

The Effect of Gender on Flirting at Work

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Abstract

Flirting at work has always occurred, but has just recently been on the forefront of scientific research (Aquino, Sheppard, Watkins, O'Reilly & Smith, 2015). Most of the current literature deals with sexual harassment in the workplace. Specifically, it addresses how power differences and organizational culture can encourage unwanted sexual advances (Popovich & Warren, 2010). There is also significant research about the different tactics that men and women use to flirt (Frisby, 2014).

In this thesis, I will review literature and preliminary survey data to examine the prediction that men's flirting tactics are more aggressive and power-oriented, while women's flirting methods are more caring and social in nature (De Weerth & Kalma, 1995). I will use Buss's (1990) evolutionary psychology theory as a framework to understand the differences we see with respect to men's and women's contemporary flirtation styles. The evolutionary theory also helps explain the social constructionist perspective of flirtation because the two theories actually support each other.

The Current Research: How do men and women flirt differently?

Before reviewing the effects that flirtation has in the workplace, it is important to first understand how men and women flirt differently. At the beginning of a socio-sexual relationship, men generally 'approach' and women generally 'accept' (Harbinger, 2017). This predetermined exchange could be due to evolutionary mating selection. Evolutionary psychology suggests that men are evolutionally wired to have sex with multiple partners to increase the probability of reproduction. Women, on the other hand, tend to be more selective in choosing their mates because their offspring is more likely to survive if they have a supportive partner (Buss, 1990). Men have evolved to over perceive sexual interest in non-familial female relationships so they

don't miss out on the opportunity to reproduce — at best, they get to pass on their genes; at worst, the woman ends up saying no and they move on. Women, on the other hand, have evolved to perceive or value sexual interest less than men, because sex with the wrong guy means risking pregnancy and child-rearing without the help of a mate, not to mention lost opportunities to procreate with a better mate (Buss, 1990). This has been offered as an explanation for why men tend to be the ones to initiate sexual relationships and women accept or deny their advances.

After initial contact is made, research shows that men's flirtation tends to be more straightforward and thought out, while women tend to be more emotional and complex (Harbinger, 2017). That is, men tend to be obvious that they are interested in a woman, but a woman is less likely to show obvious interest in a man. This could be because of the social construction of men's and women's gender roles. In most societies, men are generally more empowered than women economically, socially and politically (Eagly & Wood, 2002). This unique empowerment may make them more forward in how they approach women. Conversely, there are social penalties for women who are too forward. They are labelled as "slutty" and could be the subject of gossip. Naturally, women try to avoid these social penalties and are therefore more subdued in their flirtation behaviors (Eagly & Wood, 2002).

PROPOSITION

Based on my analysis of Buss' (1990) evolutionary theory and the social context of flirtation, I propose that men will be more forward and forceful when flirting with female coworkers, while women will be more nurturing and social.

METHOD

Participants

Undergraduate business majors at a private southern university were asked to contribute to this study in exchange for extra course credit. The sample involved 52 men and 58 women ($N = 110$). The mean age in the sample was 22.29 years and the mean months of work experience were 23.85. 81% of the students identified themselves as White.

Procedure

The study was administered in two phases, which were separated by approximately 6 weeks. In the first phase, they told us about their demographic information. In the second phase, they responded to our research question of interest. Specifically, in Phase 2, participants were asked to explain the specific ways that men and women flirted in the workplace.

Analysis

To make sense of the 251 responses provided by my respondents, I categorized the individual quotes on the basis of similarity and consistency. Specifically, I sorted the responses into categories in order to understand the most frequently used techniques for each gender. Some quotes corresponded to multiple categories. In these cases, I split quotes into stand-alone parcels, and placed each parcel in a single category. There were 25 categories, of which the reported 4 female-typed and 4 male-typed accounted for 65.33% of the entire pool of quotes. The remaining 17 categories contained between 1 and 32 quotes or quote parcels.

RESULTS

According to those surveyed, men were most likely to flirt by socializing, physical touching, suggestive comments and giving special attention/assignments. Women were most likely to flirt by wearing provocative clothes, using coy behavior and sarcasm, physical touching,

and socializing. These differences support the theory that men are more forward and direct in courtship, while women are more indirect and subtle.

Men's Flirtatious Behaviors: Socializing, Physical Touching, Suggestive Comments, and
Giving Special Attention/Assignments

Within the "socializing" category, many examples included engaging in conversations that are unrelated to work, "hitting on" women, and suggesting drinks after work. Based on the responses, it can be reasonably assumed that these conversations are not merely friendly interactions, but in fact have a sexual undertone. Participants specifically note that men would go out of their way to have a conversation with a woman he was pursuing, and that he made sure she knew that he was "interested". Finally, suggesting drinks after work can easily be construed as flirtatious, especially when a man only invites one woman. It is directly flirtatious because culturally, we assume that a first date would consist of "grabbing drinks" and it might be considered strange for two platonic coworkers of the opposite sex to go have drinks by themselves. It should also be noted that men are often the ones who initiate the conversation or suggest after work activities, which goes back to the "approach and acceptance" theory of courtship.

Physical touching is the second most frequent response for how men flirted. While women flirt by physical touching as well, men tend to use touch in a more obvious way and more often than do women. For instance, men are more likely to try "giving massages" to female coworkers and to be more "touchy-feely" in general. Physical contact, especially in the workplace, is often seen as sexual and can signify a relationship that is no longer platonic. Physical contact is one of the most commonly used flirtation tactics because it increases a sense of romantic feelings and intimacy (Burgoon, 1991). Touching can also increase feelings of

fondness and attraction. Finally, touching can signal dominance, which men could use to their advantage when flirting with a woman (Burgoon, 1991).

The third most common flirtation technique men use is suggestive comments. Suggestive comments are inherently sexual and would only be said to a woman who a man is sexually interested in. Specific comments that are reported in the survey include “Damn!” and “Nice legs!”. It should also be noted that these comments are often inappropriate, especially in a professional setting, and could be construed as harassment. They are also presumptuous and bold, which is in accordance with how men are “supposed” to flirt. In our culture, men are expected to use assertive tactics to solicit relationships with women because it is seen as masculine and powerful. If men were to take a more indirect approach, perhaps women would not even consider developing a relationship with them since women are already more apt to under perceive sexual interest.

Finally, the fourth most common flirtation behavior for men was giving women special attention or job assignments. Responses in this category include examples such as, “ask(ing) certain females to help them with specific tasks” and “ostraciz(ing) women by asking them to complete special assignments. Men hope the special assignments can lead them to more flirting, dates, and formalized relationships”. Not only does this technique make women feel valued, it can also help men to get to know women on a more personal level. Culture and evolution have made women more likely to be attracted to men who are in a position of power, so it is reasonable to assume that men who are able to give a woman a task at work could use this to his advantage when trying to pursue a relationship with her. He knows that she will likely be flattered by the opportunity, and he can use the task as an excuse to get to know her better and deepen their relationship.

Women's Flirtatious Behavior: Wearing Provocative Clothing, Coy Behavior/Sarcasm,
Physical Touching, and Socializing

For women, the most frequently reported flirtation behavior is wearing provocative clothing to entice men. This clothing can include tight and low cut blouses, short skirts, and other clothing that would be considered inappropriate in the workplace. The clothing is generally designed to make a woman's breasts look bigger and accentuate her hips and buttocks. Research shows that men are more visual than women when it comes to initial mate selection (Buss, 1989). Evolution has made men attracted to women with large breasts with similarly proportioned hips and small waists because these physical characteristics signify fertility. Women with a certain bust-waist-hips ratio are scientifically more likely to get pregnant and be able to carry the pregnancy to term (Singh, 1993). In addition to the evolutionary aspect of why women might wear tight clothes, there is also a cultural aspect. Our culture teaches women to be "sexy" and to dress in a way that men will find appealing. Women are constantly bombarded with magazine ads, commercials, and other media reinforcing that they should look a certain way so that men will be attracted to them. Aside from clothing, women are also expected to wear makeup to emphasize their facial features and make them look more feminine. Another cultural component of why women dress to impress men is because men tend to value attractiveness more than women in our society. According to Wood and Eagly, "men's greater valuing of attractiveness might follow from the greater importance of this competence in women's family and occupational roles, including women's paid occupations in postindustrial societies" (Wood & Eagly, 2006). Physical attractiveness has been associated with greater social competency, which would have been greatly important to women in a postindustrial society because their roles demanded a high degree of interpersonal competence (Wood & Eagly, 2006).

The use of coy behavior and sarcasm was the second most frequently used flirtation technique for women. This is likely due to the social norming that takes place between women and men. As previously stated, men are socialized to “approach” women and it is the woman’s job to “accept” their proposition. However, just because women are not socialized to be the ones who initiate flirtatious contact does not mean they are not attracted to certain men or do not want to have a relationship with them. Instead of going against social norms and approaching them, women use coy behavior and sarcasm to signal their interest. Hopefully, the man will take the hint and reciprocate the flirting.

The use of touch is a common technique used by both men and women. Research shows that touch does indeed lead to feelings of attraction among randomly-paired, opposite-sex couples (Williams & Kleinke, 1993). Touching was found to elevate the heart rates of the participants as well as increase romantic desire among them (Williams & Kleinke, 1993). These findings show why both men and women use touch to flirt with one another. These increase romantic feelings make the probability of a sexual relationship much more likely. Additionally, touching was found to increase feelings of receptivity and trust, which would be important in a woman’s mate selection from an evolutionary perspective (Burgoon, 1991).

Finally, socializing was the fourth most frequently used flirtation behavior for women. There could be many reasons why women socialize with men who they are interested in. One may be to help her evaluate his potential as a long-term mate. Finding out information about his personal life, his financial situation, and his family could help her decide whether or not he would be someone that she would want to have a longstanding relationship with and potentially have children with. Evolutionary theory tells us that women choose their mates based on the ability to provide for them, protect them, and the likelihood that they will stay, so it would make

sense that a modern woman would socialize with her coworker to discover his potential (Buss, 1990).

Conclusion

In conclusion, my proposition was supported. From the examples given, men were definitely more presumptuous in their flirting techniques. Women tended to be more reserved and ambiguous. Both genders used physical touching and socializing, but the ways in which they used them were different. Women used touch and socializing in a more complex and emotional way, and men used them in bolder and more straightforward ways. These differences and similarities can be attributed to both evolutionary and social theory. Evolutionary theory primes us for how we are going to act in a social situation, so instead of working separately as many researchers suggest, they are actually working congruently to determine our behaviors in modern life.

The implications of workplace flirtation are broad and differ greatly for men and women. Men need to be careful about crossing the fine line between flirting and sexual harassment. As previously stated, the flirting techniques that men use tend to be aggressive and deliberate. With this comes the chance that their advances could be taken as distressing and inappropriate. When men touch coworkers, or make suggestive comments, they are beginning to tread into harassment waters. Men need to make sure that they are conscious of this and ensure that any potential relationship is mutual. They need to read women's body language and responses to their advances, and stop at the first sign of any discomfort. Women, on the other hand, can be reprimanded for workplace flirtation. For example, in 2010, Debrahlee Lorenzana was fired from Citibank for being "too sexy" (Dwoskin, 2010). Her male coworkers were "distracted" by her appearance (Dwoskin, 2010). To remedy this issue, Citibank "ordered her to stop wearing

turtlenecks. She was also forbidden to wear pencil skirts, three-inch heels, or fitted business suits” (Dwoskin, 2010). She was ultimately fired, sued Citibank, and the case went to arbitration. This puts other women in a difficult position. While our society is moving towards more sex positivity towards women and their choice of clothing, there is a certain professionalism that is still expected in the workplace. While there is not one correct answer to solve this problem, women should air on the side of caution when choosing business attire. Additionally, companies should have specific dress codes for men *and* women that have objective standards and are enforced equally among all employees.