

## **CONSTRUCTING MYTHS TO MANAGE THE ROMANTIC CHALLENGE IN CROSS-SEX FRIENDSHIPS**

Vickey Harvey

“Matt is not the ‘boyfriend’ type. He is not to grow up and be committed to someone. Matt and I are more like sister and brother. We tell each other our deepest secrets, knowing the other will always be there for us. It is sometimes awkward for him to introduce me as his friend. I’m not really sure why this is. I think it’s hard to have a close friend of the opposite sex because people are constantly challenging your friendship because other people always see intimacy potential.”

Most likely you have or have had a friend of the opposite sex. If you are a woman, you may have a male friend whom, as in the situation above, you perceive as a brother or advisor. If you are a man, you may have a female friend whom you perceive as a sister or confidante. Adult cross-sex friendships (Bell, 1981). Our cross-sex friends can help us learn more about how members of the opposite sex feel, think, and behave. They can give us confirmation that we are attractive members of the other sex, and cross-sex friends can improve communication between the sexes. The more we understand about the other sex, the easier it can be to communicate personally, socially, and professionally.

However, it is not always easy to have a cross-sex friend. How many times have you thought you might be friends with someone of the opposite sex, only to discover yourself romantically attracted to him or her or they to you? What happens to the friendship? You may become romantically involved with your friend, or you may decide it is too hard to maintain a platonic friendship with such an attraction. Either way, the friendship can be challenging. Why does this happen? Cross-sex friendships encounter special “challenges” that women and men must overcome in maintaining cross-sex friendships. O’Meara (1989) contends that cross-sex friends face an “emotional or intimacy bond”, challenge, a “romantic or sexual” challenge an “equality or power” challenge, and an “audience perspective” challenge. Cross-sex friends must negotiate these challenges to establish clear guidelines in order for their cross-sex friendships to continue (Rawlins, 1982).

### **USING THEORY TO UNDERSTAND THE ROMANTIC CHALLENGE**

Social constructionism offers a captivating framework and interpretation of how friends construct, change, or sustain their reality through social communication and interaction with other (Bernstein, 1983). Wood (1982) believes that relationships and realities must be “talked” into existence. It is the dialogue in relationships, both between the two friends and within one’s inner dialogue that constructs notions of intimacy and friendship and negotiates the norms and rules of the friendship, including how the individuals perceive the friendship. Social constructionism leads to a study of the stories that individuals in friendships tell. Narratives provide a sense of importance and identity to the friendship that help define, articulate, and refine individual’s sense of self and friendship identity. Narratives can also produce myths that provide a prescription for the course of the friendship. How we talk about our friendships through narratives provides an understanding of the challenges confronting women and men in friendship and allows cross-sex friends to remain platonic friends.

### **THE METHOD OF NARRATIVES**

The women and men who tell their stories here are 120 college students from two eastern colleges attending communication course. They are between 18 and 27 years old and are all heterosexuals. Each of the respondents was asked to identify a casual, good, or best friend of the opposite sex. Individuals were told that the project was designed to study cross-sex friendships—that is, friendships between members of the opposite sex—excluding romantic, marital, and family relationships. Students kept a journal for 15 weeks, discussing issues related to the romantic challenge of one cross-sex friendship.

The narratives generated myths that the friends created about the friendship in order to provide some guidelines about adult cross-sex friendship. A myth is usually an attempt to explain an occurrence without using scientific fact or so-called common sense (Shaw, 1972). Myths appeal to emotion, rather than reason or logic, and date from ancient times, when rational explanations were not available nor apparently wanted (Shaw, 1972). Individuals turned to previously established myths or invented their own in response to questioning the romantic attraction in their friendship. The five myths that emerged from the journals, described in Figure 1, appear to be ways in which friends communicate about the friendship in order to maintain a friendship rather than a romantic partnership.

Myths play a dominant role as men and women attempt to communicate and manage their romantic feelings about each other. Although myths are often not true when examined closely, friends cling to them because they are the reality that the friends co-create about the structure of their friendship. Social constructionism proposes that friends in this case live their lives by stories or myths; that these myths shape the friendship; and that they have real, not imagined effects, thereby providing the structure of the friendship (White, 1991, p. 28).

### MYTH #1: DENYING THAT OUR FRIEND IS ATTRACTED TO US

The most common myth, reported by 65% of the friends, was Myth #1: “I don’t think he or she really likes me that way.” The respondents stated that their friend was not attracted to them, but this was not supported in the narrative journal writing.

<b>Myth</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Function</b>
#1 “I don’t think he or she is attracted to me.”	65%	Friends struggle with the challenge of receiving mixed messages.	Able to deny friend’s attraction to you.
#2 “We won’t cross over the friendship line.”	35%	Friends felt attraction at start of relationship and 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’m not jealous of your girl/boyfriends.”	30%	Friends deny being attracted but then feel jealous toward their friend’s dating partner.	Allows romantic feelings to surface.
#5 “As long as we aren’t sexual, it isn’t romantic.”	25%	Friends feel if they don’t engage in sexual behavior, then they aren’t romantically involved.	Friendship label allows physical contact.

The following comments illustrate the existence of an attraction that is definitely denied.

## *Women's Narratives*

“Joe asked me to be his ‘date’ for the homecoming dance. I was quite surprised because I knew that he did not like to dance, nor to get dressed up. However, I did enjoy those things, so of course I went. Later, Joe whispered to me, ‘You look really beautiful tonight.’ I must admit that I was taken off-guard when he said this. I did not know what to say at the time, because I was shocked and confused, so we just continued dancing and left it at that.”

“As I was listening to what Michael was saying, he turned to me and said, ‘I wish I had a nice a girl like you!’ I was so shocked. I did not know if he was just saying that because 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.”

## *Men's Narratives*

“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 is 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? I know she was just joking, but I was a little uncomfortable with it.”

“I always get a kiss hello and good-bye—sometimes even more than one. I get kisses sometimes when I do a good thing or sometimes just for no reason. In the middle of a conversation, one of us can just walk up to the other and put our arm around the other for no particular reason. When we are by ourselves watching a movie, now and then she will lie against me or I will rest my head on her leg. We will not get the wrong idea and because we have known each other for such a long time, this abundance of affection just comes natural.”

This myth is the premise of the romantic challenge. Men and women struggle with the challenge of their friends’ attraction to them. Oftentimes, denial is the easiest way to manage the attraction so that the friendship may continue status quo. If we acknowledge our friend’s attraction for us, then we will have to decide what to do about that attraction.

## *Reflections on Myth #1: Denying That Our Friend is Attracted to Us*

1. Women wrote the first two narratives, whereas men wrote the second two. Do you notice any gender differences regarding the denial of a romantic attraction?
2. Do you think either friend is intentionally revealing or denying a romantic attraction to his or her friend in these particular narratives?
3. What role does self-disclosure play in revealing romantic attraction?
4. To what degree can a platonic friendship be maintained through the use of denial?

## MYTH #2: NOT CROSSING OVER THE FRIENDSHIP LINE

Although Myth #1 was the most widely reported, the other myths were also related to managing the romantic aspect of the friendship. Some individuals stated in their journals that they could remain friends, and as they continued writing in their journals they became romantically involved. This was reported in 35% of the friendships.

### *Women's Narratives*

"When he kissed me on the cheek to say good night, one might say that it was just a normal good-bye gesture but I could tell that it was more of a 'yes, I am attracted to you too' type of gesture."

"I remembered that day because of the chemistry exam. We both felt this exam really stressed us out. I stayed at his house to study, and by 9:00 we still hadn't eaten anything. So Nelson suggested that he cook something to eat. After we ate dinner, I felt very sleepy. So he made coffee for me to drink in order to stay awake. At that moment, I felt like he was just like my boyfriend. He cared for me, and we are just like a couple."

"We made an agreement that we would become closer friends. Even though there was an attraction, I would always deny any feelings. Even when I talked to my best friend about him, I would always make it a point to say that we're just friends because I didn't want to go out with anyone or have a serious relationship at that point. I figured as long as I denied it and neither of us said anything, nothing would happen. But then it became too hard for us to keep it inside because the emotions were too strong to just be friends, so we became officially dating."

### *Men's Narratives*

"Jennifer and I used to avoid contact whenever possible. I think this was due to the fact that we had feelings for each other but weren't prepared to make that transition from friends to romantic interests. I think we always knew that something would happen, but we were waiting for the other person to make the first move."

"It would be fair to say that I was of the opinion that men and women could maintain pure friendships. However, based on my recent writings and experiences, including this one, I do not believe that is feasible. Regardless of what either party might say, romantic feelings inevitably intervene."

"We began to hold hands, even when the scary scenes were over, we both mutually did not let go. I had a feeling that maybe this is when we would cross that border, between friendship and a romantic relationship, which was now a thin line to me."

These individuals initially were friends but then realized that they wanted to become more involved as the friendship continued. These 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. The friendship is a discovery process or 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.

### *Reflections on Myth #2: Not Crossing Over the Friendship Line*

1. In what ways, if any, do the narratives indicate that the friends had romantic motives for initiating and developing a cross-sex friendship with their friend?

2. Do you agree with the statement that more men than women tend to have romantic motives for initiating a cross-sex friendship? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to cross over the friendship line after stating that you won't cross over the friendship line?
4. Have you ever been in a cross-sex friendship that crossed the line into a romantic involvement? If so, how did the relationship progress from friendship to romance?
5. Gender is not the only aspect of identity that affects friendships' crossing over the friendship line. Drawing on your own experience and observation, discuss ways in which friendship and romantic expression are influenced by race, economic class, age, and other aspects of social identity.

### MYTH #3: NOT RETURNING ROMANTIC ATTRACTION

Other individuals had the opposite experience of Myth #2. They thought that they could be attracted to their friend, but as they continued writing it became clear they were not romantically attracted. Myth #3, "I could be attracted that way," was reported by 32% of the friends.

#### *Women's Narratives*

"Adam and I have constantly battled the issue of dating versus friendship. He pushed more for the dating side of the coin, while I usually wanted us to remain friends. We've had times of physical intimacy, often followed by times of not talking to each other for some time. Once we got into this huge issue because he realized that, most likely, we would never be more than friends in the long run—something I had known for a while."

"Everyone viewed us as a couple, but we explained that we were not. Then Chris escalated our friendship into a romantic one. He started buying me roses and leaving little notes. Finally he told me that he wanted to be more than friends. I went silent at that moment because I was not expecting that to occur. Even though he had been hinting it, I didn't want to think about it because I didn't know how I would go about dealing with it. I did not ever think of my friend that way, even though I knew he would be a great boyfriend."

"Recently, I've noticed many changes in his type of communication. Suddenly the innocent hugs and taps and the sarcastic 'I love yous' seem to have more meaning. I feel very uncomfortable at times expressing innocent affection, for I am afraid that Mike might get the wrong idea."

#### *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 is.' Jokingly we both began to laugh kind of nervously. She eventually learned to drive, but I always wondered what I was thinking."

"I know that in a physical sense I am attracted to Cathleen. It is just the male instinct that makes me look. Though she is one of my best friends, I cannot help but look when she is wearing a tight pair of jeans or a very revealing top. To be honest, sometimes I catch myself staring at her chest, and I think she catches me too. Then I realize what is going on, and I say to myself, 'What the hell am I doing?' I think it is purely natural for two people so close to be somewhat attracted. One night I found myself kissing her, and by the end of the night we came very close to you know what, and I have to admit that the thought crossed my mind in the heat of the moments. I would have acted on my impulses and made a very big mistake. Right now I cannot think of her in a romantic sense."

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.

### *Reflections on Myth #3: Not Returning Romantic Attraction*

1. Do you believe that more men than women tend to be romantically attracted to their cross-sex friends? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever had a cross-sex friend be romantically attracted to you while you did not return the feelings? Did you stay friends with that individual? Why or why not?
3. What are the challenges associated with managing a friendship so that it remains platonic when one person is attracted to the other?
4. What messages are sent when one friend professes a romantic attraction to a friend and those feelings are not returned? How is self-esteem affected?

### MYTH #4: I AM NOT JEALOUS OF YOUR DATING PARTNER

In many of the friendships, either one or both of the friends were dating someone else. At the beginning of the narrative, friends did not perceive this as a problem. However, as the friendship narrative progressed, they began expressing jealousy over their friend's dating partner. This was reported in 30% of the friendships.

#### *Men's Narratives*

"When I walk with Antonella down the sidewalk or sit with her in a restaurant or a café, I get jealous of the other men who look at her. They either wink, raise their eyebrow, or whatever. She gets the same feelings if a girl comes up to me and asks me something."

"Whenever we are together, I never think about dating. As soon as she is out on a date, however, I can't help but think I should be the one with her. I never know when she will find someone she really likes, and then that will be the end for me."

#### *Women's Narratives*

"I am aware that Joey is not my boyfriend, and I don't even want him to be, but I seem to get jealous anyway. I often feel like Joey is mine and I don't want to share him with other girls. After all, I do have a boyfriend whom I love dearly, whom I have been dating for almost six years."

"I think the time that I realized that I was so attracted to Adam is when he started dating another girl. I remember being jealous because I was no longer the only special girl in this life."

"The night of the dance, I showed up with a date, and it seemed that Tony got a bit jealous himself. Tone kept looking our way and asking these questions in a rather defensive manner: 'Who is this guy?' or 'When did you meet him?' I found that questioning to be very sweet."

Many times when individuals already have a romantic relationship, it allows them to develop friendships with members of the opposite sex they might not otherwise. Since they are romantically involved elsewhere, cross-sex friendships do not have the emotional or sexual charge as in a romantic relationship. However, those parameters can be modified during the course of a friendship. Through their interactions, friends became aware that their emotions were heightened when they observed their cross-sex friend with a romantic partner, even though the two friends perceived each other as friends.

#### *Reflections on Myth #4: I am Not Jealous of Your Dating Partner*

1. Tensions exist in all relationships. How might tension be expressed in a cross-sex friendship when your friend indicates that he or she is envious of your dating partner?
2. What, if any, is the difference in how men express jealousy with their female friends versus women with their male friends?
3. Have you ever found yourself jealous of a cross-sex friend's date? What do you think was the cause of the jealousy?
4. Have you ever had a cross-sex friend's dating partner be jealous of you? How did that individual affect your friendship with your cross-sex friend?

#### MYTH #5: AS LONG AS WE AREN'T SEXUAL, IT ISN'T ROMANTIC

This myth, which continues the theme of managing the romantic challenge, was reported by 25% of the respondents. Many friends engaged in physical behavior such as kissing, holding hands, or flirting or emotional behavior such as feeling closer to their friend than anyone and then behaved as if the behavior was not representative of a romantic relationship but was somehow an extension of the friendship.

#### *Men's Narratives*

"During this time, Jen had a party because her parents went away. The next thing I know we are all in the pool naked and Jen and I were kissing. Not only did I enjoy those 'special moments' we had together, but I had also gained a very important friendship that I would cherish for the rest of my life."

"We convey simple affection to each other by beeping one another with 959. This is a moment in time which we would claim as ours and which reminds each of us of specific times when we were together and we saw the minute 9:59 go by together. That may sound like a corny thing, but if 959 appears on my beeper I feel very closely connected to Ann and highly reminded of our great friendship for and with each other."

"We never crossed over that fine line between strong affection and sexual desire, for I always respect people who are involved with other people. We both confess that we have sexual desire for each other, but we both understand that it would ruin a great friendship. She sends me 'I miss you' and 'I love you' tweety emails. I send her regular emails and express my

affection through the letters. I always start my emails saying how much I miss her and wish she were here. I have jokingly said to her 'I'm very unfortunate that Rezaul (her boyfriend) found you before I found you.' We express our sexual attraction to each other by constantly joking about it."

### *Women's Narratives*

"Maybe it is how he waits for a couple of hours to spend only a half-hour with me. Maybe it is because he subconsciously tried to schedule our school and work times in a complementing manner so it enables us to spend the most amount of time. He always calls me in the morning when he wakes up, and tries to call me at night before he sleeps. Maybe it is how he kicks his friends out of the front seat, so that I have the front seat reserved for me."

"He told me during the movie that if we both aren't married by the time that we are 28, then we would get married to each other."

"We write about how much we miss each other and how we would love to be in each other's company. Moreover, we send cards through email sending hugs and even kisses. Finally, we talk on the phone nightly and twice during the day. My days were filled with many thoughts of him. I woke up thinking of him and went to sleep thinking of him. I do not think that we have to be with someone to be really close to them in heart. I remain as friends with him because he is there every time I need him."

"We flirt with one another, spend a lot of extra time together, go to a certain part that overlooks the city, usually considered to be a romantic spot to which you take your boy/girlfriend. Although we are not dating, I think that we both enjoy this romantic aspect of our relationship, making it different and special from others we have."

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. Sometimes friendship serve as testing grounds for romantic expression, so those individuals may experience emotional connections to the other sex in a less restrictive context.

### *Reflections on Myth #5: As Long As We Aren't Sexual, It Isn't Romantic*

1. How do the friends behave as they create emotional or romantic impressions with each other?
2. Intimacy can vary in intensity, in the degree to which it is personal. How does the behavior of each friend help him or her create a more trusting and intimate friendship?
3. What messages are sent to the people around them who observe the friends' behavior?
4. Have you ever experienced romantic expression in a platonic friendship? If so, discuss how that expression affected the friendship.
5. How do you think the label "friendship" affects a relationship? What functions do labels for relationships serve?

## DEVELOPING A CULTURAL MODEL OF CROSS-SEX FRIENDSHIP

The five myths described here appear to be ways in which friends communicate about the friendship in order to develop and maintain a friendship rather than a romantic partnership. Most



of these friends were clear that their friendship was a valuable relationship that could not be replaced with a romantic relationship. Respondents either maintained purely platonic feelings for their cross-sex friend, decided not to pursue a romantic relationship at the expense of their friendship, or did not stir romantic feelings in their friend. 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).

The lack of cultural representation, much less understanding of cross-sex friendships, leads cross-sex friends to encounter such challenges. Social, cultural, media, or relationship models do not exist to provide distinct guidelines for cross-sex friendships. Oftentimes, individuals fall back on rules for romantic, sibling, or parental roles to initiate and develop cross-sex friendship. This is one of the reasons why women and men tend to perceive each other's behavior as either one of sexual interest, brother/sister, or maternal or paternal interaction. The most prevalent is sexual interest. Because our culture places such emphasis on gender, men and women experience difficulty in not perceiving each other in sexual terms (O'Meara, 1989).

The cultural debate continues whether or not women and men can be friends (Werking, 1997). Platonic friendships between women and men are potentially problematic because the partners cannot rely on cultural norms to guide them. A cultural model of cross-sex friendships (Werking, 1997). Cross-sex friends must create their own guidelines and reshape the way men and women 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. Cross-sex friends must manage the challenges of cross-sex friendships as identified by O'Meara (1989) that were introduced at the beginning of this paper. Friends must negotiate the emotional bond between them ("emotional or intimacy challenge"); decide what types of feelings they feel for each other, either romantic or platonic ("sexual or romantic challenge"); conquer the power difference given to men and women in our society ("equality challenge"); present an accurate picture of their relationships as platonic friends to their family and friends ("audience perspective"); and discover opportunities for initiating and developing cross-sex friendships ("opportunity challenge"). Men and women have to actively negotiate these challenges to establish and maintain their cross-sex friendships.

Cross-sex friendships tend to begin in adolescence and continue into retirement, playing more and less important roles as life transitions occur (Wright, 1999). Youth and young adults may encounter more of the challenges as they initiate and develop their friendships than do more mature adults who have established friendships and relationships. Retirement is another time for initiating friendships, and the challenges may once again need to be managed for successful relationships. Regardless of one's age, sex, marital status, socioeconomic level, or ethnic background, individuals who have cross-sex friendships usually have to negotiate one or more of the challenges that accompany those friendships.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the narratives presented, it is clear that the romantic challenge presented a challenge for the majority of the cross-sex friends. From these narratives, the development and maintenance of cross-sex friendships depend on the absence or restriction of attraction by one or both friends. Although a romantic attraction does not supersede the possibility of a cross-sex friendship, it does affect the development, management, and maintenance of cross-sex friendships, as previously reported by Rubin (1985). In some cases, cross-sex friendships

function to test romantic feelings and may act as a prelude to a romantic relationship—although it must be noted that in less than 20% of the friendships, friends identify themselves as entering into a romantic relationship during the course of their journal writing.

*Final Thoughts and Reflections on the Romantic Challenge  
Confronting Cross-Sex Friendships*

1. In what ways does understanding the myths friends describe help women and men to avoid misunderstandings and frustrations in their cross-sex friendships?
2. What makes a man and a woman friends? In your views, can men and women be friends?
3. It is said that communication rules are prescriptions for behavior. What general communication rules do you see functioning throughout this article on managing the romantic challenge in cross-sex friendship?
4. Based on what you've learned about managing the romantic challenge in cross-sex friendships, how would you manage the turning points in a friendship to ensure that it remain platonic?
5. Do you have questions about the challenges confronting cross-sex friendships? What resources can you identify to answer those questions?

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