

The reality of platonic relationships sociology essay



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Romantic relationships are characterized by feelings of passion, emotional reactions and physical attraction; and platonic relationships are characterized by the absence of physical attraction, passion or sex (Sippola, 1999). These two characterizations are very important for the scope of this paper because both are crucial to answer the question, “ Can men and women really be just friends?” In the magazine Psychology Today, Clifford Lazarus wrote an article with an explanation to this question. Lazarus contends, for the most part, purely platonic relationships for heterosexual men and women are a myth (Lazarus, 2010). To support his contention, he refers to the reflexive nature of men and the reflective nature of women.

Lazarus refers to a sexual desirability reflex, which men demonstrate towards women in prime reproductive age. This reflex suggests the immediate thoughts of males when first encountering females are whether or not he would like to have sex with her (Lazarus, 2010). Although, it is argued that females may exhibit the same thoughts, although not as frequently as with males, they tend to quickly move past this reflex. On the other hand, women generally want to determine the suitability of a potential partner. This suitability is referred to as a desire to look for potential long term, socioeconomic stability with a partner (Canary & Dindia, 1998). Women therefore, tend to be more sexually reflective and choosier than males, while males tend to be more sexually reflexive than women.

These reflexive and reflective drives can be linked to evolutionary theories.

Males have an indefinite amount of sperm while females only have a predetermined amount of eggs for her life span (Lazarus, 2010). This suggests an explanation of why males may exhibit the above mentioned

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reflex more than females, and why females exhibit a determinable reflective drive. This article therefore concludes that purely platonic relationships in cross-sex friendships do not exist. The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the conclusion of the Psychology Today article with scholarly research to determine if purely platonic cross-sex friendships can exist between heterosexual men and women.

It is important to indicate that the article's conclusion assumes that a purely platonic relationship exists when both people in the relationship have never considered having a romantic relationship with each other. Through sexually charged flirtatious behavior and evolutionary theories, the first part of this paper will provide support for the article's conclusion that purely platonic cross-sex friendships are not possible. However, the second part of this paper will present evidence denouncing the preceding hypothesis by means of costs, romantic intentions and reasons to stay platonic.

Flirtatious Behavior

Both romantic and platonic relationships report flirtatious activity although frequencies in flirtatious behavior may differ (Egland, Spitzberg, & Zormeier, 1996). Some examples of flirtatious behaviors include looking your friend or partner up and down, gazing in their eyes and smiling suggestively. When comparing results of the platonic cross-sex relationships to the romantic cross-sex relationships, platonic relationships engaged in flirtatious activity nearly as much as romantic relationships (Egland, et al., 1996). This finding bolsters the view that even in platonic relationships, flirtatious behavior is expressed.

Furthermore, flirtatious behavior may be sexually charged. According to Henningsen, Braz, and Davies (2008), people engage in flirtatious behavior for six main reasons. First is sexual motivation, referring to one's desires to engage in sexual acts. Second, an individual may be relationally motivated, with the intention of moving from a platonic relationship to a romantic relationship. Third is fun motivation, referring to flirting to gain sexual excitement or thrill. Fourth is exploring motivation, referring to flirtatious behavior of platonic relationships to explore and see if positive feedback comes from the other person. Fifth is esteem motivation, which remarks on how gaining positive feedback from flirting may boost self esteem or arousal. And finally people flirt for instrumental motivation, which is flirting for possible access to rewards.

Flirting is the primary apparatus to signal sexual and romantic accessibility (Guererro & Chavez, 2005). All of the reasons people may flirt are charged with motives other than being platonic. Flirtation can be described as a “subcategory of social-sexual communication” (Henningsen, et al., 2008, p. 2). These social-sexual communications carry the connotation of being sexually charged, suggesting one person may have had sexual or romantic thoughts at one point in time in the relationship. This suggests that flirting is associated with sexual desire, or reasons other than what constitutes a platonic friendship (Henningsen, Braz, & Davies, 2008).

Flirtatious behavior is often intended to be interpreted in a way that carries sexual motive (Henningsen, et al., 2008). This implies that those in platonic relationships have an intended purpose or conscious motive to engage in it.

For instance, platonic relationships that do not want to turn romantic
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voluntarily do not engage in flirtatious behavior (Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008). This suggests that platonic relationships may be conscious of flirting, thus indicating that people engage in flirting through a particular motivation; in these instances a sexually charged motivation. Since platonic relationships do engage in flirtatious behavior with one another, there is reason to believe that the flirtatious behavior is sexually charged

Furthermore, men may interpret expressed behavior from women differently than from what women intend. If women are not voluntarily trying to give flirtatious signals or signs of flirtatious behavior, men are much more readily apparent to interpret non-flirtatious signals as flirtatious (Canary & Dindia, 1998). Therefore, even in an apparently platonic friendship, men may be misinterpreting these non-flirtatious signals as flirtatious, and therefore sexual as well, even if there is no intention to communicate flirtatious behavior. This implies even in some apparently platonic relationships, certain behaviors may signal signs of sexual desire unintentionally. CHECK THESE PRECEDING 3 PARAGRAPHS

Evolutionary Views

According to evolutionary theories, flirtatious behavior is contingent upon a desire to procreate (Canary & Dindia, 1998). As mentioned in the article, men have a type of reflexive drive and women have a type of reflective drive (Lazarus, 2010). From an evolutionary stance, a look into interactions between men and women will reinforce these reflexive and reflective drives.

Reflective and Reflexive Behavior

Women are more likely to choose a partner or mate who exhibits status and resources, therefore being more reflective than males (Lazarus, 2010).

Women are generally more interested in men with high resource potential (Canary & Dindia, 1998). This indicates why women focus on a long term stable relationship; one which is able to support their offspring. On the other hand, men are much more likely to approach women who display more signs of flirtatious behavior (Canary & Dindia, 1998). This indicates men's reflexive drive, indicating sexual thoughts or interest upon initial encounters (Lazarus, 2010).

Interests of men and women vary depending on age group. Males prefer younger women, while women prefer older males as age ascends. Women tend to be more fertile when they are younger, while men tend to be more economically sufficient and successful as they grow older (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). This suggests men being more concerned with the fertility of women by preferring younger mates, while women reported being more concerned with male socioeconomic status, indicated by selecting older men (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009).

Parental Investment Theory

Additionally, the female perception of older males having the resources to provide for their offspring and males having the impression to mate with a fertile female is consistent with the evolutionary theory of parental investments. Under parental investment theory, the investments of men and women differ. For example, a woman needs to carry the offspring. On the other hand, men could technically end their investment of the offspring

immediately after conception. As referenced by Tafoya (2006), women's potential for reproduction after conception is inhibited, while on the other hand men as quoted by Lazarus (2010), have their sperm "constantly replenished." Furthermore, because of the paternity uncertainty hypothesis, a man can never know with absolute certainty that a child is his. On the contrary, even though the mother may not know who the father of her child is, this hypothesis holds that she will know for certain that she will pass her genes on to her offspring (Tafoya, 2006).

Considering this hypothesis and the theory of parental investments, the reflexive nature of men and reflective nature of women are explained. A male's reflexive drive can be explained since males never know if the child is theirs with absolute certainty and their investment need not go beyond conception (Tafoya, 2006). Therefore, males seem to exhibit lesser commitment, reinforcing their reflexive tendencies. Additionally, men are more likely to accept a short term mate of any overall quality than women. For instance, it is more probable that men rather than women select a short term mate whose overall qualities such as wealth, status and attractiveness are lacking. Men are also more likely than women to have a one night stand or participate in an affair (Li & Kenrick, 2006).

On the other hand, women know their genes will be passed on and are making more of a sacrifice from an evolutionary standpoint by the cessation of their potential reproduction. This indicates that females may be more selective about their mates as indicated in the article by reflective drives.

Furthermore, women prefer resources and status when looking for a short term mate more than males. In fact, women prefer the same qualities in <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-platonic-relationships-sociology-essay/>

their short term mates as they do in their long term mates (Li & Kenrick, 2006). This implies women exemplify this reflective drive in support of a potential parental investor, that being the potential mate. It is shown that mating as well as parenting is essential to success of offspring, which helps to explain the characteristics of these reflexive and reflective drives (Tafoya, 2006). However, evolutionary views not limited to parental investment theory.

Friends with Benefits and Biosocial Theory

Evolutionary theories are evident in friends with benefits relationships. Friends with benefits refer to non-romantic or platonic relationships who engage in sexual activities (McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007). Friends with benefits is not just a trend, but also is commonly engaged in. Nearly 60% of undergraduates reported having had an experience with a friends with benefits relationship (McGinty et al., 2007). This reinforces the instinctive sexual activity and sexual behavior with the opposite sex. Biosocial theory of evolution may inquire more deeply as to why friends with benefits occurs.

Biosocial Theory predicts human behavior by looking to a person's genetic predisposition and their environment. Women show to be more emotionally involved in a friend with benefits relationship than men. Because women emphasize emotional attachment, it is argued that women do so in order to have a stable relationship (McGinty et al., 2007). In having a stable relationship, women need to rear their offspring, thus suggesting why women are more emotionally concerned with friends with benefits relationships than men. On the other hand, men are more sexually focused

with the relationship. At times, men are shown to be involved in multiple friends with benefits relationships, thus strengthening the point that men exhibit a reflexive drive (McGinty et al., 2007).

Furthermore, Schneider & Kenny (2000) surveyed how rewarding and costly people see an opposite-sex platonic friendship. Sexual access was reported as a potential benefit of being in a cross-sex friendship, as well as a reported cost. For example, men may be friends with women as a means to gain sexual access, however, men report having less sexual access than women. This suggests men are more concerned with sexual access than women (Bleske & Buss, 2000). This reinforces the idea of the reflexive nature of men.

However, women are reported to be benefited when protected by an opposite sex friend. Though this is not shown to what extent this suggests a positive cue for women as mate potential, it has been suggested in a comparative study that males who protect their friends actually gain more sexual access. This was evident in a study of baboons, where the males protect the feeding grounds, and in return the female gives them periodic sexual access; therefore suggesting men's evolutionary drive for protecting women (Bleske & Buss, 2000).

Flirtatious behavior and evolutionary views support the reflexive and reflective tendencies of males and females, respectively. This suggests that men and women in platonic cross-sex friendships engage in sexually charged behavior. The preceding information also supports, as the article contends,

that platonic relationships may not be feasible simply because of evolutionary drives (Lazarus, 2010).

Although these findings reinforce the idea that purely platonic relationships do not exist, there is information to believe otherwise. The following research in categories of similar costs, romantic intent, and reasons to stay platonic indicate evidence against the preceding research, contending there may be reasons platonic relationships can exist without having intent for or a transition to romantic relationships.

Similar Costs and Status

Males and Females do not differ in how costly it is to be denied sex from the person in the friendship; the potential for rejection is perceived as low in cost for both sexes (Bleske & Buss, 2000). This suggests that men and women may be able to be friends without worrying about sexual access. However, this information does support males and/or females think about sex. Since the potential cost for rejection was low, this implies the male and females evaluated each other before making the decision to become romantic (Bleske & Buss, 2000). Therefore, this seems to be more closely related to the conclusion in the article, and more supportive of reflexive and reflective behavior than not.

Even so, the status of the relationship may have an effect on the friendship. Although, ex-romantic partners report wanting a platonic relationship to turn romantic once again, a friend who has always been platonic would not want the relationship to turn romantic (Schneider & Kenny, 2000). This indicates

that how a relationship is initiated may have an actual impact on the <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-platonic-relationships-sociology-essay/>

relationship. Platonic friendships therefore, may exist depending on past experiences with the individual. This undermines the contention that platonic cross-sex friendships can never be platonic, since past experience can have an impact.

Romantic Intent

Romantic intent was not classified in the above article Why Men and Women Can't be "Just Friends". Romantic intent can vary and impact relationships differently. In the strictly platonic relationships, cross-sex friends reported less contact, flirtation and activity compared to romantic relationships. Arguably, strictly platonic friendships do not flirt, touch and spend as much time with one another relative to mutually romantic relationships, possibly because doing so may jeopardize the friendship (Guererro & Chavez, 2005). Furthermore, long term strictly platonic friendships can move past initial romantic intent. Friendships in the long term are shown to use maintenance behaviors such as less contact and flirtation as a means to not potentially ruin the platonic friendship (Guererro & Chavez, 2005). These finding suggests strictly platonic and mutually romantic relationships do vary with romantic intent, and thus may not perceive one another as anything more than platonic friends.

Reasons to Remain Platonic

There are six motives as to why relationships should remain platonic. To safeguard the relationship, lack of or no attraction, network disapproval, third party, risk aversion and timeout. This order with safeguarding the relationship being most important implies that there is an intrinsic reason for <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-platonic-relationships-sociology-essay/>

relationships to remain purely platonic. The rewarding nature of the relationship may be seen as more rewarding than a relationship moving towards one that is romantic or sexual. For instance, a reward in a platonic relationship is the ability to share emotion and/ or gain support about external situations; the ability to disclose in the relationship. On the other hand, less rewarding factors may direct people to remain platonic as well. For example, one may feel that the friend in the relationship is not attractive, or one may not want to expose oneself to possible emotional instability (Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000). Thus, research suggests cross-sex platonic relationships may have strong reasons for existing.

Furthermore, all platonic friendships may not be sexually charged. The sexual challenge in cross-sex friendships, which refers to men and women being hardwired to be sexually attracted to one another, is said to only occur in a minority of cross-sex friendships. Furthermore, the sexual challenge may be linked to attraction of the spirit, rather than of the body. Thus, reinforcing that sexual challenges may not be accurately represented when referring to the sexual desire of men and women (Messman et al., 2000).

Conclusion

Flirtatious behavior and evolutionary theories strongly support the idea that there cannot be purely platonic relationships as indicated in the article. However, alternative research suggests platonic friendships may be possible; similar costs, subjective romantic intent, and reasons to remain reasons to remain platonic are evidence that friendships have some incentive to remain purely platonic. Although there is support for both sides, the underlying

question is whether men and women together can have purely platonic friendships. Flirtatious behaviors as well as the evolutionary theories of biosocial and parental investment demonstrate that cross-sex platonic friendships are challenging. The majority of the information in the Why Men and Women Can't be "Just Friends" article does give credence to the majority of these findings.

Although in light of these findings, the article seems to be narrow in its evaluation. The main point of the article contends that platonic relationships do not exist because of evolutionary reasoning based on reflexive and reflective drives (Lazarus, 2010). On the other hand, the article does not account for romantic intent, a significant part of relationships. The article assumes based on the first meeting of men and women that there are uncontrollable biological reactions which occur. Although these reactions tend to happen, the article should still account for the past and present status of the relationship, as well as each person's intent to whether or not they want a platonic or romantic friendship. Since the article fails to account for this romantic intent of a males and females, it therefore neglects the possibility of differences in perception; that is, how people view each other based on their past experience with that person (Messman et al., 2000).

Moreover, long term platonic friendships vary in their romantic intent depending if maintenance behaviors are used. For instance, in a relationship that has always been platonic, both persons will use more maintenance behaviors to preserve their platonic friendship, in order to safeguard the friendship from moving towards romanticism. However, maintenance behaviors are also shown not to be useful. For instance, one of the people in <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-platonic-relationships-sociology-essay/>

the relationship may be denied a desired sexual progression (Guererro & Chavez, 2005).

Although there can be changes made to the article, the underlying argument is supported by the majority of research. Assuming a purely platonic relationship to be a cross-sex friendship where neither party has the thought of addressing a romantic relationship, or having desire for sexual activities; the existence of purely platonic relationships is slim. Platonic relationships engaging in flirtatious behavior carry a sexual connotation (Egland, et al., 1996). This implies that males and females even in platonic relationships may exhibit these reflexive and reflective drives. Furthermore, the differing parental investments for males and females bolster the sentiment regarding reflexive and reflective drives; this concerns why males invest less in their relationships while females invest more in their relationships (Li & Kenrick, 2006; Tafoya, 2006). Additionally, the biosocial theory suggests evolutionary underpinnings consistent with reflexive and reflective behavior; these include sexual behavior in friends with benefits relationships and behaviors of rewards and costs. Therefore, the article and the preceding findings suggest that the existences of purely platonic cross-sex heterosexual relationships are unlikely.