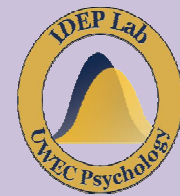




Attraction and Attractiveness in a Naturally Occurring Sample of Opposite-Sex Friends

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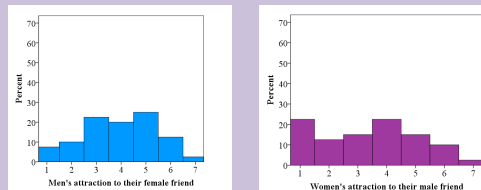
BACKGROUND

In heterosexual romantic relationships, partners tend to be similarly attractive.^{1,2} Romantic partners also tend to be highly attracted to one another; and both men and women in relationships rate their partners as more attractive than they rate themselves.^{3,4} Less is known about how opposite-sex friends evaluate one another's attractiveness, and if they are similarly attractive. In terms of attraction, however, a common finding is that men report more attraction toward their female friend than women do toward their male friend.⁵ In the current study, we conducted a field investigation of friends and couples. We aimed to (1) replicate the finding that men are more attracted than women are to their opposite-sex friends; (2) investigate variability within each sex in attraction to opposite-sex friends; and (3) determine whether friends – like romantically involved couples – are similarly attractive and rate their partners as more attractive than they rate themselves. We also aimed to determine whether discrepancies in friends' attraction to each other were related to discrepancies in friends' perceptions of one another's attractiveness.

METHOD

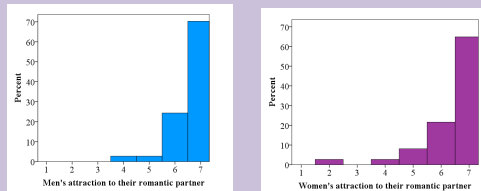
Two researchers approached male-female dyads at the university student union and asked them if they were interested in participating in a study about male-female dyads. Upon consent, each member of the dyad independently completed a brief survey. In addition to responding to various filler items, participants reported their perceptions of their own physical attractiveness relative to others of their same age and sex, their partner's physical attractiveness relative to others of the same age and sex, and their physical attraction to their partner. Attractiveness and attraction were rated on a 7-point scale. Each member of the dyad also reported the status of their relationship: *just friends, in a romantic relationship, or other* (e.g., "it's complicated"). Finally, we photographed each dyad and asked permission to use their photographs for research purposes. All participants consented. We cropped each photo into two photos – one of the male and one of the female. A total of 71 judges from another university rated the attractiveness of each individual on a 7-point scale ($\alpha = .98$). Judges did not know they were judging men and women who were in friendships and relationships.

Figure 1. Both men and women vary widely in attraction to their opposite-sex friends.



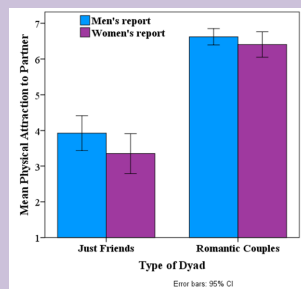
In friendships, men's and women's attraction to their partner varies greatly. Moreover, in friendships, one friend's attraction to their partner does not predict their partner's attraction toward them, $r(40) = .10, p = .556$.

Figure 2. Both men and women in dating couples report strong attraction to their romantic partners.



In romantic relationships, men's and women's attraction to their partner is typically strong and mutual.

Figure 3. Mean attraction is higher toward romantic partners than toward opposite-sex friends.



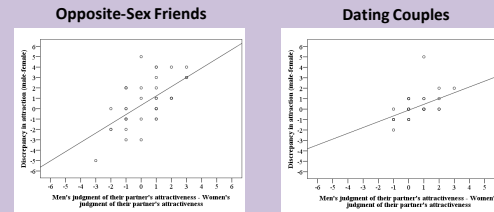
In friendships, the mean level of attraction is moderate. In dating relationships, the mean level of attraction is high.

We failed to replicate previous findings that men are more attracted to their opposite-sex friends than women are. A close look at the bars for the friendship pairs reveals a trend toward men reporting more physical attraction to their female friend than women do to their male friend.

We speculate that our sample of naturally occurring friendships provides a more realistic estimate of the average levels of physical attraction that men and women experience towards their opposite-sex friends.

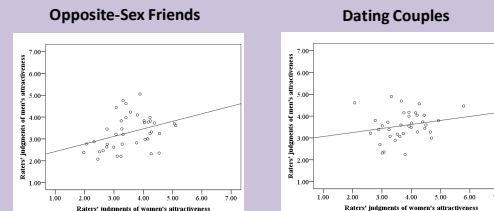
RESULTS

Figure 4. In both friends and couples, perceiving one's partner as attractive is associated with being attracted to them.



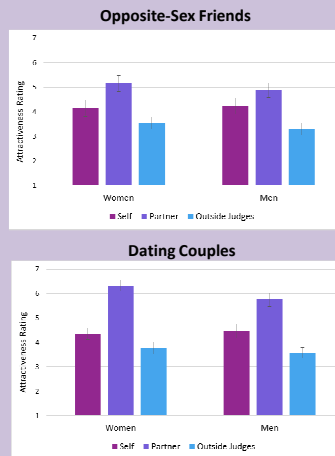
Men and women who perceive their friend/dating partner as more attractive also report more physical attraction toward that person, all $r_s > .40$, all $p_s < .012$. Further, as shown in the scatter plots above, discrepancies in male and female partners' perceptions of one another's attractiveness predict discrepancies in their attraction toward one another, friends: $r(40) = .61, p < .001$; couples: $r(37) = .47, p = .003$.

Figure 5. As previously documented with romantic couples, opposite-sex friends are rated as similarly attractive.



In this sample, opposite-sex friends were rated as similarly attractive, $r(40) = .36, p = .024$. The weak similarity for romantic partners was not statistically significant, $r(37) = .21, p = .217$.

Figure 6. In both opposite-sex friendships and dating relationships, men and women hold positive illusions about one another's attractiveness.



Men and women give higher ratings of their friend's attractiveness, relative to what friends say about themselves and relative to what outside judges say about their friend's attractiveness.

Among dating couples, this bias is so strong that participants' perceptions of their romantic partners' attractiveness is not even correlated with outside judges' ratings of their partners' attractiveness (Men $r(37) = .08, p = .655$; Women $r(37) = .04, p = .837$).
Note. Error bars represent $\pm 2SE$.

DISCUSSION

One objective of the current study was to replicate the finding that men are more attracted than women are to their opposite-sex friends.⁵ We failed to replicate that effect, and speculate that our sampling of naturally occurring dyads provides a more realistic estimate of attraction between opposite-sex friends. In our sample, both men and women varied widely in their attraction to their opposite-sex friends, and attraction felt by one did not predict attraction in return. In this way, opposite-sex friends are different from dating couples. Another objective of our research was to determine whether opposite-sex friends are similar in attractiveness and rate their friend as more attractive than their friend rates themselves. As expected, opposite-sex friends were rated by outside judges as similarly attractive, and both men and women held positive illusions about their friend's attractiveness. In this way, opposite-sex friends are similar to dating couples.

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