The Friendzone, Amatonormativity, And The Consequences

There is much back and forth about the existence of a friendzone or even what that means. This typically falls along gender lines more times than not as this accusation is lobbed at women. Proponents of this say that it’s a tactic used by women to keep a guy on standby or that a guy went about pursuing their interest the wrong way. On the inverse, detractors of this say that it’s an excuse for getting rejected or that it makes friendship (specifically between men and women) seem bad or even impossible. In this paper, I will attempt to show why the “friendzone”, as defined by societal norms, does not exist by using philosophical texts as well as examining the different relationship norms that have been established to reinforce this type of thinking. Also, I will look at how we date now; specifically, the quite new phenomenon surrounding online dating and the incel culture brewing on the internet--as well as the media we consume to see some of the depictions of these norms at work.

To start, the diminishing of platonic friendship is not helped by the portrayal that is constantly seen on television and in various forms of media. The concept of “shipping” two characters is very common among a fanbase. “Shipping” is a fanbase taking two characters who are friends in most cases and envisioning a romantic endeavor for said characters. It’s not anything malicious from the fans or creators, but the underlying assumption is that there’s something “better” for the characters involved and their relationship. It’s almost as if just being friends isn’t the best form of their relationship and there’s something more to be desired. Sometimes these narratives can feel forced in certain shows as well. Even in a show like *Craig* *of* *The* *Creek* where the two female characters, Kelsey and Stacks, are put into a romantic relationship seemingly out of nowhere to fill this expectation. Keep in mind that this is a children’s show and these are two female characters. It's not only setting the foundation early (unintentionally) that romantic monogamous relationships are the norm and the peak of human interpersonal interaction. It also acts to pull homosexual monogamous romantic relationships into the norm which only acts to reinforce it. This being unintentional and the default assumption drives home the point of how ingrained and matter of fact it has become. If two characters of opposite gender even have a bit of chemistry it is almost always established that they need to become romantically involved because it’s “better” so to speak. One needs to look no further than *When* *Harry* *Met* *Sally* or *Pretty In Pink* to see these mechanisms at work. In the former, it is acclaimed by the main character, Harry, that men and women can’t be friends. Interestingly enough they were doing it just fine but seemingly pushed into a relationship almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. They would end up breaking up but then end up getting back together in the long run. Interestingly enough it would seem that the character of Harry seemingly realizes in a quick moment that he actually wants to spend his life with Sally. It almost seems like, just in the early part of the movie, that he’s coming to that conclusison because he *has* to not necessarily because he *wants* to. In the movie *Pretty* *In* *Pink* when the character Duckie doesn’t get the girl, it is almost seen as a slap in the face. Again this is reinforcing that friendship isn’t good enough. In these two examples, an unnecessary relationship was forced and a perfectly fine friendship is somehow dismissed by viewers. In Duckie’s case, it sets up a form of entitlement because he *deserved* her, so to speak. Also, the original ending was supposed to see Andie and Duckie end up together. On the other hand, the movie *Little* *Women* shows a more aromantic view as Jo never sees herself married and turns down Laurie as she values his friendship and can’t understand why that has to somehow be disastrous in his eyes.

The concept of monogamous romantic relationships is being pushed under the guise of LGBTQ support. In reality, striking a strong distinction between monogamous relationships and non-monogamous relationships is another way to reinforce the norm of monogamous romantic relationships. A broader aspect of this is amatonormativity which was coined by philosophy professor Elizabeth Brake. This term plays off the word “heteronormativity” and takes a look at relationship structures at large. Whereas heteronormativity looks at heterosexual monogamous romantic relationships, amatonormativity examines the exclusion of polyamory, asexual/aromantic people, and single people as well. The bigger point about this is what happens when something deemed “abnormal” gets co-opted into the norm (gay marriage for example). It’s almost like a form of gatekeeping which precludes certain types of non-hetero folks. The meaning behind this is that certain forms of gay relationships are acceptable, like monogamous marriage, while other forms like polyamorous relationships are not. This can also be applied to sexual acts as well according to this quote, “Kink and BDSM practices are shown to be indicative of an attitude that prioritizes and maximizes queer sexual potential, at odds with homonormative tendencies to remove and hide sexuality”(Maine, 17). This kind of dichotomy paints hypersexuality as bad and those that are more likely to participate happen to be in the LGBTQ community. This focus on which sexual acts are okay is another way to shape the framework of normality. That included asexual or aromantic folks as well. If romantic monogamous relationships are the end goal then where does that leave poly, ace, or aromantic people? It just makes it more engrained that every sort of relationship we have as humans should aspire to reach what society views as the apex of a monogamous relationship and marriage. Your partner is expected to be your best friend now and no one should come above them. This has changed over time as even back in the 19th-century men and women both had close confidants of the same gender. Of course, from the female side, it was more rooted in misogyny as having a close female friend would “prepare them for motherhood”. It seems as though having a platonic soulmate was more accepted then than it is now.

The different roles people play in our lives now all need to be rolled into one person and all those needs are expected to be met by that singular person. Evidently, this is quite problematic. We’ve seen philosophers in the past talk about friendship as a life journey. To hear them describe it you’d think those people are in a romantic relationship but that’s not the case. Platonic relationships were seen equally as important as the romantic relationship--or even more so--which isn’t the case now. This doesn’t explicitly address the idea of men and women being platonic friends. It certainly is possible, but it gets difficult if platonic friendship continues to play the second fiddle to the holy grail that is monogamous relations. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with attraction or even casual sex but the seeming underlying expectation that platonic relationships aren’t “good enough” makes the lines more blurred and leads to ideas of the “friendzone” being utilized when someone doesn’t want to move past that.

In book nine of *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle mentions that good friends must spend their time together, and as such, you cannot have many. In this vein, he also mentions spending time together and “living” together. From this perspective, it seems that a friendship is almost akin to a romantic relationship. It follows along with the same parameters at least. He even mentions in the following paragraph that “love is the excess of friendship”. In book eight Aristotle mentions three different types of friendships, two of which are utility and pleasure. These are “easily dissolved” because it only lasts as long as the person engaging in it can get something out of it, as opposed to valuing the person themselves. This sentiment could follow along with the definition of the friendzone because the person being friended presumably still have feelings for the other person especially if they stick around. This is especially glaring with the “oppa syndrome” which is a man befriending a female with the sole purpose of dating but not making that known. This is typically seen in k-dramas They’re not only being disingenuous but also they’re just doing it for their own pleasure (sex) or utility (a partner). Moreover, the reason why it’s perceived as a bad thing for men and women to be friends is that it seems the focus is more on not getting what you want as opposed to actually losing a friend. Epicurus mentions as one of his maxims “He who desires to live tranquility without having anything to fear from other men, ought to make himself friends…” and so this drives home the importance of having good friends around. Epicurus is essentially touting the benefits of having trustworthy people around who only want the best for you and nothing from you(in the sense of using you). Keeping this in mind, I’ve already mentioned that these people crying about the friendzone have already made up their minds that they want more than friendship so this may not apply to them but it’s a good note to remember for later. Between those of the same sex if someone rejects friendship it’s seen as no big deal. You probably want different things which are okay. But when a guy spends all this time getting into a girl’s good graces and is rejected but actual friendship is still on the table, there's a level of insult at play here “Me?? Just a friend??”. It’s almost as if a man and a woman being friends is something to be ashamed of. Where is that coming from? Is it because guys think their niceness entitles them to affirmation from women? In keeping with the comparison between romance and friendship that is mentioned in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also mentions that you can extend goodwill to another person but they may not return that goodwill. The reason the friendzone is so detrimental is that it’s used as an excuse for disingenuous and manipulative behavior. Using someone for utility is fine as long as both parties are privy to what is going on. Alas, I can’t mention the friendzone without mentioning the term “niceguy”. If the friendzone is the disease this would be akin to what causes said disease. This is more of an internet phenomenon but essentially it’s guys being nice to a woman to gain either sex or romance but becoming angry at the woman when rejected. Again they wanted something from these women but masked that as just being “nice” and hoping that’s enough. They’re almost leveraging that women are objectified as a means to get romance or sex from these women thereby objectifying them.

When talking about dating and relationships I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention Tinder and what can be seen as the gamification of dating and relationships. The ease at which one could just swipe left or right to determine interest further exacerbates the issue at hand. Someone could say that having it be this easy as well as the large user base could help introduce people to others outside of their circle. But I think it just further reinforces attitudes people have. It takes the term “keyboard warriors” which is someone saying things over the internet behind a keyboard that they would never say to someone's face. This concept is brought over to the online dating space as can be seen by some of the creepy and vile things seen in some Tinder messages as most of these are from men to their female matches. Incel culture is a direct consequence of this sort of thinking. Women are seen as shallow and only want men for money or looks and as such these incel men stand no chance according to them. If romantic monogamous relationships weren’t put on a pedestal and as such reinforced then not receiving attraction wouldn’t be as much of an issue in my opinion. It almost disrupts people from seeing each other as other cool humans and instead like objects to be chased after or wooed. Of course, there are real-world consequences to incel culture as well as according to a study “Incels reported hatred for women and themselves related to their failure to attain masculine heterosexual success. In turn, they advocated for violence directed at women and themselves”(Glace, Dover and Zatkin 296). Thus we see the negative impact of pushing romance or nothing out to the masses. This can absolutely wreck someone’s self-worth and send them spiraling into radical communities such as this. It also puts women in more danger than they already are in society as it is.

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