Cross-Sex Friendships: Why it Happens and How it Works

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Can men and women simply be "just friends"? This is a commonly asked question and is often debated through media such as movies, television shows, and even different types of articles. The friendship between males and females is a widely experienced type of relationship, especially for young adults and college-aged students. The communication aspects of cross-sex friendships in particular are becoming increasingly studied because of this. It is thought that the way each gender communicates is specific to that gender, which is why communication between genders can be a challenging experience. Cross-sex friendships have different ground rules than same-sex friendships and there is often a strict boundary that is set up. Because cross-sex friendships are such an unusual type of relationship, there are many questions that can be asked, such as: what is the communication style of cross-sex friendships? what is the friendship based around/why was it initiated? how does one go about maintaining a cross-sex friendship? what happens when there is conflict in cross-sex friendships? and countless others.

The following studies that will be discussed provide the answers to these questions. Specifically, the focus will be on: communication strategies in cross-sex friendships, conflict within cross-sex friendships, and the maintenance of cross-sex friendships. Communication strategies in cross-sex friendships can be broken down into smaller subcategories that recognize different aspects of communication; these categories are: decision-making styles, communication values, and communication management. There are also subcategories within the topic of conflict in cross-sex friendships, which include: the differences in conflict styles of the two sexes, jealousy as a component to conflict, and a specific conflict strategy that cross-sex friends use. Relationship maintenance in cross-sex friendships consists of: the level of maintenance, attraction,
self-disclosure, and romantic intent. The three main categories of communication, conflict, and maintenance are important to focus on because it allows one to be able to understand the unique relationship that is a cross-sex friendship and the components of it.

*Communicating in Cross-Sex Friendships*

**Decision-making styles.** Decision-making styles in cross-sex friendships can positively or negatively affect the relational outcome within the friendship. Ramirez (2002) based his study around the believed positivity of decision-making styles within cross-sex friendships. Ramirez explored the quality of communication between cross-sex friends through the role of decision-making styles. The style that each set of friends choose to use heavily impacts the balance of the relationship. Since all relationships depend upon balance, Ramirez looked at the effect of decision-making styles and how they positively correlate to the level of satisfaction in the relationship.

The results of his study concluded that relational satisfaction was higher in cross-sex friendships when one friend influenced the other with the use of a particular decision-making style. This only proved Ramirez's hypotheses partially correct because same-sex friends rated the overall communication quality of the relationship higher than cross-sex friends did. From Ramirez's study based around the effects of decision-making styles on cross-sex friendships, it can be concluded that a specific decision-making style can positively affect the friendship's relational satisfaction, but not necessarily the overall communication quality that the two share (Ramirez, 2002).

**Communication values.** Communication values within cross-sex friendships differ from the values that same-sex friends find in their friendship. Holmstrom researched the validity of this claim and examined different aspects of same-sex and cross-sex
friendships in order to arrive at an appropriate conclusion. Like Ramirez noted in his study in 2002, Holmstrom found that there is a value placed on cross-sex friendships that is greater than that of a same-sex friendship because of the obvious, yet specific, difference in gender. Meaning, members of both sexes value cross-sex friendships because it allows them to have an "insider" type of advantage. This value is responsible for creating a strong bond within the friendship and proving this is part of Holmstrom's goal. She identifies that there are two main categories in which traits valued in friendships fall into: affective orientation, which includes supportive behaviors, and instrumental orientation, which includes active behaviors. These two categories are responsible for the value that is specifically placed on opposite-sex friendships (Holmstrom, 2009).

Each gender is responsible for maintaining one or the other category. Women are more likely to obtain the skills of affective orientation, as they, in general, are more in touch with their emotions and the emotions of others. Opposite of affective orientation, men are more apt to be instrumentally oriented. This means that they are more likely to have persuasive and narrative attributes. Each of these categories apply to the opposite genders because of specific gender roles in society. Holmstrom's study aimed to understand the concept of communication values within cross-sex friendships and explore how they affect the overall value of the relationship, such as, does one value a cross-sex friendship more than a same-sex friendship? (Holmstrom, 2009).

The results of Holmstrom's conducted study through the use of the Communication Functions Questionnaire. Within the questionnaire, there are ten functions of communication skills that apply to relational value. The questionnaire is
responsible for appropriately assessing Holmstrom's hypotheses and therefore allows the study to come to several conclusions. The first being that affective oriented skills are not just highly valued within cross-sex friendships, but are the most valued skills within both same-sex and cross-sex friendships. From this, it can also be deducted that women have a higher value in cross-sex friendships because they fulfill the aspect of affective oriented skills within the relationship. This is not to say that there is no importance placed on men in cross-sex friendships, though, because women did rate men higher than other women on the scale that was based off of instrumental skills. From Holmstrom's study, it can be concluded that there are two separate values on cross-sex friendships which are affective orientated skills as well as instrumentally orientated skills. Since cross-sex friendships contain both sets of skills, it may allow both genders to place a higher value on the friendship than they would if there was only one of the particular skills (Holmstrom, 2009).

*Communication management.* Establishing friendship without romance between two heterosexuals can be a difficult task. Boundaries have to be made and followed and violations of certain friendship rules may not be made. Within his study pertaining to the management of sex-role expectations in cross-sex friendships, Rawlins (1982) deciphered the different types of relationships that humans experience throughout their lives and how male and female relationships come into play. Just as Holmstrom (2009) discovered, Rawlins identified the fact that men are more likely to disclose to women, based on women's affectively based skills. Rawlins also examined the fact that it is men, not women, who are most likely to seek romance through a relationship that began as friendship. This is particularly because men disclose, in general, more information in
their heterosexual friendships than in their same sex friendships, which allows them to have a stronger bond with women from the very beginning (Rawlins, 1982). The effectiveness and the value of relationships come from gender specificity, as each is getting something out of the relationship that they had not and would not be getting in a same-sex friendship (Ramirez, 2002; Holmstrom, 2009; Rawlins, 1982).

Rawlins examined the hidden agendas that men may have in creating opposite-sex friendships, such as that of a sexual or romantic relationship. He notes that opposite-sex friendships have unclear boundaries and are more likely to cause uncertainty within relationships. Cross-sex friendships may also pose threats to those already in relationships. In a cross-sex friendship, it becomes necessary to denote sexuality in the friendship in order for there to be clear, labeled boundaries. Primarily, the study evaluated sex-roles in society and how there may be an undisclosed reason why men initiate cross-sex friendships (Rawlins, 1982).

Conflict Within Cross-Sex Friendships

Difference in conflict styles. Due to gender differences, there is bound to be conflict between males and females. Members of both opposite-sexes lack the ability to truly understand the other sex, thus creating an unavoidable, yet inexplicable, conflict. Samter and Cupach (1998) formulated a study around this area of cross-sex friendships. The goal of their study was to examine the reasoning behind conflict in opposite-sex friendships. The text clarifies that the actual absence of conflict in the specified friendship is actually a conflict within itself. This is because neither party wishes to bring about a conflict of a trivial manner, however, tension may still be evident. Because cross-sex friendships are of an abnormal sort, bringing a conflict into it may create a cause for
the relationship to cease to exist. The absence of conflict in cross-sex friendships is most commonly experienced (Samter & Cupach, 1998).

Not all relationships are free of direct conflict, however, because a main reason Samter and Cupach (1998) examined for conflict in opposite-sex friendships had to do with the influence of outside relationships. Not only will each individual's outside relationships with others influence the level of depth that the two share within their cross-sex friendship, but it will also influence whether or not there are pressures on the relationship from outside sources. This could include the pressure for the two friends to become romantically involved from a mutual friend. An outside pressure such as this could create an internal conflict. Another type of conflict within opposite-sex friendships relates to one party wishing to be romantically involved with the other individual. This is a conflict because it is a violation of friendship rules. In a friendship, neither friend should wish to be romantically involved, nor should they take steps such as flirting, to become romantically involved. According to Samter and Cupach (1998), it is common for this conflict to arise and end in friendship termination. After analyzing the data results, it is evident that occurrence of any type of conflict in the opposite-sex friendship will end in a lessening of the relational value, if not relational termination (Samter & Cupach, 1998).

*Jealousy in cross-sex friendships.* Because the concept behind cross-sex friendships is so unusual, participants in the friendship often experience emotions that create uncertainty in the relationship. Bevan and Hale (2006) explored the idea of jealousy and how it may or may not affect cross-sex friendships. The problem with jealousy is that it generally means that there is a threat to the relationship. The ongoing
contextual issue of the boundaries in cross-sex friendships is important to recognize here. The researches evaluate each relationship type and the applicable issue of jealousy according to the relevance within each specific category of relationship. They conducted a study in which rumination was a key aspect. For example, does the degree to which one thinks about a relational threat affect the relationship? If the answer is yes, then it truly is all about the perception of the relationship. This is the focal point of the entire study (Bevan & Hale, 2006).

Bevan and Hale (2006) found adequate results for their conducted research study, but little applied to cross-sex friendships. It was discussed that individuals may express jealousy towards an outside relationship, but the exact reasoning was not reported. This could perhaps be due to the idea of conflict within cross-sex friendships, going back to what Samter and Cupach (1998) discovered in their study. The idea that jealousy creates conflict, and conflict leads to termination of cross-sex friendships may be the reason that jealousy within cross-sex friendships, for the most part, was unreported. Jealousy within cross-sex friendships is existent and thus responsible for a possible conflict within that friendship (Bevan & Hale, 2006).

Conflict strategies in cross-sex friendships. The goal of Emmers-Sommers (1999) research study was to explore the different events that may negatively affect cross-sex friendships in the context of relational intimacy. The major finding of this study was that cross-sex friendships use avoidance-strategies more so than any other type of relationship. Just as Samter & Cupach (1999) found in their study, Emmers-Sommers (1999) also distinguished that conflict-avoidance is most common within opposite-sex friendship based relationships.
Since part of the focus of Emmers-Sommers's (1999) research was based on what negative events may affect the friendship, it is important to identify such an event. In the conducted survey it was reported that a negative event that would result in termination would most often be romantically linked. Meaning, the friendship would end because one individual wanted to take it to the next level and one did not. Avoiding this issue would make it a conflict-avoidance situation, which happens to be most commonly reported in this study. Because of the result of the data, conflict avoidance is the number one strategy in cross-sex friendships (Samter & Cupach, 1998; Bevan & Hale, 2006; Emmers-Sommers, 1999).

Maintenance in Cross-Sex Friendships

Platonic friends decrease maintenance levels. When cross-sex friends strictly follow the rules, they can be categorized as platonic friends. Relationship maintenance for this type of friendship may or may not be different than it is for other types of relationships. In a study conducted by Guerrero and Chavez (2005), this notion is debated and explored. Their research suggests that people act differently in given situations based on how their relationship has developed as well as how it has been maintained. Uncertainty plays a major role in this aspect because it may or may not cause the maintenance strategy to change (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005).

Before they performed the study, one of their deductions included: "...cross-sex friends will report differences in maintenance behavior based on whether they want the relationship to develop into a romance, or whether they want it to remain platonic" (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005. p. 343). The results were that the intent of the relationship does matter. Relational intent affects the strategy and the overall maintenance of the
friendship. In platonic friendships, less routine maintenance is done by both individuals.
They avoid relational talk, since it is not a necessary component to their relationship.
Platonic friends that base their relationship around instrumental variables as opposed to
affective variables use less maintenance strategies, as their relationship requires less
depth. The goal of Guerrero and Chavez (2005) was to understand the extent to which
cross-sex friends maintain their relationship, and the result was that the maintenance
strategies were overall downplayed in this type of relationship (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005).

*Types of attraction within cross-sex friendships.* Malachowski and Dillow (2011)
explored the types of attraction that cause cross-sex friendships to happen and how this
may or may not affect relational uncertainty and romantic intent of either individual. Just
as Guerrero and Chavez (2005) discussed, uncertainty in relationships is caused by the
potential for romance. What the study Malachowski and Dillow (2011) focuses on is the
reasons behind the potential for romance. Romance is often persuaded by interpersonal
attraction, which is the reason for initiating any type of relationship overall (Malachowski
& Dillow, 2011).

There are three aspects included in interpersonal attraction, which are: physical,
social, and task. Social attraction is the main cause of initiating friendships, but that does
not mean a friendship cannot happen based on the other two attraction types. The
difference between these types of attraction and romantic intent is that this includes
physical, sexual, and romantic attractions, while it may lack social and task attractions.
Malachowski and Dillow (2011) had the goal of evaluating the basic types of attraction as
opposed to romantic attraction and how it affects relational maintenance strategies. The
result of their research was that in strictly platonic friendships, there are specific maintenance strategies; however, they lack romantic intent. This is specifically important to acknowledge because, based on the levels of attraction, maintenance may or may not occur (Malachowski & Dillow, 2011).

*Explicit communication through self-disclosure.* Cross-sex friendships have a different way of communicating than same-sex friendships because the relational goals are not the same. In the research done by Hollenbaugh and Egbert (2009), self-disclosure as a maintenance strategy in cross-sex friendships is explored. How much is too much? This question is posed often and never gets a direct response. In experimentation processes, Hollenbaugh and Egbert (2009) make an effort to understand the use of self-disclosure along with romantic and relational intent in cross-sex friendships (Hollenbaugh & Egbert, 2009).

The study states that the depth of the relationship relies heavily on self-disclosure. Neither individual ever wants to feel vulnerable, so strategies are put forth in order to prevent this from happening. The results of the performed hypotheses suggest that the majority of participants in cross-sex friendships are in a non-vulnerable state because they choose to self-disclose explicitly. The higher the level of directness within the context of the relationship, the higher the success rate. If, in the beginning stages of the friendship, one individual states that they are not romantically interested in the other, the friendship is likely to last longer and be more successful as a friendship overall. The opposite is true as well. If an individual indirectly hints that they are in fact romantically interested, the success rate of the friendship dramatically lowers. This is because indirect communication is responsible for creating uncertainty in the friendship. Because of this
information, it is evident that self-disclosure in the most direct way is a reasonable and viable relationship maintenance strategy for cross-sex friendships (Hollenbaugh & Egbert, 2009).

Romantic desire and relational maintenance. Since strictly platonic friends partake in less routine relationship maintenance, it is able to be deduced that an individual with romantic intent will partake in more maintenance strategies in the particular cross-sex friendship (Malachowski & Dillow, 2011). Further exploring this deduction is the study done by Weger and Emmett (2009). The study also explains that discussing outside romantic relationships can suffice as a maintenance strategy in order to provide security within the friendship, and to allow certain individuals to recognize that they are platonic and not romantic friends. Although this is true, it is important to recognize that maintenance strategies are more likely and more often performed by those who wish to be romantically involved with their opposite-sex friend (Weger and Emmett (2009).

The result of the study determined that maintenance levels are higher in the context of cross-sex friendships that contain one individual who has romantic intent. Specifically used and discussed as the maintenance strategy in the context of romantic intent is the concept of flirting. Flirting is not usually a tactic that is done with strictly platonic friends. Because of this, it seems as though it is a harmless tactic that indirectly poses the possibility of romance. Flirting can be done either directly or indirectly and neither means that there is definite romantic intent. Through the use of this study, however, it is highly predicted that through the use high levels of flirting, the relationship will be more likely to be maintained. This is only because the individual is putting more
effort into the friendship, in hopes to transition into a romantic relationship. Flirting can also be responsible for relational uncertainty, as it is not a direct way of stating that one would like to be romantically involved. Because relational maintenance strategies are done at a lesser level when the friendship is platonic, it only makes sense that those who wish to be romantically involved will work harder to maintain the relationship (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Malachowski & Dillow, 2011; Hollenbaugh and Egbert, 2009; Weger & Emmett, 2009).

In Conclusion

Cross-Sex friendships are a unique type of relationship, one that has different boundaries and values than a typical, same-sex relationship, or a romantic relationship. Studies on cross-sex friendships are becoming more and more relevant as the number of people participating in cross-sex friendships increases. The popularity of cross-sex friendships may be due to the fact that both genders receive different benefits from the relationship. While initiating a cross-sex friendship, many questions may arise. This happens because of the complexity of the relationship. Often times, one individual may be romantically interested in the other individual, which then creates tension and an unequal balance of power. Cross-Sex friendships are based around equality because each sex must have a mutual agreement on what the relationship consists of. If one individual does not agree, the friendship will most likely be imbalanced, and thus create conflict within the friendship. With conflict, comes an unnecessary slew of complications. Complications in cross-sex friendships are more likely than not going to result in termination of the friendship. Because cross-sex friendships are a particularly unique type
of relationship, it is important to recognize all of the existing factors before initiating one, as well as while being in one consistently.

Cross-Sex friendships have three main aspects that should be focused on. These are: communication strategies, conflict, and relationship maintenance. Within communication strategies, it is important to recognize the value system of cross-sex friendships. Men as a collective group tend to value cross-sex friendships more than women do. This is because women are more likely to have a higher skill level in affective orientation, which is the most valued communication trait overall. As women are affectively oriented naturally, men are instrumentally oriented. Although women do value cross-sex friendships, they have a propensity to get more out of same-sex friendships. This is solely based around the idea that women are more affectively oriented (Ramirez, 2002; Holmstrom, 2009; Rawlins, 1982).

Conflict in cross-sex friendships is of the most unusual type. It is often strictly avoided, because, reportedly, individuals believe that confronting an issue in cross-sex friendships will lead to termination of the relationship. Neither friend places a high enough value on the relationship to get through the problems and solve it. Most often, conflict arises because of romantic/relational intent of one of the friends. It could also be caused by jealousy, which one friend is likely to have if the other friend is in a relationship. Avoidance is the main strategy in conflict with cross-sex friends, due to the fact that most people believe conflict will end in termination (Samter & Cupach, 1998; Bevan & Hale, 2006; Emmers-Sommers, 1999).

The final concept that is relevant to the examination in cross-sex friendships is the idea of maintenance. Maintenance levels of platonic cross-sex relationships tend to be
lower than those that have a romantic intent. This is because individuals that are romantically attracted to their cross-sex friend put more effort into contacting and being with the other person. Maintenance strategies in cross-sex friendships can explain quite a bit about what the relational intent may be (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Malachowski & Dillow, 2011; Hollenbaugh and Egbert, 2009; Weger & Emmett, 2009). Questions that are posed because of cross-sex friendships' uniqueness can be answered through the examination of the concepts of communication in cross-sex friendships, conflict in cross-sex friendships, and maintenance in cross-sex friendships.

Although there are an increasing number of studies done on cross-sex friendships, as society has made them more and more popular, there are still a few questions about cross-sex friendships that were not explained in any of the studies. In the future, one might want to look more into the concept of jealousy in cross-sex friendships. For instance, does it occur because one has romantic intent? Or does it occur in a cross-sex friendship just as it does in a same-sex friendship? It would also be interesting to explore the idea of outside pressures, such as mutual friends, and how it affects the friendship, in the sense of the mutual friend pushing the two to date. Is something more likely to happen because of the pressure? And finally, the concept of termination should be further explored. Termination was definitely a concept that was explored in cross-sex friendship research studies, but the exact reasons why termination is seen as one of the main outcomes of conflict was never really looked into. With further research in this area, cross-sex friendships would be more widely understood and the concepts behind the relationship would become more commonly recognized.
References


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