

Friends with benefits relationships as a start to exclusive romantic relationships

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Abstract

The current study examined whether young adults who start their exclusive romantic relationship via Friends with Benefits (FWB) relationships differed in relationship functioning from those who did not. After controlling for other salient predictors of relationship functioning (e.g., alcohol use, attachment style), young adults who were in FWB relationships prior to becoming exclusive reported lower relationship satisfaction when compared to young adults who did not. There were no significant associations between FWB status and communication quality or ambiguity in commitment levels. FWB status was not associated with relationship termination over the course of 4 months. Collectively, starting exclusive romantic relationships via FWB relationships had little apparent impact on later relationship functioning.

Keywords

Attachment, casual sex, commitment, friends with benefits, hooking up, relationship satisfaction

Hooking up among young adults is common and typically is defined as physical intimacy, ranging from kissing to intercourse, with a stranger, friend, or acquaintance without a mutually agreed upon committed relationship (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Owen, Rhoades,

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Stanley, & Fincham, 2010; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Within this context, approximately half of young adults hook up with friends, a relational style described as friends with benefits (FWB) (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). These relationships are typified by friendship and sexual encounters, but there is no implied or explicit relational exclusivity or commitment between partners (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Consequently, FWB relationships share aspects of traditional friendships (e.g., shared activities, trust, and mutual reliance) as well as romantic relationships (e.g., sexual intimacy); however, they are a unique variant of both.

Most research to date has examined psychological correlates of young adults who engage in FWB relationships and hooking up encounters as well as young adults' reactions to these new relational styles (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Gute & Eshbaugh, 2008; Owen & Fincham, 2011a; Paul et al., 2000). For instance, young adults typically describe their FWB relationships as being more positive than negative (Owen & Fincham, 2011b), with notable advantages being sexual encounters while retaining a trusting relationship with a friend (Bisson & Levine, 2009). However, young adults who engage in FWB relationships also report increased alcohol use and less thoughtful relationship decision-making processes (Owen & Fincham, 2011b). Moreover, when navigated poorly FWB relationships can lead to complicated friendships (Bisson & Levine, 2009).

Some young adults may see FWB relationships as an attractive way to explore a future committed or exclusive romantic relationship. For instance, Owen and Fincham (2011b) found approximately 25% of men and 40% of women hoped that their FWB relationship would progress into a committed relationship. Yet, the social scripts for engaging in FWB relationships are notably less formal and more ambiguous when compared to the scripts for traditional dating relationships (Bogle, 2007; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Stanley, 2002), and contemporary social norms may promote engaging in FWB relationships (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Oppermann, 2003). These social scripts may have implications for young adults' ability to form stable romantic relationships – a key developmental task during young adulthood (Amato et al., 2008; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). The stability and dissolution of romantic relationships in young adulthood can affect psychological well-being and shape attitudes about romantic relationship (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004; Raley, Criseey, & Muller, 2007). Indeed, it is easy to argue that patterns of behavior learned in FWB relationships may hinder the development of relationship processes deemed critical to healthy relationships, specifically the development of commitment. Accordingly, it is important to understand how young adults' experience in FWB relationships influence subsequent relational functioning.

Researchers have found that approximately 10% to 20% of young adults who engage in FWB relationships progress into an exclusive relationship (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009). Recently, Eisenberg et al. (2009) found that young adults who started their relationships via FWB relationships did not differ in psychological well-being when compared to those who did not. However, for those young adults who do progress into an exclusive relationship, it is not known whether being in a FWB relationship prior to exclusivity has an impact on subsequent relationship functioning.

FWB and relationship functioning

There are several reasons to suspect that starting an exclusive romantic relationship via a FWB relationship may have differential effects on subsequent relationship functioning when compared to those who do not. Young adults who engage in FWB relationships may be less committed to the idea of monogamy, which subsequently may affect their relationship quality and clarity about the level of commitment in the relationship. According to commitment theory, partners' general agreement and clarity about commitment in the relationship provides a foundation for relational functioning (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Rusbult, 1983). For instance, young adults in FWB relationships report low to moderate levels of commitment to their partner in absolute terms and lower levels of commitment in comparison to individuals in exclusive relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Additionally, Owen and Fincham (2011b) found that young adults who hoped that their FWB relationship would progress into an exclusive relationship also reported that they felt more constraint commitment or feeling trapped with their FWB partner. Consequently, if ambiguity about the level of commitment continues into their exclusive romantic relationship, then it is likely to affect negatively their relationship quality. Alternatively, as young adults progress into an exclusive relationship the prior levels of ambiguity about the degree of commitment may change.

Another notable feature of FWB relationships is the lack of clear communication about the ground rules for the relationship (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). Moreover, communication patterns in FWB relationships are characterized by independence and conflict avoidance, such that self-disclosures are limited and discussions about salient relational processes might be missed or "swept under the rug" (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Couple communication has been extensively researched and across numerous studies, and distressed couples typically report more negative communication patterns such as reciprocation of negative behaviors, escalation, invalidation, negative interpretations, criticism, and withdrawal (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Fincham, 2003; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010). Conversely, positive communication patterns have been described as partners' willingness to discuss relational issues, working to gain clarity about and validating each other's view points, and providing affectional support (Fincham, 2004). The lack of clarity in the communication patterns of young adults in FWB relationships may set a foundation or norm for their relationship; thus if this pattern continues then young adults' relationship quality may suffer.

Attachment, alcohol use, and relationship functioning

Beyond examining relational factors that may explain potential differences in relationship functioning for young adults who start an exclusive relationship via a FWB relationship, it is also important to recognize that factors that relate to the propensity to engage in a FWB relationship can also impact relationship functioning. Accordingly, we included in our investigation attachment style and alcohol use based on prior research demonstrating key associations with relationship functioning.

Adult attachment theory describes individuals' internal working models, which guide their desire and need for interpersonal relatedness with others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

According to the theory, secure attachment reflects a sense of ease in developing romantic relationships as well as a comfort with establishing healthy boundaries in relationships. In contrast, insecure attachment reflects a sense of anxiety about or avoidance of developing an emotionally close relationship. Developing a secure attachment between partners is at the core of a committed relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010), and this process is typically more challenging for individuals with a propensity to develop more insecure attachments. For example, several studies have found that individuals who reported insecure attachment styles (i.e., avoidant and anxious styles) were less committed to their partner and reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction and trust (e.g., Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Owen, Rhoades, & Stanley, in press). Consistently, albeit not invariably, insecure attachment styles have been related to engaging in casual sex encounters (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Owen et al., 2010).

Alcohol use can impair individuals' ability to successfully navigate the complexities of romantic relationships. For instance, alcohol use has shown negative associations with relationship functioning, such as communication quality and negative perceptions of the relationship (Fischer et al., 2005; MacDonald, Zanna, & Holmes, 2000). Moreover, alcohol use is one of the most consistent predictors of engaging in a FWB relationship, and casual sex more generally (Owen et al., 2010; Paul et al., 2000). Thus, attachment styles and alcohol use are a logical choice as viable alternative explanations for potential relational differences between individuals who start a relationship via FWB and those who do not.

The current study

We examined whether young adults' relationship satisfaction, communication quality, ambiguity in commitment level, and relationship separation differs as a function of whether or not their relationship started out as a FWB one. These four facets of relationship functioning were selected as they have been shown to differentiate between distressed and non-distressed relationships, and/or are predictors of separation and relationship stability (Fincham, 2004; Funk & Rogge, 2007; Heavey & Christensen, 1996). Our first set of hypotheses was related to relationship functioning (e.g., satisfaction, communication quality, and ambiguity in commitment). Specifically, we hypothesized that exclusive relationships starting out as FWB exhibit lower relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 1a), poorer communication quality (Hypothesis 1b) and greater ambiguity in commitment (Hypothesis 1c) than those that did not begin as FWB. Next, we tested whether these associations were still present after controlling for attachment styles and alcohol use. We posited that the differences between exclusive relationships that started via FWB (or not) for relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 2a), communication quality (Hypothesis 2b), and ambiguity in commitment (Hypotheses 2c) would still be significant after controlling for young adults' attachment styles and alcohol use. Finally, we posited that relationships that begin via FWB would be more likely to end over the course of four months when compared to relationships that do not begin as FWB (Hypothesis 3). In our analyses, we also controlled for time spent dating and participants' gender. Both variables have demonstrated effects on relationship functioning constructs,

thus, we wanted to control for some extraneous factors in our model (see Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, & Markman, 2006; Whisman, Beach, & Snyder, 2008).

Method

Participants

A total of 2,008 college students participated in a study examining attitudes and beliefs about casual and romantic relationships. Since we wanted to focus on individuals who were in an exclusive relationship, we excluded 1209 participants who were single or dating multiple partners, who were married/engaged ($n = 22$), or who were older than 25 years old ($n = 13$), as we wanted to focus our study on emerging adulthood which is typically defined as 18–25 years of age (Arnett, 2004). Thus, our final sample included 764 young adults who were in an exclusive dating relationship. Of the 764 participants, 601 were female and 163 were male, with an average age of 19.37 years ($SD = 1.41$; range 17 to 25 years old). The majority of the sample identified as White (70.9%), 11.3% identified as African American, 11.9% identified as Latino(a), 1.8% identified as Asian American, 0.3% identified as Native American, and 4.0% identified as “other.” Of the sample 37.6% identified as first year students, 25.8% identified as sophomores, 25.7% identified as juniors, 10.5% identified as seniors, and 0.5% did not indicate their year in college.

Measures

Friends with benefits prior to a committed relationship. We assessed whether young adults started their relationship based on a FWB relationship using the following definition and question: “Some people say that “friends with benefits” is a friendship in which there are also physical encounters (e.g., kissing, petting, oral sex, intercourse), but no on-going committed relationship (e.g., not boyfriend/girlfriend). Were you in a friends with benefits relationship with your current partner before there was a mutual understanding that you and your partner were dating? (were boyfriend, girlfriend).” Based on the response options (yes/no), 150 participants (19.6%) indicated that they were in a FWB relationship with their partner prior to the relationship becoming an exclusive one (FWB-prior) and 614 participants (80.4%) were not (FWB-no prior). Of young adults who were FWB-prior, 24 (16%) were men and 126 (84%) were women and of those who were FWB-no prior, 139 (22.6%) were men and 475 (77.4%) were women. The differences for men and women in FWB-prior versus FWB-no prior was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 764) = 3.17, p > .05$.

Ambiguity of relationship status. We developed a four item measure to assess participants’ views about the level of commitment ambiguity in their relationship. Example items include: “I would rather things be kind of vague about what our relationship is”, “It is important to me to know what this relationship means to us so we have a good sense of its future” (reverse coded). These four items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). The items were based, in part, on commitment

theory and research exploring how individuals approach relationship decisions (see Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011). Cronbach alpha in the current study was .71.

Relationship satisfaction. Starting with 180 items previously used to assess relationship satisfaction, Funk and Rogge (2007) conducted an item-response theory analysis to develop a four-item measure of relationship satisfaction with optimized psychometric properties. Sample items include, “How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?” (answered on a 6-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*) and “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner” (answered on a 6-point scale ranging from *not at all true* to *very true*). Their measure correlates $r = .87$ with the widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and $r = -.79$ with the Ineffective Arguing Inventory (Kurdek, 1994). Cronbach alpha in the current study was .93.

Communication quality. We assessed young adults’ communication quality using the Communication Patterns Questionnaire-constructive communication (CPQ-CC) subscale (Heavy, Larson, Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996). Specifically, this 7-item subscale assesses how individuals behave when faced with relational problems. The items were rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 9 (*very likely*). Scores are derived by subtracting the constructive communication items (3 items) from the destructive communication items (4 items). Higher scores indicate better communication quality. Example items for constructive and destructive communication include: “Mutual Discussion – Both members try to discuss the problem” and “Mutual Blame – Both members blame, accuse, and criticize each other”, respectively. Support for the CPQ-CC has been demonstrated with positive correlations with observer ratings of positive communication and relationship adjustment (Heavy et al., 1996). Cronbach alpha in the current study was .82.

Alcohol use. We used three items to assess alcohol use. The first question, “Within the last 30 days, on how many days did you have a drink containing alcohol?”, was rated on 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never drank all 30 days*) to 7 (*20–30 days*). The median number of days drinking was 3–5 days. The second question, “How many drinks containing alcohol did you have on a typical day when you were drinking?”, was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never drank*) to 6 (*10 or more*). The median number of drinks was 3 (*3 or 4 drinks*). The last question, “How often in the last 30 days did you have five or more drinks on one occasion?”, was rated on 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never happened*) to 9 (*More than 10 times*). The median number of times participants had drunk five or more drinks on one occasion was “one time.” These items are commonly used in measures of alcohol use (Saunders, Aasland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993) and in the prediction of casual sex behaviors (Owen et al., 2010). These items were highly correlated ($r_s = .67-.73$), so we created a composite score. Cronbach alpha in the current study was .84.

Experiences in Close Relationship scale – Short Form. The Experiences in Close Relationship scale – Short Form (ECR-SF) (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) was used to assess participants’ attachment styles. Specifically, the scale has two

subscales – Anxiety, and Avoidance – with six items per subscale. The items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Definitely not like me*) to 7 (*Definitely like me*). Wei et al. (2007) reported support for the validity for this shortened measure through correlations with psychological well-being, loneliness, fear of intimacy, and comfort with self-disclosure measures. In the current study, Cronbach alphas for the Avoidance and Anxiety subscales were .85 and .74, respectively.

Separation status. Separation status was assessed with a one-item measure: “Have you ended a romantic relationship since you completed the last survey?” The rating options were yes and no. Of the original 764 participants, we had valid data for this item for 746 as 18 students did not respond to this item. Thus, this item assessed whether young adults separated over the course of the 4-months of the study.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through an introductory course on families across the lifespan that fulfills a social studies requirement and therefore attracts students from across the university. The current sample includes students from two different semesters. Students were offered multiple options to obtain extra credit for the class, one of which comprised the survey used in this study. Ninety-eight percent of the class participated in the study. They completed informed consent and were told how to access the on-line survey. All variables were assessed at the beginning of the semester, with one exception. We assessed whether the participants were still in their romantic relationship at the end of the semester. They were given a five day window in which to complete the survey. All procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Results

Table 1 displays the means, SDs, and effect sizes for the differences between young adults who reported being in a FWB relationship prior to becoming exclusive with their partner and those who did not.¹ We tested hypotheses 1a–1c and 2a–2c via three hierarchical linear regressions with Ambiguous Commitment, Relationship Satisfaction, and Communication Quality as the dependent variables, respectively. In the first step of the regression we included the control variables: gender (coded 1 = women, –1 = men) and length of the relationship. In the second step, we included FWB status (coded 1 = FWB-prior, –1 = FWB-no prior). This step addressed whether young adults who started an exclusive relationship via FWB or not differed in their relationship functioning (e.g., satisfaction, Hypothesis 1a; communication quality, Hypothesis 1b; and ambiguity in commitment, Hypothesis 1c).

Next, we tested whether the differences in relationship functioning (e.g., satisfaction Hypothesis 2a; communication quality, Hypothesis 2b; and ambiguity in commitment, Hypothesis 2c) would still be evident after controlling for alcohol use, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment. Thus, in the third step of the regression model, we included alcohol use, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment. The relationship between FWB status and the relationship functioning variables in this final step

Table 1. Means, SDs, and effect sizes for relationship and personal variables by gender and FWB status

	Men <i>M</i> <i>SD</i>		Women <i>M</i> <i>SD</i>		No FWB prior vs FWB prior <i>d</i>
	No FWB prior <i>n</i> = 139	FWB prior <i>n</i> = 24	No FWB prior <i>n</i> = 475	FWB prior <i>n</i> = 126	
Relat. Satisf.	5.42 0.81	4.91 1.50	5.43 0.79	5.07 1.02	0.51
Comm. Quality	4.95 2.26	4.03 2.31	5.28 2.51	4.86 2.80	0.26
Ambig. Commit.	2.00 1.17	2.91 1.67	1.73 0.92	2.00 1.20	-0.56
Avoid. Att.	2.02 1.13	1.86 1.08	1.80 1.02	2.13 1.28	-0.07
Anxious Att.	2.85 1.14	3.01 1.37	3.14 1.19	3.27 1.28	-0.12
Alcohol Use	3.81 1.83	3.35 1.66	2.68 1.29	3.22 1.35	-0.03

Notes. The means are adjusted controlling for length of relationship $M = 18.18$ months. Relat. Satisf. = Relationship Satisfaction (possible range 1 to 6.25), Comm. Quality = Communication Quality (possible range = -6.50 to 8.00), Ambig. Commit. = Ambiguous Commitment (possible range 1 to 7), Avoid. Att. = Avoidant Attachment (possible range 1 to 7), Anxious Att. = Anxious Attachment (possible range 1 to 7), Alcohol Use (possible range 1 to 7). d = effect size where 0.20 = small effect, 0.50 = medium effect, 0.80 = large effect.

addressed Hypotheses 2a–2c, as it tested whether differences between FWB-prior and FWB-no prior on relationship functioning variables were present after controlling for the variance in the other variables.

Additionally, to establish the incremental validity of FWB status, we also reversed the order of step 2 and step 3 and examined the change in adjusted R^2 when FWB status was entered in the final step of the model (see Blais, Hilsenroth, Castlebury, Fowler, & Baity, 2001). Given our sample size we decided to use a p -value of .001 to determine statistical significance and adjusted R^2 was our measure of effect size (see Table 2).

Relationship satisfaction: Hypotheses 1a & 2a

The results for the first model with relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable were statistically significant, $F_{fullmodel}(6, 757) = 28.23, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .18$. The adjusted ΔR^2 at steps 1–3 were .00, .03, and .16, respectively ($p > .05$ for step 1, $ps < .001$ for steps 2 and 3). When the order was reversed for steps 2 and 3, the ΔR^2 for FWB status was .02, $p < .001$. Thus, FWB status was a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction (supporting Hypothesis 1a), even after controlling for attachment styles and alcohol use (supporting Hypothesis 2a). In other words, young adults who started their relationships via FWB relationships reported lower relationship satisfaction when compared to those who did not. The effect size was small, accounting for 2% of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

Communication quality: Hypotheses 1b & 2b

The second model with communication quality as the dependent variable was also statistically significant, $F_{fullmodel}(6, 756) = 19.74, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .13$. The

Table 2. Hierarchical linear regressions predicting relationship functioning by FWB status, alcohol use, attachment styles, gender, and length of relationship

	Relat. Satisf.			Comm. Quality			Ambig. Commit.		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Step 1									
Gender	0.01	.04	.01	0.19	.11	.06	-0.17	.05	-.13*
Relat. Length	0.00	.01	.01	-0.02	.01	-.11	-.01	.01	-.14*
Step 2									
Gender	0.02	.04	.02	0.20	.11	.07	-0.18	.05	-.14*
Relat. Length	0.00	.01	-.01	-0.02	.01	-.12	-0.01	.01	-.13*
FWB	-0.18	.04	-.16*	-0.25	.11	-.08	0.18	.05	.13*
Step 3									
Gender	0.03	.04	.03	0.27	.11	.09	-0.12	.04	-.09
Relat. Length	-0.01	.01	-.11	-0.03	.01	-.20*	-0.01	.01	-.03
FWB	-0.14	.04	-.13*	-0.17	.11	-.05	0.12	.04	.09
Alcohol Use	0.03	.02	.05	0.04	.06	.03	0.07	.02	.09
Avoid. Att.	-0.25	.03	-.31*	-0.36	.08	-.16*	0.39	.03	.40*
Anxious Att.	-0.15	.02	-.21*	-0.57	.07	-.28*	-0.01	.03	-.01

Notes. * $p < .001$. FWB was coded 1 = FWB-prior and -1 = FWB-no prior. Gender was coded 1 for women and -1 for men. Relat. Satisf. = Relationship Satisfaction, Comm. Quality = Communication Quality, Ambig. Commit. = Ambiguous Commitment, Avoid. Att. = Avoidant Attachment, Anxious Att. = Anxious Attachment.

adjusted ΔR^2 at steps 1–3 were .02, .01, and .11, respectively (only step 3 was statistically significant, $p < .001$). FWB status was not significantly associated with Communication Quality prior to accounting for attachment style and alcohol use (not supporting Hypothesis 1b). The ΔR^2 for FWB status when steps 2 and 3 were switched in order was .003 ($p > .05$). Not surprisingly, after controlling for attachment style and alcohol use, FWB status was not significantly associated with communication quality (not supporting Hypothesis 2b).

Ambiguous commitment: Hypotheses 1c & 2c

The results for the third regression analysis with ambiguous commitment as the dependent variable were statistically significant, $F_{fullmodel}(6, 758) = 33.28$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .20$. The adjusted ΔR^2 at steps 1–3 were .04, .02, and .16, respectively (all steps were statistically significant, $ps < .001$). FWB status was a significant predictor in the second step, prior to accounting for attachment style and alcohol use (supporting Hypothesis 1c). However, after controlling for attachment style and alcohol use, the association between FWB status and ambiguous commitment was no longer statistically significant (not supporting Hypothesis 2c). Specifically, when we reversed the order for steps 2 and 3, the ΔR^2 for FWB status was .01 ($p > .001$), suggesting that FWB status accounted for 1% of the variance in ambiguous commitment. Thus, while FWB status was related to ambiguous commitment, this association was no longer significant after accounting for attachment style and alcohol use.

Table 3. Separation status over 4 months by FWB status

	Full Sample	
	FWB-no prior	FWB-prior
Together	440 (75.9%)	130 (78.3%)
Separated	140 (24.1%)	36 (21.7%)
N	580	166
	In exclusive relationship < 12 months at start of study	
Together	182 (70.8%)	73 (79.3%)
Separated	75 (29.2%)	19 (20.7%)
N	257	92

Relationship termination: Hypothesis 3

Finally, we tested whether FWB status was related to separation status over the 4-month span of the study. We initially conducted a 2 (FWB-prior, Yes/No) x 2 (Separation, Yes/No) chi-square analysis with all participants. The results were not statistically significant $\chi^2(1, N = 746) = 0.43, p = .51$. However, since FWB status may be more salient in the early months of a relationship we re-ran our chi-square analysis for young adults who were in a relationship for 12 months or fewer at the start of the study. Consistent with our last analysis, the results were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 349) = 2.51, p = .11$. Table 3 shows the percentages of young adults who separated by FWB status. For those who were in an exclusive relationship for less than one year at the start of the study, 20.7% separated over the next four months when they started that relationship via FWB. In comparison, 29.2% separated over the next four months when they did not start their relationship via FWB. These results do not support Hypothesis 3.

Collectively, these results suggest that FWB status has a weak association with young adults' relationship functioning and separation status. Additionally, there were no significant interaction effects for FWB status and length of relationship in any of the models.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine whether young adults who start their exclusive relationships via a FWB relationship exhibit worse (or better) relationship functioning when compared to those who do not. Although many young adults report wanting to start a relationship through traditional dating as compared to casual sex encounters (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010), a sizeable minority of young adults who engage in FWB relationships still want to progress into an exclusive relationship (Owen & Fincham, 2011b). Indeed, in the current study, of those young adults who were in an exclusive relationship at the time, approximately 20% started via a FWB relationship, which is consistent with prior research (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2009). Clearly, FWB relationships are not a common entry point into an exclusive relationship; however, it does occur in a substantial minority of cases and thus warrants the question:

does starting the relationship via FWB have an impact on subsequent relationship functioning?

Although the effect size for differences between young adults who started their relationship via FWB and those who did not (controlling for length of relationship) for relationship satisfaction, communication quality, and ambiguous commitment were in the small to medium range, these differences diminished after controlling for other theoretically relevant variables. Specifically, for communication quality and ambiguous commitment there were no differences between young adults who started their exclusive relationship via FWB relationships and those who did not when controlling for relationship length, attachment style and alcohol use. Moreover, young adults who started their exclusive romantic relationships via FWB were not more likely to separate over the course of the study. The differences in separation rates for FWB status were not statistically significant and were in the opposite direction to that predicted. Thus, young adults who start an exclusive romantic relationship via a FWB relationship may not have some of the hallmark risk factors that are typically reported in FWB relationships, such as avoidant communication patterns, and lack of clarity about the commitment levels (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Owen & Fincham, 2011b). Alternatively, young adults who desire clear commitment boundaries and who do not favor avoiding meaningful communication with their partner may be more likely to progress into an exclusive relationship with a FWB partner. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot fully disentangle the directionality of these effects.

FWB status significantly predicted relationship satisfaction, over and beyond the variance accounted for by the other predictors. However, the effect size was small, with FWB status accounting for only 2% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. Nonetheless, young adults who started a relationship via FWB may feel the relationship is more vulnerable and less stable when compared to those who did not start their relationship via a FWB relationship. Given that relationship satisfaction develops through couples' ability to form a mutually shared couple identity, which is expressed within the relationship and to others (Stanley et al., 2010), the initial foundation of a FWB may have impacted this process. Future research examining the trajectory of young adults' relationships, which start via FWB, is needed to better understand this premise.

Notwithstanding the significant but small association between FWB status and relationship satisfaction, our findings provided no convincing evidence that starting an exclusive relationship via a FWB strongly affects subsequent relationship functioning. However, we also found no evidence that starting an exclusive relationship via a FWB relationship increases relationship functioning either. Simply, FWB relationships do not provide a window into how young adults' relationships will function after they become exclusive. That is, other personal and relational dynamics such as attachment styles, are more potent predictors of subsequent relationship functioning. Our findings also complement Eisenberg et al.'s (2009) study wherein young adults who started their relationships via a FWB relationship did not differ in psychological well-being when compared to those who did not.

Our findings also have implications for relationship formation theory and research. FWB relationships may be an attractive (or at least not formidable) pathway for young adults to enter into a romantic relationship. However, most research examining FWB

relationships would suggest these relationships are not ideal for setting the foundation for a healthy exclusive relationship. For instance, FWB relationships are typified by limited communication about the ground rules for the relationship and low levels of commitment (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Yet, how relationships transition may be an essential factor to consider, as making thoughtful relationship decisions can assist individuals to experience healthy relationships (Owen, Rhoades, & Stanley, in press). More research is needed to understand how FWB relationships transition into an exclusive relationship. In particular, there are two likely mechanisms to consider: selection and experience factors. For instance, some individuals may start FWB relationships with the clear intent to enter an exclusive relationship. Thus, there may be pre-existing attitudes or personality traits that are notably different for these young adults than those who enter FWB relationships due to the lack of commitment involved in these relationships. On the other hand, there may be unique interactions or experiences that occur within FWB relationships that shape young adults' decision to enter an exclusive romantic relationship (or not). There may be experiences within FWB relationships that are formative in this process, such as friendship quality, attributions, trustworthiness, or social pressures that help shape the decision to enter into a romantic relationship. Clearly, more research is needed to understand these processes.

Limitations and directions for future research

The strengths of the current study should be understood within the context of its methodological limitations. First, the sample comprised university students who were enrolled in a course on families, which may introduce a selection bias. Thus, the degree to which our results will generalize to other young adults who are not in college or adolescents is unknown. Second, although our sample was large, the proportion of students who entered an exclusive relationship via a FWB relationship was relatively small. However, base-rates for young adults who start their exclusive relationship via a FWB are likely to be low in most studies (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2009). Third, our sample was primarily female, which limited our ability to test for gender interactions. Fourth, even though we attempted to capture the association between starting an exclusive relationship via FWB (or not) and separation status, to fully examine this association, research would need to identify young adults who are currently in a FWB relationship, transition into an exclusive relationship, and then track them over a longer period of time. Given the challenges of conducting such research, our study provides the first known evidence relevant to this vital question. Fifth, all of the measures were self-report, which may have introduced common method bias. Further, we assessed relationship functioning at the individual level and not at the couple level. Thus, future research could examine young adults' relationship functioning at the couple-level to compare couples who started their relationships via FWB relationships and those who did not. To date, we do not know of any studies that have examined FWB relationships at the couple-level.

Our study also illuminates some potential areas to explore for FWB relationships and romantic relationships more generally. Although we examined young adults who transitioned from FWB to exclusive romantic relationships, it is unclear how this transition

occurred. The impact and process of relationship transitions (e.g., deciding on being exclusive or living together) has garnered more attention recently (Fincham et al., 2011; Owen et al., in press; Stanley et al., 2010) and could be important for facilitating healthy transitions from FWB relationships to exclusive romantic relationships.

Although previous studies have found an array of positive and negative correlates with, and consequences of, hooking up and FWB relationships, the current study does not continue this trend. That is, it appears that the positive elements as well as the risk factors associated with FWB relationships do not continue into the relationship to the degree that they materially affect relationship functioning. This does not preclude the possibility that behaviors learned in FWB relationships affect subsequent exclusive relationships that do not involve a FWB partner. In any event, it is important to conduct more research in order to understand the nuances of how the transition occurs from FWB relationships to exclusive relationships and what its potential impact on the relationship might be.

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Notes

1. We anticipated a low base-rate for the number of young adults who started their exclusive romantic relationships via FWB relationships, which was observed (i.e., approximately a 4:1 ratio). Moreover, the number of men who reported that their exclusive relationships started via a FWB was low, which is to be expected based on previous research. As such, tests of mean differences via MANCOVAs were deemed inappropriate and our ability to test gender interactions was also hampered.

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