and receive more social support from women than women obtain from men. Rose (1985) asserted that men can gain intimacy and acceptance from their female friends, but that women do not typically receive these benefits from their male friends. In fact, the only benefit in which women in this study reported gaining more than men in cross-gender friendships was companionship, which Rose interpreted as women's desire for increased status. Reviewing somewhat different literatures led Rawlins (1982), Schneider and Kenny (2000), and Winstead, Derlega, and Rose (1997) to conclude that equitable cross-gender friendships are impossible or quite difficult to negotiate.

Given the clear advantages and benefits that these relationships provide for men, it should be surprising to no one that every study that has investigated this topic has found that men consistently report larger numbers of cross-gender friends than do women. This difference appears to be consistent across cultures (Baumgarte et al., 2001). Given that these studies are always comprised of men and women drawn from the same populations, this difference in the reported number of cross-gender friends must represent inconsistent perceptions about who is friends with whom. In fact, Rubin (1985) found that two thirds of the women who were identified as close friends of the men she interviewed did not consider that characterization of their relationship as appropriate. That is, they did not see themselves as close friends with the men who claimed them as such. In fact, some women felt they hardly knew them. Hence, the question emerges of whether it is appropriate to call it a friendship if both partners don't agree they have one.

## **Conclusions**

The lack of a cultural script about friendship in general and cross-gender friendships specifically leaves individuals without a sense of what it means to be friends with someone of the opposite gender. Furthermore, the existence of very powerful societal norms for romance and the resemblance of these two types of relationships cause the friendship to take on romantic characteristics. Evidence suggests that cross-gender friends typically harbor at least some degree of romantic interest, and these interests often go unreciprocated. A tendency to avoid discussion of these issues and a heightened focus on ambiguous nonverbal cues result in a relationship that is characterized by misunderstandings or at least a lack of agreement about the nature of the relationship. This lack of agreement is likely to be frustrating and unsatisfying for both partners.

For most cross-gender friends, sexual tensions and particularly men's tendency to sexualize these relationships impact the friendship in a detrimental fashion. Although some friends engage in sex, and some of these find it beneficial to their relationship, the risk of exploitation is clearly in evidence. With respect to emotional support, men and women want and seek similar affective benefits. However, men's reticence to demonstrate equivalent emotional support and intimacy implies that these relationships often become unequal. In fact, with respect to both status differentials and the nature of the exchange, cross-gender friendships are characterized by inequality. On nearly all dimensions that have been studied, men benefit from

these relationships more than women do. The definition of friendship offered at the beginning of this chapter stressed the requirements of equality, reciprocity, and mutual agreement about the nature of the relationship. Cross-gender friendships, according to the literature reviewed here, often seem to lack all three of these requirements.

### **Recommendations**

Taken together, the evidence suggests ample reason to be cautious about pursuing a friendship with someone of the opposite gender. This warning applies especially to women, for whom these relationships are at risk of becoming emotionally or sexually exploitive. Although the benefits and adaptive aspects of cultivating a cross-gender friendship have been thoroughly explored in other reviews of this literature, this chapter has focused exclusively on the problems associated with these relationships, arguing that it may be inappropriate to think of them as genuine friendships. Although pessimistic in tenor, this analysis does imply some adaptive recommendations.

The factors that cause cross-gender friendships to be something less than friendship are evident. Stated in the briefest form, cross-gender friendships tend to be unequal relationships lacking in the openness of communication needed to sort out exactly what it means to be a friend, and how romantic feelings and sexual interests are to be negotiated within the relationship. The pervasiveness of the evidence for these difficulties suggests that many people may not be capable of a genuine cross-gender friendship. (Keeping the issue in perspective, it should be noted that a marriage in the U.S., a highly valued and scripted form of intimate relationship, tends to have only a 50% chance of survival, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 1992.) Yet, by exploring all of the avenues by which a cross-gender friendship can go awry, one can gain insight about what would be required to make them more functional, satisfying, and enjoyable relationships for both partners. Many people, especially young adults, are pursuing this type of relationship, and it is important to determine what can be done to improve their chances of success.

This review implies some rather clear recommendations concerning cross-gender friendships. These recommendations are given from the perspective of what could be considered the ideal, realizing of course that relationships in the real world often fall short of such fantasies. First, our society needs more television programs, Hollywood movies, or best-selling novels in which the main characters are involved in a cross-gender friendship that has no hint of a past or future romance. The characters might well be involved in committed, romantic relationships, but the friendship itself should be a dominant feature of the plot. These could be dramas, comedies, war stories, science fiction stories, or whatever. In fact, the more varied the genre, the wider the potential appeal. But the main characters should be attractive, popular individuals who cultivate a close, communicative, enjoyable relationship with someone of the opposite gender. Sexuality could be depicted with delight and humor, but also with clarity and sensitivity about each other's intentions. Above all, the friendship should be portrayed as a relationship between equals in which the costs and benefits are shared equally. A very wide range of media images exists for romantic relationships. Why have friendships been so persistently stereotyped as same-gender buddy stories? It is time that modern societies consider widening their relationship horizons.

For those engaged in a cross-gender friendship, the clear and pervasive implication from this review is the importance of open and honest talk, especially talk aimed at understanding and clarifying the nature and state of the relationship. This principle would apply especially to those experiencing discomfort with the mixed signals they are receiving from their partners. The strong inhibition against talking about these issues could, itself, be discussed. Of course, this type of talk is much easier for the partner who is clear about his or her own goals and intentions for the relationship. Achieving such clarity of self may be more difficult for the young adult,

whose identity isn't fully established, and also for the person who has lingering romantic interests that are at risk of being rebuffed. Yet mutual self-disclosures in the context of a committed friendship should allow the partners to weather such uncertainties. It is important to realize that such clarity in cross-gender friendships does increase over time (Monsour et al, 1994; Reeder, 2000; Werking, 1997a). The longer the friendship endures, the lower the inhibition partners experience in discussing the state of their relationship and the easier it is to talk about romantic and sexual issues. Of course, relationships are dynamic, organic phenomena that progress, evolve, regress, fluctuate, digress, and may decline over time. Given the lack of cultural models for cross-gender friendships, the importance of monitoring these changes and each other's conceptions and aspirations for the relationship are more important than what they would be for a same-gender friendship.

Men will have to make a special effort to clarify their own motives and to approach the relationship with care and candor. They must be honest and forthright about their romantic interests or lack thereof. With respect to sexuality, it is important that men understand and appreciate their own tendency to sexualize the friendly behaviors of their female friends. Men must be sensitive to their friends' reactions to their sexual overtures, no matter how oblique or charming they perceive their gestures to be. Sexuality can add humor and spice to the relationship, or it can be annoying (Cupach & Metts, 1991). It is important to distinguish the difference. Simply asking from time to time how one's sexually oriented gestures are being perceived would go a long way to clear the air and solidify the basis for a satisfying friendship. It is important for women to realize that, as Leaper et al. (1995) showed, men's attempts at self-disclosure and intimate talk are often insufficiently encouraged. For both, committing to the relationship as a friendship and agreeing on the implications of this commitment would be essential. Most important, perhaps, men must give to these friendships in proportion to what they take from them, especially in the realm of emotional support and intimacy. After any significant interaction with a female friend, men should ask themselves: Who was supported more in this interaction? Who was more nurturing, caring, and encouraging? Who honestly knows the other better? Having an egalitarian relationship, which friendships are supposed to be, will only occur when men are as emotionally expressive, receptive, and supportive as their female friends are.

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