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The glass partition: Obstacles to cross-sex friendships at work

Kim Elsesser and Letitia Anne Peplau

ABSTRACT

This study explores cross-sex friendships within the professional workplace and examined the impact of the workplace environment and heightened awareness of sexual harassment on cross-sex friendship formation. Results from interviews with 41 professionals suggest the existence of obstacles to developing cross-sex friendships at work. Specifically, these professionals worried that their cross-sex friends would misinterpret their friendliness as romantic or sexual interest, that their co-workers would misinterpret their friendliness to a cross-sex friend, and that their humor and conversational topics might be perceived by a cross-sex friend as sexual harassment. Barriers to cross-sex friendship at work were labeled the 'glass partition,' and the potential impact of this glass partition on women's and men's careers is discussed.

KEYWORDS

cross-sex friendship ■ gender ■ organizational behavior ■ sexual harassment ■ work environment

Cross-sex friendships can be difficult to develop and maintain under any circumstances (O'Meara, 1989). Issues stemming from male-female differences in friendship norms and interests, sexual attraction, and concerns that a cross-sex friendship may be misperceived as sexual all pose potential challenges (Martin, 1997; Swain, 1992). Within the workplace, where friendships are particularly important for career development (Kram & Isabella, 1985), physical proximity and job requirements may facilitate cross-sex

friendship formation. On the contrary, other organizational influences such as fear that a cross-sex friendship may be misperceived as a romantic relationship or fear of sexual harassment charges may decrease interactions between cross-sex co-workers, limiting the pool of potential friends. The present analysis of interviews with professionals investigates the impact of the workplace on the development and maintenance of these friendships.

Workplace friendships are important because they can provide benefits which promote career success. Lincoln and Miller (1979) defined friendship networks in organizations as 'systems for making decisions, mobilizing resources, concealing or transmitting information, and performing other functions closely allied with work behavior and interaction' (p. 196). Friends in the workplace provide information, networking, and support that are invaluable for both job performance and satisfaction (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Lincoln & Miller, 1979).

Bridge and Baxter (1992) found that work friends provided career support in three forms. Friends provided information access, serving 'as a second pair of eyes and ears for one another.' Friends also provided work-related assistance, helping each other accomplish their job tasks. Third, friends gave psychological support to one another, 'providing understanding, empathy and comfort' (Bridge & Baxter, 1992: 216).

While friendships with peers are important, relationships with those more senior in the organization can also be valuable to the careers of junior employees. Sometimes these mentor relationships are formally initiated and managed by the organization, but more often they are informal relationships similar to friendships (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Mentors can provide advice and information, offer protection, and promote the mentee's career by making his or her accomplishments more visible (Burke, 1984; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Mobley et al., 1994).

Given the substantial advantages that friendships in the workplace offer, those not able to form friendships are at a career disadvantage. A preference for same-sex friendships restricts an individual's pool of potential friends. This may have the most impact for women in male-dominated work environments who need to befriend men in order to develop both peer friendships and mentor-like relationships. Extending the previous research on cross-sex friendships to the workplace may therefore illuminate an important barrier to women's career advancement.

Cross-sex friendships

To date, research on barriers to the development of cross-sex friendships has typically been conducted outside the context of work. Nonetheless, this

research suggests several important factors that may be relevant to workplace friendships. First, gender differences in recreational interests and preferred topics of conversation result in a preference for same-sex friends (Martin, 1997; Swain, 1992). In addition, gender differences in norms and expectations of friendships could cause problems for cross-sex friends. For example, men often disapprove of their same and cross-sex friends crying while women approve of this behavior (Felmlee, 1999).

Sexual attraction toward a potential friend can spur the initiation of a cross-sex friendship. However, in situations where a romantic or sexual relationship is inappropriate or where one partner prefers a non-romantic friendship, sexual undercurrents often jeopardize cross-sex relationships (Kaplan & Keys, 1998; Monsour, 1992; Swain, 1992; Werking, 1997). Finally, friends are concerned that a platonic cross-sex friendship will be misconstrued by third parties as romantic (Monsour et al., 1994; O'Meara, 1989; Swain, 1992).

Workplace environment

Since little research has examined cross-sex friendship in the workplace, the effects of organizational influences on these friendships remains unknown. Certain aspects of the work environment may facilitate cross-sex friendship development while others may hinder the development of new friendships.

Many workplaces encourage teamwork (Beyerlein et al., 1995) which leads to greater interaction between employees. Therefore, the workplace potentially provides an environment where men and women can work closely together to achieve common goals. Consequently, the workplace offers co-workers proximity, familiarity, and common interests, all of which have been shown to promote liking and friendship (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). This suggests that cross-sex friendships may be easier to develop within the workplace than outside of work.

Other current workplace trends may inhibit cross-sex friendship. For example, since workplace romances are often discouraged, some may want to avoid any possibility that their co-workers misperceive a friendship as a romance. Even co-workers who are participants in workplace romances typically attempt to keep their romance a secret (Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985). Unlike friendships and other work-sanctioned relationships, workplace romances can be disruptive to the organization and typically lead to negative gossip (Bowes-Sperry & Tata, 1999; Mainiero, 1986; Powell & Graves, 2003). The romantic label can be particularly damaging when the alleged couple are not peers in the organization. For example, Powell (2001) found that when those perceived to be in a romantic relationship are not peers, and

the subordinate is female, other employees tend to believe that the relationship is utilitarian (where sex is traded for career advancement). Once a relationship is deemed utilitarian, outsiders may question the basis for work-related rewards from the higher-level participant. To date, there is no research on how this fear of third-party misperception of cross-sex friendship impacts friendships at work.

Similarly, the increased awareness of sexual harassment within organizations may impact cross-sex friendship development. A recent survey by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) found that 97 percent of organizations had sexual harassment policies, and 62 percent had formal training in dealing with sexual harassment (SHRM, 1999). However, little research has addressed how increased awareness of sexual harassment has impacted interactions between cross-sex co-workers. One survey of university professors found that 68 percent were concerned about being unjustly accused of sexual harassment, and 45 percent had modified their behavior toward students due to that concern (Nicks, 1996). In addition, Gutek (1997) suggests that 'the adversarial nature of the formal complaint procedures has had the effect of polarizing men and women in the workplace' (p. 196).

Finally, an examination of the literature on social networks and mentor relationships provides material relevant to cross-sex friendships at work. The preference of men to associate with other men has been well-established in the literature on social networks (see McPherson et al., 2001 for a review). Among managers, men tend to have more gender homophilous networks than do women (Ibarra, 1992, 1995). The causes for same-gender preference in these work networks have included similarity (individuals choose to be close to those who are similar to themselves) and contact (people are most likely to come into contact with others like themselves).

Research on cross-sex mentor relationships (typically male mentor and female protégé) indicates they can be more difficult to develop than same-sex mentor relationships. Cross-sex mentor pairs socialize less outside of work than same-sex mentor pairs, and report their relationships are harder to initiate due to fear that the prospective mentor or other co-workers would misconstrue their friendliness as sexual interest (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). These same concerns may apply to cross-sex friendship development in the workplace.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate friendships within the professional workplace and to examine what impact, if any, the workplace environment has on cross-sex friendship formation. Structured interviews were combined with a questionnaire in order to obtain a broad range of descriptions of friendship development within organizations. We focused exclusively on professionals in this study as one example of how the

work environment impacts cross-sex friendships. It will be left to future research to explore how other categories of workers' cross-sex friendships are affected by their organizations.

Method

Structured telephone interviews were conducted with 41 professionals from 30 different organizations. A sample of 21 women and 20 men were recruited. E-mail messages describing the study were sent to personal contacts of the first author requesting their participation, and these contacts were encouraged to forward the e-mail to other potential participants. Although personal contacts of the author represented 39 percent of the sample, these professionals were unaware of the study objectives or the author's research prior to participation. All interviews were conducted by the primary investigator who is female. In addition, questionnaires were sent to participants to supplement the interview.

To be eligible for the study, participants had to be professionals in organizations with at least 50 employees and had to be employed by their organization for at least six months. Participants were from various geographical regions of the US with the majority from New York City (54 percent) and Los Angeles (19 percent). Professions which typically require at least a bachelor's degree were considered 'professional' for purposes of this study. Occupations covered a wide range of professions including lawyers, computer programmers, investment bankers, management consultants and managers. Ages ranged from 23 to 59 years with a mean age of 31.7 years ($SD = 8.47$). Eighteen percent of participants described themselves as senior level managers in their organizations, 57 percent as mid-level, 20 percent as entry-level, and five percent as other. Fifteen percent of respondents were married, 15 percent were living with their romantic partner, and the remaining 70 percent were single. No questions were asked about the race, ethnicity or sexual orientation of respondents.

Since this study explored the impact of sexual harassment policies on cross-sex friendships, it is important to note that these professionals were all employed by organizations that had sexual harassment policies. The majority (56 percent) were employed by organizations which offered formal sexual harassment training or video programs that employees had to attend. Others received pamphlets, memos, or guidelines which had to be read and signed annually. These professionals heard about sexual harassment frequently, with 43 percent formally hearing from their organizations about sexual harassment at least once a year (and as frequently as once a month). Only one

participant had never heard about sexual harassment from his organization, and he had only been employed with his organization for six months.

Participants were told that the interviews would focus on friendships at work. For purposes of this study, participants were asked to use the following definition of a friend:

A friend is defined as someone you make an effort to talk to outside of what is required to complete your duties at work. That would not include people with whom you only exchange greetings, but would include those with whom you have short conversations that are not required by your job.

Respondents were first asked general questions about their friendships at work. Each participant was asked to discuss the benefits of friendships at work, the initiation of friendships at work compared to outside of work, and their three closest friends from work. The professionals were then asked specifically about their cross-sex friendships, and how these friendships were similar to or different from their same-sex friendships at work. Finally, participants were asked if they ever thought about sexual harassment issues when interacting with the opposite sex.

When the interview was concluded, participants completed a questionnaire about their organization. In the questionnaire, they rated their perception of the magnitude of certain obstacles to initiating cross-sex friendships at work. Consistent with prior research on cross-sex friendships, these items covered fear of sexual interpretation of the friendly overtures, third-party concerns and gendered differences in friendship. Some items were specific to the workplace (e.g. 'Fear friendliness will be misinterpreted as sexual harassment'), while others would apply both inside and outside of the workplace (e.g. 'Jealousy from a romantic partner'). Participants rated how large an obstacle each item was for them in starting cross-sex friendships with peers and also how large an obstacle it was in starting cross-sex friendships with their superiors and subordinates. Participants rated these potential obstacles on a scale from 1 (representing no obstacle at all) to 9 (an insurmountable obstacle). Most participants completed the interview and questionnaire within 40 minutes.

Interviews were transcribed, and a qualitative analysis using multiple readings of transcripts was used to identify the major concepts that emerged from the interview. A process of open coding was then applied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Codes were generated from a microanalysis involving a line by line reading of the transcripts. The codes were noted next to each response on the transcripts. The code labels were reviewed and more abstract

categories, applying to several specific responses, were determined. To identify possible differences between men and women, transcripts for each group were read separately to determine categories that were more dominant in each group. In addition, we completed exploratory data analysis to uncover patterns in the quantitative data.

Results

The primary goal of analyzing interview and questionnaire data was to investigate obstacles to the formation of cross-sex friendships at work. Before turning to this topic, however, we briefly consider respondents' views on initiating friendships, benefits of workplace friendships, their perceptions of the ease of making friends at work, and the gender patterning of respondents' workplace friendships.

Friendships at work

Participants were asked about their three closest friendships at work and how these friendships were initiated. The most common theme that emerged was having a similar interest or goal. The similarities mentioned were both work-related (worked on the same projects together) and non-work related (interests in current events, sports, family, members of the opposite sex and jokes). Other themes that emerged for why the friendships began include physical proximity (e.g. having desks or offices in close proximity to one another), a previous relationship with the person (e.g. went to college together) and a formal work relationship (e.g. boss/subordinate, mentor/mentee, or interviewer/interviewee).

Consistent with previous research, all respondents were able to identify benefits they received from their friends at work when asked specifically about these benefits during the interview. Although the specific benefits cited were varied, respondents commonly emphasized that friends provided many forms of assistance and that informal social interactions with friends make the work setting more enjoyable.

Friends were also seen as providing valuable information and assistance. One man, an urban planner, reported that his friends at work help him 'gather information, not just about how the company works, but who is doing what to whom and when, and what the real story was.' Friends were thought to aid with networking and information flow that is critical to career success. A female computer programmer provided a typical description of the benefits of friends at work:

It gives you a network, it does help in learning what's going on in other areas of the organization . . . It could be things that help you do your job better when you hear about things that you might not have heard about from your manager or people you work with directly.

Professionals often felt more comfortable turning to friends rather than other co-workers or supervisors for advice, information, and assistance.

Friends were described as helpful, even essential, to one's career. Friends were characterized as allies who 'look out for you.' A male manager commented, 'Friends are necessary for survival . . . because your enemies are going to kill you, it's a jungle out there.'

In addition to providing information and assistance, friends also made the workplace more enjoyable on a day-to-day basis. Conversations with friends were seen as offering a break in the monotony of the work day. As a male investment banker explained:

It allows you to work longer, because you don't have to be focused on doing the same job all day long. You can have breaks which consist of conversations about other topics which allows you to get some mental relief or rest time from work issues so that you can then go back to them.

Friends also provided someone to listen to complaints. A female information technology consultant noted that:

Being able to share some of your grievances or what you like about your job with somebody who is able to understand . . . especially in our line of work, it's really complicated what we do, so when you try to talk about work with somebody else, you have to explain, but when you're with people at work they understand.

In sum, friends were seen as a vital ingredient in a professional's work life.

The professionals we interviewed perceived the workplace as providing many opportunities for making new friends. In interviews, when asked to compare the initiation of friendships at work with those outside of work, most respondents (80 percent) reported that it was easier for them to initiate friendships at work. The workplace provided mutual interests and occasions for informal conversations that could lead to friendship. As one woman technology consultant explained, 'you spend approximately eight hours a day, five days a week with a certain group of people at work so there's a rather high probability of making friends at work.'

The workplace presumably offers opportunities for both same-sex and cross-sex friendships to develop. In some ways, the shared goals and interests of co-workers might help to overcome the obstacles to cross-sex friendships found outside of work, where gender differences in interests and leisure activities may limit opportunities for cross-sex friendships. In the current research, the majority of professionals came from predominantly male organizations. Consequently, it might be expected that both men and women would be more likely to report having men as friends. This was not the case. When asked to list their three closest friends at work, 69 percent of the friends chosen were same-sex and only 31 percent were cross-sex.

An overview of barriers to cross-sex friendship is provided by participants' numerical ratings of nine potential obstacles presented to them in the questionnaire (see Table 1). Participants were asked to rate each potential obstacle to cross-sex friendships on a scale of 1 (no obstacle at all) to 9 (an insurmountable obstacle). The variance in responses indicate that these barriers do impact cross-sex friendships for some employees. In order to determine when the barriers to cross-sex friendship are greatest, differences in mean ratings were examined with respect to marital status, age and organizational size (all three of which emerged as themes from the qualitative portion of the analysis). Ratings of obstacles for cross-sex friendships between peers were also compared to those between superiors and subordinates. No significant differences were found between the ratings of male and female participants.

Mean comparisons revealed that participants who were married ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 1.6$) rated sexual tension in friendship as less of a barrier to cross-sex friendship between peers than single participants ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.5$) $t(39) = 2.033$, $p = .04$. No other significant differences were found between the ratings of married and single participants. With respect to age, participants under 30 years old ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.7$) were less likely to rate jealousy from a romantic partner as an obstacle to a cross-sex friendship between subordinates and superiors ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.95$), $t(39) = 2.5$, $p = .01$. No other mean differences between older and younger participants were significant at the .05 level. For organizational size, mean comparisons revealed those who were in larger organizations (between 50 and 100 people) rated jealousy from a romantic partner ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.9$), sexual tension in friendship ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.7$) and comfort with same-sex friends ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.9$) as a greater obstacle to cross-sex friendships between peers than those in smaller organizations ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 1.7$) $t(39) = 2.1$, $p = .04$; ($M = 1.7$, $SD = 1.0$) $t(39) = 2.3$, $p = .03$; and ($M = 1.9$, $SD = 0.8$) $t(39) = 2.3$, $p = .03$ respectively. In addition, those in large organizations ($M = 4.4$,

SD = 2.1) rated jealousy from a romantic partner as more of an obstacle to cross-sex friendships between superiors and subordinates than those in smaller organizations ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 2.0$) $t(39) = 2.1$, $p = .04$.

Finally, the obstacles may have a greater impact on cross-sex friendships between subordinates and superiors than those between peers. With the exception of jealousy of spouses, mean ratings for all other obstacles to cross-sex friendships between superiors and subordinates exceeded mean ratings for friendships between peers. On each individual item, mean

Table 1 Ratings of potential obstacles to cross-sex friendships at work

Potential barrier	Friendships with peers Mean (S.D.)			Friendships with subordinates and superiors Mean (S.D.)		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
<i>Fear of sexual interpretation of friendship</i>						
Fear friendliness will be misinterpreted as sexual harassment	3.7 (2.0)	2.9 (1.6)	3.3 (1.8)	4.5 (2.1)	3.7 (2.1)	4.1 (2.1)
Sexual tension in friendship	2.6 (1.6)	2.7 (1.7)	2.6 (1.6)	2.6 (1.6)	3.1 (1.9)	2.9 (1.7)
Fear friendliness will be misinterpreted as sexual or romantic interest	4.1 (1.7)	3.4 (1.6)	3.7 (1.7)	4.6 (2.3)	3.9 (2.1)	4.2 (2.2)
Fear of sexual harassment charges	3.3 (1.8)	4.2 (2.3)	3.8 (2.1)	4.3 (2.0)	4.6 (2.4)	4.4 (2.2)
<i>Fear of third party concerns</i>						
Other coworkers misinterpret friendship	3.9 (1.8)	3.5 (1.9)	3.7 (1.8)	4.8 (1.9)	4.2 (2.2)	4.5 (2.1)
Jealousy from romantic partner	3.7 (1.9)	4.4 (1.9)	4.1 (1.9)	3.8 (2.1)	4.1 (2.3)	4.0 (2.2)
<i>Gendered preferences in friendship</i>						
Different interaction styles of men and women	3.4 (1.6)	3.2 (1.7)	3.3 (1.7)	3.2 (1.6)	3.8 (1.9)	3.5 (1.8)
Different interests	2.9 (1.5)	3.2 (2.0)	3.0 (1.7)	2.9 (1.4)	3.8 (2.1)	3.4 (1.8)
More comfortable with same-sex friends	2.5 (1.2)	3.2 (2.1)	2.9 (1.8)	2.8 (1.5)	3.8 (2.2)	3.4 (1.9)

There are no significant differences between ratings between peers and ratings between subordinates and superiors at $p < .05$. There are no significant differences between ratings by men and by women at $p < .05$.

comparisons indicated that the differences between ratings for peers and superiors/subordinates were not significant at the .05 level. However, using the binomial expansion, the probability that eight of the nine mean ratings for subordinates and superiors randomly would be greater than the respective mean ratings for peers if there was no true mean difference is .017.

In the following sections, we used interview data to consider in greater depth professionals' concerns that other co-workers will misperceive the nature of a cross-sex friendship, concerns that a potential cross-sex friend will misinterpret a friendly overture, and fears related to possible accusations of sexual harassment. We also examined the differential impact of these obstacles in relationships with friends versus acquaintances.

Concern that other co-workers will misperceive cross-sex friendships

In interviews, professionals expressed concern that their co-workers would misperceive a cross-sex friendship as romantic. Although this third party issue also affects cross-sex friendships outside the office, the workplace exacerbates such concerns. In the workplace, sexual and romantic relationships between co-workers are often deemed inappropriate. Further, in the work environment, privacy is limited, and individuals can often easily observe the behavior of their co-workers.

A female recruiter described her apprehensions about being observed with a male co-worker friend and suggested that the size of an organization may impact this concern:

When I go out with my one male friend I always wonder what people are thinking. . . . You can really shoot yourself in the foot if you're forging personal relationships that go beyond friendships with members of the opposite sex. Sometimes I do feel it's a little bit different here, because it's a smaller audience. And what you're doing here is more closely scrutinized than it would be with a larger organization.

Marital status may be another factor in third party judgment of relationships. Married women and men believed that their cross-sex friendships were not questioned, because their co-workers knew they were married. A single, female attorney described how this third party scrutiny was particularly aimed at single employees:

If you're not married or you're not dating someone seriously, people in the office will always think there is something going on between

opposite-sex friends. So you have to get over, get used to that, just work through it.

Similarly, a male management consultant conveyed how his friendship was misinterpreted:

My good friend, the one that I walk around with at lunch and stuff, she got engaged a couple of years ago, and this guy saw us walking around together, saw that she was engaged, and assumed that I was who she was engaged to. So, I think people have probably wondered whether there was any kind of romantic relationship going on because we hung out so much. Although that was the only time anyone ever said something about it, it was obvious that was what they thought.

In total, 30 percent of participants reported in interviews that they had a co-worker question them about a cross-sex friendship. This suspicion from co-workers creates self-consciousness for those involved in cross-sex friendships.

Concern that a potential cross-sex friend will misinterpret friendliness

The professionals in this study also worried that a potential cross-sex friend might misinterpret their friendly gestures as sexual or romantic interest. The first concern focused on features of the work culture that discourage any type of sexual attraction in the workplace. Men were more likely than women to mention these concerns, and they expressed how their concern was greater in the workplace where misinterpretation can result in sexual harassment allegations. The following male engineering consultant described how the heightened awareness of sexual harassment issues in the workplace may make his cross-sex friendships take longer to develop:

There is certainly an atmosphere of awareness in this day and age about what type of behavior is acceptable between opposite-sex relationships so those friendships that weren't initiated by activities relating directly to work would probably take longer to nurture than they would if you had some direct interaction on a daily basis, because there is that element that you feel like you're seeking that person out in a non-work sort of way.

A second concern expressed by both men and women was more interpersonal. Professionals mentioned the awkwardness of dealing with a

misunderstanding and the discomfort of repeatedly seeing someone at work who had previously made such an interpretation. These concerns made some professionals wary of cross-sex friendships and led others to end these relationships. As one female management consultant explained, 'I always feel that it [being friends] ends up being something where maybe someone gets the wrong idea, and then you can't be friends anymore.' Similarly, a female technology consultant described how she ended a cross-sex friendship when there was a misinterpretation:

I just stopped being friends with him. Usually I just would either try and bring up the fact that I have a boyfriend in casual conversation so the other person gets the message that I'm not interested, or really try and be less friendly than I might normally be, so that the person doesn't interpret that. Or just stop being friends with them at all.

In summary, 25 percent of professionals linked their fears of misinterpretation to aspects of the workplace. They sought to refrain from anything that could be misconstrued because of an 'atmosphere of awareness' of sexual harassment issues at work or because 'it's ingrained in you that you don't.' Professionals also describe the awkwardness that surrounds misinterpretations and how this awkwardness often results in the termination of friendships.

Not all of the professionals interviewed were afraid of appearing romantically interested in their co-workers. Four professionals described instances of flirtation with co-workers, and this ability to flirt made initiating cross-sex friendships easier for them. One female attorney suggested that the work environment was a particularly safe place to flirt with her male colleagues:

I think they're different though, the same-sex [friendships], especially in the legal field, we have all these lawyers' lunches and it tends to be like we're women in this together. Where with the guys it would be, more like it would be outside of work, flirting a little bit, and joking around. . . . I think that to me, as a single person, and all these single guys here, it helps start it [cross-sex friendship] definitely cause you know you can flirt with them, but there's always, oh we work together so it wouldn't work out anyway.

In summary, the professionals we interviewed had differing views about flirting and sexual attraction in the workplace. Most of the participants who discussed this issue seemed to accept the idea that sexual

attraction should be minimized at work and sought to avoid being falsely perceived as romantically linked to a co-worker. A smaller set of participants, both men and women, suggested that flirtation and even mutual romantic attractions in this environment might promote cross-sex friendships.

Heightened awareness about sexual harassment

A third common obstacle to cross-sex friendship centered on issues directly related to sexual harassment. Men, in particular, mentioned how they had to think about what they said before speaking to women because they feared their comments could be misinterpreted. In interviews, 75 percent of male participants mentioned that they think about sexual harassment issues when interacting with women at work. They discussed how they must watch what they say with women and cannot share the same stories and jokes with women that they can with men. Humor and joking were mentioned most frequently by men as something that could not be shared with women at work. Those same comments among same-sex friends go unedited and unnoticed. One male management consultant explained how fears of offending a woman can inhibit friendship:

If I make an off-color joke or something like that, I'm more likely to do that with a male than a female. Not that I go around telling dirty jokes all the time, but if I get a funny e-mail or something like that, that I find humorous, I would certainly segregate by gender who I'd send that to, if I were to pass it on. So is it harder to develop a real friendship. I have to have comfort that, even though I am not necessarily operating strictly within the professional decorum boundaries, that's not going to reflect back on me professionally through that person's eyes. And it's easier to get a feel for that with a same-sex person.

By contrast, women were not afraid of sharing jokes and humor with men. Instead, women reported sensing men's discomfort and noticing their exclusion by men. In interviews, only five percent of women felt as though they had to watch what they say around men at work, but 66 percent of the women mentioned that men at work seemed inhibited in their conversations with women. A woman consultant summarized how she feels the need to put men at ease:

I think a lot of times [cross-sex friendships] are harder to make because I feel like sometimes, [men] don't feel like they can relax when women are around as much. They feel like they have to be careful what they

say, and they have to be careful what jokes they tell in front of the women in the office. Whereas when they're just all men they can joke around and talk about things they wouldn't want to talk about when women were around so it's harder to break that barrier, but once that barrier has been broken, then I guess it's easier for me to be closer with them. . . . I try to make the men feel like I understand them, that I'm not offended by all their stupid jokes and things like that. I guess after they understand that I'm not like every woman that's going to sue them for sexual harassment or something, then it's fine.

Similarly, a woman attorney noted the discomfort of male partners in her firm:

My own experience when I worked with certain male partners, I think when they worked with male associates they would be more free to, as some attorneys do, probably a lot senior management do, to swear or act in a certain way. You felt as though they didn't feel comfortable doing that in front of you which was fine, but then you felt that also they just didn't feel comfortable, they felt uncomfortable with you entirely. You could tell they were trying to think about how they should act which made it a kind of uncomfortable relationship. You wanted to say, hey, act how you want, I don't really care, I'm very easy going, just do whatever. You could just sense that they felt they had to act differently and that it made them just prefer to not be alone with you in an office and not have to, you know, they would rather work with a male associate.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was that the same behavior might be interpreted differently by a same-sex versus other-sex co-worker. Consider a situation in which an employee compliments a co-worker on her new dress. If the compliment comes from a woman, it might initiate the development of a friendship. A woman hospital manager described how she began her relationship with one of her closest same-sex friends at work: 'In the building, she's the closest one to my age, it just automatically started by commenting on each other's outfits or accessories or something.'

In contrast, when a male manager offered a similar compliment to a woman at work, he was questioned by the human resources department for alleged sexual harassment:

Then the next question [from the human resources department] was 'Have you ever complimented this person on her clothes?' And then all

the sudden I said, 'Oh, where are you going with this? First of all, this is a person who did wear very nice clothes, but otherwise, believe me I had no interest in her whatsoever, but if I said that's a nice suit or something, nothing was meant by that.' Quite specifically, I know that sometimes that comment can be a euphemism for nice tight sweater, but this is not a case of a woman who had a shapely figure or wore revealing clothes, she wore tailored stuff and there was no turn-on there, so anything that was interpreted, it had to be entirely on her part.

As a result of the questioning and accusations, this man was more reserved and hesitant in talking to women about certain topics. In short, concerns linked to sexual harassment can contribute to a preference for same-sex friends at work.

Obstacles affect interactions with acquaintances more than close friends

In discussing how concern about sexual harassment impacts their cross-sex friendships, a noticeable distinction was made between close friendships and less established friendships. In interviews, when asked specifically what they talk about with their three closest friends at work, no participants reported concern over sexual harassment and none said they restricted their conversational topics even when the close friend was a cross-sex friend. However, it was in response to interview questions about all of their cross-sex friends at work (e.g. at work, is there anything that makes opposite-sex friendships either easier or more difficult to start than same-sex friendships?) that the conversational concerns began to emerge. The discrepancy may be explained by the closeness of the friend. The conversational concerns may not apply to close cross-sex friends, but only to those they knew less well. As one man, a technology consultant, described:

My closer friends that are opposite sex, now that I've gotten to know them, I don't really temper my discussions, but with people that aren't one of my couple best friends at work, I pretty much don't even talk to them about anything other than work or I try to temper what I say.

Similarly, women did not report that their closest male friends exhibited the discomfort they described of their more distant friends. As previously pointed out by the female technology consultant,

. . . once that barrier has been broken, then I guess it's easier for me to be closer with them [male co-workers]. . . I guess after they understand that I'm not like every woman that's going to sue them for sexual harassment or something then it's fine.

Discussion

The professionals in this study reported receiving substantial benefits from their friends at work. In addition to making the workday more enjoyable, friends provided valuable advice, information, and assistance. Although it was easier for the professionals to meet people and make friends at work than outside work, the participants reported the majority of their closest friends at work were of the same sex. Even women working in predominantly male organizations tended to form more friendships with women than with men.

Although many factors undoubtedly contribute to this pattern of same-sex friendships at work, several were particularly noteworthy. Similar interests played a role in the friendship development of the professionals in this study, and gender differences in interests may lead to a preference for same-sex friends (Martin, 1997; Swain, 1992). However, within the workplace, co-workers share a common interest in the work they perform, which facilitates friendship development. The majority of the participants' closest friendships in the present study were launched as a result of cooperating on a work project. Although gendered interests may still pose some obstacle to friendships within the workplace, they most likely create a more substantial barrier to friendships outside of work.

Instead, barriers to cross-sex friendship at work centered around aspects of the work environment that discourage romantic entanglements among co-workers and seek to prevent sexual harassment. Professionals were concerned that their co-workers might misperceive a platonic cross-sex friendship as an inappropriate sexual liaison. While misperception is also a concern of cross-sex friends outside of the workplace, it may present a greater barrier inside the organization, where co-workers speculate about the motives of the perceived romantic partners (Bowes-Sperry & Tata, 1999; Mainiero, 1986; Powell & Graves, 2003). In addition, men reported concern that women at work might misinterpret a friendly overture as sexual harassment, or that women would take offense at their jokes or topics of conversation. Women were concerned that men felt uncomfortable in their presence and therefore might avoid them. These concerns appeared to be more

common in interactions with acquaintances and casual friends than among close friends and between senior and subordinate pairs than between peers.

On a positive note, the findings of this study suggest that sexual harassment policies are working. Men reported they joke less in front of women and are less likely to perform behaviors that may be interpreted as harassment. Women concur that men joke less around them, and that men are less likely to be alone in an office with a woman. Certainly these behaviors create a workplace with a less hostile environment for women. However, an additional, unintended consequence of increased sexual harassment awareness is that it may make cross-sex friendships harder to develop. Consistent with research that indicates that women perceive more behaviors as harassing, the male participants restricted their behavior around women, but not around men, increasing contact among men (Berryman-Fink & Riley, 1997; Solomon & Williams, 1997). Furthermore, the same interactions that were deemed inappropriate for cross-sex communication were utilized to develop same-sex friendships. For example, male employees described initiating friendships by joking with other men, but not women. A male participant who complimented a woman on her clothes is charged with harassment, while a female participant reported offering clothing compliments to other women to start friendships. If co-workers believe that same-sex friends will not label their behavior as harassing, they may have a larger range of behaviors to utilize in initiating same-sex friendships.

The glass partition

Along with obstacles associated with cross-sex friendships outside of the organization, organizational practices that heighten workers' fears about sexual harassment and proper conduct on the job may create barriers that inhibit male and female employees from crossing the gender line to form cross-sex friendships. We label these barriers to cross-sex friendship in the workplace the 'glass partition.' Much like the glass ceiling which prevents women from reaching the top levels of corporations, the glass partition may differentially disadvantage women who work in predominantly male organizations. As participants in this study clearly indicated, friends can be invaluable to success on the job.

Factors that limit a worker's range of friends based on gender place greater restrictions on women than on men. For example, women in male-dominated professions need to befriend men in order to obtain the information and networking necessary for career success. Men in these professions, however, have sufficient numbers of same-sex co-workers and senior managers to befriend.

Obstacles to cross-sex friendships may also limit women's ability to establish friendships with senior employees which could evolve into mentor relationships. The present research suggests that the barriers to cross-sex friendship may be greater for friendships between superiors and subordinates. Since men often hold the most powerful positions in corporations (e.g. in 2002, 84 percent of the corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies were men [Catalyst, 2002]), women who are not able to forge friendships with men in their workplace may be left with less powerful mentors or no mentors at all. This may be particularly true for women who are senior within their organization and must seek out mentors at the top levels of the organization.

Although some have suggested same-sex mentor relationships may be more effective than cross-sex relationships, the research is inconclusive as to whether same-sex mentor relationships or cross-sex mentor relationships are more beneficial to the protégé (see Powell, 1999, for review). However, because of their power in the organizations, male mentors may have the ability to provide more valuable support to both their male and female protégés. For example, Dreher and Cox (1996) found that both male and female MBA graduates with male mentors were able to attain greater compensation than those with female mentors. Once again, women who have more difficulty establishing friendships or mentor relationships with men in the organization have a career disadvantage.

By contrast, the glass partition may have less impact for men in female-dominated environments, where women outnumber men. Williams (1989, 1992, 1995) suggests that men who enter female-dominated professions, such as nursing, befriend the men who are often at the supervisory levels of these professions. That is, since many female-dominated professions often have men at higher levels of management, the men entering these professions have other, more senior men with whom they can establish friendships or mentor relationships. These relationships with senior men create what Williams labeled a 'glass escalator' for men in these fields, allowing them to advance their careers more quickly than their female co-workers. However, this preference for same-sex friends may prevent the women in female-dominated professions, which are still predominantly managed by men, from establishing valuable friendships with management and senior personnel.

Possible moderators of the impact of the glass partition on cross-sex friendship include the closeness of the friendship, the relative status of those in the organization, the marital status of the friends and the size of the organization. First, the discomfort with cross-sex co-workers may impact acquaintance relationships more than close friendships. Although close friendships can create a strong bond between individuals, there are significant advantages to acquaintance-type relationships. Granovetter (1973,

1974) found that people with whom an individual shares a close bond are likely to be in the same network as the individual and therefore provide redundant contacts and information. Acquaintances, or what Granovetter labels weak ties, can be more advantageous than closer ties because they bring individuals into new networks and provide less redundant information and contacts than the closer ties. For example, several studies have found those who used weak ties to find new jobs obtained better jobs than those who used only strong ties (Bian, 1997; Lin & Dumin, 1986). In addition, closer friendships evolve from acquaintances in the organizations, so barriers to the establishment of weak ties may ultimately hinder the development of close friendships.

Second, the glass partition may have a greater impact on cross-sex friendships between superiors and subordinates than those between peers. Senior employees may be more concerned about befriending cross-sex junior employees, because misperceptions may have consequences for both employees' careers. If the cross-sex friendship is misperceived as romantic then others may speculate that the relationship is utilitarian or that inequities exist in the workplace (Bowes-Sperry & Tata, 1999; Powell, 2001). Also, since sexual harassment often involves one party with greater power in the organization (Tangri et al., 1982), the more senior employee may have a greater fear that friendly gestures will be misperceived as harassment.

The relationship between marital status and the glass partition is less clear. Some barriers may have less impact for married people whose 'off-limits' status reduces the likelihood that their friendliness will be misperceived as sexual interest, and thus allows them more freedom in establishing friendships. However, sexual attraction can aid in the development of cross-sex friendships (Rose, 1985), and some single participants reported their ability to flirt broke down barriers to cross-sex friendship.

The effect of organizational size on the glass partition remains equally unresolved. A small organization may foster more frequent contact facilitating friendship development, but third-party concerns may be greater in a small organization where everyone can observe their co-workers' behaviors. Future research should further investigate the relationship between the glass partition, marital status and organization size.

It is important to note that these barriers to cross-sex friendships are not insurmountable. With the exception of one male participant, all participants in the study had at least one cross-sex friendship at work. The glass partition merely suggests that it may be more difficult to establish cross-sex friendships than same-sex friendships. With over 112 million women in the US workforce (US Census Bureau, 2003), and men holding the most powerful positions in many corporations (Catalyst, 2002), phenomena which create even small barriers to cross-sex friendships could have a large impact on the

career advancement of women (Prentice & Miller, 1992). Although a substantial number of cross-sex friendships develop in the workplace, future researchers of the glass partition are cautioned to examine not only these friendships that were able to overcome barriers, but also to consider potential friendships that were never initiated due to the glass partition.

Limitations

As a first study of cross-sex friendship at work, the goal of this research was exploratory. As a result the research was limited in several ways. Due to the difficulty in recruiting busy professionals for lengthy interviews, the sample was relatively small. However, the sample of professionals came from diverse organizations and different regions of the country. It is also important to note that this study examined cross-sex friendships in large professional organizations. It is possible that employees in smaller organizations or in non-professional work environments may have different experiences. In addition, different organizational cultures may differentially impact the barriers to cross-sex friendship. A systematic investigation of organizational culture and cross-sex friendship would be useful.

No information was requested about the sexual orientation of the participants or of their cross-sex friends. It is possible that homosexuals and heterosexuals face different barriers to same-sex and cross-sex friendships at work. One woman in this study mentioned that a gay male work friend was 'no threat whatsoever' and that her friendship with him was similar to her same-sex friendships. However, lesbians and gay men may encounter more barriers to same-sex friendship than cross-sex friendship in the workplace. Future research examining sexual orientation and workplace friendship would be useful.

Although the gender make-up of the participants' organizations was assessed, no information was collected on the gender makeup of the participant's work role. Although men and women often work in the same organization, work roles or jobs are often segregated by sex (see Padavic & Reskin, 2002, for review). Having similar work roles may also lead workers to prefer same-sex friends. It will be left to future research to examine the impact of gender segregated work roles on the glass partition.

Future directions for the organization

Although some barriers to cross-sex friendships will exist regardless of organizational policies, there may be directions the organization can take to diminish the impact of the glass partition. For example, sexual harassment

policies that were initiated to make the workplace a more hospitable environment for women may, inadvertently, have increased barriers to cross-sex friendship at work. Sexual harassment has been a serious problem faced by women at work, and efforts to prevent harassment and to make the workplace more welcoming to women are commendable. Fortunately, results of this study suggest that an awareness of harassment has successfully influenced men to reduce their inappropriate joking and conversation in front of women in the workplace. However, male employees may continue to utilize this inappropriate behavior to bond with other men in the workplace, leaving the female employees feeling ostracized. It is therefore time for those who train employees about sexual harassment to see beyond the legal liability and consider the behavioral consequences of these programs. For example, employees should understand that jokes and offensive language and behavior that are not appropriate for cross-sex interactions are also not appropriate for same-sex interactions in the workplace. In addition, if sexual harassment regulations were less ambiguous, employees might not need to fear misinterpretation of their well-intentioned actions.

Future investigations could also explore other organizational changes that could help break down the glass partition. Powell (2001) has suggested that the implementation of organizational training on handling workplace romances may reduce the negative reactions from co-workers. This may have the additional benefit of reducing the anxiety that surrounds cross-sex friendships that may appear romantic. Finally, if organizations encouraged social interaction and facilitated friendship among men and women at work, perhaps social, cross-sex interactions would not be perceived as unusual.

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