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Abstract

The main goal of this research is to present a narrative description and identify categorical myths of cross-sex friendship in order to more fully understand the romance challenge confronting women and men in friendship. Closer examination into the challenges confronting cross-sex friends through narratives generate insight into the process of communication and interpretation of how friends construct, change and sustain their reality of their friendship. Current research suggests that cross-sex friendships differ from same-sex friendships (Werking, 1997). Respondents were 120 college students from a Midwest college and a West Coast college attending communication classes between 2000-2002. Respondents kept a journal discussing developmental and current issues of one cross-sex friendship.

Keywords

Cross-Sex Friendship, Romantic Challenge of Friendship, and Narrative Inquiry

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"We're Just Friends": Myth Construction As A Communication Strategy In Maintaining Cross-Sex Friendships

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The main goal of this research is to present a narrative description and identify categorical myths of cross-sex friendship in order to more fully understand the romance challenge confronting women and men in friendship. Closer examination into the challenges confronting cross-sex friends through narratives generate insight into the process of communication and interpretation of how friends construct, change and sustain their reality of their friendship. Current research suggests that cross-sex friendships differ from same-sex friendships (Werking, 1997). Respondents were 120 college students from a Midwest college and a West Coast college attending communication classes between 2000-2002. Respondents kept a journal discussing developmental and current issues of one cross-sex friendship. Key words: Cross-Sex Friendship, Romantic Challenge of Friendship, and Narrative Inquiry.

Introduction

I completed my graduate education, all five years of it, with the support and companionship of two male friends. Randy was my rival and friend for two years during the master's program and Bob was my confidante, mentor and closest friend for the three grueling years of the doctorate program. As a graduate student, having a trusted colleague meant having the support of someone who was enduring the same hectic schedule that I was. It meant someone to share the workload, someone to vent with and someone to check and recheck the constant deadlines that had to be met. The support was invaluable. However, it also meant having to manage these friendships as just that, platonic friendships, which was not always easy. Sometimes the romantic tension became greater than the friendship we had entrusted with each other. As a result of this tension, I grew interested in how other women and men constructed and maintained their cross-sex friendships.

The following narrative approach highlights the construction of myths that friends create for cross-sex friendship development and the complexity involved in the communication process. Opportunities for interaction between women and men are increasing in the workplace, educational settings and the community. These individuals have the opportunity to meet, interact and development a friendship with one another. As the individuals encounter each other, they find they share mutual interests, enjoy the same types of activities, and experience similar life experiences and shared values and beliefs with the opposite sex.

Adult cross-sex friendships provide men and women with distinctive advantages that are hard to obtain in same-sex friendships (Bell, 1981; Monsour, 1992). For example, cross-sex friends provide insight perspectives on how members of the opposite sex think, feel and behave (Sapadin, 1988), they are nurturing and supportive for men and fill a void in same sex friendships, they are an emotional outlet where men can express feelings that they tend to keep hidden from same sex friends (Kulander, 1991), they are less demanding for women in that they have lower levels of disclosure and are less threatening (Kulander, 1991), and they improve communication between the sexes (Monsour, 1992).

Rawlins (1982) initiated one of the more sensitive areas of investigation into adult cross-sex friendships and this has been more fully developed by O'Meara (1989). Their research focuses on the unique "challenges" that women and men must overcome in maintaining cross-sex friendships. O'Meara (1989) contends that cross-sex friends face an "emotional bond" challenge, a "sexual" challenge, an "equality" challenge, and an "audience" challenge. These challenges have been studied by Monsour, Beard, Harris, and Kurwil (1994) and found to exist and have powerful effects on individuals in cross-sex friendships although for the majority of participants in cross-sex friendships the challenges were not perceived as salient. Although the study by Monsour and his associates initiated the clarification of challenges that confront adult cross-sex friends, the challenges were not examined in-depth. Now that we have confirmed existence of the challenges it is appropriate to begin an in-depth examination of each of them. The current research examines the romantic challenge as originally identified by O'Meara (1989).

Theoretical Framework

Social constructionism offers a captivating framework and interpretation of how friends construct, change, or sustain their reality through social exchanges with others. Social constructionism posits that communication is the process by which individuals collectively create their social reality. Realities do not exist outside of the human construction of them. It is through communication and interaction that individuals invent, sustain, and modify their realities (Bernstein, 1983). "Talk is the agency of social behavior through which many of the other relational processes (of relationships) come to life" (Duck, 1992, p. 38). Wood (1982) believes that relationships and realities must be "talked" into existence. It is the dialogue in relationships, between the two friends and one's inner dialogue that constructs notions of intimacy and friendship and negotiates the norms and rules of the friendship including how they will perceive the friendship.

Social constructionism leads naturally into a study of the stories that individuals in friendships tell (Turner & West, 1998, p. 93). Narratives provide a sense of importance and identity to the friendship that help define, articulate, and refine their sense of collective identity, and in doing so, they contribute to the meaning of the relationship. The narratives can also produce myths that provide some prescription or direction about the how the friendship should continue. These narratives help the individuals in the friendship to understand and make sense of their relationship (Turner & West, 1998). Friendship communication is a yielding relationship to explore the social construction of the challenges confronting individuals in cross-sex friendships.

The main goal of this research is to present a narrative description and identify categorical myths of cross-sex friendship in order to more fully understand the romance

challenge confronting women and men in friendship. Closer examination into the challenges through narratives generates insight into the process of communication and interpretation of how friends construct, change and sustain their reality of their friendship. Current research suggests that cross-sex friendships differ from same-sex friendships (Werking, 1997). To better understand friendship construction as a whole, we need to examine the distinctions of cross-sex friendships and especially the challenges confronting them.

Method

Subjects

The women and men who tell their stories here were 120 college students from a Midwest college and a West Coast college attending communication classes between 2000-2002. Student ages were between 18 and 36 years old and only students who wrote about a heterosexual friendship were included in the journals analyzed. Fifty-six percent were Caucasian, 21% were Hispanic, 10% were Portuguese, nine percent were African American and four percent indicated other. Forty-six percent of the respondents wrote about their best friend, 49% their close friend and 5% casual friend. Females wrote about a best friend more often than males (52% versus 36% respectively). Females selected a friend they had a longer friendship with than did males (11.5 years versus 2.3 years respectively). Both women and men tended not to have been romantically involved with their friend (48% versus 57% respectively). Although more men reported that they were romantically or sexually attracted to their friend than did women (50% versus 41% respectively), more women were uncertain whether or not they were attracted to their friend (11% versus 7% respectively).

Procedures

Each of the respondents was asked to identify one casual, good or best friend of the opposite sex. Individuals were told that the project was designed to study cross-sex friendships (i.e., friendships between members of the opposite sex, excluding romantic, marital, and family relationships). Respondents kept a journal for sixteen weeks discussing developmental and current issues of one cross-sex friendship. The journal questions were generated from founding research by Don O'Meara (1989) who coined the four challenges in cross-sex friendships and Bill Rawlins who further investigated the challenges. O'Meara (1989) contends that cross-sex friends face an "emotional bond" challenge, a "sexual" or "romantic" challenge, an "equality" challenge, and an "audience" challenge.

Developmental issues concerned how the friends became friends. Two sample questions were "How did you and your friend meet?" and "Describe the nature of your friendship." Current issues concerned the emotional nature, romantic nature or audience perspective of the friendship. Respondents were asked to answer questions on any of the three perspectives. Questions concerned with the emotional nature included, "What kinds of things do you typically do when you are together?" and "Is this an intimate relationship in terms of sharing experiences and confiding in each other?" Questions

concerned with the romantic nature included, “How do you communicate affection for each other?” and “If ever, discuss the times when you felt you would like the friendship to become a romantic relationship.” Questions concerned with the audience perspective included, “How do you manage your public image as one of friends rather than dating partners?” and “How have the reactions of other people affected your friendship? Please describe some specific examples.”

Journals were collected three times during the course of 16 weeks and respondents were given feedback pertaining to the journals. Since respondents wrote about their own personal experiences, there were no inaccurate perceptions although feedback may have been given asking that examples be more specific and less general. Respondents signed a consent form indicating that the completion of the journal was voluntary and students had the option of completing a journal on a same-sex friendship or a cross-sex friendship.

Content Analysis of the Journals

A Q-sort measured the content validity of the myth themes. Content analysis employed pattern recognition. This is the ability to perceive patterns in seemingly random information (Boyatzis, 1998, as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 452). “Content analysis usually refers to analyzing text (interview transcripts, diaries, or documents) rather than observation-based field notes” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Generally speaking, content analysis allows for data reduction and sense-making that takes a volume of text and attempts to identify core consistencies and interpretations (Patton, 2002). These interpretations are called patterns or themes that contain meanings about, in this case, the romantic challenge of cross-sex friendships.

During the analysis of the journals, each journal was treated as an individual case examining the romantic nature of friendship. After identifying romantically linked narratives for each individual friendship journal, similarities could then be drawn across all the friendship journals concerning the myth themes. Two communication scholars selected narratives that related to the romantic challenge. Distinctions were not made about the narratives specifically at this point except that they focused on the romantic challenge in cross-sex friendships.

The myths reported in this study were generated from forty undergraduates who were asked to identify myths about cross-sex friendships and how they constructed and managed feelings of romance or sexual attraction. Students identified ten separate myths that were commonly known of which six received validity.

The validity of myth themes was established by means of a Q-sort. Seven graduate students were each given ten cards each containing a single myth. The evaluators were asked to select narratives that illustrated each particular myth. Narratives were printed on a separate piece of paper. The evaluators were instructed to identify and sort the narratives into the type of myth that best described them. If a narrative did not fit into an already identified myth, they were to generate a new myth for the narrative. The evaluators rank ordered each narrative. Each narrative was categorized in one myth with a 86% to 100% agreement by each of the evaluators. This allowed for one evaluator to disagree or be uncertain about a particular narrative’s fit into a myth. Narratives that did not reach at least 86% agreement were not included in a myth theme.

Conducting Narrative Research

The most significant truth about cross-sex friendships begins when the friends tell the stories of their friendships. The crux of narrative research, based on the real lives of people made public; converts what is private into public. When we listen or read another's story, our intention is to bring our own interpretation to the material. It is our interpretative framework that structures understanding. We acknowledge that there is no observer-free science and that accounts of stories are never independent of the observer/recorder (Josselson, 1996). Doing narrative research carries with it the responsibility to contain this awareness rather than silence it. Mishler (1990) suggests that we rely on Kuhn's prescription of exemplars for working toward new paradigms of inquiry:

Those of us engaged in inquiry-guided and interpretative forms of research have the task of articulating and clarifying the features and methods of our studies, of showing how work is done...so that together we can develop a community with shared exemplars through which we confirm and validate our collective work. (cited in Josselson, 1996, p. 423)

From this standpoint, narrative analysis is grounded in a particular theoretical commitment to strategies that employ rigor. Denzin (1978) defines rigor as the attempt to make "data and explanatory schemes as public and replicable as possible" (cited in Anfara, Jr., Brown, & Magnione, 2002). This rigor is demonstrated in this paper by letting readers know how the respondents were selected, journal protocol used to collect data, identification of sample questions, and by providing enough description and details to allow validity judgements to be made by the reader which are all strategies introduced by Anfara and associates (2002). The myth themes were identified as a means of peer audits and narratives were selected by investigator triangulation. Both Patton (2002) and Anfara et al. (2002) agree that peer audits and triangulation strengthen a study design by using a combination of methodologies.

Narratives of Romantic Challenge

Figure 1 is schematic representation of the narratives derived from the responses to the journal questions directly addressing the romantic challenge. Pervasive throughout each narrative is the theme of "supportive construct;" that is, the romantic challenge between the cross-sex friends is perceived by the partner to be one of support even as the friends are confronted by the romantic challenge. The partners recognize their cross-sex friend is someone who is supportive of them and of whom they are supportive while they manage the romantic feelings in the friendship. The narratives generated myths that friends constructed to manage their friendships. Narrative interpretation is not just reporting what we have been told nor simply organizing events chronologically or grouping them into themes but converting accounts into a social construct. The purpose is not to understand a single individual or friendship but to enlarge and show the connection between individual lives and social practices. Narratives are not about separate actions but about practices. Using the methodology of narrative interpretation, we can show how friends use myths to manage their feelings of attraction for their cross-sex friend so that they are able to initiate and maintain platonic relationship with those friends.

Figure 1: Myths Concerning Relationship Definition & Development

Myths	Response Rate	Description	Functions
#1 "I'm not attracted to my friend"	65%	Friends send double messages	Able to deny attraction to friend
#2 "We can remain just friends"	47%	Friends felt attraction at start of relationship & struggled to stay just friends	Friendship as prelude to romantic relationship
#3 "I could be attracted that way"	32%	Their friend is attracted to them but they don't return the feelings	Test romantic feelings
#4 "I don't discount my feelings"	30%	Friends did not communicate about feeling attracted or they have expressed those feelings in the past without continuation	Able to avoid discussion of romantic thoughts or expressions
#5 "Kissing doesn't count"	26%	Friends behave in a romantic way such as kissing or sexual contact state it doesn't count since they are just friends	Context allows friends but to express romantic feelings without commitment
#6 "If we've been romantically involved, we can't be friends"	9%	Friends who have been romantically linked wonder if they can be friends	Friends try to be friends after dating

*Percentages equal more than 100% since respondents could describe more than one myth

Myths

The narratives generated myths that friends constructed about the friendship in order to provide some guidelines about adult cross-sex friendship. Myth is "a notion based more on tradition or convenience than fact. Myth also refers to widely shared stories on how society ought to be organized. Myth depends less on what is perceived to

be real and more on what we want to be real” (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000). Cross-sex friendships have few traditional definitions or guidelines and individuals have to make their way in these relationships. Friends turned to previously established myths or invented their own in response to questioning the romantic attraction in their friendship.

Myths play a central role in the cross-sex friendships as women and men attempt to communicate and manage their romantic feelings about each other. Six myths emerged that describe the communication in the friendships: 1) “I’m not attracted to my friend;” 2) “We can remain just friends;” 3) “I could be attracted to you that way;” 4) “I don’t discount my feelings;” 5) “Kissing doesn’t count;” and 6) “If we’ve been romantically involved, we can’t be friends.” These six myths are described in Figure 1. These myths appear to be ways of communicating about the friendship in order to develop and maintain the friendship as one of friends rather than romantic partners. All the myths were reported with frequency in the journals. The reporting of one myth was not exclusive to another and for that reason percentages were not aggregated.

Myth #1 “I’m not attracted to my friend.”

The largest percentage of friends (65%) both denied and acknowledged receiving or sending mixed messages that they were attracted to their friend or that their friend was attracted to them but then also stated the opposite. The messages were not direct messages and did not occur with regularity and in some cases were not introduced again. However, friends felt confused and were not certain of the attraction in the relationship although most of them acknowledged romantic intentions.

Men’s Narratives

I drive a manual car and she wanted to learn how to drive it. One night I drove to Astoria Park and stopped in the parking lot. It was about one o’clock in the morning. She was so excited and kept telling me before that she tried to learn how to drive a stick from her father but he wasn’t a very good teacher. So we exchanged seats. I told her to use her left foot to push the clutch all the way down and then turn on the ignition. She did so and found out that it was weird because she is just used to turning on the ignition right away. Then I took my right hand and stroked her right thigh at the same time telling her that she is going to have to balance out the gas and clutch with this leg. I guess it kind of turned her on. Then I showed her where the gears were, both of us with our hands on top of each other shifting from gear one to two to three to four and then finally to five. She looked at me when I was showing her and gave me sexy gestures. I then got close to her face and she came close to my face on the verge of kissing me on my lips. I then put my finger on her lips and told her, ‘that’s not it.’ Jokingly we both began to laugh kind of nervously. She eventually learned to drive but I always wondered what I was thinking?

Today I was talking to her over the phone and I was thanking her for doing this project that we were supposed to do together by herself because

she said that I worked two jobs and she knew that I would be busy so she did it by herself, which I was grateful for. I thanked her and said that I owed her a favor anything that she wanted. I meant this in a purely innocent form and she turned it around and made it sort of sexual. She kept asking me so what are you going to do for me? How are you going to repay me?

Women's Narratives

We flirted the entire week. I loved it, everyone was asking if we were going out and I would insist that we were just friends. Then he told me he had a crush on me. This made me both happy and sad. There was a time I thought maybe he was 'the one.' So when I heard him call it a crush it hurt me because I felt something much deeper than that; at the same time I was overjoyed because he felt something for me at all and he gave me hope that maybe in a few years when age wouldn't matter so much we would be able to pursue a relationship." This was the only time he talked about how he felt toward me. Now discussing it is out of the question because chances are it will only lead to more trouble since the first time our professional and social lives both suffered and we can't risk that again.

Our affection for each other became apparent, but we were still too shy to say anything openly. We chose to show it through actions—flirting, more subtle teasing and eventually phone calling (believe it or not, but we did not exchange phone numbers until three years later).

I am still uncertain about our friendship. I do not know if I want to date him now or even at all. I do not know if I want to give up our friendship just yet. What will happen if we did start dating? Would we be sick of each other because we know each other so well?

As I was listening to what Michael was saying, he turned to me and said, 'I wish I had a nice girl like you!' I was so shocked. I did not know if he was just saying that since he was upset or if he meant it. There was a big pause because I didn't know what to say to him. All of a sudden I heard the front door open and his parents came home. Michael's mother called to him and he jumped up and went to see what she wanted. Unfortunately, there was never a mention of Michael wanting a girl like me again.

Myth #2 "We can remain just friends."

Forty-seven percent of the friends felt an attraction at the beginning of the relationship and began expressing romantic feelings while the other person was still thinking they were going to be friends or were uncertain of their attraction to their friend. These friends became friends with the ulterior motive of the friendship becoming a

romantic relationship. At one point during journal writing, the friends stated that either they or their friend could remain just friends but eventually one of them acknowledged the mutual romantic interest and in some cases starting dating.

Women's Narratives

He actually felt the romantic feeling first. He says he knew that he wanted to be more than friends the day he saw me. I, on the other hand, did not feel it right away. I knew he liked me but didn't want to rush things. I recognized he was attracted to me by the constant flirting, calling me, writing me letters, and always going out of his way to see me. I found him always being there whether I expected to or not. If we were hanging out with 20 kids, he would always be right beside me, not even speaking to his friends. I realized that I was attracted to him when I started calling him as soon as I walked in the door and I found myself always thinking about him.

I started telling him that I had it bad for him. We both laughed and I told him again. Then I went downstairs and halfway down the stairs I made up my mind and returned to kiss him. I kissed him, finally! It was all I thought it would be and my heart tingled every second. From that point on I knew we were not just friends. Real friends don't make you feel like that. He said he would take it step by step and he's sure that he wants this more than anything. But he does have a girlfriend and I have a boyfriend. We will have to wait.

I would wait three hours for him after school so we could ride the train home together. It was at this time that I started wondering what it would be like to kiss him, or what it would be like to be his girlfriend. He started thinking the same way too.

Men's Narratives

We both have an attraction to each other but are taking it very, very slow. We have both been through the ringer with past relationships so we decided on doing it differently and becoming more of friends that that of a sexual nature. We do kiss and hug but not very often. We usually talk when we are together and learn more about each other. I have noticed when you just jump into bed and try to make a relationship out of it things usually don't work out for me. I think my friend initially defined our relationship has a dating relationship looking for future commitment. From the beginning she asked me what I thought was going to be the outcome of the relationship and I said I do not know. Time will have to tell that, but I have to go slow. There is no need to rush.

I believe and hope that in a month we will probably be together. Would she go out with me if I didn't have a girlfriend? That brings me to another point; I am going to break up with my girlfriend this weekend. It is so hard to keep a long distance relationship. I go home every weekend and have no life here.

I honestly think that if it was not for the attraction we have between us that we would not be as good of friends. I normally do not have many good female friends. I have plenty of female acquaintances and regular friends but not many do I talk to on the phone. So every time we talk on the phone or on America Online, we not only talk because we are friends but because there is that romantic tension between us. I believe if we had no romantic feelings toward each other whatsoever, I think we would just be acquaintances and not good friends that we are. I know that I am going to have to take care of the romantic attraction in our friendship in the near future.

Kristen and I started out by just talking. This soon turned into a nice friendship. Throughout all of this however, there was always an attraction that we both knew we had for each other. I found that I couldn't shut up and just wanted to constantly get to know Kristen more and more. We could walk and talk for hours. At the beginning Kristen didn't think our friendship would turn into something so great and special. She thought that we would be friends.

The first two myths support research by Werking (1997) that acknowledges the idea that women and men have romantic motives for initiating and developing a cross-sex friendship. Many people are attracted to other people but they are not clear on what those attractions are based. Young people are still learning about relationships of all types and have not yet determined how to distinguish between platonic and romantic attractions.

Myth #3 "I could be attracted that way."

In thirty-two percent of the friendships, their friend is attracted to them and they think they might be able to return the feelings but as they continue writing in their journal they realize they don't feel the same way. In some cases, the friend acknowledges that this person would make a good mate but they don't have romantic feelings for them.

Men's Narratives

She has tried to take the relationship further and has dropped a few not so subtle hints. When we say goodnight she always moves her cheeks so that I'm very close to kissing her lips. During the car ride, she will have her hand on my thigh. She's even vocalized that she would be interested in taking what we have to a sexual level. I laugh it off most of the time. But I know she's serious. I just can't do it.

The last time I saw Jessica I thought she had lost weight. But I didn't want to say anything because if I was wrong, I didn't want to get on the topic of her weight. I finally mentioned it at the end of the night and she said that she was glad I noticed. She had lost 10 pounds and was determined to lose more. This causes an interesting situation for me. If she loses the weight and begins to look more attractive to me, should I then move forward in the way that she wanted me to?

Women's Narratives

I love Tim—not exactly as a lover or a friend, but somewhere in the middle.

He does not try to hide his feelings, which is a good thing but at times this makes me feel uncomfortable. I cannot force myself to have feelings for him. I have to be true to myself. I can not create feelings that are not true and I cannot get romantically involved with someone just because others think that we would be “cute together.”

There are times when I actually try to be attracted to him. Where I try to face the fact that he would be good for me. As much as I try, it just doesn't work. I'm just not attracted to him. I find the fact that he likes me makes it hard to be his friend.

Chris is a great guy but I doubt things would work out between us. Chris is somewhat of a player who has never had a stable relationship with just one girl. He's the type of guy who would go out with a few girls at the same time. There have been times when Chris has tried and kissed me but I always managed to let him know where I stand and I have even attempted to hook him up with some friends. I kind of like him as a boyfriend but I still am not willing to give up our friendship.

The only reason I kissed him that night was because we were the only ones not doing it. He told me he wants more than friendship with me. I don't think I could ever really go out with him—it would be so weird. I could never think of Mike as my boyfriend as that would be like dating my brother. Why do I think about it all the time if I hate the fact that he has an attraction for me? I think I like the fact that Mike is attracted to me for my own selfish reasons but I don't like the fact that he expressed them to me—I mean he confuses me. Maybe Mike and I aren't ready to handle anything more than a friendship because we are immature at this age.

Right before the receiver hit the base of the phone, I heard these words... ‘You know I love you.’ BANG! I was left with a stunned look and a dial tone. I was just speechless because I had no idea his feelings were so strong. As much as I love the person he is, and the possibility of a great

husband...I do not love him. I cannot find those feelings within myself. I did not love him when I first hung out with him and I do not now.

Friends often feel pressure from the cross-sex friend as well as other friends and family members to perceive their cross-sex friend as a potential mate. Research finds that women frequently question men's motives for friendship (Rose, 1985) and often have to manage the romantic challenge in the friendship in order to maintain the friendship. More women than men in this study found that their friend was attracted to them while they did not return the attraction.

Myth #4 "I don't discount my feelings."

Thirty percent of friends have communicated their romantic interest in the other person in the past but no longer do because it caused discomfort in the friendship. Or they do not tell the other person of their attraction so that the friendship can continue without disruption. However, there may be brief comments that indicate an attraction but then nothing further ensues.

Women's Narratives

Maybe one day I will tell him how I feel about him! Sometimes I think it would be awkward to date because of our families' friendship with each other. What happens if our dating relationship did not work out?

Michael has a boy dog and I have a girl dog. Since his dog was running after my dog he said, "They look so cute together." I thought to myself maybe I should say that about us. Since I still do not have the guts to say it, I did not say anything. Michael is such a nice person. He always jokes around with the dogs and says, "They should get married!" Sometimes I want to reply, "Maybe we should get married." But due to me not being more gutsy, I keep my mouth shut.

I sometimes found myself wanting to kiss him. I began to think about him more often and imagining asking him out. I felt a bit frustrated because I knew that I was too shy to let Tony know how I really felt about him. I was surprised that I felt this way about him since I never thought of him in a romantic sense. We were always just buddies; helping each other out whenever we needed it.

Men's Narratives

The next phase was the "possibly we should date" phase. It came up a few times, however, we both felt uncomfortable talking about it.

I felt that these feelings (sexual tension) were always there for this person, but just not shown. Sometimes it is better not to push your feelings on someone. I feel that these feelings are genuine and I hope I didn't make a

mistake of displaying them because no one wants to get them thrown back into your face.

Stories often function to seal off alternative explanations (Galvin & Brommel, 2000). Sometimes friends revise an interpretation of the events that occur to create a slightly different view of their own feelings as well as their friend's feelings. If the friend were to acknowledge a romantic attraction, then perhaps the friendship would change or worse the friendship would end.

Myth #5 "Kissing doesn't count."

In 26% of the friendships, friends engaged in romantic or sexual behavior such as kissing or holding hands then behaved as if the behavior was not representative of a romantic relationship but was somehow an extension of the friendship. In many cases the behavior was not talked about again even though it may have continued to happen.

Men's Narratives

While we were searching for her sister, midnight rolled around and while everyone else was kissing...we kissed. It wasn't a long kiss, but it was long enough. After the kiss, we continued to search for her sister.

We are not together as boyfriend/girlfriend but we are sharing the most beautiful relationship where 'I love you' can be said without feeling any pressure. Sometimes I have to admit the attraction is still there because we just let go and make love like crazy people. The way we broke up kind of hurt me but we never talk about it.

Women's Narratives

We sometimes hold hands when we are walking in the street and we sometimes kiss and call each other sweet names. My friends sometimes see us hugging and a little closer than normal friends because we are closer than normal friends.

At that dance, Jerry and I kissed each other for the first time. After the dance, Jerry and I walked home in complete silence. Both of us pretended like it never happened, in fact, we still have never spoken about that incident.

I sometimes think about what it would be like to be his girlfriend. I love the relationship we have now and I just couldn't see us together as a couple. This however does not stop me from wanting to fool around with him...is this bad?

We always flirt but never really talk about the romantic nature. My boyfriend and I are close but it always feels good to have a close guy friend make you feel romantic. I really can't believe how one kiss and hug could totally change the nature of a friendship. It really broke the ice between us. Now we are constantly showing affection towards each other. It's not always a kiss or hug but maybe just a simple touch of the hands. Sometimes the things he says or the way he touches me makes me feel so great. With my best friend, Sallie, we can't talk mushy or hold hands without there being a serious problem. With Tim though, we can do all that and just say that we are close friends and it all works out fine. We had fun playing pool but it was the flirting and stuff that I liked best about the night.

There was a time when I went through a horrible breakup. Tony was once again there for me. While he was consoling me, there was a brief silence in our conversation. Tony moved closer and kissed me. This wasn't our regular 'hello and goodbye' kiss; this was a real kiss on the lips. Afterwards we hesitated and we just shrugged it off, then we continued our conversation. We just acted as if it had never happened.

This type of sexual expression has been found in some cross-sex friendships when friends differentiate between “friendly, almost platonic sex and romantic sex” (Rubin, 1985). For some individuals, sexual behavior or romantic expression became part of the framework of the friendship and did not infringe upon the friendship. These expressions allowed the friends to feel attractive to the opposite sex without a romantic commitment.

Myth #6 “If we’ve been romantically involved, we can’t be friends.”

In a few friendships, (9%) friends had been romantically linked at some point in their relationship and were now attempting to build a friendship without the dating interest. Most of them found their friendship had changed after having a romantic partnership and building a friendship again took some time.

Women’s Narratives

We had gone out for a few months and realized that neither of us was happy. For some odd reason, we couldn't talk to each other like we used to when we were just friends. We decided to take things slow and give the relationship some time to grow. After continuously going out with each other and letting the relationship grow, our feelings for each other grew into nothing more than just friends. Since that day we kept in touch like we always did and until this very day we never lost contact with each other again.

We did not speak to each other for about four months. We promised each other we would always be there for each other no matter what. I helped

him out a lot, he needed to get past the horrible phase in his life and I don't think that he would have come out of it if it wasn't for me. Now with me by his side, as friends, he is starting to get his life in order. He sees us getting back together soon but for now we are good friends.

Things were starting to develop romantically between us and I couldn't be happier. Of course, it didn't last. After a while it got to the point when John decided that he just wanted to be friends. He didn't want to get too serious and then watch our relationship fall apart as a result. I still had those feelings for him but I put them aside. I would continue to repress them for a while after that. A part of me will always have romantic feelings for John because in a way he was my first love.

Men's Narratives

When it comes to attraction, there is still some between us. Actually it's very little. On my part I feel attracted to her when we hang out. I still see her in a negative way. But I think that there will be a day when both of us will look back on how we acted and laugh. We still have more to do but I think that our relationship will get better even though we won't be romantically involved.

After we broke up we tried to be friends. I really wasn't trying to be her friend. Actually I didn't want to be her friend because I thought she was just a waste of time. I had some bad feelings toward her and she knew about it. She tried to make things better between us but it didn't help until maybe four months ago when I felt comfortable with her and I realized I couldn't hate her forever just because she make some mistakes. Now we talk once a week and our conversations are civil and I know that she will be there for me when I need her and vice a versa.

These friends were clear that their friendship was a valuable relationship after their romantic interest waned and that it would outlast a romantic relationship. In some cases, respondents decided not to pursue a romantic relationship at the expense of their friendship. This finding supports research that proposes sexual involvement between friends may be seen as a threat to the friendship (Bell, 1981; Sapadin, 1988) and friends will not act upon their romantic attraction for fear it will ruin or change the friendship (Furman, 1986).

Discussion

These narratives are powerful examples of how friends create friendship meanings. Friendship between men and women is developed and maintained without a clearly defined set of norms or guidelines, without even a language that makes the distinctions between the different types of friendships to which we apply the term cross-sex friendship. Thus it is that one person may perceive a romantic or sexual attraction to

their supposedly platonic friend while the other person perceives no such attraction. Ideas about what cross-sex friendship is, as well as norms are learned in cultural, social and national contexts. Individuals learn how to be a friend from family, friends, and the media. Such social and cultural comparisons affect our judgements about same-sex and cross-sex friendship formation and development (Collier, 1996).

The lack of cultural representation, much less accepted norms and guidelines of cross-sex friendships leads cross-sex friends to encounter O'Meara's challenges. Cultural transmission is a process by which individuals in a given ethnic group learn the core values and values of their culture passively and actively, through formal training and casual observation (Gaines, 1994). Together the friends negotiate the impact of cultural values on friendship initiation and development. A cultural model of friendship is being developed as evidenced by research into cross-sex friendship (Werking, 1997).

Providing in-depth documentation of individuals and their cross-sex friendships through narratives-- individual's stories about their patterns of interaction is important to the study of personal relationships because narratives are real people's descriptions of events as they attempt to construct, change or support their reality through communication with themselves and others (Gareis, 1995). According to Yerby (1993), "From the narrative perspective one's sense of self is the story that a person has created about herself from the totality of her experiences" (p. 6). It is this experience that shapes not only individuals in friendship but has the potential to shape a more just and humane world of relationships (Rodriguez, 2002). In this case, the narrative perspective creates a sense of self for the friend in a cross-sex friendship that allows him or her opportunity to identify myths as a means of understanding and prescribing how the friendship should continue. The logic individuals use to construct and reconstruct narratives and in particular myths, are influenced by their culture and native language. Both friends' cultures influence how they communicate and develop friendship (Gudykunst, Gao, Sudweeks, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1989).

From these conceptualizations, platonic friendships depend on at least one friend not being attracted to the other or one or both friends restricting the attraction. Implicit in cross-sex friendship is the assumption that cross-sex friends are platonic, in that they include no sexual activity. However, heterosexual women and men are naturally romantically attracted to each other except in friendship. Is this always the case? No. This is one of those cases where there are no clear guidelines (Medina & Harvey, 2001). A romantic attraction does not supersede the possibility of a cross-sex friendship, however it does affect the development, management and maintenance of cross-sex friendships as reported by Rubin (1985). In some cases, cross-sex friendships often function to test romantic feelings and in some cases act as a prelude to a romantic relationship. The friendship is a testing ground for a romantic relationship that may naturally develop from the friendship or the attraction may not last and they will continue as friends.

Future Studies and Limitations

While it is important to have in-depth documentation of how cross-sex friends use myths as a communication strategy in maintaining a platonic relationship, future studies would benefit from uncovering variables that distinguish the various types of communication strategies that cross-sex friends employ in maintaining platonic

relationships. One limitation of the current study was that it did not distinguish between the generation of myths and how those myths might result in specific coping strategies. Such information could be helpful in determining what influence, if any, myths have on the types of maintenance strategies preferred by cross-sex friends. A second limitation was that a social desirability bias may have influenced participants' recording of narrative myths they indicated they used to manage their romantic feelings. Some participants may have written more about their romantic feelings for their friend or of their friend's feelings for them than was normally perceived or experienced in their day to day relating. Participants could have misrepresented their thoughts and feelings when completing the journals. Future studies of journal writing would benefit from better ways to assure integrity of data.

There was another limitation in the current study that needs to be addressed and which may have had an influence on the findings. The study used a convenience sample of students rather than a probability sample. As with all convenience samples, generalizability is restricted. At this time, little is known about how cross-sex friends manage their romantic feelings. Future studies would benefit from comparing characteristics of both partners in cross-sex friendships and their communication strategies of managing their romantic feelings.

In conclusion, this exploratory study was an attempt to gain some insight into the narrative approach by highlighting the construction of myths that friends create for cross-sex friendship development and the complexity involved in the communication process. Cross-sex friends must develop their own guidelines and reshape the way women and men typically interact with one another. Cross-sex friends have to examine their own motives for initiating and developing cross-sex friendships as well as manage the friendships relationally, socially and culturally. As for my friendships with Randy and Bob, Randy and I lost contact five years after graduate school but Bob and I continue to be life long friends lending support to the notion that it is not only possible but also rewarding to manage the romantic challenge in cross-sex friendships.

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