Introduction

Cross-sex friendships are common during young adulthood (Hallock & Christakis, 2009; Weger et al., 2019). Yet, they vary widely and are vulnerable to misunderstanding, even by the friends themselves (Gaines, 2003; Felmlee et al., 2012). Previous research has attempted to understand cross-sex friendships by comparing them to same-sex friendships, finding similarities in areas such as emotional closeness and differences in areas such as jealousy (e.g., Baumgart & Nelson, 2009; Monour, 2017). We furthered this investigation by examining how cross- and same-sex friends responded to different types of relationship conflict.

We hypothesized that same-sex friends would respond more negatively to conflict than would cross-sex friends.

Method

Participants

Participants (n = 127) were young adults with a mean age of 20.19 (SD = 3.28). Forty-one percent were African American, 39% were Caucasian, and the remainder represented other ethnicities. Sixty-four percent were women.

Procedure

Through an online system, participants were randomly prompted to either think of their closest same-sex or opposite-sex friend and to respond to the McGill Friendship Questionnaire (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999), with that friend in mind. Participants then encountered three conflict scenarios (hurtful remark, social abandonment, betrayed secret) and asked how they would respond if these occurred with the imagined friend.

Experimental Conditions

Scenario 1

You and your friend meet up to grab some lunch. While you are sharing something that is very important to you, your friend misunderstands the importance and jokingly tells you to “Shut up about this already!”

Scenario 2

You find out that your friend has plans to hang out with some of your other mutual friends. You ask your friend about it and are told that you were not invited. Your friend plans to go without you.

Scenario 3

You tell your friend a very personal secret and insist that this secret not be shared with anyone. You later find out that your friend told other people.

Friendship Similarities

We used a 2(participant gender) X 2(friend gender) MANOVA. Our first scenario, where the friend makes an inappropriate joking comment to stop the conversation, revealed significant interactions. A man thinking about a female friend would be more likely to end the friendship than would a man thinking about a male friend; F(1, 122) = 4.53, p = .03. A man thinking about a female friend was more likely to report that the situation was no big deal than all the other groups, F(1, 122) = 6.63, p = .01. The second scenario, where the friend abandons the other for a social event, also revealed a significant interaction. When either a man or woman was thinking of a male friend, they reported that the behavior did not surprise them. Men were most surprised when a female friend engaged in this behavior, F(1, 122) = 3.85, p = .05. We found no significant interaction for the third scenario.

Gender Comparisons

Compared to women, men agreed more that friendship between two women will always involve competition [r(120) = 2.10, p = .04], that a male-female relationship will always involve sexual tension [r(120) = 3.65, p < .001], and that same-sex friends will always be closer than opposite-sex friends [r(120) = 3.18, p = .002].

Conclusion

In sum, our hypothesis was not supported. We did not find differences in friendships based solely on the gender concordance or discordance of the friendship. Instead we found that men were very sensitive about a female friend making a hurtful comment or socially excluding him. This finding may reveal expectations that men had of their female friends but not of their male friends. Neither gender was surprised by a male friend socially abandoning them, perhaps reflecting that social expectations of men are lower than those for women. Despite these findings, how adults reacted to the friendship scenarios depended more on their gender than on the gender of their friend. In general, women were more upset by our conflict scenarios than were men and felt it was important to help their friend see their point of view. The examination of conflict in cross- and same-sex friendships adds to our understanding of this common experience of young adulthood.