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Opposite-Sex Friend

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Synonyms

[Cross sex friend](#); [Opposite-gender friend](#)

Definition

Unrelated person of the opposite sex for whom one feels affection or esteem.

Introduction

Opposite-sex friendship is a historically novel relationship between a man and a woman that is supposed to be platonic and nonsexual. Evolutionary psychology considers opposite-sex friendships through two perspectives: as a specific type of friendship that has its own psychological adaptations and as a type of relationship “ruled” by mating strategies used in an evolutionary novel social situation. Considering sexual attraction is often experienced in this type of relationship, existing research mostly confirms the second perspective.

Historical and Social Context

Opposite-sex friendships are relationships between men and women that present a fairly new development in social relations and have only recently become a subject of research. Additionally, opposite-sex friends are less common than same-sex friends. Historically, having an opposite-sex friend has been quite unusual, as men-women relationships have mostly been seen through the perspective of romantic partnership. For example, in the 1950s, it was extremely rare for men and women to have an opposite-sex friend, compared to now when people report having more than one opposite-sex friend. In that period, social structure and norms have separated women and men through different social roles they were fulfilling, and, aside from relatives and spouses, neither women nor men were able to develop more significant relationships with the opposite sex. The modern way of life has made it possible for men and women to spend time together, at work and in other social activities, which makes it possible to form opposite-sex relationships which are not focused solely on romantic motives or sex (Bleske-Rechek et al. 2012; Halatsis and Christakis 2009).

Evolutionary Psychology and Opposite-Sex Friends

Evolutionary psychology has viewed opposite-sex friendships as relationships that had existed

in the evolutionary past and therefore caused the development of specific psychological adaptations, in order to manage such friendships (Bleske and Buss 2000; Buss 2008). As Bleske-Rechek et al. (2012) mention, this perspective would have required a regular interaction with opposite-sex friend(s) that would have helped our ancestors with two basic evolutionary problems: survival and reproduction. Essentially, that would mean opposite-sex friends helped our ancestors in their everyday survival, through sharing food and shelter and providing physical protection or sexual access, in such a way that enabled a higher survival rate and reproduction for individuals in such friendships.

A different perspective proposes that perceptions of the opposite-sex friend are by-products of mating strategies being used in a new evolutionary environment – the so-called by-product hypothesis (Bleske-Rechek et al. 2012). More specifically, the attraction experienced in opposite-sex friendships is a manifestation of activated mating strategies applied to novel social situations, in which a person is in contact with numerous unrelated opposite-sex individuals. As previously mentioned, opposite-sex friendships are a historical novelty, as our ancestors were foragers and nomads that lived in small groups consisting of reproductive partners and kin, and it seems highly unlikely individuals had an opportunity to develop nonsexual supportive relationship with the opposite sex (Bleske-Rechek et al. 2012).

Mating strategies are psychological adaptations for partner selection which are sex specific due to the amount of resources invested in offspring, as proposed by Trivers (1972) in his well-known *Theory of parental investment*. Multiple research has proven the premises of the theory: men consider signals of fertility, youth, and health in a partner and have preferences toward a variety of partners, compared to women who are more discerning and looking for signals of good parenting and partnership, as well as efficient provision of food and other goods (Buss 2008). Considering opposite-sex friendship in this context, research has shown opposite-sex friendships follow the same patterns as is predicted by mating strategies: men consider their friends more sexually attractive;

they over-perceive the females' sexual interest, while women value physical protection, as well as signs of "good mate" material in their male friends.

Sexual Attraction in Opposite-Sex Friendships

Sexual attraction is often experienced in opposite-sex friendships, and it can be considered as a benefit (e.g., "friends with benefits") or as a cost, when it negatively impacts the friendship. Research has shown attraction is often experienced in opposite-sex friendships (e.g., Reeder 2000), and if communicated, it can transform a friendship into a romantic relationship, end a friendship completely, continue it as a "friendship with benefits," or, in some cases, friends find a way to keep their relationship platonic (Halatsis and Christakis 2009). For instance, Afifi and Faulkner (2000) reported that around 50% of their participants experienced sexual intercourse in an opposite-sex friendship, some of them even when involved in romantic relationships. This points us toward the potential cost and benefit of opposite-sex friendship: the threat it poses for the relationship with a romantic partner and a possible romantic relationship which can develop from a friendship.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Having Opposite-Sex Friends

Opposite-sex friends have certain benefits compared to same-sex friends: people learn more about the opposite sex and adequate ways to communicate, which can be beneficial in attracting and keeping a partner. Additionally, in opposite-sex friendships, men experience intimacy and emotional depth that is mostly lacking in friendships between men, while women can benefit from physical protection that a male friend can provide. Considering the fact that some friendships develop into romantic relationships, opposite-sex friends can be a pool of potential mates, which have already been evaluated and are considered

compatible in some way. Opposite-sex friends will not become rivals during mating, which sometimes happens in same-sex friendships.

Partner's jealousy of an opposite-sex friend can be a potential disadvantage of this type of relationship, and men and women do consider attraction toward their opposite-sex friend as a cost of that relationship. Considering the fact that stronger attraction toward an opposite-sex friend is related to lower romantic relationship satisfaction (Bleske-Rechek et al. 2012), partner's jealousy seems evolutionarily justifiable.

Methodological Considerations in Researching Opposite-Sex Friendships

Opposite-sex friendship is considered as a platonic relationship between men and women; however, the previously mentioned findings signify a need for a careful description of "friend" when opposite-sex friends are researched. Considering the frequently present attraction and sexual contact in opposite-sex friends, it is necessary for a researcher to carefully consider the possible "types" of friendships when choosing a sample and discussing their results.

Conclusion

Opposite-sex friends are essential members of a modern way of life and provide additional assets in one's social context. Research results confirm the "by-product hypothesis": the frequently present attraction in this type of friendship is a manifestation of mating strategies activated in a novel environment.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Benefit of Opposite-Sex Friendship](#)
- ▶ [Friends with Benefits](#)
- ▶ [Friendship](#)
- ▶ [Gender of Friend](#)
- ▶ [Mating Strategies](#)
- ▶ [Protection as a Benefit of Opposite-Sex Friendship](#)
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Long-Term Mating Preferences](#),
- ▶ [Sex Differences in Short-Term Mating Preferences](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Access and Friendship](#)

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