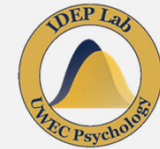




Romantically Involved or Just Friends? Accuracy and Consensus in Judgments of Male-Female Dyads

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Introduction

- A unique challenge for opposite-sex friends is convincing others of the platonic nature of their relationship.¹
- One reason for this challenge may be that opposite-sex friendships are often *not* clearly platonic:
 - Male-female friendships sometimes transition from being platonic to romantic;²
 - Heterosexual young adults tend to report low-to-moderate levels of attraction to their opposite-sex friends;^{3,4}
 - For some young adults, involvement in opposite-sex friendships is motivated by sexual attraction.³
- In the current study, we aimed to determine whether outside observers can reliably distinguish male-female *friends* from male-female *dating couples*.
- We hypothesized that use of a clear coding scheme would enable naïve, independent observers to agree in their judgments of male-female dyads as romantically involved or just friends. However, because romantic attraction is common among friends and that attraction might leak through in dyads' behaviors (such as attentiveness and smiling), we also hypothesized that observers' judgments would be inaccurate in that they would over-infer romantic involvement among male-female dyads who are actually just friends.

Procedure

- Researchers went out in male-female pairs to a popular lounging/eating area on campus.
- When they identified a male-female dyad sitting in the area, they began a 90-second observation of the dyad and recorded various behaviors such as proximity of the partners to one another, talking, laughing, touching one another, self-touching, and eye contact.
- Upon completion of the 90-second observation phase, each researcher recorded their independent judgment of the dyad's relationship status – friends or romantically involved – and of each dyad member's level of romantic attraction to the other person. Romantic attraction ratings were made on a 10-point scale (*not at all to extremely*).
- After judgments were recorded, the researchers approached the dyad (except for six dyads who left or were preparing to leave at that moment), told them of the observation, and asked them to continue their participation with a brief interview.
- The male researcher and female researcher interviewed the male and female members of the dyad, respectively, about (1) the dyad's actual relationship status; (2) that member's level of romantic attraction to their partner; and (3) their perception of the other dyad member's level of romantic attraction to them. Romantic attraction ratings were made on a 10-point scale (*not at all to extremely*).

Results

Consensus and Accuracy in Judgments of Relationship Status

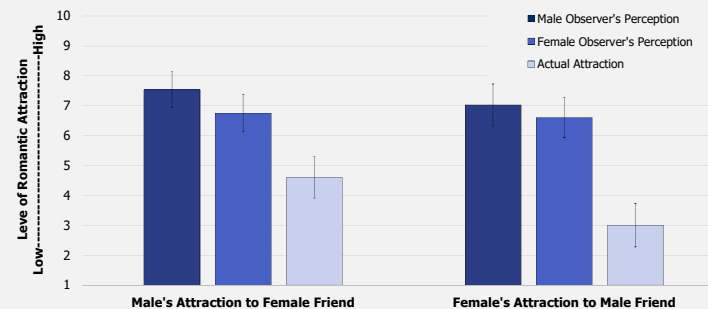
The male observer and female observer did not show consensus in their judgments of each dyad's relationship status. Although they agreed 61% of the time (60 of 98 dyads), their rate of agreement was not statistically above chance agreement of 50% ($Kappa = .16$).		Female Observer's Judgment	
		Romantically Involved	Just Friends
Male Observer's Judgment	Romantically Involved	44	18
	Just Friends	20	16

Male observers did not accurately judge dyads' relationship status. They correctly identified 66% (25 of 38) of those who were romantically involved, but they were just as likely to infer romantic involvement for the dyads who were actually just friends (62%, or 33 of 53), $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 0.12, p = .730$.		Dyad's Actual Relationship Status	
		Romantically Involved	Just Friends
Male Observers' Judgments	Romantically Involved	25	33
	Just Friends	13	20

Female observers showed accuracy in their judgments of dyads' relationship status, such that their judgments were associated with actual relationship status, $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 8.02, p = .005$. They correctly identified 82% (31 of 38) of the romantically involved couples, although they, too, over-inferred romantic involvement for 53% (28 of 53) of those who were just friends.		Dyad's Actual Relationship Status	
		Romantically Involved	Just Friends
Female Observers' Judgments	Romantically Involved	31	28
	Just Friends	7	25

Consensus and Accuracy in Judgments of Romantic Attraction

Correlational analyses revealed that the observers did not show consensus in their perceptions of how attracted men and women in friendships were to one another ($r = .13$ and $.24$). Moreover, their estimates were inaccurate: neither male nor female observers provided estimates of romantic attraction that coincided with men's and women's own self-reported level of romantic attraction to their friend or dating partner (mean $r = .10$).	Male's Attraction to Female		Female's Attraction to Male	
	Romantically Involved	Just Friends	Romantically Involved	Just Friends
Male-Female Observer Consensus (r)	.39*	.13	.33*	.24
Male Observer Accuracy (r)	-.01	.27	-.05	.15
Female Observer Accuracy (r)	.27	.15	.07	-.05



The figure above shows that both male and female observers over-estimated how romantically attracted men were to their female friends and how romantically attracted women were to their male friends. Error bars represent ± 2 SEM.

Discussion

- In the current study, pairs of researchers observed 98 male-female dyads for 90 seconds each, coded each dyad on a variety of cues (eye contact, body proximity, attention, eye contact, touching, self-touching, talking, laughing, etc.), and made judgments about each dyad's romantic involvement and each dyad member's level of romantic attraction toward their partner.
- Contrary to expectation, our male and female observers did not agree in their judgments of dyads' relationship status.
- In line with our expectations, however, follow-up interviews with the dyads revealed that male and female observers alike over-inferred romantic involvement for dyads who were just friends, and also tended to perceive male and female friends as more romantically attracted to one another than they actually were.
- Why were the observers unreliable and relatively inaccurate in their judgments? We thought that coding each dyad on a set of behavioral codes would allow for reliable judgments, but in the public context in which dyads were observed, romantic couples did not show overt cues of their involvement like kissing, and friends displayed many ambiguous cues like smiling or maintaining eye contact that made it hard to distinguish them from romantically involved couples. Indeed, none of the physical cues we coded was consistently associated with judgments of relationship status or of dyads' actual relationship status. Future research could observe male-female dyads in other contexts, such as restaurants or community events, where behaviors of friends might more clearly differ from behaviors of dating couples.

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