

COLLEGE MEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS RELATIONSHIPS

DR. SPENCER B. OLMSTEAD
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

DR. KAY PASLEY
The Florida State University

DR. FRANK D. FINCHAM
The FSU Family Institute

Friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs) occur when two friends who are not in a committed romantic relationship engage in ongoing sexual activity (i.e., oral sex and/or intercourse) over a period of time. The purpose of this study was to examine the demographic and psychosocial characteristics of college men involved in FWBRs ($N = 407$) using a short-term prospective study design. After including several relevant variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, year in school, age, religious service attendance, relationship status, casual sex attitudes, relationship awareness, alcohol use), men were less likely to be involved in a FWBR during the semester if they were in a stable committed romantic relationship and were more likely to do so if they held more positive attitudes towards casual sex, had a more extroverted personality, and had FWBR experience in the 12 months prior to the study. Implications for relationship education for emerging adult college men are discussed.

Key words: friends with benefits; casual sex; emerging adulthood; college men

Emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) is a period of exploration and experimentation, particularly with romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 2004). Growing attention is given to casual sex experiences of emerging adults attending college. One type of casual sex is "friends with benefits" relationships (FWBRs; Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden, & Shaw, 2013). Most studies on FWBRs compare men and women (e.g., Owen & Fincham, 2011); however, little is known about FWBR experiences

specifically among college men, and perhaps more importantly, the correlates that differentiate their involvement in FWBRs. Most studies on FWBRs are cross-sectional, failing to consider engagement in FWBRs over time. The purpose of this study was to examine college men's FWBR experiences using a short-term prospective design, with attention given to correlates that differentiate involvement in FWBRs.

Friends with benefits combines ongoing sexual interaction with the relational

component of friendship (Owen & Fincham, 2011). A consistent feature of FWBRs is engagement in sexual activity (e.g., intercourse; Mongeau et al., 2013). The literature has identified several demographic and psychosocial correlates of being involved in a FWBR. Most of these studies conduct between gender comparisons (e.g., Puentes, Knox, & Zusman 2008), some of which include small samples of men. Thus, we were interested in examining several demographic (e.g., race/ethnicity, year in school, age, religious service attendance, relationship status) and psychosocial (e.g., attitudes towards casual sex, relationship awareness, and alcohol use) correlates using a sample of college men, and extend this literature by exploring the role of personality traits and previous experience within FWBRs using multiple data points.

There is reason to expect that personality influences engagement in FWBRs based on the casual sex literature. For example, Gute and Eshbaugh (2008) found that those who scored higher on measures of extraversion and neuroticism were more likely to be involved in non-committed sexual encounters (e.g., intercourse or oral sex with a partner known less than 24 hours). However, higher scores on agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness were linked to a lower likelihood of such behaviors. Also, research shows that previous behavior plays a key role in predicting future behavior. For example, research on non-committed sexual relationships shows that previous experience is linked to future behavior (Olmstead, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013).

Public health concerns are important to consider, as FWBRs often involve penetrative sex behavior (e.g., oral sex and/or intercourse; e.g., Owen & Fincham, 2011). Scholars (e.g., Stinson, 2012) have raised concern about the lack of research on college men, specifically as it relates to sexual health and casual sex relationships. Although men

vary in their definitional scripts of friends with benefits (see Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009), little is known about how they differ in their involvement in FWBRs.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

The study sample was undergraduate men (18-25 years) at a large Southeastern university in the U.S. enrolled in an introductory course on marital and family relationships ($N = 407$). Data are from a larger project on emerging adult relationships approved by the university's institutional review board. Participants accessed an online survey at three different points during the semester (T1 = week 1, T2 = week 8, T3 = week 15). To increase sample size, data collected from two separate semesters (and thus two different samples) were combined. Participants were on average 19.4 years old ($SD = 1.33$). Most (73.0%) reported as Caucasian, and underclassmen: freshmen (35.9%), sophomores (36.1%). The majority (94.8%) identified as heterosexual.

Independent Variables

At T1, participants identified their race/ethnicity (*White, African American, Latino, Asian American, or Other*), year in school (*freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior*), and age. To measure religious service attendance, at T1 participants responded to the following: "How often do you attend religious services?" Responses ranged from 0 (*never or almost never*) to 3 (*one or more times per week*).

At each time point participants indicated whether they were in a romantic relationship (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*), and the relationship type (*dating nonexclusively, dating exclusively, engaged, married*). They also indicated at T2 and T3 whether they had ended a previous relationship (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) and if they had begun a new romantic relationship (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). Based on responses to these items,

men were coded as (0) *not in a committed romantic relationship throughout the semester* or (1) *in a committed romantic relationship throughout the semester*. To measure attitudes towards casual sex, at T3 participants responded to the attitudinal subscale (3 items) of Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) measure of sociosexuality. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*), and items were averaged ($\alpha = .81$).

At T2, participants completed Owen and Fincham's (2011) Relationship Awareness Scale (RAS), which includes 4 subscales: *confidence about relationship skills*, *awareness of relationship risk factors*, *thoughtful relationship decisions*, and *long-term visions* (see Owen & Fincham for items). Subscales consisted of 4 items each (total of 16 items), and responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for each subscale was acceptable ($\alpha = .67-.88$). At T1, participants responded to two items about their frequency of alcohol consumption (see Saunders, Aasland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993). The items were rescaled to be consistent (0-5) and averaged.

Also at T1, personality was measured using a brief measure of the Big 5 (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, Jr., 2003). Each trait (*extraversion*, *agreeableness*, *conscientiousness*, *emotional stability*, and *openness to experience*) was measured using 2 items, and responses ranged from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Because each trait was measured with two items, it is not appropriate to calculate Cronbach's alpha for each subscale (Hulin & Cudeck, 2001). Items were averaged within each personality type, with a range of 1-7 for each. Also, at T1, participants reported their number of different friends with benefits partners in the past 12 months. Responses ranged from 0 to 10 or more. We dichotomized this item as (0) *No, friend with benefits relationships* and (1) *one or more friends with benefits relationships*.

Dependent Variable

The outcome variable was whether a participant had engaged in one or more FWBRs during the semester. At T2 and T3 participants reported the number of different FWBR partners since the last survey. A dichotomous variable was created at T2 and at T3 (0 = *no FWBRs*, 1 = *one or more FWBRs*) and combined across T2 and T3: (0) *no FWBRs* and (1) *one or more FWBRs*. Participants also identified FWBR behaviors including *kissing*, *sexual touch*, *oral sex*, and *intercourse* (vaginal/anal).

Results

Descriptive analyses. About half (46.9%) reported a FWBR in the 12 months prior to the study. Men with FWBR experience reported an average of 2.37 FWBR partners ($SD = 1.83$, $Median = 2.00$). At T1, men reported that they used condoms, on average, *most times* during their intimate activity with their FWBR partners ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.50$), with just over half (55.5%) reporting *always* using condoms during FWBR encounters in the past 12 months. Overall, 45% of men had a FWBR during the semester. Among these men, 79.8% engaged in penetrative sex behaviors (oral sex and/or intercourse) with their FWBR partner. A small proportion of men (22.1%) were in a committed relationship throughout the semester; of these, 18.9% reported *also* having a FWBR partner and 82.4% of these extradyadic FWBRs included penetrative sex behaviors.

Bivariate analyses. For dichotomous variables, a series of 2x2 chi-square analyses were conducted to examine differences in men's engagement in FWBRs during the semester. We found that a lower percentage of men in stable committed relationships were in a FWBR during the semester, $\chi^2(1) = 31.75$, $p < .001$, and a greater percentage of those with previous FWBR experience were in a

FWBR during the semester, $\chi^2(1) = 38.61$, $p < .001$. For continuous variables, a series of t-tests were run to compare the means of those who did and did not have a FWBR during the semester. We found that men involved in FWBRs had higher mean scores on casual sex attitudes ($p < .001$), alcohol use ($p < .01$), extraversion ($p < .001$), and openness to experience ($p < .05$), and lower mean scores on religious service attendance ($p < .10$), confidence in relationship skills ($p < .05$), and thoughtful relationship decisions ($p < .01$). (Analyses not shown. Contact first author for table).

Multivariate analyses. We then conducted a hierarchical logistic regression (see Table 1). To be more parsimonious, variables that were not significant during bivariate analyses were not included. The model with Block 1 variables was significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 407) = 55.70$, $p \leq .001$, and fit the data well, $\chi^2(8, N = 407) = 8.25$, $p = .41$. These variables explained 17.1% of the variance in having a FWBR during the semester (Nagelkerke R^2). In Block 2 we entered extraversion and openness to experience (personality measures) and previous FWBR experience. The model remained significant, $\chi^2(9, N = 407) = 79.41$, $p \leq .001$, and fit the data well, $\chi^2(8, N = 407) = 6.41$, $p = .60$. Including these three variables explained an additional 6.6% of the variance in FWBRs during the semester. When including all variables, about 67% of those who had a FWBR during the semester were correctly classified.

Discussion

We contribute to the literature by examining how college men differ in their involvement in friends with benefits relationships, attending to the role of personality and previous FWBR experience. Two personality traits seemed important to engaging in FWBRs: extraversion and openness to experience. Our findings on extraversion fit with past research on other casual sex relationships (e.g., hookups;

Olmstead et al., 2013) in that those who identified having a more extraverted personality were also more likely to have a FWBR during the semester. Also, men who identified as more open to experience were more likely to have a FWBR during the semester, but this relationship did not remain in multivariate analyses. Previous experience in a FWBR played an important role in identifying those who had a FWBR during the semester.

Involvement in a stable committed romantic relationship reduced the likelihood of involvement in FWBRs during the semester. Past studies (e.g., Owen & Fincham, 2011) typically exclude such individuals, and our study largely supports focusing on those who are not in ongoing committed relationships for studies on FWBRs. However, we did find that some men in FWBRs also reported being in a committed romantic relationship and a majority of these men engaged in penetrative sex behaviors, raising concerns about exposure to health risks.

We note several limitations. First, the findings are not generalizable to all college men, because participants were not randomly selected; they self-selected into a class on families across the lifespan. Second, a majority of variables included were individual level correlates. Although we also included social (i.e., alcohol use) and relational (i.e., involvement in a committed romantic relationship) variables, future research should expand the examination of variables to provide a more comprehensive picture of men involved in FWBRs. Additionally, we examined sexual behaviors within FWBRs; however, condom or other contraceptive use with a FWBR partner during the semester was not measured.

An important implication for practice arises from the fact that college students are a population of interest to relationship educators (Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011). As noted, college men who engage in FWBRs may be at increased risk for negative health

consequences (e.g., STIs). Thus, it is important that relationship education interventions aimed at this population include information and training on intentional sexual decision making, with particular attention given to the potential for risk associated with diverse and emerging types of romantic relationship like FWBRs.

Table 1 Logistic Regression of No-FWBRs vs. FWBRs (N = 407)

Variables	B (S.E.)	Exp(B) ^a	95% CI
Block 1			
Religious Service Attendance	-.40 (.13)	.96	.75 – 1.23
Stable Committed Romantic Relationship	-1.34 (.33)	.26***	.14 – .50
Attitudes Towards Casual Sex	.10 (.06)	1.10 [†]	.99 – 1.23
Confidence About Relationship Skills ^b	-.05 (.17)	.95	.68 – 1.33
Thoughtful Relationship Decisions ^b	-.25 (.19)	.78	.53 – 1.15
Alcohol Use	.07 (.08)	1.08	.93 – 1.25
Block 2			
Extraversion ^c	.25 (.09)	1.28**	1.06 – 1.54
Openness to Experience ^c	.04 (.11)	1.04	.84 – 1.28
Previous FWBR Experience	.79 (.23)	2.20***	1.39 – 3.48

[†] $p = .08$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

^aAdjusted odds ratios

^bRelationship Awareness Scale Subscale

^cPersonality Scale Subscale

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