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## “It’s Complicated”—Sex Differences in Perceptions of Cross-Sex Friendships

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**ABSTRACT.** Surprisingly, little is known about how a person’s sex relates to beliefs about cross-sex friendships. In this study, participants completed a survey in which they provided separate estimates for the percentage of cross-sex friendships that contained secret “female-on-male” and “male-on-female” sexual interest, indicated their optimism in the idea that males and females could be “just friends,” and reported their comfort with their partner forming a cross-sex friendship. Males were just as optimistic as females about the possibility and indicated similar levels of discomfort in response to imagining their partner entering into a cross-sex friendship. Furthermore, males did not provide higher estimates of sexual interest in cross-sex friendships compared to females. Instead, a more nuanced pattern emerged. Males (vs. females) provided higher estimates of male-to-female sexual interest, but females (vs. males) provided higher estimates of female-to-male sexual interest.

**Keywords:** cross-sex friends, friendship, judgment and decision-making, social cognition

AS CROSS-SEX FRIENDSHIPS BECOME MORE NORMATIVE (e.g., Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012; O’Meara, 1989), there have been calls to understand people’s beliefs and expectations about cross-sex friendships (e.g., Felmlee et al., 2012; Monsour, Harris, Kurzweil, & Beard, 1994; O’Meara, 1989). As cross-sex friendships are often sexualized in the media, some theorists have presumed that people anticipate that apparently platonic cross-sex friendships often contain hidden sexual interest (Monsour et al., 1994; O’Meara, 1989; Reeder, 2000). Yet, to our knowledge, no research has sought to examine people’s beliefs about hidden sexual interest in cross-sex relations, and only a few studies addressed people’s beliefs about the plausibility of platonic cross-sex friendships. The current research seeks to examine these beliefs from the perspective of both males and females. This focus on sex seems particularly interesting because different theoretical perspectives and findings suggest different possibilities for how sex might relate to beliefs about cross-sex friendships (Felmlee et al., 2012; Halatsis & Christakis, 2009; Reeder, 2000). In that context, the present research attempted to answer the following questions:

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Does a person's sex relate to perceptions that men and women can be just platonic friends, and does sex relate to estimates of the frequency of secret sexual interest in cross-sex friendships? As we elaborate next, compelling alternative hypotheses can be put forward to suggest different answers to each of these questions.

### Will Sex Relate to Beliefs That Men and Women Can Be Just Platonic Friends?

On the one hand, a case can be made that a person's sex should relate to these beliefs. For example, men might be more skeptical about the possibility of a platonic (i.e., nonsexual) friendship than women. Indeed, it seems to be the case that males struggle more than females with sexual attraction and agendas in cross-sex friendships (e.g., Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001; Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012). Compared to females, males (a) more often admit to experiencing sexual attraction to their cross-sex friends (Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Koenig, Kirkpatrick, & Ketelaar, 2007), (b) perceive sex with cross-sex friends as more beneficial (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001), (c) report more instances of sex and attempted sex with cross-sex friends (Bleske & Buss, 2000), and (d) are more likely to misperceive sexual interest in cross-sex friends (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012; Koenig et al., 2007). Based on this work, it seems reasonable to argue that males would express greater skepticism about cross-sex friendships (Bleske & Buss, 2000). Presumably, men, relative to women, might be more aware of the sexual interest present in cross-sex friendships, which should undercut their ability to conclude that platonic cross-sex friendships are plausible.

On the other hand, a case can be made that the two sexes might express similarly optimistic beliefs about the possibility of platonic cross-sex friendships. For one, although males more often struggle with sexual desire in cross-sex relationships, it could be the case that women are quite aware of this desire and would not discount this knowledge when reporting their own levels of optimism. As we will discuss shortly, the effect of sex on the estimation of sexual interest in cross-sex friendships is difficult to anticipate, and it is plausible that both sexes could arrive at approximately similar estimates. This calls into question the hypothesis that males ought to be more pessimistic because they are more wary of hidden sexual interest. Second, because men seem to truly enjoy various platonic aspects of cross-sex relationships, these benefits might overshadow sexual motives. Research suggests that cross-sex relationships are often experienced positively by both sexes and are typically prized because they support companionship and intimacy needs (Bell, 1981; Bleske & Buss, 2000; Sapadin, 1988). Indeed, men in one study (Bleske & Buss, 2000) ranked "talking openly" as the top benefit of their opposite sex relationships—"mate potential" was listed as a distant sixth. Furthermore, although men did indicate that sex with their opposite-sex friend was more beneficial than women, men rated this feature as less than a 2 on a 6-point scale (1 = *not at all important* to 6 = *very important*), suggesting that men consider this feature to be rather trivial. It seems that both sexes recognize the undeniable fact that men and women make good companions, which might imply that they may both express optimism over the idea that men and women can be just friends. Based on this work and theorizing, it might seem reasonable to assume that the sexes might express similar beliefs on the possibility of cross-sex friendships.

Further complicating matters, research that has directly asked males and females about the possibility of purely platonic cross-sex friendships has yielded mixed results. In one study (Felmlee

et al., 2012), males and females expressed similar levels of optimism; however, in another study (Halatsis & Christakis, 2009), males expressed less optimism than females. In each study, researchers used a single-item measure with categorical response options (e.g., yes, maybe, no) to assess beliefs. Perhaps the inconsistent results could reflect the unreliable nature of the measures and/or the presence of a weak or null effect. One way to limit measurement error is to allow participants to express their beliefs using multiple items (worded slightly differently) and to indicate their responses on a continuous scale (Krosnick, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2005).

### Will Sex Relate to Estimating the Frequency of Hidden Sexual Interest in Cross-Sex Friendships?

Apart from people's beliefs about whether cross-sex friendships are plausible, another central issue posed by prior theorists concerns people's beliefs about the frequency of hidden sexual interest in apparently platonic cross-sex friendships. One idea that has been proposed is that observers might frequently assume that apparently platonic cross-sex friendships are fraught with secret sexual interest (Monsour et al., 1994; O'Meara, 1989; Reeder, 2000). Indeed, popular sitcoms and romantic movies often tell the story of seemingly platonic cross-sex friends experiencing secret sexual attraction and romantic interest. Furthermore, it seems likely that a person's sex might relate to estimating concealed sexual interest in cross-sex friendships, but the nature of this relation seems open to speculation.

Perhaps the most straightforward hypothesis is that men might estimate more concealed sexual interest in these friendships than women. To this point, numerous studies reveal that men experience more sexual attraction in cross-sex friendships (Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Koenig et al., 2007) and tend to overperceive sexual interest in their female friends (Koenig et al., 2007). Although males' overperception of sexual interest may sometimes be due to their lower threshold for perceiving sexual interest (Kowalski, 1993), Koenig et al. (2007) provided evidence that males projected their own interests onto their female friend (e.g., "If I am interested, I bet she is interested."). These ideas and findings would suggest that men, relative to women, might provide higher estimates of secret male-on-female sexual interest because they have firsthand experience with this interest. Furthermore, due to projection, men might provide similarly higher estimates of secret female-on-male sexual interest too. Although this possibility seems consistent with past research and appears theoretically compelling (Koenig et al., 2007), alternative possibilities exist.

Another possibility is suggested by the idea that males' and females' perceptions may align with what they would like to believe (i.e., a flattering conclusion). There is an abundance of evidence suggesting that people are quite capable of convincing themselves of desirable beliefs, so long as they can muster enough evidence to support these beliefs (Hart et al., 2009; Kunda, 1990; Molden & Higgins, 2005). Because males should perceive female-on-male sexual interest as flattering, males, relative to females, might estimate a larger percentage of cross-sex friendships contain female-on-male concealed sexual interest. And, because females should perceive male-on-female sexual interest as flattering, females, relative to males, might estimate a larger percentage of cross-sex friendships contain male-on-female concealed sexual interest. But, males and females are not simply free to believe whatever they would like to believe about the percentages of this sexual interest. One reality constraint on this motivated reasoning is that male-on-female (vs. female-on-male) sexual interest is more prevalent in cross-sex friendships

(e.g., Bleske & Buss, 2000; Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Koenig et al., 2007). Hence, males may acknowledge this reality but downplay its extent relative to females.

A third possibility is suggested by the idea that males' and females' perceptions might align with definitive information that comes to mind easily. For example, frequency estimates are often disproportionately influenced by the availability of relevant examples in memory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). People assume: "If I can easily think of instances of the event, the event occurs frequently." Consider how this reasoning strategy might influence males' and females' estimates of the percentage of cross-sex friendships containing male-on-female and female-on-male hidden sexual interest. Examples of one's own hidden sexual interest are definitive instances, whereas examples of others' hidden sexual interest are often speculative instances. Furthermore, one's own hidden sexual interests on the opposite sex probably involve a great deal more thought and strategizing. For these reasons, one's own secret sexual interest should be more available in memory, so males should estimate a larger percentage of cross-sex friendships containing male-on-female hidden sexual interest relative to females. At the same time, females should estimate a larger percentage of cross-sex friendships containing female-on-male hidden sexual interest relative to males. Similar to a motivated bias in estimation, biases arising from availability are also bound by reality. Hence, males and females may estimate that male-on-female concealed sexual interest is indeed more frequent than female-on-male concealed sexual interest in cross-sex friendships, but females should downplay this difference relative to males.

### Overview of the Current Study

In the current study, participants reported their endorsement of the idea that males and females could be platonic friends (i.e., no member of the dyad secretly desires a romantic connection). Unlike past work on the topic, we used multiple items and a continuous scale to index beliefs, thus ensuring a more precise measure of beliefs. Also, unlike past work on the issue, participants indicated how uncomfortable they would feel if their own relationship partner became involved in a cross-sex friendship. It is one thing to say that cross-sex platonic friendships are possible, but it could be another thing to feel comfortable about one's own girlfriend/boyfriend entering into one. Hence, we could address whether sex differences (or the lack of sex differences) were consistent across these two different measures. Participants also indicated the percentage of ostensibly platonic cross-sex friendships that they thought contained concealed sexual interest (i.e., at least one member of the dyad has sexual interests) and provided separate estimates for the percentage of cross-sex friendships that contained secret male-on-female concealed sexual interest and secret female-on-male concealed sexual interest. For all the reasons we just highlighted, we did not have clear expectations for how a person's sex might relate to the variables we measured in this study—in fact, the authors of this article did not always share similar predictions.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 418 undergraduate students (315 females) from the University of Alabama were recruited to participate in an online survey. Participants completed the study in exchange for

partial course credit in their Introductory Psychology course. Mean age was 18.99 ( $SD = 0.98$ ; age range: 17–24 years). Approximately 80% of the sample identified as White, non-Hispanic ( $n = 335$ ); approximately 14% identified as Black, non-Hispanic ( $n = 60$ ); approximately 5% identified as Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, or American Indian or Alaskan ( $n = 23$ ). Of the sample, 50% ( $n = 208$ ) indicated being in a romantic relationship with a member of the opposite sex; 50% of the sample indicated not being in such a relationship ( $n = 210$ ). Of note, relationship status did not vary as a function of participant sex,  $\chi^2 = 0.26, p = .61$ .

## Materials and Procedure

As the study was completed online, all instructions and questions were presented over the computer. Participants were informed that they would complete a few questions about their views on relationships. In this context, participants were first asked to estimate the percentage of cross-sex friendships that contained hidden sexual feelings. Participants were asked to provide a number between 0% and 100%. Participants also indicated separate estimates for the percentage of cross-sex friendships that involve secret male-on-female sexual interest and the percentage that involve secret female-on-male sexual interest. For each estimate, participants were asked to indicate a number between 0% and 100%. Next, participants were asked about whether they thought it was possible for males and females to be “just friends.” In particular, participants used a 10-point scale (1 = *this statement is not at all true* to 10 = *this statement is completely true*) to indicate agreement with the following two items: “Men and women CAN be ‘just friends’ without one member of the pair desiring a romantic connection” and “Opposite-sex friendships CAN be purely driven by motives for platonic companionship (i.e., no interest in romance).” Because responses to these items were highly correlated ( $r = .65$ ), they were averaged into a single index termed “possibility for a cross-sex platonic friendship.” Next, participants indicated how uncomfortable they would feel if their opposite-sex partner developed a cross-sex friendship. Using a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all uncomfortable* to 9 = *extremely uncomfortable*), participants responded to:

For this question, even if you are NOT in a romantic relationship with a member of the opposite sex, please imagine that you are. Imagine your significant other (“S.O.,” i.e., your romantic relationship partner) makes a new opposite-sex friend. Your S.O. says that the friendship is “purely platonic” (in other words, completely nonromantic). How uncomfortable would this make you?

Lastly, participants indicated their sex as either male or female, and responded “yes” or “no” to the question “Are you currently in a romantic relationship with a member of the opposite sex?” To test hypotheses unrelated to the focus of the current study, we included a measure of narcissism. Of note, narcissism failed to alter any of the sex effects (or lack thereof) that we present.

## RESULTS

Because a sensitive test of some of our ideas would involve sampling only individuals sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex (i.e., heterosexual or bisexual participants), we intended to include a question addressing sexual orientation and exclude homosexual participants from the study (as in Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001; Koenig et al., 2007). But, due to an experimenter error, this item was unfortunately not included. Instead, we used “relationship

status” to exclude homosexual individuals from the analyses. In these analyses, participants were selected into the analysis if they indicated being involved in a romantic relationship with a member of the opposite sex ( $n = 210$ ). These analyses should be sensitive to theory testing but entailed eliminating data from not only homosexual participants but also from heterosexual or bisexual participants that were single. For example, if less than 3.5% of Americans identify as homosexual (e.g., Gates, 2011; for rather similar estimates with college-student convenience samples, see Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001; Koenig et al., 2007), then we might estimate that no more than 15 of our 418 participants would be excluded. So, in a separate set of analyses, we performed tests using data from all of the participants ( $N = 418$ ). The findings from the two sets of analyses yielded the same conclusions regarding the reliability of sex effects (at an alpha of .05) and revealed a similar pattern of means. This high level of convergence between the sets of analysis could be anticipated if we assume that a very small proportion of our sample was homosexual—an assumption that would be in line with results from recent population-level surveys (Gates, 2011) and surveys with college-student convenience samples (Bleske & Buss, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001; Koenig et al., 2007). Hence, in the interest of including as much data as possible, we present analyses using all 418 participants.

### Possibility of Truly Platonic Cross-Sex Friendships

First, we assessed participants’ beliefs about the possibility of a purely platonic cross-sex friendship. The mean on the index ( $M = 7.24$ ;  $SD = 2.31$ ) significantly differed from the scale midpoint (5.5;  $t(417) = 15.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that, overall, participants in the study believed that males and females can have a purely platonic friendship (for a similar idea, see Felmlee et al., 2012). Next, we submitted this index to an ANOVA with participant sex as the predictor. The model revealed a null effect of participant sex,  $F(1, 416) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .61$ ,  $d = .06$ , 95% CI:  $[-.17, .28]$ , suggesting that the belief in a purely platonic cross-sex friendship was equally shared amongst males ( $M = 7.14$ ;  $SD = 2.44$ ) and females ( $M = 7.27$ ;  $SD = 2.26$ ).

### Percentage Estimates of Cross-Sex Friendships With Secret Sexual Interest

Overall, participants estimated that 63.05% ( $SD = 21.28$ ) of cross-sex friendships contain secret sexual interest. This estimate was greater than 50%,  $t(417) = 12.53$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that participants believed that, more often than not, cross-sex friendships contain secret sexual interest. Next, we submitted this estimate to an ANOVA with participant sex as the predictor. The model revealed a null effect of participant sex,  $F(1, 416) = .17$ ,  $p = .68$ ,  $d = .05$ , 95% CI:  $[-.17, .27]$ , suggesting that estimates were similar for males ( $M = 63.80$ ;  $SD = 22.90$ ) and females ( $M = 62.80$ ;  $SD = 20.76$ ). It is still possible, however, that sex differentially influences the estimation of cross-sex friendships containing male-on-female and female-on-male hidden sexual interest.

### Percentage Estimates of Cross-Sex Friendships Containing Male-on-Female and Female-on-Male Secret Sexual Interest

Next, we analyzed participants’ estimates of the percentage of cross-sex friendships in which a male is secretly attracted to the female (i.e., male-on-female sexual interest). Overall, participants

estimated that 60.87% ( $SD = 20.66$ ) of cross-sex friendships contain this sort of sexual interest. This estimate is greater than 50%,  $t(417) = 10.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that people believe that the majority of cross-sex friendships contain male-on-female secret sexual interest. We also analyzed participants' estimates regarding the percentage of cross-sex friendships in which the female is secretly attracted to the male (i.e., female-on-male sexual interest). Overall, participants estimated 54.03% ( $SD = 21.42$ ) of cross-sex friendships contain this sort of sexual interest. This estimate is greater than 50%,  $t(417) = 3.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that people believe that the majority of cross-sex friendships contain female-on-male secret sexual interest.

Next, we submitted these estimates to a 2 ("estimate type:" male-on-female vs. female-on-male secret sexual interest)  $\times$  2 (participant sex) mixed-model ANOVA with estimate type as the repeated measure and participant sex as the between-subjects factor. The model revealed a main effect of estimate type,  $F(1, 416) = 59.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , showing that participants estimated more male-on-female ( $M = 60.87$ ,  $SD = 20.66$ ) than female-on-male secret sexual interest ( $M = 54.03$ ,  $SD = 21.42$ ). The main effect of participant sex was null,  $F(1, 416) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .13$ ,  $d = -.17$ , 95% CI:  $[-.40, .05]$ , suggesting that overall estimates of secret sexual interest in cross-sex friendships were similar between males ( $M = 55.38$ ;  $SD = 13.98$ ) and females ( $M = 58.13$ ;  $SD = 16.58$ ). Interestingly, the effect of estimate type was moderated by participant sex,  $F(1, 416) = 38.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$  (for means, see Figure 1). To understand the nature of this interaction, we examined the effect of participant sex within each level of estimate type. For estimates of male-on-female secret sexual interest, males ( $M = 65.71\%$ ,  $SD = 20.83$ ) estimated a larger percentage than females ( $M = 59.29\%$ ,  $SD = 20.38$ ),  $F(1, 416) = 7.62$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .31$ , 95% CI:  $[.09, .54]$ . By direct contrast, for female-on-male secret sexual interest, females (56.97%,

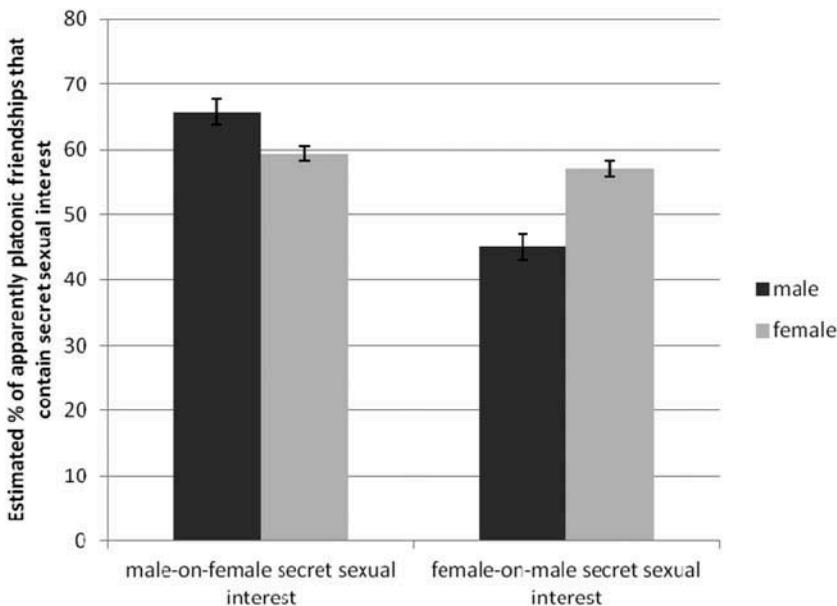


FIGURE 1 Male versus female participants' perceived percentage of male-on-female versus female-on-male secret sexual interest.

$SD = 21.40$ ) provided larger estimates than males (45.06%,  $SD = 18.93$ ),  $F(1, 416) = 25.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -.57$ , 95% CI:  $[-.79, -.35]$ .

### Discomfort With Partner in a Cross-Sex Platonic Friendship

An additional way to address sex differences in opinions on whether cross-sex friends can be just friends is to assess people's discomfort with their partner developing a cross-sex friendship. For example, if people believe that platonic cross-sex friendships are plausible, then they should be less disturbed by their partner establishing a cross-sex friendship. Discomfort ratings were submitted to an ANOVA with participant sex as the predictor. Similar to the null effects obtained with the explicit belief ratings, the analysis revealed a null effect of participant sex,  $F(1, 416) = 1.53$ ,  $p = .22$ ,  $d = -.14$ , 95% CI:  $[-.36, .08]$ . Discomfort was similar for males ( $M = 5.16$ ;  $SD = 2.44$ ) and females ( $M = 5.46$ ;  $SD = 2.08$ ). Of note, the overall rating on the index ( $M = 5.39$ ;  $SD = 2.17$ ) differed from the scale midpoint (5;  $t(417) = 3.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting participants felt somewhat uncomfortable. Although both males and females endorse the idea that the sexes can be just friends, this does not seem to stop either sex from experiencing similar levels of discomfort when imagining their partner beginning a cross-sex friendship.

## DISCUSSION

There have been various calls to understand lay beliefs about cross-sex relationships (Felmlee et al., 2012; Halatsis & Christakis, 2009; Monsour, 2002; Monsour et al., 1994). In response to these calls, we chose to focus our study on assessing men's and women's position on the age-old issue of whether men and women can be just friends, and the hidden sexual interest that may underlie apparently platonic cross-sex friendships. Prior to the current investigation, these issues had not been adequately addressed, and clear-cut hypotheses were difficult to extrapolate from past research and theorizing. To this point, the current findings were not always consistent with prior assumptions. For example, although some theorists have assumed that males and females may disagree about the plausibility of cross-sex friendships (Bleske & Buss, 2000), our work suggests that both groups are similarly optimistic. Furthermore, although some theorists have assumed that men would estimate a higher frequency of secret sexual interest in cross-sex friendships, a more nuanced pattern of estimation emerged. Although both sexes agreed that sexual interest was common—both sexes assumed that about 63% of cross-sex friendships contain sexual interest—they differed in how they estimated secret male-on-female and female-on-male sexual interest in these relationships. Females estimated that a smaller percentage of cross-sex friendships involve male-on-female secret sexual interest than males did. By the same token, males estimated that a smaller percentage of cross-sex friendships involve female-on-male secret sexual interest than females did.

These estimates seem rather unflattering for both sexes and therefore seem inconsistent with a motivated-reasoning mechanism. Various theorists have presumed motivated-reasoning biases may often underlie different perceptions between the sexes. For example, perhaps due to their own enhanced sexual interest, males have been known to inaccurately project sexual interest onto their female friends (Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Koenig et al., 2007). The fact that males, relative to females, provided lower estimates of female-on-male sexual interest is therefore interesting.

Although this finding seems consistent with the idea that males are not primarily motivated by sex in cross-sex friendships (e.g., Monsour et al., 1994; Reeder, 2000), alternative interpretations exist. First, males may not perceive a lack of sexual interest as a major impediment to a sexual relationship with a female friend. Indeed, males may believe that their friends' sexual interest can develop. Second, males may believe that their female friends often possess sexual interest in them, but believe that their experiences might not generalize to other cross-sex friendships. In this case, males might not hold the view that female-on-male sexual interest is prevalent in the population, but still be optimistic about their own chances for sexual relations with female friends.

Some researchers have postulated that males might be more skeptical about the possibility of a purely platonic cross-sex friendship than females (Bleske & Buss, 2000). The current research failed to support this idea. Males indicated similar levels of optimism about the possibility as females (see also Felmlee et al., 2012). Furthermore, males indicated similar levels of discomfort over their partner developing a cross-sex friendship. It is likely that both sexes realize that males and females can and do make good friends. Although males experience more sexual attraction in cross-sex friendships (Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Koenig et al., 2007), this does not seem to interfere with males viewing platonic cross-sex friendships as possible. Cross-sex friendships seem to offer both sexes various benefits such as intimacy and perspective on the other sex that people may not wish to complicate with sexual activity. It seems to be generally worthwhile to seek out these benefits (i.e., to be just friends) through platonic cross-sex friendships.

One potentially interesting implication of the estimates reported here is that participants may believe that a relatively large proportion of cross-sex friendships involve mutual secret sexual interest. Given that participants estimate that approximately 63% of cross-sex friendships involve some kind of secret sexual interest—61% involve male-on-female secret sexual interest and 54% involve female-on-male secret sexual interest—the logical conclusion is that at least 52% of friendships involve a mutual secret sexual interest. Although participants may be unaware of this implication of their estimates, and thus may not endorse this conclusion if posed directly, their responses suggest that people perceive at least some proportion of cross-sex friendships to involve mutual sexual attraction. If participants do in fact perceive quite a high degree of overlap between male-on-female and female-on-male sexual interest in cross-sex friendships it would be informative to examine views about the potential risks of revealing such interests.

The current study was limited in ways that might encourage future research on this topic. First, the current study was performed with college students, so it remains unclear whether the present findings might generalize to other populations. One population of interest might be older adults. On the one hand, perhaps due to diminished sex drive and involvement in committed relationships, older adults may estimate smaller absolute rates of sexual interest in cross-sex friendships and may express even greater optimism about the possibility of platonic cross-sex friends. On the other hand, it is possible that older adults may estimate higher absolute numbers. Consider that older adults have had more time to experience sexual interest in cross-sex friendships, and these experiences of sexual interest might be weighted heavily in their judgments. In either case, estimates of male-on-female and female-on-male sexual interest may begin to converge for men and women with age. To be sure, because psychological phenomena are complex and context-dependent, we would not presume that the present effects should hold under all circumstances. A richer understanding of the issues we addressed here could account for differences in context.

Second, the current study ultimately revealed a null effect of respondent sex on beliefs about the plausibility of platonic cross-sex friends, and null effects are difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, null effects can be meaningfully interpreted when a study is adequately powered and uses appropriate methodology (e.g., sensitive measures), and when prior work might suggest the absence of a strong effect (Fanelli, 2010; Greenwald, 1975). To these points, the current study seems well-powered. We included enough participants to achieve a high-degree of power (.85) to detect a small gender effect ( $d = .30$ ) at an alpha of .05. Furthermore, in relation to past research on the issue (e.g., Felmlee et al., 2012; Halatsis & Christakis, 2009), we aimed for more sensitive measurement by including multiple items to tap conscious beliefs that were rated on a continuous scale (Krosnick et al., 2005). Furthermore, and consistent with possibility of a null effect, other research has produced mixed findings regarding the relation between sex and conscious perceptions of cross-sex friendship tenability (Felmlee et al., 2012; Halatsis & Christakis, 2009). Quite often, inconsistent results can highlight the presence of a weak or null effect.

Third, the current research was limited to examining sex differences in perceptions about cross-sex friendships but other individual differences and contexts seem important to consider. For example, research suggests that individuals with unrestricted (vs. restricted) views on sex seem more likely to form cross-sex friendships with a mating goal in mind (Lewis, Al-Shawaf, Conroy-Beam, Asao, Buss, 2012). Such individuals, perhaps owing to their awareness of their own sexual motives and experiences in cross-sex friendships, may indicate higher estimates of secret sexual crushes and greater pessimism over the idea of platonic cross-sex friendships. Additionally, discomfort with one's mate forming a cross-sex friendship might depend on the nature of the cross-sex friendship. For example, people might feel less disturbed by their partner entering into a friendship with one of their own friends (vs. someone they have never met). In this case, their friend might be able to help "keep tabs" on their partner (Pham, Barbaro, Mogilski, Shackelford, 2015). Future research might address these possibilities.

In sum, cross-sex friendships represent a relatively new topic of study, and one neglected approach has been to address lay assumptions and beliefs about these types of relationships. To this point, the present work helps answer how men and women perceive the plausibility of cross-sex friendships and estimate secret sexual interest within these relationships. Although men and women think secret sexual attraction in these relationships is relatively common, neither sex seems to endorse the pessimistic mantra: "men and women can't be just friends."

#### NOTE

1. Of note, relationship status had essentially no effect on ratings of discomfort,  $F(1, 414) = 1.97, p = .16$ , and it failed to moderate the effect of participant sex,  $F(1, 414) = 0.01, p = .94$ . People in a relationship ( $M = 5.57, SD = 2.29$ ) indicated slightly more discomfort than single people ( $M = 5.20, SD = 2.04$ ). Recall that we asked single people to simulate being in a relationship to answer the discomfort question. The null effect of relationship status might imply that single people were able to simulate being in a relationship.

#### AUTHOR NOTES

**William Hart** received his PhD from the University of Florida in 2009 and is currently an Assistant Professor in Social Psychology at the University of Alabama. He is interested in judgment and decision making and goal pursuit. **John**

**Adams** received his MA in 2013 and is currently pursuing his PhD in Social Psychology at the University of Alabama. **Alexa Tullett** received her PhD from the University of Toronto in 2012 and is currently an Assistant Professor in Social Psychology at the University of Alabama. She is interested in belief systems and motivated cognition.

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