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The Perceived Benefits of the Friends with Benefits Relationship

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Abstract

The friends with benefits relationship (FWBR) is a complex, opposite-sex friendship in which partners freely engage in sexual activity within the relationship, but do not interact as romantic partners, but rather as platonic friends. And while framed as apparently beneficial, the current study attempted to determine if, in fact, any relational benefits actually exist within the FWBR as compared to other platonic, opposite-sex friendships where no sexual activity occurs. Undergraduate students (N = 203) from a private, Christian university in the south-central United States responded to questions concerning attitudes and activities regarding opposite-sex friendships. Results indicated that some interpersonal benefits do exist for the FWBR, but these appear to be related to actual participation in a FWBR rather than due to any sex differences between men and women.

Key words: friends with benefits, friendship, opposite-sex friendship, intimacy

Over the last decade, scholars interested in the intricacies of human social interaction have begun to investigate a unique form of relating that challenges almost every conceivable pre-existing and/or traditional concept of what it means to be “just friends.” The long held mandate of the clear and distinct separation between friend and romantic partner is being challenged, redefined, and re-conceptualized in order to craft a new type of hybrid relationship, one that brings together what it means to be a platonic friend with what it means to be a romantic partner. The result is a complex, distinctive, challenging, and apparently quite common form of human relating, the so-called “friends with benefits relationship” (FWBR).

The friends with benefits relationship (FWBR) is usually defined as a relationship that emerges from an existing opposite-sex, platonic friendship. The most notable and potentially challenging feature of the FWBR is that it incorporates sexual activity within the friendship, i.e., what most perceive to be the “benefit” of this form of friendship. And while usually framed as non-exclusive and un-committed, the sexual behavior between the two opposite-sex, platonic friends has been found to range from intimate kissing to oral sex to sexual intercourse (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Another notable feature of the FWBR is that including sexual activity in the friendship is not designed to create romantic commitment; rather, it is a way to combine the perceived benefits of platonic friendship with the perceived benefits of a romantic/sexual relationship, but without the associated responsibilities and obligations commonly inherent with a romantic relationship (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). Furthermore, the FWBR differs from what has been referred to as a simple “hook-up,” which is characterized by a single incidence of sexual intercourse between people who are relatively unknown to each other and who have no expectation of continuing their sexual activity with one another in the future (Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Rather, the friends with benefits relationship has been defined by Rawlins (1982) as “friendship-love,” a relationship where the friendship is maintained but it is also characterized by on-going, continuing, regular sexual involvement as part of the friendship bond.

The FWBR warrants scholarly attention for a number of reasons. First, as noted above, it presents a direct challenge to traditional definitions of platonic friendship versus romantic relationship. In doing so, it blurs the bright-line separation between what has traditionally been conceptualized as two very distinct, truly separate forms of human relationship and challenges long-held beliefs about what is (or is not) appropriate behavior for both (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002). The outcome of such a fusion of previously understood relationship categories presents a potentially significant set of unique challenges for anyone attempting to understand the dynamic of a relationship form that fits neither traditional category and yet contains features and characteristics of both.

Second, the FWBR appears to dispute a number of other commonly held beliefs about the role and outcome of incorporating sexual behavior into a strictly platonic arrangement, most notably the notion that sexual activity is an exclusive maintenance behavior for romantic relationships, not platonic friendship (Brehm, et al., 2002). The FWBR further confronts the belief that sexual activity usually brings with it a requirement for commitment, monogamy, and compels the relationship into a transition from its platonic state to an overtly romantic form (Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000; Mongeau, Ramirez, & Vorrell, 2003). Engaging in un-committed, non-romantic sexual behavior has long been thought to be the exclusive arena of male behavior and yet, the FWBR calls into question even this traditional and frankly, well supported conception, based in bio-evolutionary theory, that is, men desire this type of arrangement, but women do not (Baumeister, 2000; Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994).

The extant research on the relationship between sex, emotion, and female attitudes and beliefs has long contended that most women associate love with sex (while most men separate the two) and are more interested in the emotional and interconnected aspects of love, sex, and relationship than are most men (Baumeister, 2000). Thus, the FWBR also appears to challenge traditional beliefs about the typical types of relational maintenance activities that are common to either romantic or platonic opposite-sex friendships, as once more, this unique form of human relating questions previous beliefs concerning more traditional friendship and romantic relationship maintenance (Goodboy & Myers, 2008).

Third, the FWBR creates a compelling relational context for further investigating the nature of interpersonal intimacy, particularly in terms of psychological closeness. For the most part, the prevailing theoretical argument concerning relational closeness is that it is both developmental and interactional, inherently based on expectancies of knowledge and interaction patterns grounded in ways of relating with significant others (Fehr, 2004), or as Prager (2000) noted, “intimate relationships are built on intimate interactions” (p. 230). Others have conceptualized interaction patterns of intimate behavior to include self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, unconditional support, and physical (nonsexual) affection (Monsour, 1992), while Reis and his colleagues have defined closeness in more emotionally-laden terms, grounding it in feelings of being understood, validated, and cared for (Reis, 1998; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). In sum, the types of interpersonal relating that are most likely to contribute to indicators of closeness and intimate behavior between two people are those that involve shared and significant moments of experience and interaction; however, the FWBR context directly confronts conceptions of just what counts as a significant moment of closeness between two friends.

Finally, the FWBR is apparently a very common form of friendship on college campuses across the country, with activity rates ranging from 49% to 62% of college students admitting participating in some type of FWBR (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007). For example, Grello, Welsh, and Harper (2006) found that casual sex was fairly common among participants of their study, with more than half reporting that they had engaged in sexual activity with friends with whom they were not romantically involved. In her study on sexual interest within opposite-sex friendship, Whelchel (1990) found that 74% of the participants in her study indicated that they had had some sort of sexual interest in their closest opposite-sex friend and 72% specified that they had become romantically involved with at least one of their opposite-sex friends. Others have found similar results for non-collegiate samples, including Kaplan and Keys (1997) who noted that 62% of men and 60% of women in a study of working professionals indicated that there was sexual tension within their opposite-sex, work-place friendships, while Denizet-Lewis (2004) reported that at one high school, of the 55% of 11th graders who had participated in sexual intercourse, 60% had had sex with a platonic friend.

The Current Study

The FWBR presents a number of intriguing challenges to our current understanding of the role of friendship and romance as distinct forms of human interpersonal relating and yet, despite its apparent popularity, particularly with young, single adults, this unique relationship type remains relatively under-studied. Building on the limited work of previous scholars who have focused their attention on understanding the interpersonal dynamics of the FWBR, the current study will attempt to assess what are, by its very definition, the alleged “benefits” of the so-called friends with benefits relationship. Others have assessed reasons for participating in a

FWBR (Bisson & Levine, 2009), maintenance strategies for the FWBR (Goodboy & Meyers, 2008), attitudes and sex differences of college student involvement in the FWBR (McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007), and the love attitudes and network communication and support of those in a FWBR (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005); however, to date, we are unaware of any existing research assessing perceived relational *benefits* of the friends with benefits relationship. Clearly, un-committed sex is the covert meaning of the term “benefit;” but beyond that, this study will attempt to determine if participation in a FWBR brings with it any other, more traditional forms of interpersonal benefits for those who choose to engage in sexual activity with their platonic, opposite-sex friends.

Though the outcomes and motivations for participation in a FWBR have been established, the perceived or actual benefits of these relationships have not been investigated in scholarly research. Moreover, the extant literature offers mixed findings for the outcomes associated with the FWBR; for example, support for the idea that sexual behavior may actually strengthen (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Rubin, 1985) or may actually weaken the opposite-sex friendship (Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000) has previously been explored, but the actual variables or dynamics of the friendship (i.e., the benefits) have yet to be investigated. Furthermore, while research claims that more men than women involve themselves in casual sexual opportunities (Clark, 1990; Clark & Hatfield, 1989), the current literature does not claim how each sex potentially might benefit, at least from an interpersonal/relational standpoint, by involvement with a FWBR.

One previous study that helps to inform the current project is work done by Bleske and Buss (2000) on the perceived costs and benefits of platonic opposite-sex friendships. While they did not frame their study as an investigation of the FWBR, nevertheless, their results suggested that while demanding some costs, the opposite-sex, platonic friendship does generate some benefits, namely the potential of sex for men, physical protection and safety for women, and increased knowledge of and information about, the other sex. In their follow-up study of the similarities and differences in initiation, selection, and dissolution of opposite-sex friendships, Bleske and Buss found that women judged physical protection as more important than men, while men found attraction to the opposite-sex friend and the possibility for sex as more important (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001). This study also reported that more so than married individuals, single men and women were more likely to judge “long-term mate-ship potential” as more important in opposite-sex friendships, with men finding romantic potential more important than women. Overall, their argument was that platonic, opposite-sex friendship is a “mate acquisition strategy” (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001). Although they found that opposite-sex friendships are much like same-sex friendships in that people are looking for honesty, companionship, humor, sensitivity, and dependability, they found that several unique benefits stand out, namely, sexual activity for men and physical protection for women. The only other relevant study directly attempting to assess the benefits of participating in a FWBR is from Bisson and Levine (2009), who simply asked their subjects to respond to the open ended question, what are “the major benefits (if any) of FWB?” Once more, the major reported benefit of participation in a FWBR was “having sex with a trusted other while avoiding commitment” (p. 68).

However, assuming un-committed sex with a trusted friend as the given benefit of participation in a FWBR, what other relational benefits are potentially available for those who involve themselves in such a relationship? Is sex the only benefit of the friends with benefits relationship or are there other, more traditional interpersonal outcomes also associated with a

FWBR? A simple review of the extant interpersonal literature easily generates a long list of potential benefit outcome variables traditionally associated with friendship and romantic relationships, for example, increased commitment, involvement, self-disclosure, satisfaction, closeness, and affection to name only a few (see Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000; Knapp & Daly, 2002; Perlman & Duck, 2006; Vangelisti & Perlman, 2006). The goal of the current study was to assess these variables for their potential as additional beneficial outcomes associated with participation in a FWBR. Because the literature focused exclusively on the FWBR is very limited and what does exist is mixed in its findings concerning the outcomes of participating in a FWBR, the current study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: In what kinds of activities do opposite-sex friends typically engage?

RQ2: Will men and women differ in their perceptions of the potential relational benefits of participating in a FWBR?

RQ3: Compared with those who have not participated in a FWBR, will participation result in differing perceptions concerning the potential relational benefits of a FWBR?

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 203$) were 104 (51.2%) male and 99 (48.8%) female mostly undergraduate communication studies students currently enrolled in a mid-sized, private, Christian university in the south-central United States. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 27 ($M = 20.56$ years; $SD = 1.36$). A majority (88.7%) were Caucasian, while 4.4% were Black, and 4.9% were Hispanic. At the time of the study, 97.5% of the participants were pursuing a Bachelors degree; 2.5% were pursuing a graduate degree. Of all the participants, 97% were single/never married at the time of the study, while 3% were married. Each participant also reported demographic information about his or her closest opposite-sex (non-romantic or dating) friend. 31.5% of participants reported currently having five or more close, platonic, opposite-sex friends, 55.2% reported two to four close, platonic, opposite-sex friends, and 13.3% reported having only one close, platonic, opposite-sex friend ($M = 3.28$ opposite-sex friends; $SD = 1.43$). The average duration of the reported opposite-sex friendships was more than five years in length ($M = 5.28$ years; $SD = 4.75$).

Procedure

This study employed the use of paper and pencil surveys in order to gather information from the participants. Students were simply asked if they would be willing to participate in a study related to opposite-sex friendship. After being informed of their rights as a participant, the anonymous, confidential questionnaire was distributed to students in class. In order to maximize confidentiality, participants were asked to complete their surveys outside of class and once finished, to return it to us in sealed, anonymous, self-addressed and stamped envelopes. Participants were permitted to discontinue the survey at any time should they find anything offensive or inappropriate. Extra credit was offered for the student's participation with the study.

Measurements

One of the unique challenges of a study on friends with benefits relationships is clearly establishing a consistent, working definition for the purposes of measurement and analysis. The

limited, contradictory, and differing approaches to the study of the FWBR has resulted, thus far, in a failure of relational scholars to agree upon a common set of terminology and/or definitional parameters, i.e., what constitutes a friends with benefits relationship? For the purposes of the current study, we explicitly set out to frame the FWBR as a distinct, established, on-going, opposite-sex friendship in which partners freely engage in sexual activity as part of the relationship, but do not perceive each other as romantic partners, but rather, as platonic friends. Repeatedly and consistently in seven different places, the instructions in our survey asked participants to think about/reference a close opposite-sex friend but NOT their current or former romantic/dating partner. In order to simply and clearly establish those participants who have participated in a FWBR from those participants who have not participated in a FWBR, we created a scale with eight overtly sexual behaviors and asked the following:

We realize this might be a highly sensitive or very private question to ask—however, please remember that your answers are *completely confidential, private, and anonymous*.

Have you ever participated in a relationship with an opposite-sex friend (not a dating partner) that included sexual behaviors such as: (please circle yes or no).

The list of sexual behaviors included in this order: kissing, deep kissing/ “making out,” over the clothes touching, under the clothes touching, kissing/touching while partially naked, kissing/touching while fully naked, oral sex, sexual intercourse. The last two items (oral sex and sexual intercourse) were used as the primary behaviors for separating our subjects into those who have and those who have not participated in a FWBR.

The rest of the survey was used to gain information about any perceived benefits of a friends with benefits relationship. To provoke thought generation and focus, subjects were first asked to think about their closest opposite-sex, platonic friend (*not* a dating/romantic partner) and to write down the initials of this person; they were also asked to include simple demographic information such as age, sex, race, and duration of this opposite-sex, non-romantic friendship. Next, in order to gain some idea about the typical (or not) activities in which these opposite-sex, platonic friends normally engaged, a 16-item opposite-sex friendship activities scale was developed for this study. Participants indicated on a Likert scale of randomly generated activities (where 1 = I never do this with my closest opposite-sex friend and 7 = I frequently do this with my closest opposite-sex friend) how often they engaged in such activities, including three overtly sexual behaviors, e.g., kiss/make out, have oral sex, and have sexual intercourse (16 item scale $\alpha = .82$)

For other variables of interest, several Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) were constructed or modified for use in the current study. *Relationship involvement* (i.e., the perceived level of interaction and/or engagement with a friend) was measured with a series of seven Likert-type items developed by Floyd and Morman (2000). This scale included items such as, “I am always spending time with my friend” ($\alpha = .92$). *Relationship satisfaction* was measured using a series of six Likert-type items developed by Floyd and Morman (2000). This scale measured the extent of participant’s satisfaction with the nature of their friendship as illustrated by such comments as, “I am very satisfied with the relationship I have with my friend” ($\alpha = .87$). A modified version of the Investment Model Scale developed by Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) was used to measure *relationship commitment* (i.e., the extent to which a person is devoted or loyal to the friendship). This five item friendship commitment scale included items such as “I want our friendship to last for a very long time” ($\alpha =$

.93). Next, *relationship closeness* was assessed with the single-item Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale consists of a set of seven Venn-like diagrams, each symbolizing varying points of overlap. One circle in each pair is labeled “self” while the other circle is labeled “other.” Participants were instructed to identify the image that best depicted the level of perceived closeness within their closest opposite-sex friend (i.e., literally to mark with an “X” one set of overlapping circles). The Affectionate Communication Index was used to assess how opposite-sex friends express *affection* within their relationship (Floyd & Morman, 1998). Subjects were asked to respond to 18 items on Likert-type scales used to assess verbal affection (e.g., “say I love you”) ($\alpha = .83$), nonverbal affection (e.g., “kiss on lips”) ($\alpha = .83$), and instrumental affection (e.g., “help with problems”) ($\alpha = .75$). The overall affection scale reported a combined alpha rating of .91.

Next, *self-disclosure* within the opposite-sex friendship was assessed with a modified version of a self-disclosure scale developed by Wheelers and Grotz (1977) (e.g., “I often share information that is more revealing about who I really am”) ($\alpha = .95$). A five-item *sexual tension* scale developed for this study asked subjects about their perceptions of sexual tension within their closest opposite-sex friendship. Using the 7-point Likert scale, subjects responded to statements such as “At times, I am sexually frustrated with my opposite-sex friendship,” and “I think about having sex with my opposite-sex friend” ($\alpha = .94$). *Attitudes* related to the so-called “friends with benefits” relationship were measured with seven semantic differential, Likert-type scales (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) consisting of opposite terms like bad/good, negative/positive, inappropriate/appropriate ($\alpha = .95$). Next, a 7-point Likert-type *appropriateness* scale (also developed for this study) asked subjects to indicate how appropriate they thought certain sexually intimate behaviors would be within an opposite-sex friendship. As noted above, the eight sexually oriented items were kissing, deep kissing/ “making out,” over the clothes touching, under the clothes touching, kissing/touching while partially naked, kissing/touching while fully naked, oral sex, and sexual intercourse ($\alpha = .98$). Finally, in order to determine what types of more overtly sexual behaviors the study’s participants themselves had engaged in with an opposite-sex friend, subjects were asked to answer “yes” or “no” (i.e., have you ever done?) to the same behaviors listed in the appropriateness scale. After all the scales were completed, participants were asked to provide simple demographic information about themselves, including age, sex, race, marital status, and highest degree of education.

Results

While overtly defined as containing perceived benefits, the primary goal of the current study was to attempt to determine if, in fact, any relational benefits actually exist within a so-called “friends with benefits relationship” particularly as compared to other platonic, opposite-sex friendships where no sexual activity occurs. Three research questions were advanced concerning (1) activities engaged in the opposite-sex, platonic friendship, (2) the differences in perceptions of men and women regarding the relational benefits of a FWBR, and (3) the differences in perceptions of the relational benefits of a FWBR between those who have participated in such a relationship and those who have not. Results indicate that some relational benefits do exist for those participating in a FWBR, but these benefits appear to be related not to any sex differences, but rather to a person’s actual participation in a FWBR.

Research Question #1: Activities in Opposite-sex Friendships

Research question one asked about the kinds of activities in which opposite-sex friends typically engage, including three overtly sexual behaviors (i.e., kissing/making out, oral sex, and sexual intercourse). The friendship activity scale was utilized for a number of reasons, mainly to

(1) help participants in the current study to focus more acutely on opposite-sex friendship interaction, (2) to think more deeply about their closest opposite-sex friend, and (3) to ensure that our categorical designations for participation in a FWBR were, in fact, significantly different from each other on the key issues of sexual activity within the friendship. The 16-item measure asked participants to use a 7-point Likert-type scale to identify common friendship activities in their closest, platonic, opposite-sex friendship. The five most common activities reported for both men and women included *self-disclosing* ($M = 5.24, SD = 1.55$), *watching TV* ($M = 4.74, SD = 1.84$), *going out to eat* ($M = 4.54, SD = 1.73$), *talking on the phone* ($M = 4.24, SD = 1.88$), and *going to sports events* ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.85$). The three least commonly ranked items among men and women included *kissing* ($M = 1.48, SD = 1.28$), *sexual intercourse* ($M = 1.22, SD = .99$), and *oral sex* ($M = 1.20, SD = .89$), indicating for the most part, that participants were following directions and primarily reporting on close, opposite-sex friendships instead of romantic, dating, or FWBR type friendships.

In order to further assess the question of the activities involved in opposite-sex, platonic friendship, we tested for differences between men and women in the activities each reported as most often engaged in with their opposite-sex, platonic friend. A series of one-way ANOVA tests revealed significant main effects for sex on only four of the 16 activities assessed by our participants. The first significant difference was for talking on the phone, with women reporting talking on the phone with their opposite sex friend ($M = 4.53, SD = 1.89$) more than men ($M = 3.97, SD = 1.84$) ($F(1, 201) = 4.46, p = .036$). A second main effect for sex was found for playing video games, with women reporting playing more video games with their male friends ($M = 2.73, SD = 1.88$) than men reported playing with their female friends ($M = 1.96, SD = 1.58$) ($F(1, 201) = 9.87, p = .002$). A third main effect for sex was found for kissing and making out with an opposite-sex, platonic friend; this time, men reported more kissing activity with their female platonic friend ($M = 1.66, SD = 1.43$) than did women ($M = 1.28, SD = 1.07$) ($F(1, 201) = 4.60, p = .033$). The final main effect for sex was for going to a sporting event with an opposite-sex, platonic friend. Women reported attending more sporting events with their male friend ($M = 4.10, SD = 1.86$) than men reported attending with their female friend ($M = 3.51, SD = 1.87$) ($F(1, 201) = 5.08, p = .025$).

Using the distinct FWBR participation category described above, we also tested for differences in activities based on subject's actual participation in a friends with benefits relationship. Another series of one-way ANOVA tests revealed significant main effects for participation in a FWBR on seven of the 16 activities assessed by our participants. The first significant difference was found for talking on the phone, with those individuals involved in an actual FWBR reporting more phone conversations ($M = 4.98, SD = 1.84$) than for those not involved in a FWBR ($M = 4.06, SD = 1.86$) ($F(1, 198) = 7.90, p = .005$). Amount of self-disclosure was the second significant difference discovered for participation, with those involved in a FWBR reporting more self-disclosure ($M = 5.85, SD = 1.17$) than those not involved ($M = 5.08, SD = 1.59$) ($F(1, 198) = 8.60, p = .004$). A third main effect for participation was found for spending the night together, with those involved in a FWBR reporting more over-night stays with their opposite-sex friend ($M = 2.66, SD = 2.19$) than for those not involved in a FWBR ($M = 1.75, SD = 1.35$) ($F(1, 198) = 11.11, p = .001$). A fourth main effect for participation was found for watching television together with an opposite-sex friend, with those involved in a FWBR reporting more television watching ($M = 5.34, SD = 1.61$) than for those not involved in a FWBR ($M = 4.63, SD = 1.86$) ($F(1, 198) = 5.04, p = .026$). The fifth main effect for participation in a FWBR was indicated for the item kissing/making out with an opposite-sex, platonic friend, with

those actually involved in a FWBR reporting more kissing ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 2.19$) than for those not involved in a FWBR ($M = 1.22$, $SD = .726$) ($F(1, 198) = 37.64$, $p = .000$). The sixth main effect for participation was found for oral sex, with those involved in a FWBR reporting more experiences of oral sex with their opposite-sex, platonic friend ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.62$) than for those not involved in a FWBR ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .532$) ($F(1, 198) = 14.00$, $p = .000$). The final significant main effect for participation was found for sexual intercourse, with those involved in a FWBR reporting more sexual intercourse with their opposite-sex, platonic friend ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.96$) than for those not involved in a FWBR ($M = 1.03$, $SD = .317$) ($F(1, 198) = 34.52$, $p = .000$).

As noted above, in order to further assess participation in the more overtly sexual activities of the FWBR, subjects answered “yes” or “no” (i.e., have you ever done this with an opposite-sex, platonic friend?) to a series of eight sexually intimate behaviors including kissing, deep kissing/making out, over the clothes touching, under the clothes touching, kissing/touching while partially naked, kissing/touching while fully naked, oral sex, and sexual intercourse. The verbatim instruction for this scale was, “Have you ever participated in a relationship with an opposite-sex friend (not dating partner) that included sexual behaviors such as:” For both men and women, 66% reported kissing in their platonic, opposite-sex friendship, while 58% reported participating in deep kissing/making out. Slightly more than 48% of respondents reported participating in over the clothes touching with their platonic, opposite-sex friend, while 40% engaged in under the clothes touching. Almost 38% of the men and women in this study reported participating in kissing/touching while partially naked, while 27.6% said they had engaged in kissing/touching while fully naked. Finally, 26% of both males and females reported having oral sex with their platonic, opposite-sex friend, while 20.2% reported engaging in sexual intercourse. When assessing these behaviors separately by sex, in all eight sexual activities, men reported higher participation percentages with these behaviors in their platonic, opposite-sex friendships than did women, including 38.5% of the men in study reporting having oral sex and 26% having sexual intercourse with a platonic female friend. That compares to only 13% of women who reportedly had oral sex and 14% who had sexual intercourse with a male platonic friend.

Research Questions 2 & 3: Sex and Participation Differences

The second research question asked if any differences existed between men and women in their perceptions of the potential relational benefits of participating in a FWBR while the third research question asked if any differences in perceptions of benefits existed between those who have participated in a FWBR and those who have not participated. We attempted to answer these questions using a MANOVA design with sex and participation in a FWBR as the categorical predictor variables and by grouping together the relational benefit variables (i.e., the continuous, dependent variables) in groups based on their conceptual similarity and correlation with each other (see Table 1).

Table 1: Correlations of Interpersonal Variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|
| 1. Involvement | | .650* | .543* | .456* | .690* | .516* | .375* | .521* | .526* | .096 | .111 | .152* |
| 2. Commitment | .650* | | .503* | .384* | .589* | .530* | .417* | .566* | .565* | -.008 | .019 | .158* |
| 3. Self-Disclosure | .543* | .503* | | .174* | .524* | .531* | .366* | .588* | .548* | .176* | .107 | .328* |
| 4. | .456* | .384* | .174* | | .350* | .221* | .104 | .251* | .208* | -.007 | .017 | - |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Satisfaction | * | * | | | * | * | | * | * | | | .248* |
| 5. Closeness | .690* | .589* | .524* | .350* | | .458* | .306* | .405* | .438* | .152* | .129 | .101 |
| 6. Verbal Affection | .516* | .530* | .366* | .221* | .458* | | .599* | .729* | .875* | .107 | .150* | .223* |
| 7. NV Affection | .375* | .417* | .366* | .104 | .306* | .599* | | .626* | .878* | .317* | .315* | .503* |
| 8. Instrumental Affection | .521* | .566* | .588* | .251* | .405* | .729* | .626* | | .870* | .116 | .121 | .277* |
| 9. Overall Affection | .526* | .565* | .548* | .208* | .438* | .875* | .878* | .870* | | .220* | .237* | .400* |
| 10. Attitudes toward FWBR | .096 | -.008 | .176* | -.007 | .152* | .107 | .317* | .116 | .220* | | .628* | .352* |
| 11. Appropriateness | .111 | .019 | .107 | .017 | .129 | .150* | .315* | .121 | .237* | .628* | | .347* |
| 12. Sexual Tension | .152* | .158* | .328* | -.248* | .101 | .223* | .503* | .277* | .400* | .352* | .347* | |

**correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* correlation significant at the 0

In all, four different MANOVA models were produced. In the first model, both sex and participation in a FWBR served as the categorical predictor variables while relationship involvement, commitment, and self-disclosure were used as the first group of continuous dependent variables. The multivariate test of the model for sex was non-significant but the test of the model for participation was significant (Wilks' Lambda = .940, $F(3, 193) = 4.12, p = .007, \eta^2 = .06$). Participation in a FWBR was found to have a significant main effect for both relationship involvement ($F(1, 198) = 5.04, p = .026, \eta^2 = .025$) and self-disclosure ($F(1, 198) = 11.66, p = .001, \eta^2 = .056$) such that those who have actually participated in a FWBR reported more relationship involvement and more self-disclosure than those who have not participated in a FWBR (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). The second MANOVA model also had sex and participation in a FWBR as the predictor variables with relationship satisfaction and closeness serving as the second group of dependent variables. The multivariate test of the model for sex was non-significant but the test of the model for participation was significant (Wilks' Lambda = .931, $F(2, 192) = 7.11, p = .001, \eta^2 = .069$). Participation in a FWBR was found to have a significant main effect for closeness ($F(1, 196) = 10.82, p = .001, \eta^2 = .053$) such that those who have actually participated in a FWBR reported more closeness with their opposite-sex, platonic friend than did those who have not participated in a FWBR.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations

| | Men | | Women | | Participated in FWBR | | No Participation in FWBR | |
|-------------|------|------|-------|------|----------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Commitment | 5.49 | 1.27 | 5.98 | 1.12 | 5.92 | 1.12 | 5.69 | 1.24 |
| Involvement | 4.37 | 1.26 | 4.61 | 1.38 | 4.85* | 1.41 | 4.39* | 1.28 |

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| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| Self-Disclosure | 4.84 | 1.53 | 4.70 | 1.52 | 5.48** | 1.29 | 4.59** | 1.53 |
| Satisfaction | 5.22 | 1.07 | 5.37 | 1.30 | 5.19 | 1.38 | 5.32 | 1.14 |
| Closeness | 3.93 | 1.44 | 4.03 | 1.55 | 4.67** | 1.42 | 3.81** | 1.46 |
| Verbal Affection | 3.89 | 1.42 | 4.03 | 1.51 | 4.67** | 1.21 | 3.77** | 1.47 |
| NV Affection | 3.27 | 1.32 | 3.23 | 1.25 | 3.93** | 1.49 | 3.07** | 1.16 |
| Inst. Affection | 4.99 | 1.04 | 5.17 | 0.92 | 5.52** | 0.90 | 4.96** | 0.98 |
| Overall Affection | 4.02 | 1.10 | 4.09 | 1.06 | 4.67** | 1.06 | 3.89** | 1.03 |
| Attitudes | 3.55* | 1.55 | 2.75* | 1.46 | 4.29** | 1.39 | 2.88** | 1.47 |
| Appropriateness | 2.87** | 1.77 | 1.73** | 1.09 | 3.71** | 2.04 | 1.97** | 1.23 |
| Sexual Tension | 3.19** | 1.82 | 2.20** | 1.58 | 3.42* | 2.06 | 2.54* | 1.65 |

*Significant at $p < .05$

**Significant at $p < .001$

The third MANOVA model retained sex and participation in a FWBR as the predictor variables with the third group of dependent variables assessing perceptions of the expression of affection within the opposite-sex, platonic friendship. The four affection-based dependent variables were verbal affection, nonverbal affection, instrumental affection, and overall affection. The multivariate test of the model for sex was non-significant, but the test of the model for participation was significant (Wilks' Lambda = .915, $F(3, 191) = 5.89$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .085$). Participation in a FWBR was found to have a significant main effect for all four factors of affectionate expression such that those who have participated in a FWBR have higher levels of verbal affection ($F(1, 196) = 12.80$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .062$), nonverbal affection ($F(1, 196) = 14.74$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .071$), instrumental affection ($F(1, 196) = 12.06$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .059$), and overall affection ($F(1, 196) = 17.73$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .084$) than for those who have not participated in a FWBR.

The final MANOVA model retained sex and participation in a FWBR as the predictor variables with attitudes towards the FWBR, appropriateness of the FWBR, and sexual tension within the opposite-sex, platonic friendship serving as the final set of dependent variables. This time, both multivariate tests of the model were significant for sex (Wilks' Lambda = .876, $F(3, 191) = 9.04$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .124$) and for participation in a FWBR (Wilks' Lambda = .821, $F(3, 191) = 13.88$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .179$); however, the test for the interaction of sex and participation was non-significant. Participant sex was found to have a significant main effect for all three dependent variables such that men, more so than women, held more favorable attitudes towards the FWBR ($F(1, 196) = 6.31$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .032$), perceived the FWBR to be more appropriate ($F(1, 196) = 20.28$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .095$), and reported higher levels of sexual tension within his current opposite-sex, platonic friendship ($F(1, 196) = 12.43$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .061$). Additionally, actual participation in a FWBR was found to have a significant main effect for all three dependent variables in the model such that those who have actually participated in a FWBR held more favorable attitudes towards the FWBR ($F(1, 196) = 24.88$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .114$), perceived the FWBR to be more appropriate ($F(1, 196) = 37.66$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .163$), and reported higher

levels of sexual tension within their current opposite-sex, platonic friendships ($F(1, 196) = 4.49$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .023$).

Discussion

The friends with benefits relationship is a unique, opposite-sex friendship in which partners freely engage in sexual activity within the relationship, but do not perceive each other as romantic partners, but rather attempt to remain as strictly platonic friends. By definition, the FWBR is perceived to contain benefits most commonly understood to be non-committed sexual activity. However, the current study attempted to determine if, in fact, any other relational benefits actually exist within the FWBR as compared to other platonic, cross-sex friendships where no sexual activity occurs. The results of this study indicated that some interpersonal benefits do exist, but these appear to be related to actual participation in a FWBR rather than grounded within any sex differences between men and women.

In fact, the only reported sex differences found in the current study are that men, more so than women, claim more overtly sexual activity is occurring within their opposite-sex, platonic friendships. However, the only statistically significant differences found between men and women were that men engage in more kissing/making out with their opposite-sex, platonic friends and those men have more favorable attitudes towards the FWBR and perceive the FWBR to be more appropriate than do women. Finally, more so than women, men reported significantly higher levels of sexual tension in their close, opposite-sex, platonic friendships. And yet on all the other relationship variables that are commonly recognized as being some of the potential beneficial outcomes of maintaining close, personal relationships (i.e., closeness, involvement, commitment, satisfaction, self-disclosure, and affection), no significant differences were found between men and women.

The significant differences that were revealed appear to be related to actual participation with a FWBR; that is, for those men and women who have actually participated in a FWBR, results indicated higher levels of relationship involvement, self-disclosure, closeness, and affection; however, these same men and women did not report significantly different perceptions of commitment to, or satisfaction with, their FWBR. Thus while it appears these individuals gain some level of relational benefit (in addition to sexual activity) from their participation in a FWBR, these benefits seem to be limited and ultimately, leave these men and women no more committed or satisfied with their FWBR than with any other close, opposite-sex friendship where sexual activity is absent from the experience of friendship.

Thus overall, the answer to the question concerning any perceived benefits resulting from engagement of a FWBR is somewhat limited. The fact that no differences were found regarding commitment to the FWBR is not surprising since by definition, this particular type of friendship is designed to restrict feelings of commitment, especially regarding any sexual activity that occurs within the friendship (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). However, the lack of satisfaction stemming from involvement in a FWBR is also informative, i.e., that while a lack of commitment is one of the primary goals of a FWBR, achieving that goal appears to be somewhat unfulfilling due to the lack of reported relational satisfaction arising from participation with a no-commitment desired FWBR.

Furthermore, the data from the current study also indicated significant differences between men and women in regards to attitudes towards the FWBR, perceptions of appropriateness of the FWBR, and with respect to sexual tension experienced within the platonic, opposite-sex friendship. As noted above, men had significantly more favorable attitudes towards the FWBR than did women, perceived the FWBR to be more appropriate than

did women, and experienced more sexual tension within their opposite-sex friendships. A number of theoretical perspectives are available to help understand these results.

First, evolutionary psychology would argue that due to lower levels of obligatory investment in offspring compared to women, men have historically benefitted more, in terms of gene replication, from mating with multiple partners. As a result, men should have evolved a greater willingness (relative to women) to engage in multiple sexual opportunities (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994). Women, on the other hand, reserve sexual access for those men that show a willingness to provide resources for them and any children they produce thereby maximizing mate (and by extension, offspring) quality rather than quantity. Since women bear much more of the long-term burden for carrying and raising children, women are usually more selective in their mating choices and are less willing to freely engage in uncommitted sex. From this perspective, men intuitively would have more positive attitudes towards a FWBR and would also find it more appropriate because the FWBR provides them the opportunity to engage in casual, uncommitted sex, possibly with multiple women. Accordingly, men, more so than women, have been found to be more interested in uncommitted sex, more quickly aroused through sexually explicit visual stimuli, less concerned with a female partner's status, yet more concerned with her physical appearance, and more sexually jealous of female interaction with other men (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994).

Additionally, in regards to psychological intimacy, scholars have consistently found that women report emotional closeness and emotional expression are their primary motivators for having sex, while men report pleasure and release as their primary motivators for sex (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985; Leigh, 1989). Women have been found to have more emotionally close relationships with friends and relatives (Abowitz & Knox, 2003), are more aware of emotional issues within their relationships (Croyle & Waltz, 2003), and report more emotional rather than sexual interests in relationships (McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007). Furthermore, a recent study of attitudes towards the FWBR found that women viewed their FWBR relationship as more involved and emotional than did men; nearly 85% of women compared to less than 15% of the men in this study claimed they were more friends than lovers. Not surprisingly, this same study found men to be more sexually focused than women and to hold more favorable attitudes towards having multiple sexual relationships (McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007). Other studies have also found that men have more permissive attitudes towards casual, uncommitted sex than women, and also engage more frequently than women in such sexual behaviors (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; 2000). The findings of the current study further support these views concerning men and casual, un-committed sexual attitudes and behaviors.

The finding that the women in our study hold less favorable attitudes about the FWBR, find it less appropriate than men, and experience less sexual tension in their opposite-sex, platonic relationships is also worthy of explanation. Combining aspects of both nature and culture, Baumeister (2000) argued that the male sex drive is less "plastic" than the female sex drive, thus it is much more stable, fixed, and relatively indifferent to the social/cultural context. Due to factors like bio-chemical hormones, age, general health, and genetic predispositions, men, more so than women, are "creatures of nature" (p. 369), driven not so much by the social meanings of or for sex, but rather by the more simple, physical aspects of sex. He argued that the more fixed and unchanging male sex drive stands in sharp contrast to the more plastic, flexible, and malleable female sex drive, influenced by a host of social and cultural issues as well as by the meanings and interpretations that a given sex act may have. A woman's understanding of her sexuality and sex drive is an exploratory process akin to "pursuing a moving, shape-

changing target” (p. 370). In his exhaustive review of literature, Baumeister contended that the average woman is more likely than the average man to change her sexual patterns and behaviors over the course of her adult lifespan, thereby making male sexual behavior much more predictable than female sexual behavior. Further, he argued that socio-cultural forces such as education, religion, political ideology, acculturation, and peer influence generally have stronger effects on the sexuality of women than men, thus increasing the importance of these social and cultural factors for understanding female sexuality and, as a result, causing less consistency between sexual attitudes and behaviors for women. Because women have been forced to become more socially malleable and accommodating as an adaptation to male power (i.e., physical, political, economic) and are generally the gatekeepers of sexual behaviors in most relationships (i.e., it is usually the woman, not the man, who determines if consensual sex will occur), Baumeister argued these contexts demand more flexibility in female sexual attitudes and behaviors as she is constantly being forced to adapt, to change her mind, and to respond to the sexual offers and demands of male partners who face no such requirements or need for flexibility or accommodation. Add to that the well supported finding that the female sex drive is milder and weaker than the male sex drive, and yet again, women are potentially being asked (or forced) to accommodate the much stronger, more consistent, testosterone fueled, male sex drive. In light of the findings of the current study, the net effect of more plasticity in female sexuality appears to be that women’s sexual patterns and behaviors are more easily changed than are men’s and that socially constructed interpretations of or for sexual behavior have more meaning and hold more power for women than for men, i.e., the meaning of sex is significant for women “before, during, and after” the sexual experience, yet for men, it may be a “perfectly fine experience even if it hardly means anything at all” (p. 371).

Finally, the standpoint of exchange theory also further informs our findings. Combining basic exchange theory with these same bio-evolutionary arguments noted above, Bleske and Buss (2000) asserted that single men and women often engage in an exchange of beneficial resources within opposite-sex friendship. In their study of the costs and benefits associated with friendship, they found that opposite-sex friendships in particular, may be an “evolved strategy” in which men provide physical protection for women; women provide sex for men; and both sexes gain more beneficial information about the opposite-sex that presumably, they may use in their pursuit of a long-term, more traditional romantic partner. Men in this study perceived sex with their opposite-sex friends as more beneficial than did women, while women reported the receipt of protection from their opposite-sex friends as highly beneficial. And while Bleske and Buss did not frame their study in the context of a FWBR, clearly, whether an evolved psychological strategy for survival or not, this type of resource exchange grounded in the context of the FWBR makes sense in light of the fact that both partners in a FWBR gain some of the benefits of a more traditional romantic relationship (i.e., physical protection and sexual activity) and yet without the typical demands of such an arrangement (i.e., commitment and monogamy). Add to that the fact that having a number of opposite-sex friends provides more access, proximity, and availability to the opposite-sex and clearly the context by which single men and women might be open to the idea of a FWBR, if for nothing other than the expediency of simple resource exchange, becomes at least plausible. In fact, a recent study found that convenience and opportunity were listed by 30% of the respondents as the primary reasons for engaging in a FWBR (Bisson & Levine, 2009).

Limitations & Further Exploration

This study faced some limitations that merit attention. First, even though 26% of the participants in the current study reported having oral sex with their opposite-sex, platonic friend and 20% admitted to having sexual intercourse in their close, opposite-sex friendship, it is still worth noting that these men and women were college students at a medium-sized, private, Christian university in the south-central United States; thus, the number of students actually admitting to such behavior may be restricted. Other studies of the FWBR have reported much larger rates of participation than reported here; for example, McGinty et al., (2007), reported a 57.3% participation rate for a FWBR; Afifi and Faulkner (2000) reported that 54% of their sample had engaged in sex with a friend at least once; and Mongeau, Ramirez, and Vorrell (2003) reported that 61.7% of study participants on one campus and 48.5% on another campus reported experience with a FWBR. Therefore, due to the sensitive subject matter and the location of our data collection, controlling for issues of social desirability and religiosity might have potentially benefited the final results of the current study, particularly given the well promoted Christian mandate against any form of pre-marital sexual activity before marriage that could potentially lessen sexual activity in any kind of relationship, romantic or otherwise. However, even if under-reported, given the restraints of the southern and Christian culture of our university, the fact that 20% of our respondents reported sexual intercourse is truly informative regarding the prevalence of the FWBR phenomenon on American college campuses. Also, a large majority (88.7%) of participants were Caucasian which also potentially restricts the applicability of the data analysis due to a lack of ethnic diversity. Gathering more data from various races and at multiple universities, including non-religiously affiliated institutions, would potentially rectify these issues as would collecting data from a non-college student /older population of single individuals, thereby affording the opportunity to assess the role of the FWBR in other contexts. Future inquiries into the nature of the FWBR should consider examination of this relationship type in a non-collegiate context in order to assess any differences between those engaging in a FWBR while in college with those who are potentially older, more established in their careers, and yet, still remain single and more open to having multiple friends of the opposite-sex.

Conclusion

The current study makes a number of important contributions to the understanding of the FWBR and to the existing research in this area. First, the current project adds to the small extant literature concerning this under-studied relationship. Despite its apparent popularity across college campuses, the FWBR remains truly under-represented within our scholarly investigations of various types of human relationships. Second, the findings of this study challenge the stereotypical belief that compared to women, men would benefit more from participation in an FWBR. While men reported more favorable attitudes concerning the FWBR and framed it as more appropriate, nevertheless, the current study provides no support for the idea that at least from an interpersonal benefits standpoint (e.g., satisfaction, investment, closeness), that men benefit more from participation in a FWBR than do women. Third, the findings of the current study contribute to a deeper understanding of the relational and interpersonal dynamics of the FWBR as, for the first time that we are aware of, the relationship maintenance issues of self-disclosure, affection, satisfaction, involvement, commitment, and closeness are explored and analyzed within the context of this unique type of friendship. Finally, this study also challenges traditional conceptions of the development and maintenance of psychological closeness within opposite-sex friendships and further questions exactly what does or does not constitute feelings

of intimacy within the friendships of men and women. Most current theories of psychological closeness argue that intimacy is grounded in intimate encounters and interaction (Prager, 2000) involving higher levels of self-disclosure, affection, involvement, and commitment all designed to move the typical relationship into increasingly deeper feelings and/or perceptions of closeness. And while the current study did find support for higher levels of these factors within the FWBR context, the fact that these relationships are, by definition, restricted in feelings of overt intimacy, especially overt romantic intimacy, our conceptualization of just what closeness means within a FWBR is clearly challenged and therefore, calls for more investigation.

Over the last 20 years, scholars have continued to investigate the unique nature of the opposite-sex friendship, asking the intriguing question of whether or not men and women successfully can be “just friends.” Clearly, the more we learn about the prevalence of the FWBR, the experiences, and the outcomes for those participating in a such a relationship, the more the answer to this timeless question appears to be found within an increasingly complex, challenging, and provocative form of human relating, answers that warrant even more inquiry into the intricacies of male/female interaction, platonic or otherwise.

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