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Talking With College Students About Frontiers and Frustrations of Cross-Sex Friendships



Many people are intrigued by the topic of cross-sex friendship. At its core it involves the prospects of one half of the human race living in friendship with the other half, namely biological females with biological males. Like all friendships, the possibilities for this kind of connection differ according to historical and sociocultural circumstances. The very idea of males and females being friends occupies a roiling intersection of diverse discourses concerning friendship, romance, marriage, family, individual will, relational practices, subjectivities, sexualities, femininities, masculinities, desire, permission, and narratives of the well-lived life.

Cross-sex friendships are reportedly more prevalent during the college years than at any other time in the life course (Monsour, 2002; Rawlins, 1992; Rubin, 1985; D. Wright, 1999). Seeking to explore this topic in relation to my students' accounts of their own lived experiences, for the past 15-plus years I have sponsored an informal debate about cross-sex friendship in each of my undergraduate interpersonal

communication classes. The specific form of this debate was originally suggested to me by Kathy Werking, a graduate student studying with me at the time the discussions began and later the author of a noteworthy book, *We're Just Good Friends: Women and Men in Nonromantic Relationships* (1997). Here's how the debates proceed. Before class meets, the students read an essay I wrote concerning cross-sex friendship (Rawlins, 1982). Then, drawing on their own lives, familiar others' relationships, scholarly arguments and evidence, literary and popular media exemplars—any sources they find relevant—one half of the class develops all the arguments, conditions, and examples they can assemble to support the assertion, "Enduring, close, cross-sex friendship IS possible in our culture." The other half of the class works from the same potential range of sources their group identifies as pertinent to support the contrasting assertion, "Enduring, close, cross-sex friendship IS NOT possible in our culture." After spending a class period preparing their positions, the two groups present their cases to each other with me functioning as a moderator and commentator. The point of the exercise is to provoke the students' and my reflections on whether and how cross-sex friendships figure into our lives.

Over the past decade and a half I have taken careful notes in tracking these discussions to engage with students' ideas in the classroom. Consequently, I have compiled an archive of some 25 interactive sessions asserting and challenging the possibility of enduring close cross-sex friendship. All of the classes met at two major universities in the midwestern United States. We should recognize from the outset that my re-presentation below is based largely upon predominantly white, middle class, young adults' discourses circulating in the midwestern United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As such there are inevitable privileges, blind spots, and assumptions about social life inscribing the worldviews of their discourse. For example, there have been virtually no reflections about how class, racial, and ethnic differences intersect with gendered ones in their discussions, and for the most part the students presume heterosexual identities.

Even so, in this chapter I read these students' exchanges as embodying enabling and constraining discourses that shape and reflect their lived experiences (or not) of cross-sex friendship. I have always been struck by the significant redundancies in themes and situations that have surfaced in their talk across the years. In the first half of this chapter I offer in mostly my words a composite re-presentation of the ebb and flow of a characteristic debate in an effort to display the issues that typically have emerged during their discussions. Just as I try to do in the classroom, in the last part of this chapter I will engage with,

make some critical observations, and draw some overall conclusions about the discourses, conditions, and practices that facilitate and subvert cross-sex friendships as occasioned by these student interactions.

❖ DEBATING CROSS-SEX FRIENDSHIP

“One reason we know that cross-sex friendships are possible,” the students often begin, “is that we have them. They are very common here at school.” They admit such friendships are not easy but possible. Achieving them involves work not to be influenced by others who constantly question the fact that it is “just” a friendship. Other students argue no criteria dictate that friendship has to be same sex. They have same-sex friends and just as easily can have cross-sex friends. It’s just a stereotype that cross-sex friendships are doomed to become “something else.” The point is that friends can exert their will to be friends, actively resisting normative pressures and third-party judgments. I think it is important to recognize that across the years in these debates, many students have insisted on the presence, importance, and enjoyment of cross-sex friends in their lives. This pattern is consistent with extensive research documenting young adulthood as the life course period when cross-sex friends are most prevalent (Monsour, 2002; Rawlins, 1992).

Differences Between Females and Males That Enhance Cross-Sex Friendships

The affirming students believe that males and females typically complement each other in ways that make cross-sex friendships special. Men and women each have their own strengths that are not available in same-sex friendships. For one, their communicative styles complement each other. Women make good friends for men because they listen better and are more sensitive; males can allow themselves to feel more vulnerable with female friends than male friends. Many men go to women to discuss emotional matters and relationship issues. Men can tell women things they can’t tell men; they can be more open and let down their guard in front of women. By and large, their same-sex male friends don’t respond in such understanding, caring ways with them.

However, men can also make good friends for women in several ways. Men like to do activities instead of going on and on about things. They shoot hoops and play video and computer games. They just hang out. Women don’t need emotional outlets with men—male friends are

more neutral, uninvolved, create less drama. Male friends are not petty with women like female friends can be; they actually make good friends for women because they aren't so sensitive. Females are more trusting of males because men are more laid back. While the men rely on women for emotional connection and support, the women like men because they don't take things too seriously. *Ironically, these students seem to incorporate some stereotyped images and practices of men and women in their portrayals of cross-sex friendships, which can mesh in ways that enable such friends to transcend stereotypical expectations of their relationship.*

In a word, the differences between females and males are valued in this context of friendship. The students maintain that cross-sex friendship is somewhat less judgmental *because* the friends are not the same. It is easier to open up and have that acceptance because neither person has to act in ways expected by persons of their gender. They argue that the differences between males and females alleviate competitive tendencies of either the male-male or female-female type within such friendships. Overall, there is less competition between cross-sex friends than same-sex ones. There is also a lack of competition for equal needs in the relationship; people can give differently and fit better. The competition that does occur in cross-sex friendships is about something that matters to both friends; it is competition that encourages each one to do and be better as a person. Between men and women there truly is friendly competition, which is more communication oriented. A male can protect a woman from undeserved disappointment in herself while a woman can empathize with a man in similar ways.

One of the most frequently described benefits of cross-sex friendship derives directly from females' and males' contrasting worldviews. A member of the opposite sex provides an "insider's perspective" on the other sex. Students maintain that their closer, more intimate cross-sex and same-sex relationships are strengthened by such insight. Persons need that other sex's point of view. It is helpful to get a man's/woman's point of view, for example when trouble occurs in a dating relationship. Cross-sex friends get a male's perspective on relationship problems with a man and a female's perspective on relationship problems with a woman. Talking with a member of a different sex about issues involving a member of that sex is educational; persons learn from each other. You can't beat an opposite-sex mentor to consult about what to buy for Valentine's Day or your opposite-sex significant other's birthday. Cross-sex friends trade information concerning each gender's point of view. One female student observed if each person provides a different perspective on life, a man can see how a contemporary woman has to live and learn not to objectify women.

Additionally, people obtain insights into the other sex without competing for attention or dates from the opposite sex. They are more comfortable talking and sharing things with cross-sex friends about a potential romantic partner because they are not worried their cross-sex friend will go after this person. Finding a romantic partner is a key task of this period of life—what better friend to help with this pursuit than someone who understands how the other gender thinks and who is not competing with you for these persons?

A virtue of this dialogue between cross-sex friends is that it can allow participants to transcend narrow definitions of who they are. In some cases males and females blend their styles, with females enjoying activities they may not otherwise pursue and males learning how to care and converse about relationships and emotional matters. Some males want to communicate in feminine ways; some females want to communicate in masculine ways. They can do so less self-consciously in a cross-sex friendship. Males teach females to enjoy the surface; females teach males to get deeper. Without the pressure of being a romantic partner with a person of the opposite sex, individuals in cross-sex friendships are allowed to take on some behaviors not typically associated with their gender roles. As women try on “male roles” and males try on “women’s roles” to varying degrees, stereotypical male/female roles lose some of their grip on persons’ possibilities for being in relationships with others.

Differences Between Females and Males That Undermine Cross-Sex Friendships

In contrast, the students arguing against the possibility of enduring close cross-sex friendship invoke discourses of human nature and social destiny. They assert that what happens between cross-sex friends is not merely a matter of will; it is human nature. Since people are supposed to reproduce, basic primal attraction can get in the way of friendship. It is natural to express cross-sex closeness sexually. Meanwhile, the social pressures for cross-sex friends to recognize “the true nature” of their relationship are also too compelling to be resisted. Most cross-sex intimate relationships start off as friendships, but cross-sex friendship will evolve into “something else” sooner or later. It cannot be avoided because of the natural course of close relationships between men and women.

Considered from this perspective, fundamental differences divide males and females. For one, the different modes of talking between males and females are seen to inhibit friendship. Basic differences in

communication styles always create the possibility of misunderstanding, barriers, and frustration. There are also some things women don't feel they can talk about with a man, for example, "my new boyfriend," "my period," or "going to the gynecologist," but they could with a girlfriend. Basically, they feel uncomfortable talking "girl-talk" with a member of the other sex. Sometimes females don't open up because males don't understand their intentions; for example, a friendly confidence may be interpreted as an invitation to romance. Both males and females observed there are certain types of things they don't feel comfortable telling the other sex. It's hard to open up completely because of separate worlds of discourse. As a result, the women especially don't speak as freely or take as many risks with men as they do with their same-sex friends; they tend to hold back their friendship. How can persons really be intimate if they are guarded?

Further, men build relationships on mutual experiences and doing activities together. Women build their bonds on emotional sharing; to be best friends persons have to be able to share, and men typically don't do this to the same extent as women do. On basic emotional levels, men and women are also too different to be friends. Women become attached emotionally with their friends; men avoid involvement because they don't want to be vulnerable or one-down. Due to such differences, women won't get the emotional support they expect from a male friend. The fact that males and females like to do different things—men watch sports, fish, and hunt; women shop and talk—can also cause problems.

All told, a prime reason that cross-sex friendships don't work out is "the flat-out differences" between males and females. In addition to the natural tendencies toward sexual activity, different ways of talking, emotional outlooks, and interests make it difficult for males and females to be lasting friends.

Mutually Defined Boundaries and Common Interests Facilitating Cross-Sex Friendships

Students advocating the possibility of sustained, close cross-sex friendship reject the notions of inherent differences dividing females and males as well as irrevocable propensities for sexualized relationships. In contrast, they argue that enduring cross-sex friends cultivate common interests and treat each other as individuals not defined by gender or sexual potential. For them, living in friendship involves sharing traits and breaking down stereotyped boundaries. Ways of speaking change; males and females communicate as individuals and

determine common goals and interests. The students describe common interests—like music, campus politics, long-boarding, computers, sports, the outdoors, journalism—and the joy of having someone to talk with about them. They are friends with cross-sex others because of common interests, which promotes treating each other as equals with more freedom from stereotypes. As one student stated, “Friends will do things together and will have common interests; what they do together starts to circle back and blur distinctions.” In short, such friends don’t put the emphasis on sex. They view themselves and their friends as individuals, not as sex objects. They emphasize the personhood of each other, saying in effect, “This is my friend.” Regarding one another as really good friends, they focus on their commonalities versus their differences, and each other’s singular humanity.

In doing so, these students maintain that it is crucial to communicate clear definitions and boundaries within the relationship. They acknowledge that many persons are drawn to the opposite sex and desire to be friends with them. Frequently there is some physical attraction, some sexual component, but expressing or acting upon it is not inevitable. Attraction can begin a relationship and create tension, but it can be viewed positively. Friendship doesn’t negate romantic interest; physical and sexual attractiveness are simply aspects of cross-sex friendship that must be addressed if it is to remain a friendship.

For these students, the belief that sex is essential in a relationship between cross-sex friends or regarding sex as an uncontrollable drive is actually a part of socialization. Friends have to set boundaries that everyone must understand; they need to establish norms from the beginning. Cross-sex friends should talk about sex, address it. They should ask each other, “What do you want? What defines your understanding of friendship?” An explicit definition of the friendship that both people share establishes boundaries and clearly addresses the issues of sex and passion. As one student noted, “I have two friends; it’s already been defined. There is no romantic friction; we have mutual understanding of our relationship’s boundaries. Once we decided we’re not going to be lovers, we emphasize other qualities.” For such students, persons can’t control what they think about, but persons can control what they do. They don’t act on sex; they can even go on dates and just hang out. They deemphasize their sexuality. They consider this a mature basis for cross-sex friendship.

Even so, they recognize an ongoing need for open communication about the boundaries and definition of their relationships, noting there’s always a point where persons have to state where they’re at, to keep roles clearly defined. They may say, “I love you,” but need to

clarify, "But I'm not in love with you." Romantic feelings need to be kept in check; they can't slip into the boyfriend/girlfriend mode. It is an intimate relationship but not a sexual or romantic one, more of a deep friendship with a cross-sex person without sexual stuff.

However, actively communicating boundaries from the beginning is not the only way sexual matters are handled in ongoing cross-sex friendships. Physical attraction and sexual activity can play out in at least three other ways. First, sex is not always or necessarily an issue between cross-sex friends. If neither person finds the other physically or romantically attractive, sex just isn't an issue. The friends have a lot of things in common; they're just not physically attracted. Second, the friends may acknowledge their sexual attraction and romantic feelings for each other. They may actually explore these possibilities and decide it doesn't work, or that they both don't feel the same way, and return to a good friendship. Sometimes it's easy to do this and it may make the friendship better after they have gotten over the sexuality issue. The boundaries created after an initial crush make the friendship more comfortable. The third way of dealing with sex is to incorporate it into the relationship while still viewing each other as friends. This is sometimes called "friendship with benefits."

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I want to interject here that I believe that a more prevalent sexualization of friendship is connected with other trends occurring with this age group and emerging pop cultural discourses. In other words, I have observed one theme with important ramifications in the students' views change and take on more prominence over the past 15 years. In early discussions, the groups advocating enduring cross-sex friendship were almost uniformly adamant about how engaging in sex together risked altering the definition of their relationship as a friendship. They were vocal about the intrinsic values of friendship for friendship's sake between males and females despite the multiple challenges such friends face both internally and from third parties. Only on rare occasions were there allusions to what they termed "physical friendship," for example, where sex is regarded merely as another activity that friends do together.

However, I noticed their discourse begin to alter about the same time as Alanis Morissette's celebration of a "best friend with benefits" in the song "Head Over Feet" that appeared in her 1995 multiple platinum recording *Jagged Little Pill*. Along with her videos frequently appearing on MTV's rotation, the phrase "friends with benefits" began to surface routinely in our classroom discussions of cross-sex friendship. However, this song can be interpreted in different ways. On one hand, the song can be heard as attempting to celebrate a secure romantic relationship by

saying to her lover, "You're the best listener that I've ever met; you're my best friend; best friend with benefits." On the other hand, it can be heard as celebrating sex as an added benefit between friends. In the past few years this latter interpretation of the phrase has even been taken up as a category of friendship in scholarly publications due to its circulation in multiple everyday cultural discourses apparent in research participants' discourse (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). For example, MTV devoted a widely repeated episode of their *True Life* series to friends with benefits. More bluntly in recent years a few students refer to "FtFs" or "friends that fuck." Reflecting the ongoing ambiguity and possible volatility of the option, *over the years "friendship with benefits" has been cited by students to support both the possibility and the impossibility of enduring close cross-sex friendship.*

As a further indication of the highly sexualized cultural context and social environment within which current students attempt to pursue their interpersonal relationships, I cite the practice of "hooking up" reported as popular by heterosexuals on college campuses (Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003; Kirschner, 2004). Lambert, Kahn, and Apple (2003) report that "hooking up" refers to "when two people agree to engage in sexual behavior for which there is no future commitment" (p. 129). In fact, "The cardinal rule, according to students, is not to expect a relationship to develop" (Kirschner, 2004, p. 10). From my perspective, this practice is almost a caricature of the sexual objectification and use of others for personal gratification associated with uncommitted consensual sexism at its worst. Even so, I want to emphasize that I am not equating hooking up and friendship with benefits, but viewing them as interpersonal practices currently occurring in the cultural contexts of each other and heterosexual social life in college environments. I distinguish between friendship with benefits and hooking up while acknowledging that each arrangement likely involves multiple definitions across participants. I consider friendship with benefits to describe a cross-sex friendship of some duration that consensually includes sexual activities as contrasted with the lack of emotional involvement, casual promiscuity, and episodic contact associated with hooking up.

Granting this opinion, research reveals additional troubling aspects of the phenomenon of hooking up. First, Lambert et al. (2003) found that "both women and men reported less comfort with their perceived norm of hooking up than they believed was experienced by their same-sex peers. . . . In addition, both men and women believed members of the other gender experienced greater comfort with hooking-up behaviors than members of the other gender actually reported" (p. 132). The authors insightfully describe this unfortunate pattern of living down to

inaccurately perceived expectations of their same-sex and cross-sex peers as “due to pluralistic ignorance” (Lambert et al., 2003, p. 132). They conclude, “It is likely that most students believe others engage in these hook-up behaviors primarily because they enjoy doing so, while they see themselves engaging in these behaviors primarily due to peer pressure” (p. 132). The students fail to realize the different degrees of comfort experienced by other persons engaged in hooking up. In the terms of this book, students perform the Primary Misperception of Participation in exaggerating the similarities between themselves and others and remaining unmindful of differences in perspective that could make a difference in whether they pursue this activity. In another study 75% of the sample reported at least one hookup with 33% of them having sexual intercourse “with a stranger or a brief acquaintance” (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000, p. 84).

My overall point is that such widely reported instances of hooking up indicate a highly sexualized culture of interpersonal encounters among college students. It manifests some of the worst tendencies of heterosexist subculture, and it is antithetical to friendship as a committed, ethically informed, and other-regarding relationship. One of the main findings reported by Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) supports this contention. The authors conclude, “The more sexual involvement in hookup experiences, the more severe the alcohol intoxication symptomatology, the higher the fear of intimacy concerning the loss of individuality through relationships, and the less likely that relationship approaches were based on friendship or altruism” (pp. 84–85). Moreover, in another study Paul and Hayes (2002) report the prevalence of a sexual double standard for males and females in the heterosexist subculture of hooking up. Males brag about their hooking up experiences to their friends. In contrast, females explore with their friends how they will deal with encountering the male participant in the future. Despite the subcultural injunction to view the experience impersonally, women are more inclined to attach emotional significance to their hookups (termed “catching a feeling”) than men are and to feel “confused and used” (Kirschner, 2004, p. 10). I return now to the students’ debate.

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In addition to clarifying the boundaries of their cross-sex friendships and deemphasizing sexual activities, a final practice effective for defining cross-sex friendships as only friends and nothing “more” is to employ discourses of kinship to describe one’s friends. This terminology is used between the two friends as well as to portray the relationship to persons outside the bond. When persons describe friends as siblings, like a brother or a sister, they are clearly off-limits for sexual

or romantic advances. In one female student's words, "The point when I know there is no possibility for romance is when they say you're like a little sister." Such friends look out for and take care of each other like brothers and sisters. Like siblings, sometimes they are fiercely protective of each other. Their mutual affection is interpreted as resembling family in depth and legitimacy. They may in fact be regular guests and regarded as family in each other's parents' homes.

The successful establishment of boundaries; avoidance of sexual and romantic tensions through various practices; and enjoyment of conversation, mutual sharing, and common interests, as well as the treatment of each other as equals, promotes mutual trust between cross-sex friends. Trust and respect are important components of such friendships. With sufficient trust developed in longer term relationships, there is a high comfort level. The friend is part of one's life. A person can be more intimate and talk about almost anything without second-guessing the friend's motives. It is easy to talk with such a friend about other relationships. Mutual trust continues to build when a person risks confiding and friends prove trustworthy.

Desire and Inevitable Sexual Tensions Overcoming Spoken Definitions of Cross-Sex Friendships

In contrast, the group doubting cross-sex friendship's long-term viability presents compelling challenges to these optimistic images. First, these students maintain if both parties are heterosexual, inevitably there is going to be sexual tension that is either one-sided or mutual. Persons choose friends because there is something attractive about the friend; and even if their personality sparks the original interest, their looks can grow on someone. All cross-sex relationships revolve around underlying sexual needs and attraction. Physical attractiveness is important in any relationship, and so boundaries are too hard to define. Since physical love is the sexual counterpart of platonic love, physical attractiveness will eventually become sexual attraction even to people with whom a person is friends. Even if the attraction is not acted on physically, there will be sexual feelings and emotional tensions. Consequently, men and women can't be close friends indefinitely; underlying sexual tensions within the friendship will eventually ruin the idea of permanent platonic friendship.

These ambiguities are not easily or completely defined away. When a man and a woman start to spend a lot of time together, care for each other and feel attracted to each other, emotions get mixed and confused. It is difficult to define their relationship as friendship once it reaches

that point. The rules aren't clear. People may say they only want to be friends, but they only think they do. Both persons' true feelings are never known even if they say clearly what they want. There also may be "attraction conflict" that clouds the friendship—one person wants romance, the other doesn't; or both are attracted romantically (Reeder, 2000). In the first case the person with deeper feelings will sometimes demand "all or nothing." If the other friend doesn't share these feelings and refuses, it often ends the friendship. Ironically, either asymmetrical or symmetrical romantic attraction or sexual desire makes long-term cross-sex friendship very difficult if not impossible.

Moreover, although the opening stages of friendship and romance are similar, participants can get confused if they have different expectations. When signals get crossed, it can end a friendship or start a romantic relationship. Both persons have to look at each other as friends in the same way. This is unlikely because motives and expectations may be different for a cross-sex friendship. Each sex seems to have incongruent definitions of relationships. For one thing, affection is misinterpreted by either males or females. "Intimate" to women typically means emotional closeness; "intimate" to men often means sex. Women are used to expressing emotional closeness with their same-sex friends. Men are not and are socialized to interpret caring from women as romance. As a result, men misinterpret motives (i.e., friendliness) more than women. Men have trouble keeping romance out; they can't be close with an attractive female without trying for "more." Women are more discriminating about their involvements. For women, there is always the underlying fear that the man is going to make a move. For both friends in some relationships that feeling of "What if?" never goes away.

Even if the friends mutually agree to try out a romantic or sexual relationship, it doesn't necessarily resolve tensions. It is hard to be friends after romance; it is hard to return to friendship once people have been lovers. In many ways it is too risky to go back to friendship after persons have admitted romantic feelings for each other. What if one person admits them and the other doesn't reciprocate those feelings? Once they cross that line, they will never look at each other the same. Friends may want to test it out, cross over—but once they try romance, they can't get the same friendship back.

Other Relationships and Social Conditions That Facilitate Cross-Sex Friendships

Both groups remark that social circumstances and norms play a huge role in shaping the course of cross-sex friendships. Those arguing

for enduring cross-sex friendships observe that it's culturally accepted now, as on television shows such as *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *Grey's Anatomy*. It depends on one's culture; times are changing and cross-sex friendships are seen as okay now. From kindergarten on, students describe participating in youth coed sports, for example. In the college environment, they may have many more relationships that are cross-sex friendships than they do sexual relationships, and they perceive such relationships as the best thing for them to do. They are forced to be friends with many people—in classes, residence halls, and student organizations. It is also easier when their peer group supports the friendship. The fact of more women entering the work force allows more common ground, hanging out, golfing, beer drinking. Productive working relationships insisting on business-only behaviors require cross-sex friendships; it doesn't pay to undercut effective cross-sex bonds.

A variety of other social conditions foster cross-sex friendships. Family connections enable multiple cross-sex friendships with diverse relatives, including brothers- and sisters-in-law, cousins, uncles, and aunts. While young, friendships with brothers and sisters, as well as girls' relationships with fathers and boys' relationships with mothers, provide a basis for cross-sex friendship early in life. Growing up with parents who have cross-sex friendship allows children to learn through watching their friendships, and students report developing friendships with some of their parents' friends. On that note, some students maintain that a large age discrepancy also allows for cross-sex friendship. Moreover, students invariably assert that cross-sex friendships are possible between homosexuals and heterosexuals. If either person is homosexual, this erases sexual attraction so that neither is attracted romantically to the other, and neither person will perpetuate a cycle of "What if?" The students suggest that gay men and heterosexual women are an especially good bet, since gay men can relate well to such women.

An important facilitating condition is when someone has a boyfriend or girlfriend and therefore is already committed romantically to another individual. When each friend has a significant other, it clarifies the focus on friendship between them. Sexual tension is reduced when someone is involved and content with a romantic relationship and those needs are already met. Even so, each friend plays important roles in making this situation work on an ongoing basis. First, if friends are involved with other relationships, each friend needs to respect the other's romantic relationship and not jeopardize it. It does no good for friends to make significant others jealous. However, some students argued that if boyfriends and girlfriends do get jealous, it is time to assert the importance of the cross-sex friendship. Romantic

relationships do not fulfill all of a person's needs. One woman stated, "If you have a romantic relationship and you are looking for friendship. My best friend is male, and I want a guy that I can belch around and stuff that I don't do around my boyfriend—and he is not going to be the boyfriend. He is still a male; but he is my friend." Basically, it raises the question, how much does someone value each of the relationships, that is, the cross-sex friend versus the boyfriend or girlfriend? Will a person break off with a jealous significant other for his or her cross-sex friend? Will the person end a cross-sex friendship to appease a romantic partner? Perhaps the simplest circumstance is when neither person is in a romantic relationship. But that situation risks a whole other set of pressures from persons outside the friendship as well as within that relationship.

A particularly facilitative situation is when romantic couples make common friends. Couple friendships find a woman becoming friends with her boyfriend's buddies, and her own same-sex friends can become friends with her boyfriend. A male observed, "You can be friends with your girlfriend's friends—you would never breach that trust." Meanwhile, cross-sex friendships with a same-sex friend's boyfriend or girlfriend also are "honor bound." They are off-limits as potential romantic partners. In each case, one's loyalty to one's partner and one's friend is at stake. In general, ongoing cross-sex friendships are possible with a variety of people—including family members, co-workers, friends of cross-sex friends, friends of romantic partners, and romantic partners of same-sex friends. Cross-sex friendships are especially possible when they are not the primary relationship or a free-standing relationship.

Other Relationships and Social Conditions That Subvert Cross-Sex Friendships

The skeptical group discusses the very conditions cited above for enabling cross-sex friendships as potentially constraining them. First, despite superficial changes and scattered media depictions, society still puts a damper on cross-sex friendships; they are not viewed as the norm. As a result, such friends experience numerous pressures. Cross-sex friends are pressured "to pair off" by those who love them, as well as those who don't necessarily. Parents and relatives automatically assume—say a person brings a friend to a picnic or family gathering—that person's relatives assume they are already together or that they are developing a relationship. There is pressure from family—especially older persons who see cross-sex friendships as against the norm—as

well as from other friends to become a couple, pressure to be married. These outsiders say things like, "You have such a great relationship, why aren't you dating?" and "When are you going to admit your true feelings for each other?" If cross-sex friends are always seen together but as just friends, people won't approach and introduce themselves, which cuts down on each friend's possibilities for romantic relationships with others. Less caring third parties are also always suspicious, label the situation, gossip and continuously spread rumors. When they see a man and woman together a lot, they assume the two are romantically involved or having sex, and they constantly ask questions. Cross-sex friends get tired of having to explain themselves. Other friends don't have to; why should they?

Cross-sex friendships developed as a dimension of work relationships or different categories of familial relationships—such as with parents, siblings, in-laws—aren't truly free-standing friendships. The same limitation applies to befriending the spouse's best friend; getting married makes it more likely that persons will have couple friendships. Meanwhile, each spouse is more likely to drift away from the cross-sex friendships that they chose on their own and cared about before getting married. There is only so much time for relationships, and primary relationships such as marriage, family, and work come first. In work settings sexual harassment laws place an additional stress on the possibility of making cross-sex friends. Further, if a person has off-limits friends because of commitment to a boy- or girlfriend, and that commitment breaks down, the newly single person might become fair game. There is rebound potential, which could cause complications for the cross-sex friendship. If someone is involved with a romantic relationship that ends, what happens to the cross-sex friendships made through the romantic partner? How much were they the person's own relationships and how much merely an extension of the relationship with the boyfriend or girlfriend?

Jealousy is arguably the biggest issue affecting cross-sex friendships. Students frequently describe jealousy as "natural" and playing a large role in curtailing cross-sex friendships. If someone is in an established romantic relationship, the boyfriend or girlfriend is likely to become jealous of that person's cross-sex friends, especially if they are close ones. It is difficult for a partner to understand and allow much time and affection for a perceived competitor. Other persons may identify and talk about the friendship couple as more than friends, which also makes the partner jealous. Jealousy of either or both friends' significant others and/or competition for the friend's time creates tension and drives a wedge between cross-sex friends.

Jealousy takes other forms as well. Either person's same-sex friends may get jealous of the time someone spends with a cross-sex friend, prompting the question, "Why do you spend so much time with her/him and not us?" And the close cross-sex friend may become jealous about the time a person spends with same-sex friends. As a result, tensions may develop between the female friend versus his male friends as well as between the male friend and her female friends. There may be jealousy between the cross-sex friends themselves if one member starts to date someone else or that person's significant other gets jealous and successfully restricts the friends' time together. Friends also may have trouble dating their cross-sex friend's friends. According to one student, "You feel like they are off-limits." Multiple constraints on cross-sex friendships arise from societal norms and third party challenges ranging from relatives to friends to significant others.

❖ ADDRESSING STUDENTS' POSITIONS ON CROSS-SEX FRIENDSHIP

Sometimes when the students finish debating, they turn to me expectantly to render a verdict on the winning side of their debate. I emphasize that neither side defeats the other. Rather, in debating cross-sex friendship, both groups have voiced discourses at large in the culture with enabling, constraining, and mixed effects concerning the students' own possibilities for thinking about and engaging in friendship. Their spoken positions also presuppose their gendered identities, conceptions of romantic love, and sexual relations with other persons. *Focusing on the possibility of enduring, close cross-sex friendships reveals that all friendships are potentially sites of struggle due to the politics of sexual identity, enactments of gender, the relative importance of friendship versus romance, and the contingencies of social lives.* I argue that much of the commotion about cross-sex friendship inscribed in the students' exchanges arises in the pursuit and portrayal of such relationships in the context of a predominantly heterosexual culture. In the spirit of cultivating personal agency and expanded options for being friends with others, I explore with them how issues of sexism, gendered performances, and sexual identities—in conjunction with other selectively emphasized similarities and differences—influence descriptions of and participation in cross-sex friendships. I further argue that the positions we perform concerning these matters continually shape and reflect our own identities.

Sexism, Gendered Performances, Sexual Identities, and Cross-Sex Friendships

By sexism I mean any outlook that privileges sexual activity as the root metaphor for our being-in-the-world. In Burke's (1969) sense, sexual striving constitutes our primordial vocabulary of motive, with selves and others consequently reduced to sex objects. Of course, Freud's writings emphasize precisely this outlook; in his view *all friendships* involve "aim-inhibited sexuality" (see Rangell, 1963). Now it is one thing to observe the importance of physical attractiveness in all types of social bonds and the notion that an individual's sexuality and desires are a necessary part of the total person, which may not be and probably should not ever be completely suppressed. But sexist vocabularies incorporated as part of any sexual identity can construct others primarily as naturalized objects of sexual desire, as opposed to social beings that may be known, befriended and/or loved for reasons and attributes that transcend sexual relations.

To a significant degree I perceive a heterosexist ideology with its required gendered identities manifest in the students' debates about cross-sex friendship I have re-presented here. Indeed, this seems to be the dominant system of signification and power under which they labor in forming their relationships and realizing their subjectivities. As a normative enterprise, heterosexism insists upon a naturalized binary division between genders based on biological sex differences; an assumed heterosexual orientation that rejects other sexual identities and orientations; and a privileging of heterosexual romance and marriage over friendship and other forms of loving. By and large, the challenges the students describe facing their cross-sex friendships transpire at dramatic intersections of sexist, heteronormative scripts encompassing both romantic relationships and cross-sex friendships. These scripts are inscribed upon male and female bodies with the students and others naturalizing these connections, prescriptions, and proscriptions. Taken seriously, cross-sex friendship productively troubles the naturalization of biological sex differences and romantic scripts through emphasizing participants' agency in fashioning their own gendered performances and relational expectations.

As Judith Butler (1990) has persuasively argued, there is nothing intrinsically natural about separating all human beings into two opposing categories on the basis of one physical attribute of their overall being-in-the-world. Rather than a static binary category for reductively sorting males and females, gender can be viewed as an ongoing array of activities, performances, and ideologies pervading all facets of social

life (Walker, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender functions ideologically when people restrictively interpret the meaning of their own and others' lives as well as their eligibility to think, feel, and behave in desired ways solely due to their gender. In acting out stereotypical beliefs about what males versus females are supposed to do and how they are supposed to feel in close same-sex and cross-sex relationships, we construct gendered contrasts on an ongoing basis (Reeder, 1996; Walker, 1994; Werking, 1997). Preserving these gendered distinctions obscures the diverse ways of being human occurring within each category of biological sex as well as the extensive commonalities performed across gender divides in various personal and social relationships.

What assumptions are enacted about gendered identity—that is, what it means to be a feminine or masculine woman, or a masculine or feminine man—in our discussions and experiences of friendship? Does being masculine (in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual relationships) mean being assertive and initiating sexual activity, and does being feminine mean wanting to get to know and care about a person for who they are before or perhaps instead of pursuing sexual relations (Nardi, 1992)? What performances and practices do persons use to identify themselves and others as masculine or feminine within their friendships? How are females and males required to act and feel in ongoing relationships lived and breathed in extensively scripted cultural contexts for being a person and being-with-others? How gendered and sexual orientation identified are our judgments and attributions about self and others in the contexts of caring relationships? To what extent do relational participants define themselves as women or men according to sexual or other practices and participation in normative scripts concerning marriage, procreation, and/or raising children (Rose, 2000)?

What my students discuss as gender differences, complementarities, and affinities negotiated between males and females in the context of cross-sex friendships—for example, in speaking styles, instrumental or emotional outlooks, and interests—also need to be addressed by same-sex friends. This is true whether either or both friends are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual. Perhaps such issues do not arise as noticeably between two masculine-identified homosexual or heterosexual males or between two feminine-identified lesbians or heterosexual females. However, consider a masculine-identified heterosexual male developing a friendship with a feminine-identified heterosexual male. Consider a feminine-identified heterosexual female becoming friends with a masculine-identified heterosexual female. Salient issues

negotiated between the friends could be ones of gender identification, which could have varying consequences for how the friendships are conducted and experienced.

Will these persons experience subtle or overt pressure to alter the performance of their gender identifications and practices by their respective friends? Or will they voluntarily enjoy learning and performing some of the interests and ways of communicating of the other person's gender identity through spending time together as friends? If so, will these altered gendered practices carry over into the identities they perform in other relationships with family and at work? What could facilitate or limit such activities of being a person? How much support do they receive from others to be the more ambiguously gendered persons they take themselves to be?

On a different note, will these negotiations of gender identity between the friends become conflated with issues of sexual identity? If so, where is the impetus for this muddle? Does it arise through interactions between the friends, or will it more likely derive from judgmental messages received from outside of their friendship? A moment's reflection reveals that these cross-gendered same-sex friends may face similar exigencies potentially arising within their friendship and from their social networks as cross-sex friends do.

Such social exigencies and negotiations occur because understandings and ascriptions of gender are not discrete accomplishments. Gender interweaves with every aspect of human culture (Bateson, 1958). As Wittig (1992, p. 2) notes, "Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order." Moreover, by and large the gender dichotomies assumed in the student discussions are continually constructed and enforced within "a heterosexual matrix in which heterosexuality is presupposed in the expression of 'real' forms of masculinity or femininity" (Butler, quoted in Allen, 2004, p. 473). This matrix supports a heteronormative gaze that envisions heterosexual romantic relationships and specific forms of segregated same-sex homosociality as the standard by which to judge all relationships (Kalmijn, 2002).

Informed by this outlook, cross-sex friendships are discussed as if similar predicaments do not occur in same-sex ones, for example, jealousy, possessiveness, physical and/or sexual attraction, and sexist attributions and injunctions by third parties. For example, Lorin Arnold (1995), who self-identifies as heterosexual, describes how her close, demonstrative same-sex friendship with another woman was constantly second-guessed as a lesbian sexual relationship by the males they worked with in a college town bar. Insisting that sexual

relations were occurring between Lorin and her friend, these men badgered the women and asked if they could “watch” when the two women were alone. Consequently, these males performed a virtual caricature of the sexualizing and objectifying masculine-gendered identity often dramatized in heterosexist cultures and relationships. In doing so, they mapped their own world of constricted possibilities for friendship onto that of Lorin and Heidi.

Friendships between heterosexual males in middle-class North American culture are modally characterized by instrumentality and an activity orientation with limited emotional involvement or expression except in their closest bonds (Rawlins, 1992). Several authors argue that such men may be reluctant to express much affection for other men due to homophobia, a fear of being or perceived as homosexual (R. A. Lewis, 1978; Morin & Garfinkle, 1978). These concerns are more than functions of a predominantly heterosexual cultural setting; they also reflect men being taught to view most of their relations in a highly sexualized manner as an expression of masculinity (Abbey, 1982). In such a heterosexist setting, men may downplay their emotional feelings for other men and simultaneously feel that they should express similar feelings for women (e.g., their cross-sex friends) romantically and/or sexually. This is a pervasive script for performing masculine identity within a heterosexist worldview (Allen, 2004). By comparison, in a homosexist gay culture males may be urged to view other males initially or primarily as potential sexual partners. Reflective essayists in this setting have been concerned about the possibilities for “only” friendship between men who care about each other (A. White, 2006; E. White, 1983). It appears that gendered effects of certain versions of masculinity transcend sexual orientations.

Such masculinist tendencies come into sharper focus when compared with lesbian-feminist relationships. Lesbians tend to perceive love and friendship as transpiring on a continuum. The pronounced distinctions between romantic love relationships and friendships fade away for lesbians when they view friendship as a primary basis for forming romantic bonds and when they emphasize emotional closeness and companionship over sexual behavior across relationships (Rose, 2000; Vetere, 1982). Further, they also aspire to equal treatment of each other in a woman-identification that wants to supersede the brinkmanship, objectification, and power struggles they perceive in many heterosexual romantic relationships. Some lesbians hold that compartmentalized relationships derive from heterosexist culture with its emphasis on romantic ideologies and sexual activity over the affections of friendship on its own right and between lovers (Vetere, 1982). Consequently, for many lesbians deep friendships with other women do not necessarily threaten romantic

partners. More typically they experience few problems “remaining close friends with ex-lovers” (Rose, 2000, p. 324), although tensions related to romance can occur (Kennedy, 2004; Vetere, 1982).

When the students maintain that close enduring cross-sex friendship is possible if either person is homosexual, they oversimplify the dynamics of sexual and gendered identities that I have been discussing. For one thing this possibility for friendship assumes that the complications produced by one-sided or mutual sexual attraction and activity are the most important problems cross-sex friends face. But it neglects the friends’ gendered identities as well as other salient identifications such as race, ethnicity, class, or political involvement. Consider, for example, that a lesbian may have difficulties being friends with a masculine-identified heterosexual male primarily because of the woman’s identification with feminist worldviews. These gendered convictions inform her disdain for masculinist worldviews with their characteristic focus on competition, unilateral power arrangements, and hierarchical relationships, irrespective of—though often played out in terms of—masculine sexuality (Connell, 1993). Because of his masculine-gendered identity, the male also may have difficulty self-disclosing or becoming emotionally available in a friendship. Whether he is gay or straight, to the extent that a man identifies with such masculine worldviews with their relational tendencies, it may be difficult for a woman-identified lesbian to entertain friendship with him. It may be more a matter of gendered and political identities than sexual orientation. On the masculine-identified heterosexual male’s part, to the extent that he views a woman as cultivating a worldview that summarily marginalizes men, or inappropriately performs masculine-gendered identities or activities, he may avoid friendship with her. He may also feel threatened by a friendship with a woman who does not complement his masculine self-image.

Meanwhile, we need to keep in mind that masculinities and femininities (as well as sexual identities and conceptions of friendship and romantic loving) exist on a continuum of identifications, even though they have been discussed here in a binary fashion and with the risks of reproducing stereotypes in the previous examples. Moreover, in all cases the viability of given friendships will depend upon how the specific persons involved treat each other, the relevant identities situationally in play during their interactions, and the concrete circumstances of their friendship. For example, it is conceivable that the feminist lesbian and the masculinist heterosexual male considered above could form an alliance, become political or civic friends, and perhaps even personal friends, under circumstances where their shared participation in a

worthwhile social cause with its associated identities allows them to perceive each other as similar or complementary in important ways that diminish the significance of other perceived differences. Their shared activities and alliances could trump individuated identities not directly relevant to concerted political action.

When the students suggest that gay men and heterosexual women are especially good candidates for cross-sex (as well as cross-sexual orientation) friendship, an array of identities, discourses, and practices frequently intersect to facilitate such bonds. First, the sexual identities and desires of gay men and heterosexual women typically remove potential sexual tensions and second-guessing of each other's affection from the relationship, although they still may find each other attractive. Second, in relationships involving feminine-identified gay men and heterosexual women, there are shared identifications with each other's lesser status in a masculinist, male-dominated, heterosexual world (Grigoriou, 2004; A. White, 2006). Equality is a significant aspiration of all friendships. Shared oppression can level the social field, providing an important basis for edifying identification with each other as friends. Third, the openness, trust, depth of disclosure, and emotional involvement arising from shared identification with feminine styles of communicating give these relationships a closeness and sense of comfort often associated with women's friendships. Fourth, in contrast to women's same-sex friendships, each participant also values the insider's perspective of the other sex. Meanwhile, they typically do not feel competitive about the men each may find sexually or romantically attractive as the woman might with her heterosexual same-sex friends and the man might with his gay friends (Grigoriou, 2004).

Through doing activities together, women friends may also connect gay men to the heterosexual world, the dominant social nexus ignored with difficulty and feelings of disappearance by gays (Tillmann-Healy, 2001). On their part, gay men provide women friends with male companionship without the risks, possessiveness, or involvements that occur in heterosexual romantic bonds (Grigoriou, 2004). Finally, in contrast to most other types of cross-sex friendships, well-known media texts like the television series *Will and Grace* and *Sex and the City* and movies like *My Best Friend's Wedding* actually dramatize this kind of friendship, rendering them more visible and normatively acceptable.

The Comparative Significance of Friendship and Romantic Love

The challenges to cross-sex friendship voiced by these students also reflect the relative positions of friendship and romantic love in the

heteronormative hierarchy of relationships in North American middle-class life. Heterosexual romantic love is widely encouraged, institutionalized, and positively sanctioned religiously and legally through marriage at this point in time. In contrast, friendship, as well as other forms of loving, occupies contingent, more tenuous positions (Brain, 1976). Romantic loving, with its exclusive commitment, possessiveness, and potential for sexual gratification, is often regarded as part and parcel of the march to marriage. Further, Greenfield (1965) argues that the "romantic love complex" (p. 364) instructs persons to fall in love in order to fill necessary positions in normative society as husbands-fathers and wives-mothers.

Despite their importance for emotional well-being, across young adulthood, friends increasingly take a back seat to the priorities of committed sexual relationships, romantic coupling, marriage, family, and work. In a sense, *all* friendships, not just cross-sex ones, must be permitted by this dominant heterosexual matrix if friends are to remain active parts of persons' lives. The added wrinkle of cross-sex friendships is their potential subversion of dominant heterosexualist scripts and the gendered identities they enforce. As the students suggest, cross-sex friendships can allow us some freedoms not found in romantic relationships in relation to enacting masculinity and femininity. Small wonder that so many discourses come to bear in restricting the perceived possibility of enduring, close cross-sex friendships between the young adult students in my classes over the years.

Indeed, the students voice several narrative imperatives produced by the ideology of the romantic, heterosexual institution of marriage. While friendship is described as the pinnacle of same-sex closeness, romance and marriage are regarded as the highest forms of cross-sex intimacy. As a result, it is considered inevitable that close cross-sex friendships will evolve into something "more than friendship," meaning romantic involvement and/or sexual activity. These narrative visions also join with a normative trajectory to heterosexual marriage. Once married, spouses embrace the "couple companionate ideal" in which each person is expected to meet all of the other's needs, including those for close friendship (Oliker, 1989). This vision further limits the possibilities for freestanding cross-sex friendship for either spouse. Not surprisingly, the greatest drop-off in the number of friendships, including cross-sex friends, at any point in the life course occurs during young adulthood when many persons marry (Rawlins, 1992).

Accompanying these discourses in the students' debate are ones that conspicuously tend to naturalize the practices of interpersonal relationships. We hear that it is *natural* for males and females who love

each other as friends to want to take their relationship to “a higher level,” to want “more,” to have sex. Over the years one of the other common statements by students has been that jealousy is “natural” in romantic relationships. These locutions are apologies for versions of the status quo that picture romance as the be-all and end-all of interpersonal life, relegating friendship to second fiddle. In his comprehensive intercultural survey of human variations of loving, *Friends and Lovers*, anthropologist Robert Brain (1976) derides this hierarchy and the related notions that competition and conflict are “natural” features of the human condition. He asserts convincingly that cooperation and friendship are just as essential to human life.

But where do we hear that it is *natural* for men and women to be friends? If relationships are co-authored stories created within conventions and genres taught by our culture, where are the stories portraying close, enduring cross-sex friendship? I ask, what is *unnatural* about cross-sex friendship? In my judgment, most naturalizing discourse is used tautologically to explain practices that reduce humans to some essentializing common denominator like the sex drive or the instinct for aggression. Such discourses tend to be deployed as privileged vocabularies for masking mysteries or curtailing evolving practices of our being-and-becoming-with-others-in-the-world. They always serve somebody’s interests and claims to power. Such discourses miss the point of our definitive abilities as symbol users and abusers in Kenneth Burke’s (1966, 1969) view, that is, to fashion our own possibilities and impossibilities for loving and being loved, for caring and concern, for cooperation, and for sharing a planet.

Some friends preserve the platonic essence of their bond unselfconsciously through an absence of sexual attraction and/or activities. Other friends devote themselves to avoiding sexual expressions of affection, believing that such actions risk altering irrevocably the definition of their relationship as a friendship in their own and others’ eyes. And other cross-sex friends enjoy sexual behaviors together as part of their activities as friends without assigning romantic significance to them. As mentioned above, such “friendship with benefits” seems to be emerging as yet another negotiated definition of cross-sex friendship that further blurs the boundaries among types of relationships (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). Perhaps cross-sex friendships of whatever stripe may be celebrated as alternatives to reductionist, heterosexist scripts and the naturalized march to romantic attachment sanctioned by the ideology of heterosexual marriage.

Meanwhile, cross-sex friendship ironically provides a strong basis for enduring affection within such normative scripts. People who have

been friends before they become romantically involved tend to be kinder to each other during troubled times and nicer to each other if their romantic relationship ends (Rawlins, 1992). In my previous book, I asserted the desirability and ethical potentials of treating each other as friends within marriage. Here (cross-sex) friendship's person-qua-person regard for the other, negotiated mutuality and equality, and respect for each other's freedom compose humanizing supplements to the asymmetrical benefits, obligations, and role-based treatment of each other frequently occurring in "traditional" heterosexual marriages (Rawlins, 1992).

Friendships are permeated with ambiguities. Brain (1976) argues convincingly that they have lost their "ceremonial patterning and emotional expression" in Western capitalist cultures. How do persons know for certain that they are someone's friend? What private and public rituals do we have for registering friendship? When persons realize that they have formed a friendship that should last the rest of their lives, do they rent a hall, send out invitations, and gather their family and other friends to consecrate this commitment? On a different note, performing coitus typically and "traditionally" functions as the consummation of a heterosexual romantic bond (McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001). How are friendships consummated? More specifically for our purposes here, how are cross-sex friendships consummated? The lack of cultural scripts for performing binding affection in such relationships is part of the problem of sustaining them as friendships, especially in the context of unequivocal heteronormative romantic scripts. We need to develop grammars, discourses, and narratives that legitimize friendships of all kinds. It is likely that consummation and being joined together are not even the best metaphors.

Rake (1970) once observed that the exclusiveness and possessiveness of romantic loving produces the freedom-to-be-one in contrast to the practices of friendship, which create the freedom-to-be-two. In Conlon's words, "Friends share each other's experiences of the world; they see it in similar ways and enjoy it together. Lovers, in contrast, as the rhetoric of romance insists repeatedly, *are* each other's world" (1995, p. 297, emphasis in original). Perhaps the sense of union desired in romantic loving is a dubious counterpart to the sense of delight in each other's singular potentials offered in friendship. As such, cross-sex friends, indeed all friends, transcending enforced categories, must create and face together their own narrative openings and contingencies. The legitimacy of their stories will need to be recognized by third parties and enveloping cultural discourses.

❖ CONCLUSION

Pursuing cross-sex friendship takes us into an interlinked assortment of cultural myths, assumptions, identities, and positionings of similarities and differences between persons. Root images of mutually conditioning and mutually opposing otherness constitute femininities, masculinities, and sexualities that articulate the contingencies of cross-sex friendship in both edifying and unsettling ways. Strongly held binaries undermine the continuities, existential commonalities, and edifying distinctions among differently gendered and sexually identified people, as well as their relationships. Moreover, in these students' and other discourses, various subject positions—like those of race, ethnicity, class, and embodied abilities—are conspicuous in their absence from consideration (A. White, 2006). Taken-for-granted hierarchies of social relationships, including romantic love and marriage versus friendship, preferred and stigmatized sexual identities, and constructions of gender continually assemble the permitted modes of caring.

Close cross-sex friendships are merely one example of sustained human caring that subverts these pageants of allowed and disallowed relationships. Such friendships struggle for identity, both in finding names for the relationship that justify its otherness to third parties, and for the friends to legitimize their own practices and feelings for each other (Rawlins, 1982). Compounding the difficulties co-telling stories of cross-sex friendship is learning how to listen without prejudgment to other persons' narratives of friendship and loving and to hear them for who the friends say they are. This communicative work points to the very conditions for sustaining shared identities as friends in numerous situations of scrutiny and skeptical discourse. In short, cross-sex friendship challenges persons to position themselves among the intersections of an array of discourses with surpassing power to articulate for them the experiences and practices of their own relationships and subjectivities. Enduring is the issue. Realistically, how long can such freestanding friendships last, given all of the constraining factors we have witnessed, and usually living on borrowed time and secondhand language?

Talking with students, this chapter performs "discursive penetration." It is an effort to decipher and name the enabling and constraining discourses configuring their relationships' chances and complicities (Giddens, 1979). What normative discourses hold sway in composing the rationales for their relationships? What defines persons' identities and eligibilities as (cross-sex) friends? Is it their biological sex, gendered performances of self, sexual motivation, sexual

orientation and identity, race, ethnicity, social class, interests and activities, abilities, speaking style? Some composition of these attributes? What configuration of these attributes does each person self-identify as? How much say do the friends actually have in identifying, negotiating, and celebrating the differences and similarities between them that matter across contexts? What social groups are the friends able to interconnect in light of their individuated configurations of self- and shared identities? What is each friend's stance toward their different identities, and how susceptible are these identities to commentary or even censure in emerging circumstances? How do friends avoid the reduction of each other and their friendship to others' categories based on stereotyped attributions? Recurring challenges of identity and social location shape and reflect the (im)possibilities of sustaining cross-sex friendships—indeed all forms of freely chosen caring relationships.

Differences and similarities are hierarchically arranged in social contexts. The differences modally associated with sexes and genders that we transcend through friendship are different differences to navigate than ones of race, social class, sexualities, or embodied abilities. In fact, many of the differences identified by these students in attempting cross-sex friendship presuppose a host of more fundamental similarities in life circumstances. For example, an array of privileges are connected with white, middle-class existence, including the opportunity to attend college (DeMott, 1995). Such oblivion is a potential shortcoming of their close dyadic friendships. *Individual similarities and personal differences incorporated into a dyadic relationship may consciously or unconsciously presuppose participation in another level of exclusion.*

Under what conditions are people allowed to care for each other? The case of cross-sex friendship reminds us that we are always acting within the discursively, culturally, and materially patterned opportunities and constraints of social positions. As with all friendships, it simultaneously depends upon the initiatives, choices, and negotiations—the praxis of the individuals involved. Blanket statements based on modal profiles potentially must answer to the voices, choices, and activities of individuals. To be sure, social circumstances and stratifications play crucial, often understated roles in the initiation, continuation, and demise of friendships (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan, 1979; Kalmijn, 2002). In choosing each other as friends, we assume the ongoing responsibility to perform our choices together and to treat each other as friends to the extent our negotiated expectations and situations allow. When our friendships skirt conventional injunctions of gendered practices and sexual identities, we must be careful to avoid

slippage into cultural scripts that deny the legitimacy of our mutually chosen practices and subjectivities. In doing so, we may face stringent contextual sanctions and need to take advantage of whatever facilitating conditions exist. All friendships—and certainly cross-sex ones struggling under the duress of marginalizing scripts—require individual agency, dyadic negotiation, and actively performed benevolence to become and remain part of social life.