

---

## Interaction Adaptation Theory in Cross-Sex Friendships: A Literature Review

Daniel Casey  
Kent State University Stark

*This literature review examines how interaction adaptation theory (IAT) functions within cross-sex heterosexual friendships where one or both members desire a different level of intimacy. IAT seeks to explain and predict how individuals interact in dyadic exchanges based on how different or congruent a situation unfolds compared to the individuals' anticipated outcome. Specifically, this review examines how expectations, matching, and diverging behaviors function across a variety of cross-sex friendships from the perspective of IAT.*

Starting at birth, individuals develop adaptation patterns that will shape how they act in interpersonal relationships for the rest of their lives (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995). Burgoon et al. (1995) constructed the interaction adaptation theory (IAT) with the purpose of explaining how and why individuals react the way they do in dyadic interpersonal exchanges. IAT states that the way an individual will react in a dyadic exchange will depend upon how they imagined the interaction would take place, and what actually happens during the interaction (Floyd & Burgoon, 1999). There are a host of variables that affect how an individual imagines an interaction will take place that will be covered in a later section. This paper will examine how IAT functions in the context of heterosexual cross-sex friendships where one or both members of the dyad seek to escalate the level of intimacy in the relationship. Friends-first relationships are unique because both partners are able to develop emotional intimacy prior to developing physical intimacy (Akbulut & Weger Jr., 2016). This increased understanding of a relational partner typically allows for more accurate predictions of how they will behave or adapt in a dyadic exchange. However, the uncertainty that comes with escalating a friendship to a physically intimate or romantic relationship can affect how an individual predicts their partner will adapt (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). This is especially true in instances where one partner views the friendship

---

differently than the other partner. In order to better understand how these variables work together a more thorough explanation of IAT is needed.

### **Background of Interaction Adaptation Theory**

Interaction adaptation theory seeks to explain how individuals will react in a given situation based on a combination of their expectancies, desires, and requirements for that situation (Burgoon et al., 1995). Expectancies are comprised of what an individual thinks will happen within a given situation based on its context. They are often based on the social norms for that specific situation. For example, if an individual shares a piece of good news with a friend she may expect that her friend will congratulate her. Likewise, telling a friend bad news may lead to the expectation that the friend will attempt to help or console the individual. Expectations typically become more accurate the better an individual knows the person she is interacting with (Burgoon et al., 1995). In addition to expectancies, individuals bring their own set of desires to any given interaction. Desires are made up of an individual's goals, preferences, current mood, and temperament (Burgoon et al., 1995). They are not based solely on the desires for a specific interaction. Desires can be characterized by long term goals that affect an individual's everyday life in less obvious ways. For instance, an individual wanting to become the president of The United States will likely carry herself differently on a daily basis than someone who does not have the same dream. That individual's desire to become the president affects her interactions, even in interactions unrelated to her future plans. Finally, requirements are basic biological needs that an individual needs fulfilled by an interaction (Burgoon et al., 1995). These requirements can be as simple as standing closer to someone who has a hearing impairment, or more complex. Other requirements can include, but are not limited to, the need for love, affiliation, affirmation, and autonomy. Depending on the situation, an individual's expectancies, desires, and requirements can change. They are dynamic in nature. It is not uncommon for these variables to shift throughout the course of an interaction as well (Burgoon et al., 1995).

Expectations, desires, and requirements work in combination to create an interaction position. An interaction position is a prediction of how an individual envisions a specific interaction will occur (Burgoon et al., 1995). Similar to the previously mentioned variables, interaction positions can change and evolve throughout an interaction. Contextual information

---

for specific interactions helps inform the interaction position, or prediction of behavior. The interaction position is then compared against the actual behavior that occurs. If the actual behavior is viewed more favorably than the interaction position, then IAT predicts that an individual will engage in converging, matching, and reciprocal behaviors ( $IP < AB$  behaviors; Burgoon et al., 1995). These behaviors are characterized by conforming to the communication style or energy of the other member of the dyad. If the actual behavior that occurs is viewed as less desirable than the interaction position then the theory predicts that the individual will engage in diverging, compensatory, and maintenance behaviors ( $IP > AB$  behaviors; Burgoon et al., 1995). These behaviors are designed to restore the interaction to how it was conceptualized in the interaction position. Having briefly covered IAT, it is also important to define cross-sex heterosexual friendships.

### **Cross-Sex Heterosexual Friendships**

Friendship is characterized by individuals when they choose to interact and respond with one another on a personal level outside of any other roles they may occupy (Wright, 1984). Cross-sex heterosexual friendships are non-romantic friendships between a male and female where both members identify as heterosexuals (Werking, 1997). These friendships can be platonic or physical in nature. This often results in cross-sex friendships being more complicated than either same-sex friendships or romantic relationships (Werking, 1997). The remainder of this paper will examine how different aspects of IAT play a role in cross-sex heterosexual friendships where one or both partners desire higher levels of relational intimacy.

### **Expectations**

Expectations play a critical role in cross-sex friendships where one or both members of the dyad are interested in altering the level of relational intimacy. Both members of the dyad will rely on their expectations to help form an interaction position for the interaction. However, they must consider that there are other individuals with expectations for the dyad's relationship. Cross-sex friendships are characterized by the expectations of not only the dyad, but also their larger social networks (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). Akbulut and Weger (2016) collected surveys from undergraduate college students measuring this and several other factors that influence the escalation of cross-sex friendships.

---

The cross-sex friendships that escalate into friends-with-benefits (FwB) or romantic relationships typically exist in larger social networks prior to their escalation. Akbulut and Weger (2016) found that social networks are influential in determining whether a relationship will escalate or not. They found that this is especially true in networks that both members of a dyad share. These networks represent important resources for both members of the dyad. Social networks provide members with important emotional support. If it is expected that the change in intimacy will be viewed as negative, then the dyad is less likely to escalate the relationship (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). They would rather maintain their current relationship than risk the loss of the social networks support. The opposite is also true; if the pair expects a positive reaction from their larger social network, then they are more likely to escalate the relationship (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). Guerrero and Chavez (2005) surveyed heterosexual students examining maintenance behaviors in cross-sex friendships. They also found that expectations of a dyad's social network to be influential in the escalation of cross-sex friendships maintenance behaviors. This is likely due to the fact that the social network is an established and guaranteed form of support. The escalation of the dyad's level of intimacy may even be able to eclipse this support, but it is uncertain and not guaranteed. In addition to the influence of social networks, there are several other influences on the expectations in cross-sex friendships where one or both partners desire higher levels of relational intimacy.

Societal norms also impact expectancies that relational partners have for one another (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). When entering into a monogamous relationship fidelity becomes an expected norm that both partners will abide by. Similarly, it is expected that romantic relational partners will avoid and discredit other potential partners. Akbulut and Weger (2016) found that both of these measures help in the formation of new or escalated relationships by ensuring there is no extra-relational competition. Interestingly, Floyd and Burgoon (1999) found that when individuals lack information about their interaction partner they rely on norms to dictate how they should act. There is a basic assumption that strangers will act and behave according to social norms when interacting with other strangers. This is different from how individuals expect relational partners they know intimately to behave. Differences in expectations also exist beyond how familiar someone is with another individual.

---

There are also significant sex differences in cross-sex relationships depending upon if they are sexual (FwB) or romantic in nature. Cohen and Shotland (1996) distributed a questionnaire to undergraduate college students designed to gauge the student's attitude towards the appropriate timing for sexual intercourse in a relationship. They found that men expect for relationships to sexually escalate significantly faster than women. Both men and women were found to believe that their expectancies for the timing of sexual intercourse were more conservative than their peers. Basically, both men and women felt their peers were having sexual intercourse with new relational partners sooner. For men, this can be attributed to the fact that the study found men significantly more likely to disclose information regarding frequency and number of sexual partners. Women were found to be more conservative with this type of information. A study by Herzog and Hill-Chapman (2013) that surveyed undergraduate students found that females expect higher amounts of exclusivity in new relationships than males. This information can inform both members in cross-sex friendships as to typical expectations depending upon their partner's sex. Sex differences are just one way of predicting how an individual will act during an interaction.

An individual's attachment style is also a strong predictor of the types of expectancies they will have for a relationship. Guerrero and Burgoon (1996) surveyed romantic dyads to see how their relational attachment style impacted their interaction adaptations. They found that individuals with preoccupied attachment styles have much higher expectations and requirements for a relationship. Preoccupied individuals are characterized by a need for high levels of intimacy and validation within relationships. This results in much higher expectations for relational partners (Guerrero & Burgoon, 1996). Contrastingly, individuals with dismissive attachment styles have much lower expectations for relational partners. The dismissive style is characterized by individuals who are highly self-sufficient and lack the need for high levels of intimacy. Simply put, they invest less in intimate relationships and therefore have lower expectations. Attachment styles are formed while individuals are still infants (Feldman, 2010). They are learned from primary caregivers. In 2010, Feldman published a study where she analyzed the emotional attachment styles of mother child pairs starting when the child was 3 months old and concluding when they were 13 years old. She found that attachment styles can dramatically change over long periods of times (Feldman, 2010). This means

---

that individuals in cross-sex friendships can have both shifting attachments styles and expectations for relational partners. As time progresses, regardless of escalation in levels of relational intimacy, both members in a cross-sex friendship can anticipate changes in their own expectancies, as well as their relational partners. Expectations are not the only IAT behavior that is subject to change through prolonged interaction in cross-sex friendships.

### **IP<AB Behaviors**

IP<AB behaviors characterize interactions where both partners are acting harmoniously. When an individual's interaction position is out performed by their partner's actual behavior, the individual will begin to match, mirror, or reciprocate their partner's actions (Burgoon et al., 1995). Floyd and Burgoon (1999) observed the dyadic interactions of undergraduate students. They were looking to assess how expressions of nonverbal liking affected interaction adaptations. Their study found that IP<AB behaviors are more likely to occur the longer an interaction takes place. This was attributed to the fact that expectations, requirements, and desires are dynamic in nature. When an interaction occurs over a longer period of time the dyadic partners become more familiar with one another. This allows the dyad to form a more accurate interaction position for their partner. This same concept was also explored by Gurrero and Burgoon (1996) while studying attachment styles, nonverbal liking, and IAT. In this study it was found that preoccupied attachment styles are much more likely to exhibit IP<AB behaviors when compared to other attachment styles. They also found that the longer an interaction takes place the more likely individuals are to display IP<AB behaviors. Essentially, the more prolonged an interaction is the more difficult it is for dyadic partners to avoid matching, mirroring, and reciprocating one another. IP<AB behaviors are common in cross-sex friendships with the potential to escalate in intimacy (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). By definition, these dyadic partners will have known each other long enough to be considered friends. This means they have an established understanding of each other's expectations, desires, and requirements. Assuming an attempted escalation is not rebuffed by one member of the dyad, it is likely that the escalation of the relationship will be reciprocated (Bisson & Levine, 2009).

IP<AB behaviors are also more likely to occur when there are high levels of nonverbal immediacy. Jones and Wirtz (2007) found that nonverbal

---

immediacy increases the likelihood of IP<AP behaviors in dyadic interactions. Smiling, comforting touch, and soothing vocal tone were all actions associated with an increase in IP<AP behaviors. Similarly, Floyd and Burgoon (1999) also found that high levels of nonverbal immediacy resulted in IP<AB behaviors; specifically, in instances where dyadic partners were unfamiliar with one another. Guerrero and Burgoon (1996) came to the same conclusion in a study of upper-division college students and their romantic partners. For individuals in cross-sex heterosexual friendships, this means that exhibiting nonverbal immediacy increases the chance that a dyadic partner will reciprocate attempted escalation. If a relational partner does not respond with IP<AB behaviors, then it is possible they do not wish to escalate the level of intimacy in the relationship. In this instance, it is likely that the partner is trying to engage in IP>AB behaviors to keep the relational intimacy at its current level.

### **IP>AB Behaviors**

When a dyadic partner's interaction position is viewed more positively than the actual behavior that takes place, IAT states that IP>AB behaviors will occur. These behaviors are intended to adjust the actual behavior to more closely resemble the intended interaction position (Burgoon et al., 1995). IP>AB behaviors are most commonly exhibited in cross-sex friendships when one or both members of a dyad are not interested in escalating the relationship from its current level of intimacy (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). These behaviors are designed to maintain the current level of intimacy within the relationship. They can also be used to deescalate relationships when appropriate. Not surprisingly, Guerrero and Burgoon (1996) found that individuals with preoccupied attachment styles are likely to try to resist relational de-escalation. These individuals look for relationships with high levels of intimacy. As a result, attempts to reduce intimacy will prompt them to engage in maintenance behaviors. Similar reactions are common from dismissive attachment styles when a relational partner attempts to escalate the level of intimacy in a relationship. The dismissive individual would prefer to keep the relationship at a lower level of intimacy (Guerrero & Burgoon, 1996). This is also true for individuals who are interested in Friends with benefits (FwB) relationship as opposed to romantically escalating a cross-sex friendship (Bisson & Levine, 2009). FwB relationships are characterized by high physical and low emotional intimacy. In cross-sex heterosexual friendships identifying a partner's reactions to

---

attempted escalations is important to ensure both partners are on the same page. Confusing these signals could have detrimental effects on the relationship, regardless of preferred level of intimacy.

It is also important to be sure that relational partners are clear about their attitudes toward one another. Floyd and Burgoon (1999) found that when individuals in dyadic relationships are made to believe they are disliked those individuals will almost exclusively exhibit IP>AB behaviors. They observed that expressions of nonverbal immediacy, typically indicative of IP<AB behaviors, are unable to alter an individual's response once they are under the impression they are disliked by their partner. Attempts to repair the relationship can be viewed as fake or insincere. This concept is important to understand for anyone in a cross-sex heterosexual friendship that they wish to escalate in intimacy. Individuals seeking to escalate the relationship must be sure to give off signs of liking associated with IP<AB.

Another indicator of IP>AB behavior is avoidance. Guerrero and Chavez (2005) found that relational partners who were rebuffing an attempt to escalate a relationship often engaged in avoiding strategies. As a form of relational maintenance, avoiding prevents increases in intimacy by keeping members of a dyadic pair away from one another. The intent is to send a message to a relational partner without having to directly confront them. In addition to avoiding their relation partner, they also avoided discussing the topic with their social networks (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). Refusing to share an attempted escalation with a social network sends the message that the escalation is not up for discussion. Not introducing the idea to the social network makes it difficult for the partner who desires a higher level of intimacy to seek support. Similarly, females who were interested in relational escalation, but felt their partner did not, are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors. Women typically act as gatekeepers to the escalation of relational intimacy (Cohen & Shotland, 1996). This may explain the increase in antisocial behaviors. Women are not used to being denied escalation of relational intimacy. As a result they may turn to antisocial behaviors as a means to cope.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to examine of IAT functions within the context of cross-sex friendships where one or both partners may desire escalation of intimacy. There was significant research looking at different kinds of expectations within cross-sex friendships. There are clear



---

differences between men and women in terms of expectations for new relationships. Research has also shown that social networks are largely influential in the process of escalating intimacy in cross-sex friendships (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). It would seem that the known quantity of the social network's support is more favorable than the unknown quantity of escalating a cross-sex friendship. If the newly escalated relationship didn't work out, and the social network is gone, then the dyad would be left severely lacking in emotional support structures. Another interesting implication of social networks is a dyadic pair's ability to use the social network against one another. By refusing to talk about a relational partner's attempt to escalate intimacy one partner can once again be left lacking in social support structures. It would be interesting to look into how social networks relate to IAT in greater depth. Additionally, it could be interesting to see how societal norms impact the expectations of the larger social network, and the dyadic pair. Fidelity and dismissing competing partners are common expectations of relationships (Akbulut & Weger, 2016). It would be interesting to see how other societal norms and expectations change over time as societies change and adapt. This could include attitudes towards FwB or nonromantic relationships, sexual promiscuity, and who is expected to at the gatekeeper in intimate situations.

Attachment styles were shown to have a significant impact on adaptation patterns, specifically in romantic relationships (Gurrero & Burgoon, 1996). Preoccupied and dismissive styles were both mentioned heavily in the research and this paper. These attachment styles are comparably opposite of one another. Preoccupied individuals have a high need for IP<AB behaviors and are resistant to IP>AB behaviors. Contrastingly, dismissive individuals are likely to value low amounts of IP<AB behaviors and are more likely to implement IP>AB behaviors as a way of maintaining a relationships level of intimacy. Further studies should examine how all four attachment styles relate to one another in the context of IAT, not just preoccupied and dismissive.

Moving forward, IAT should be examined within the context of different kinds of relationships. Most of the research either looks at IAT between strangers or at the formation of new relationships. There is a lack of research specifically examining how IAT functions in the context of established romantic relationships. The majority of literature instead focuses on adaptation patterns between strangers.

---

**References**

- Akbulut, V., & Weger, H. (2016). Predicting responses to bids for sexual and romantic escalation in cross-sex friendships. *Journal of Social Psychology, 156*(1), 98-114. doi:10.1080/00224545.2015.1066296
- Bisson, M. A., & Levine, T. R. (2009). Negotiating a friends with benefits relationship. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 38*, 66-73. doi:10.1007/s10508-007-9211-2
- Burgoon, J. K., Stern, L. A., & Dillman, L. (1995). *Interpersonal adaptation: Dyadic interaction patterns*. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
- Cohen, L. L., & Shotland, R. L. (1996). Timing of first sexual intercourse in a relationship: Expectations, experiences, and perceptions of others. *The Journal of Sex Research, 33*(4), 291-299.
- Feldman, R. (2010). The relational basis of adolescent adjustment: Trajectories of mother-child interactive behaviors from infancy to adolescence shape adolescents' adaptation. *Attachment & Human Development, 12*(1), 173-192. doi:10.1080/14616730903282472
- Floyd, K., & Burgoon, J. K. (1999). Reacting to nonverbal expressions of liking: A test of interaction adaptation theory. *Communication Monographs, 66*(3), 219.
- Guerrero, L. K., & Burgoon J. K., (1996). Attachment styles and reactions to nonverbal involvement change in romantic dyads: Patterns of reciprocity and compensation. *Human Communication Research, 22*(3), 335-370.
- Guerrero, L. K., & Chavez, A. M. (2005). Relational maintenance in cross-sex friendships characterized by different types of romantic intent: An exploratory study. *Western Journal of Communication, 69*(4), 339-358.
- Herzog, T., & Hill-Chapman, C. (2013). Relationship formation and early risk exposure: Diverging associations with romantic self-concept and attachment. *Journal of Adult Development, 20*(1), 1-15. doi:10.1007/s10804-012-9151-5
- Jones, S. M., & Wirtz, J. G. (2007). "Sad monkey see, monkey do:" nonverbal matching in emotional support encounters. *Communication Studies, 58*(1), 71-86. doi:10.1080/10510970601168731
- Werking, K. (1997). *We're just good friends : Women and men in nonromantic relationships*. New York: Guilford Press

Wright, P. (1984). Self-Referent Motivation and the Intrinsic Quality of Friendship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1(1), 115-130.

### **Personal Biography**

Casey graduated from Kent State University at Stark with a B.A. in communication studies in the fall of 2016. He is currently pursuing his M.A. in communication studies at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. His current research interests lie in the effects mobile technology and social media have had on interpersonal interactions. Following the completion of his masters he hopes to enter a doctoral program and ultimately become a professor of communication studies.

dcase908@uwsp.edu