In heterosexual samples, men and women consistently report low-to-moderate levels of romantic and sexual attraction to their opposite-sex friends.1, 2 A constructional explanation for sexual attraction to opposite-sex friends emphasizes heterosociation in society, such that men and women are socialized to sexualize the opposite sex.3 An alternative explanation, however, is that men and women have evolved mating strategies that are activated by the presence of reproductively viable members of the opposite sex.4 If this latter hypothesis is correct, then thinking about either a romantic partner or opposite-sex friend should prime sexual cognition; but thinking about an opposite-sex sibling should not prime sexual cognition (because although siblings are likely to be of similar age, they are kin rather than potential reproductive partners).

In heterosexual samples, men report more sexual attraction to their female friends than women do to their male friends.5, 6 It may be that women are not consciously aware of attraction to their opposite-sex friends or that women do not consciously experience matevalue potential in their friendships. Alternatively, it may be that women’s mating motives are less activated than are men’s in the context of opposite-sex friendship. To test these competing possibilities, we investigated men’s and women’s reported attraction to their opposite-sex friend and compared it to their “implicit” sexual cognitive response after thinking about their opposite-sex friend.

In Study 1, we asked men and women to write about either an opposite-sex sibling, an opposite-sex friend, or their current romantic partner; then we assessed their sexual cognition with a word-relatedness task.5, 6 We defined sexual cognition as the extent to which individuals perceived sexually ambiguous words (e.g., heat) as related to other sexual words and sexually ambiguous words.

In Study 2, we asked men and women to write about either an opposite-sex sibling, an opposite-sex friend, or their current romantic partner; then we assessed their sexual cognition with a word-completion task.7 We defined sexual cognition as the proportion of word stems completed with a sexual response as opposed to a non-sexual word.

**Hypotheses**

H1. Explicit attraction to different relationship partners: Participants’ explicit self-reports will reveal more sexual attraction toward romantic partners than toward opposite-sex friends or opposite-sex siblings, and more sexual attraction toward opposite-sex friends than toward opposite-sex siblings.

H2. Implicit attraction to different relationship partners: Participants’ implicit sexual attraction, as indexed by sexual cognition, will be stronger after writing about a romantic partner or opposite-sex friend than after writing about an opposite-sex sibling.

H3. Sex differences in explicit attraction to opposite-sex friends: Men and women will report similarly high levels of sexual attraction to their romantic partners and similarly low levels of sexual attraction to their opposite-sex siblings, but women will self-report more sexual attraction to their opposite-sex friends than women will.

**Research Question:** Will men and women differ in implicit sexual attraction to their opposite-sex friends (as indexed by sexual cognition)?

**Participants**

**STUDY 1.** A total of 56 men and 209 women completed a survey online (Mean age=20.91). Participants were recruited through university resources and social networking sites. They first reported their romantic relationship status and then completed a survey, which filtered them into their primary condition options. A total of 39 men and 131 women wrote about an opposite-sex friend, 11 men and 44 women about a romantic partner, and 6 men and 34 women about an opposite-sex sibling.

**STUDY 2.** A total of 98 men and 149 women from upper-level courses across campus completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire as part of an in-class activity (Mean age=21.76). A total of 57 men and 73 women wrote about an opposite-sex friend, 15 men and 34 women about a romantic partner, and 26 men and 39 women about an opposite-sex sibling. Those without a sibling or mate were asked to write about an opposite-sex friend.

**Method**

**STEP 1. RELATIONSHIP PRIME**

In both studies, participants were asked to think about either an opposite-sex friend, opposite-sex friend, or current romantic partner, as applicable to their sibship and relationship status. Participants wrote in the name of the person and then typed (or wrote in Study 2) responses to several questions about their target person. The questions:

- Tell us about your first memory with this person.
- How long have you known this person?
- Describe what activities you and this person enjoy doing together.
- What aspects of their personality do you like?
- What aspects of their appearance do you like most?
- How do you feel about this person?
- What do you like best about the relationship you have with this person?

**STEP 2. SEXUAL COGNITION TASK (“IMPLICIT” SEXUAL ATTRACTION)**

In Study 1, we had expected that participants primed to be in an opposite-sex friend/mate were more likely to respond sexually on the word completion task.5, 6 In fact, our word-pair relatedness task was not directly assessing sexual attraction. Instead, participants were asked to judge the relatedness of word pairs. The relatedness of the word pairs might reflect their ability to complete the word stems with sexual words. In Study 2, we expected that participants primed to be in an opposite-sex friend/mate would tend to predict (although not significantly) the opposite-sex friend as related to one another. Specifically, we had predicted that participants primed to be in a mating mindset would perceive sexually ambiguous words as related. In Study 2, opposite-sex friends did tend to predict (although not significantly) the opposite-sex friend as related to one another. Specifically, we had predicted that participants primed to be in a mating mindset would perceive sexually ambiguous words as related. In Study 2, opposite-sex friends did tend to predict (although not significantly) the opposite-sex friend as related to one another. Specifically, we had predicted that participants primed to be in a mating mindset would perceive sexually ambiguous words as related. In Study 2, opposite-sex friends did tend to predict (although not significantly) the opposite-sex friend as related to one another. Specifically, we had predicted that participants primed to be in a mating mindset would perceive sexually ambiguous words as related. In Study 2, opposite-sex friends did tend to predict (although not significantly) the opposite-sex friend as related to one another. Specifically, we had predicted that participants primed to be in a mating mindset would perceive sexually ambiguous words as related.