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Sex Differences in Approaching Friends with Benefits Relationships

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This research explored differences in how men and women approach “friends with benefits” (FWB) relationships. Specifically, this study examined sex differences in reasons for beginning such involvements, commitment to the friendship versus sexual aspects of the relationship, and partners’ anticipated hopes for the future. To do so, an Internet sample of individuals currently involved in FWB relationships was recruited. Results indicated many overall similarities in terms of how the sexes approach FWB relationships, but several important differences emerged. For example, sex was a more common motivation for men to begin such relationships, whereas emotional connection was a more common motivation for women. In addition, men were more likely to hope that the relationship stays the same over time, whereas women expressed more desire for change into either a full-fledged romance or a basic friendship. Unexpectedly, both men and women were more committed to the friendship than to the sexual aspect of the relationship. Although some additional similarities appeared, the findings were largely consistent with the notion that traditional gender role expectations and the sexual double standard may influence how men and women approach FWB relationships.

“Friends with benefits” (FWB) relationships consist of friends who are sexually, but not romantically, involved. In other words, such relationships are comprised of persons who engage in sexual activity on occasion, but otherwise have a basic friendship (Mongeau, Ramirez, & Vorell, 2003). On the surface, such relationships might seem to carry many of the defining features of a true romance, such as intimacy and sexual passion, but it is important to recognize that FWB partners do not consider their involvements to be romantic relationships. Rather, FWB relationships are perhaps best regarded as friendships in which the partners involved have casual sex with one another.

Little research has examined FWB relationships, but they are important to study for several reasons. First, from an applied standpoint, FWB relationships (just like other types of casual sexual relationships) likely have implications for public health. Casual sex is a risky sexual behavior that increases one’s likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted infections (e.g., Levinson, Jaccard, & Beamer, 1995). By studying how people approach and view FWB partnerships, we may gain better insight into the potential health consequences of this specific type of relationship. For example, the extant research on FWB relationships has not examined whether the partners in such involvements are monogamous. Knowing whether individuals have multiple FWB relationships simultaneously can help us to begin to classify the risk level of such involvements. Second, from a theoretical standpoint, there is an extensive literature suggesting that men and women view casual sex differently for a variety of reasons (e.g., Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Schmitt et al., 2003). Using this research as an organizing framework could help us to understand whether and why men and women negotiate FWB relationships differently and what implications this might have for the long-term outcomes of such relationships.

The goal of this research was to increase our understanding of several important facets of FWB relationships including the initiation, maintenance, and anticipated future development of these involvements, as well as the number of FWB partners one might have. Moreover, we sought to examine how these factors might differ based on sex of the participant. In other words, we explored the degree to which men and women differ in terms of their reasons for getting into FWB relationships, what motivates continuation of such relationships, how such involvements are expected to develop and change over time, and how many of these relationships individuals typically have.
FWB Relationships

Based on our description at the outset of this article, it should be clear that a FWB relationship is neither a true romantic relationship nor a true friendship. Rather, it is a unique relational hybrid that is not neatly categorized into other existing relationship types. It is not quite a friendship in the sense that sexual activity occurs between the parties involved but, at the same time, it is not quite a full-fledged relationship in the sense that the partners lack romantic commitment and avoid typical relational labels, such as “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Mongeau et al., 2003). FWB relationships are also distinct from “hookups,” which consist of one-time sexual encounters between strangers or minor acquaintances (Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). By contrast, to truly be considered a FWB relationship, sexual activity typically needs to occur (or at least needs to have the potential to occur) more than once, and the parties involved must have an ongoing friendship as well (Bisson & Levine, 2009). In summary, FWB relationships can be seen as combining the intimate aspects of a friendship with the sexual aspects of a romance in the context of an ongoing relationship that lacks traditional romantic commitment and labels.

To date, only a handful of research studies have addressed the topic of FWB relationships. Such research indicates that these involvements may be a relatively common occurrence. For example, in several recent research studies focusing on college students, over one half of the participants sampled reported prior involvement with one or more FWB relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009; McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007; Puentes, Knox, & Zusman, 2008; Williams, Shaw, Mongeau, Knight, & Ramirez, 2007). Certainly, there may be a selection bias in some of this research, given that these studies consisted of nonrandom samples that were explicitly advertised as either studies of attitudes toward FWB relationships or general sexual attitudes and behaviors. Nonetheless, these findings still suggest that FWB relationships occur with at least some degree of frequency on college campuses. These studies have also begun to paint an emerging portrait of the characteristics of FWB relationships and the people most likely to enter them.

In terms of relationship characteristics, FWB partners engage in a variety of sexual activities with one another (e.g., oral sex, sexual touching, and vaginal intercourse), but it appears that intercourse is the sexual activity that occurs most frequently (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Many of these relationships have established ground rules about sex, such as what constitutes safe sex and who outside of the relationship can have knowledge of it (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). This access to sexual activity is viewed as the biggest advantage of being involved in a FWB relationship.

FWB partners also see advantages in that the nature of the relationship allows them to have sex with a trusted other, and that the involvement has the potential to bring them closer together. The biggest disadvantage is fear of potential harm to the friendship or someone getting their feelings hurt as a result of having become sexually involved (Bisson & Levine, 2009).

With regard to who enters FWB relationships, research indicates that demographic characteristics such as living in urban areas and having less frequent church attendance are associated with a greater likelihood of FWB involvement (McGinty et al., 2007). In addition, persons who enter FWB relationships tend to have a less romanticized view of love, believing that there are multiple people with whom they could fall in love and also that sex can occur independent of love (Puentes et al., 2008).

Although such existing research on FWB relationships is informative and interesting in its own right, it is limited in several ways. First, virtually all work in this area has focused exclusively on college student samples, which implies that such relationships occur only among young adults. We believe that such relationships are not inherently limited to younger adults and that an exclusive focus on college student FWB relationships limits our understanding of this relationship phenomenon.

Second, no study to date has recruited a sample exclusively composed of persons currently involved in FWB relationships and examined their experiences. Much of the existing data on FWB relationships involves people’s retrospective recollections of past FWB relationships (which is subject to memory distortions) or their feelings about what a FWB relationship might be like if they were to have one (which may not accurately reflect people’s true FWB experiences). To understand the nature of FWB relationships, we need to assess the experiences of people who are currently involved in such relationships.

Third, most FWB research has focused on issues such as prevalence, how people define FWB relationships, and what kinds of activities occur within the context of such relationships. We know relatively little about some of the more consequential issues such as what it is that prompts people to form these relationships in the first place, what motivates the continuation of a FWB over time, and what hope people have for the future from such involvements. We also do not have much sense as to how many of these relationships individuals might have either at one time or throughout their lives.

Lastly, very little research has addressed potential sex differences in how people approach FWB relationships. This seems like a particularly critical issue to explore, given the fact that women and men differ in their interest in casual sex and are evaluated very differently by society for engaging in it (e.g., Crawford & Popp, 2003). Specifically, research suggests that men are more
interested in and likely to have casual sex compared to women (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003). There is a vast amount of data supporting this sex difference and showing that it has held throughout virtually every country in the world, both past and present. Not only do men seem to be more interested in casual sex, it is also more socially permissible for men to seek it compared to women (Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

In contrast, women who express a desire for or engage in casual sex tend to be socially denigrated or viewed unfavorably (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Thus, there is a sexual double standard when it comes to casual sex (e.g., Milhausen & Herold, 1999), such that women tend to be judged more harshly by society than men for engaging in sexually permissive behavior. This double standard can perhaps partially explain why women seem to express less interest in casual sex—that is, it may be the case that women report being less interested in casual sex because they feel that it would be inappropriate for them to say otherwise.

An important caveat to this, however, is that when a woman does engage in casual sex, she is not evaluated quite as negatively by society if she is at least emotionally involved with her partner (Cohen & Sprecher, 1996; Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbuch, 1987). In other words, emotional involvement can help to legitimize contexts in which women engage in intercourse outside of an exclusive relationship. Thus, perceived emotional involvement may help to mitigate, but not completely alleviate, the double standard that exists in the case of casual sex.

What little relevant work exists on the topic of sex differences in FWB relationships suggests that men and women may emphasize different aspects of the involvement. Specifically, some research suggests that women tend to view their FWB involvements as more emotionally based than men (McGinty et al., 2007). Interpreted in light of the aforementioned literature review, this could be viewed as a means of helping to justify or legitimize involvement in a casual sexual relationship. Beyond this finding, however, the issue of sex differences has been largely unexplored and no serious attempt has been made to posit how and why men and women might differ when it comes to FWB relationships.

In this research, we address these limitations by exploring sex differences in the initiation, maintenance, and anticipated future development of FWB relationships in a diverse Internet sample of current FWB partners. We also consider the scope of people’s FWB involvement (i.e., number of concurrent and lifetime total FWB relationships) and how it differs by sex.

Hypotheses

First, FWB involvements appear to follow different norms compared to traditional romantic relationships. For example, they lack typical relational labels and romantic commitment (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Mongeau et al., 2003). As a result, FWB relationships would seem less likely to subscribe to the same norm of monogamy as traditional romances. Therefore, we predicted that it would be reasonably common for FWB partners to indicate involvement in multiple such relationships simultaneously. Nonetheless, given men’s greater interest in casual sex (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003) and their general tendency to have more sexual partners (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), we predicted that men would be more likely to report having multiple concurrent and greater lifetime total FWB partners than women.

Second, Bisson and Levine (2009) found that people perceive access to sexual activity as the greatest advantage of involvement in a FWB. Another advantage cited with some frequency in their research was “becoming closer.” Consistent with these perceived advantages, we expected that when it comes to FWB initiation, individuals would report both sex and emotional involvement as common motives for beginning their relationship. However, we expected an important sex difference to emerge with respect to how frequently these reasons for relationship initiation were cited.

Given that past research on the sexual double standard has found that women are more socially denigrated than men for engaging in casual sex (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Milhausen & Herold, 1999), it would seem to follow that men should have fewer qualms about citing sexual desire as a FWB motive compared to women. As a result, we predicted that a higher percentage of men would report sexual motives for initiating the relationship, whereas a higher percentage of women would report nonsexual reasons for entering such relationships. For women, placing an emphasis on nonsexual motives may serve as a psychological justification for involvement in a socially taboo relationship. Specifically, because emotional involvement helps to legitimize contexts in which women are having casual sex (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Sprecher et al., 1987), we predicted that women would report emotional connection motives for beginning their FWB relationships more often than men.

Third, because FWB relationships are characterized by both sexual and friendly involvement, persons involved in FWB relationships should be committed to nurturing each of these aspects of the relationship. In other words, FWB partners should evidence reasonably strong commitment toward both their friendship and their sexual relationship. In terms of the overall sample, we did not advance a hypothesis as to whether commitment to one relational aspect would be stronger than the other. We did predict, however, that men and women would differ in terms of which aspect they were most committed to. Previous research on college student FWB relationships suggests that women tend to be more

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emotionally involved in these relationships than men (McGinty et al., 2007). Consistent with this result and the aforementioned finding that men tend to be more interested in casual sex than women, we expected that between-sex comparisons would reveal that women would be more committed to the friendship aspect of the relationship than men, whereas men would be more committed to the sexual relationship than women. Furthermore, we expected that within-sex comparisons would reveal that women would be more committed to the friendship than to the sexual relationship, whereas men would be more committed to the sexual relationship than to the friendship.

Lastly, with respect to the anticipated future of FWB relationships, we expected that partners would anticipate a variety of future trajectories (e.g., staying the same, becoming friends who do not have sex, becoming romantic partners, or having no relationship whatsoever). Specific expectations for the future should depend on one’s sex, however, given that men and women are hypothesized to differ in terms of their reasons for getting into these relationships. In particular, because men tend to be more interested in casual sex than women (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003), we anticipated that men would have less desire to change the state of their FWB relationship in the future. In other words, we expected that men should want to keep an opportunity for casual sex open as long as possible. Men should, therefore, be less interested in transitioning into a full-fledged romance, becoming friends who do not have sex, or ending the relationship altogether.

In contrast, because women who have casual sex tend to be denigrated for doing so (e.g., Crawford & Popp, 2003), female FWB partners should be more likely to desire shifting the relationship into one that is more socially acceptable and is not characterized by casual sex (e.g., a full-fledged romance, a regular friendship, or no relationship at all). In other words, we expected that women would desire that the relationship transitions into a more intimate involvement, or no involvement at all, rather than remain in a relationship that is considered to be socially taboo.

Note that all of the aforementioned predictions are grounded in psychological research and theorizing on the nature of gender and sexuality. We wish to acknowledge, however, that many of the same predictions could be generated from a public health view of casual sex. For example, research from this perspective has found that, compared to men, women are typically more concerned with the potential health consequences of casual sex, such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (e.g., Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong, 1998; Loewenson, Ireland, & Resnick, 2004). Given women’s greater fear of these outcomes, one might posit that they should approach casual sexual relationships (including FWB relationships) more cautiously than men, engaging in fewer of them, and de-emphasizing the sexual component. Thus, there are other theoretical perspectives that would seem to converge on the same set of hypotheses regarding how men and women approach FWB relationships.

This research tested these predictions through an Internet study of people currently involved in self-defined FWB relationships. As noted earlier, all previous FWB research has focused on college students, which is a major limitation. The Internet was used to facilitate data collection because samples obtained online tend to be more diverse in a number of ways compared to college student samples (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). In carrying out this study, we followed suggestions for best practices regarding psychological research conducted online (Barchard & Williams, 2008; Gosling et al., 2004; Lehmiller, 2008).

Method

Participants

Participants were 411 individuals (307 women and 104 men) who indicated current involvement in a self-defined FWB relationship. On average, participants were 26.95 years old (SD = 9.12; range = 18–65). For a breakdown of participants by sex and age range, see Table 1. Most participants were White (71%), with the remainder indicating that they were Asian (4%), Black (15%), Hispanic (7%), or “other” (3%). In terms of sexual orientation, the majority were heterosexual (86%), although some participants indicated that they were homosexual (2%), bisexual (11%), or “other” (1%). All participants were recruited over the Internet between June 2008 and January 2009, and were not compensated for their participation.

We should note that data from some participants were excluded for various reasons and are not reflected in the overall sample of 411. First, any participant who reported being under the age of 18 was not included in the final dataset (n = 38) because we did not have the

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of Participants by Age and Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–23</td>
<td>150 (48.9)</td>
<td>52 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24–29</td>
<td>68 (22.1)</td>
<td>13 (12.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–35</td>
<td>37 (12.1)</td>
<td>11 (10.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36–40</td>
<td>24 (7.8)</td>
<td>11 (10.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–45</td>
<td>14 (4.6)</td>
<td>7 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46–50</td>
<td>10 (3.3)</td>
<td>8 (7.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51+</td>
<td>2 (0.7)</td>
<td>2 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reported age</td>
<td>2 (0.7)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Within-column percentages may not add to exactly 100 due to rounding.

*a n = 307.

*b n = 104.
necessary institutional review board approval to analyze data from minors. Next, following the advice of Gosling et al. (2004), we examined the data for repeat IP addresses, which were automatically recorded with the completion of each study questionnaire. IP addresses are unique identifying numbers that are associated with particular computers linked to the Internet at particular points in time. Thus, a single IP address associated with multiple questionnaire responses may be an indicator that the same individual has completed the questionnaire more than once. To account for this, we excluded data when a particular IP address appeared more than once (n = 14).

Materials

Past and current FWB involvement. Participants were first asked several questions about their past and current involvement in FWB relationships. These included the following: “Are you currently involved in a ‘friends with benefits’ relationship?,” “How many ‘friends with benefits’ do you currently have?,” and “Approximately how many ‘friends with benefits’ have you had in your life?” The first question involved a dichotomous (yes–no) response, whereas the latter two involved open-ended numeric responses.

Only those participants who responded affirmatively to the question about involvement in a current FWB relationship were directed to complete the measures presented later. Instructions preceding these measures stated that if an individual was involved in more than one FWB relationship, they should complete the measures with their most significant FWB relationship in mind. This was to ensure that participants were thinking about the same partner when responding to each item. Participants who did not indicate current FWB involvement were directed to an alternate survey, the results of which are not considered here.

Relationship initiation. Participants were asked what motivated them to establish their FWB relationship. The response options to this question included (a) sex (e.g., the desire to engage in sexual activity with a friend) and (b) emotional connection (e.g., a desire to feel closer to a friend). Participants could select one, both, or neither as a reason for starting the relationship. For analytic purposes, each motivation (i.e., sexual and emotional) was treated as a dichotomous variable, coded as 0 for not selected and 1 for selected. We do not wish to suggest that desires for sex and emotional connection are the only possible reasons that people might have for beginning a FWB relationship. We decided to focus primarily on these two motives because previous research has found that they are among the most commonly cited advantages of involvement in FWB relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009), and because they were most relevant to our central hypotheses regarding sex differences in the motivations underlying casual sexual relationships (Schmitt et al., 2003).

Relationship commitment. Participants completed measures of commitment to the sexual (Cronbach’s α = .87) and friendship aspects (Cronbach’s α = .91) of their FWB relationship. Two items each were used to assess sexual and friendship commitment. These included the following: “I am committed to maintaining our sexual relationship (friendship),” and “I feel very attached to our sexual relationship (friendship).” These items were modeled after portions of the Investment Model Scale’s commitment subscale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Participants indicated their level of agreement with these items using a scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 9 (agree completely).

Expectations for the future. Participants were asked how they hope their FWB relationship would change over time. Response options to this question included the following: (a) I hope it stays the same, (b) I hope we become a romantic couple, (c) I hope we become close friends who do not have sex, and (d) I hope we discontinue our sexual relationship and friendship altogether. Participants were only able to select one of the options described. A dichotomous variable was then created to reflect whether participants desired that their relationship stay the same (i.e., those who chose the first response option; coded as 0) or change (i.e., those who chose one of the latter three response options; coded as 1).

Procedure

Participants accessed the Internet survey via links posted on various Web sites, particularly Craigslist (craigslist.com), Online Psychology Research UK (onlinepsychresearch.co.uk), and the Social Psychology Network (socialpsychology.org). All of these are commonly used and recommended Web sites for Internet-based research (Lehmiller, 2008). The solicitation notice informed participants that this was a study of “attitudes toward ‘friends with benefits’ relationships” and that individuals must be age 18 or older to take part in this research.

When participants arrived at the questionnaire Web site, they were prompted with a consent button as a means of obtaining their informed consent, consistent with best practices for Internet research (Barchard & Williams, 2008). After providing consent, participants completed the measures presented earlier (assuming that they indicated current involvement in a FWB relationship). Participants were free to skip questions that they did not wish to answer, and were free to stop participating at any time. Upon survey completion, they were directed to another page thanking them for their participation.
Results

Number of Concurrent and Lifetime FWB Partners

Most participants indicated current involvement in only one FWB relationship ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.03$). Specifically, 76% of participants indicated having just one FWB partner, 16% had two, and 8% had three or more. Although the majority of participants seemed to suggest exclusive involvement with just one FWB partner, these data indicate that a sizeable minority did not practice monogamy in their FWB relationships. Also, supporting our hypothesis about sex differences in number of current FWB partners, results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that men reported significantly more numerous concurrent FWB partners ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.18$) than women ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 0.97$), $F(1, 404) = 7.99$, $p < .01$.

With regard to the total number of FWB relationships participants have had in their lifetime, the average was 4.80 ($SD = 6.84$). Consistent with the aforementioned finding that men were likely to have more concurrent FWB partners than women, men also indicated having had more FWB partners in their lifetime ($M = 7.44$, $SD = 11.29$) compared to women ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 4.08$), $F(1, 402) = 21.36$, $p < .001$.

Relationship Initiation

In terms of reasons for starting a FWB relationship, both sex (60%) and emotional connection (35%) were cited with relative frequency, consistent with expectations. In fact, the vast majority of participants (77%) indicated that one or both motives played a role in starting their FWB relationship. To examine sex differences in reasons for beginning such relationships, the dichotomous relationship initiation variables were submitted to chi-square analyses. Results indicated that men (72%) were more likely than women (56%) to cite a desire for sex as a primary motivator, $\chi^2(1, N = 411) = 8.07$, $p < .01$. In contrast, women (37%) were more likely than men (25%) to cite a desire for emotional connection as a primary motivator, $\chi^2(1, N = 411) = 5.35$, $p < .05$. These findings are consistent with our predictions that men and women would differ in terms of how frequently they reported sexual and emotional connection motives as reasons for beginning their FWB relationships.

Relationship Commitment

With respect to FWB commitment, participants appeared to be relatively strongly committed to both the friendship ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 2.29$) and to the sexual relationship ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 2.40$), with both means appearing above the midpoint of the scale. A paired $t$ test revealed that, overall, participants reported significantly greater commitment to the friendship than to the sexual relationship, $t(406) = 7.57$, $p < .001$.

Next, between-sex comparisons were conducted to determine whether commitment to the sexual and friendship aspects of the relationship differed for men and women. With regard to the friendship, although women ($M = 6.57$, $SD = 2.26$) evidenced a higher level of commitment than men ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 2.35$), results of an ANOVA indicated that this difference was not significant, $F(1, 407) = 2.09$, $ns$. Likewise, with regard to the sexual relationship, although men ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 2.19$) had higher levels of commitment than women ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 2.46$), results of an ANOVA revealed that this difference was not significant, $F(1, 405) = 1.25$, $ns$. Thus, although the pattern of means for each type of commitment fell in the expected direction, the statistical results failed to support our hypotheses.

We then conducted within-sex comparisons to determine whether commitment to the friendship was stronger or weaker than commitment to the sexual aspect of the relationship within each sex. As hypothesized, results of a paired $t$ test revealed that women were significantly more committed to the friendship compared to the sexual aspect of their FWB relationship, $t(306) = 7.45$, $p < .001$. Contrary to expectations, a paired $t$ test revealed that men were also more committed to the friendship compared to the sexual aspect of their FWB relationship, $t(101) = 1.99$, $p < .05$.

Future Expectations

Lastly, our data suggest that FWB partners do not have consistent expectations for the future of their relationship. Most of the sample hoped that the relationship would either stay the same (39%) or develop into a romantic relationship (38%), with fewer hoping that they would become “just friends” (17%) or discontinue the relationship altogether (6%).

We then examined whether people’s future expectations for their FWB relationship depended on their sex. To do so, we submitted the dichotomous future expectations variable we created (coded as either stay the same or change) to a chi-square analysis. Consistent with hypotheses, men and women differed in their expectations for how their FWB relationship will evolve over time, $\chi^2(1, N = 367) = 24.75$, $p < .001$. Specifically, women (69%) were more likely than men (40%) to hope that their FWB transitions in the future into a full-fledged romance, a basic friendship, or no relationship at all. By contrast, men (60%) were more likely than women (31%) to desire that their relationship stay the same over time.

We also conducted separate analyses to determine whether this sex difference holds for each of the specific relational end-states assessed (i.e., romantic relationship, friendship, or no relationship at all). Thus, we computed three separate dichotomous variables: (a) stay the same versus romantic relationship, (b) stay the same versus friendship, and (c) stay the same versus no relationship.
versus friendship, and (3) stay the same versus no relationship. These new variables were submitted to chi-square analyses. Consistent with the preceding results, women were significantly more likely than men to desire a shift to a romantic relationship, \( \chi^2(1, N = 281) = 20.21, p < .001; \) as well as a friendship, \( \chi^2(1, N = 207) = 13.10, p < .001. \) There was not a significant sex difference in desire to end the relationship, \( \chi^2(1, N = 163) = 1.16, ns, \) perhaps because so few participants of both sexes (approximately 6% each) selected this as an option. The exact percentage of men and women desiring each future relationship state can be seen in Table 2.

### Ancillary Analyses

We repeated all of the previous analyses controlling for demographic factors, including sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. non-heterosexual) and age. Inclusion of these covariates did not change the results of any of the previous analyses (i.e., significant results remained significant, and nonsignificant results remained nonsignificant).

### Discussion

This study was designed to examine a variety of potential sex differences in FWB relationships. In line with our hypotheses, the results suggest that men and women indeed approach FWB relationships quite differently in some respects. In other ways, however, they are more similar than they are different. First, our findings indicate that men are involved in more simultaneous FWB relationships and report having had more past FWB relationships compared to women. This is consistent with the fact that men typically express greater interest in casual sex (Schmitt et al., 2003), tend to have more sexual partners in general (Laumann et al., 1994), and also have more social freedom to engage in sexually permissive behaviors (Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

Second, with regard to reasons for beginning FWB relationships, men reported sexual desire as a primary motivator with significantly greater frequency than did women, again consistent with men’s greater interest in casual sex (Schmitt et al., 2003). In comparison, women reported the desire to connect emotionally as a primary motivator significantly more often than did men. This is consistent with our speculation that women might be inclined to report such motives as a psychological justification for FWB involvement because emotional involvement helps to legitimize contexts in which women are having casual sex (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Sprecher et al., 1987). It should be noted, however, that the majority of both men and women cited sexual motives as one of the reasons for starting their FWB relationships. Thus, it is not that women lack interest in the sexual aspect of such relationships. Indeed, just like men, most women reported sexual desire as a motive for initiating the relationship. It is just that, relative to men, women are less likely to report it as a primary reason for beginning the relationship, perhaps because it is not as socially permissible for them to do so.

In terms of what motivates continuation of FWB relationships, our results indicated that partners were committed to both the sexual and friendship aspects of the involvement, with average scores above the midpoint of the scale for both types of commitment. We should note, however, that commitment to the friendship was significantly stronger than commitment to the sexual relationship. This finding held for both men and women, and suggests that the sexes may be more similar than they are different when it comes to the value placed on the friendship in FWB relationships. This was somewhat unexpected. We predicted that this result would hold only for women, with men being more committed to the sexual relationship than to the friendship. Contrary to our original hypotheses, then, our results suggest a new prediction: Regardless of partners’ sex, friendship comes before “benefits” in FWB relationships. This makes some sense in the context of past research demonstrating that fear of harm coming to the friendship is participants’ biggest worry when it comes to FWB involvements (Bisson & Levine, 2009). It also provides further evidence that we should consider FWB relationships to be separate from hookups (Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000), given that they consist of much more than just sexual encounters.

Lastly, with regard to expectations for the future, it appears that men and women hope that their FWB relationships will evolve differently. In particular, men are more likely to desire that their relationship stay the same, whereas women are more likely to hope for a change in relationship state (in particular, a change into either a full-fledged romance or a basic friendship). This is consistent with our reasoning that women may be more motivated than men to transition their relationship to one that is not characterized by casual sex, given that women are evaluated more negatively than men for engaging in sex outside of an exclusive relationship (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

These findings have several notable implications, both applied and theoretical. For example, we found that nearly one fourth of our sample had more than one simultaneous FWB relationship. Of importance, having a greater number of casual sexual relationships typically has negative implications for sexual health.
(e.g., Levinson et al., 1995). Whether the intimacy involved in a FWB relationship promotes safer sex and a more honest exchange of sexual histories is not clear based on our data. However, our findings do suggest that greater attention to the potential public health consequences of FWB relationships is warranted. In particular, it might be useful to examine whether the different motives and future expectations for FWB relationships examined in this research have implications for sexual communication and practices within such relationships. Further work that explores FWB sexual practices in more detail could be useful for designing safer sex interventions and sex education curricula for adolescents and young adults.

Also, from a theoretical standpoint, it is important to highlight that our results are not entirely consistent with the published literature on gender roles and sexuality. For example, such research suggests that men should be sexually driven and to desire multiple partners while remaining emotionally detached from them (e.g., Crawford & Unger, 2004; Levant, 1997). Although the men in our sample reported having had more FWB partners than did the women, they did not appear to be emotionally unattached with respect to these relationships. In fact, they were more committed to the intimate aspect of the relationship (i.e., the friendship) than anything. This is consistent with recent research suggesting that, like women, men may also desire close, emotional ties to their sexual partners (e.g., Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009; Smiler, 2008). Thus, some of our traditionally held assumptions regarding sex differences in approaching casual sexual relationships may require revision.

Strengths and Limitations

There are a number of strengths to this research. First, to our knowledge, our study marks the first exploration of FWB relationships in a sample that is not comprised exclusively of college students. This is noteworthy because our use of Internet recruitment yielded a more diverse sample than has previously been examined in this context. The demographic features of this sample indicate that FWB relationships are not exclusively a college student phenomenon. They also occur with some frequency among older adults (up to age 65 in this study). Likewise, they are not limited to heterosexual involvements. Although this sample is not as diverse as it could be and cannot be considered representative, our findings definitely suggest that FWB relationships occur among members of a variety of demographic groups, and future research inquiries in this area would be well-served by further exploring how the nature of FWB relationships might vary in non-college samples.

Second, this research is unique in the sense that all participants indicated current involvement in a FWB relationship. As a result, this study is not subject to the inherent drawbacks of many of the past studies in this area, which have relied at least partially on retrospective recollections of past FWB involvements. Lastly, this study significantly advances our understanding of several important elements of FWB relationships, including relationship initiation, maintenance, and anticipated future development, not to mention how these factors are similar or different depending on participant sex.

As with all research, however, this study was not without its limitations. For example, although we obtained a sample of respectable size that contained more diversity than past studies in this area, it was still predominately White and heterosexual. Thus, we did not have an adequate number of each racial and sexual minority group to run separate analyses that could determine whether our predictions would necessarily generalize to them. We tentatively expect that at least some of the same hypotheses advanced in this research (especially those that concern sex differences in FWB initiation motives) would hold irrespective of participant race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. For example, regardless of ethnic background and sexual orientation, men tend to desire greater numbers of sexual partners than do women (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003). As a result, we would expect that even when racial and sexual orientation differences are taken into account, men would be more motivated to begin a FWB relationship out of a desire for sex compared to women. However, future research might consider explicitly recruiting greater numbers of racial and sexual minority participants to more definitely address such questions.

Another limitation of our sample was that many more women than men participated. This is not very surprising from the standpoint that participants in both traditional and Internet-based studies are generally more likely to be women (Gosling et al., 2004). With respect to Internet studies of relationships in particular, this gender discrepancy is typically even larger. Notably, the gender ratio in this study (75% female) is quite similar to the ratio obtained in other recent relationship studies conducted online (72% female in Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; 73% female in Lehmiller, 2009). Nonetheless, the gender imbalance is important to note because it suggests our ability to generalize the results may be limited due to certain selection effects (e.g., a survey of relationship experiences may have inherently appealed more to women than to men). Speaking more broadly, our use of Internet methodology carries inherent selection biases in that Internet users, although more diverse than the average college student body, may not be representative of the overall population in terms of factors such as education level and socioeconomic status (Gosling et al., 2004). Consequently, we caution that our findings may not reflect the full range and variability of FWB relationships that exist.

In addition, our hypotheses and our interpretation of the results make the implicit assumption that most
participants are aware of or believe in traditional gender roles. Although our findings were often consistent with this reasoning, it would be useful to determine whether the observed sex differences are indeed a direct function of gender role influences. As one example, perhaps women are only more likely than men to cite emotional connection motives as a reason for beginning their FWB relationship to the extent that they are strong proponents of traditional feminine gender role beliefs. Women who do not subscribe to such beliefs may feel more sexually empowered and, therefore, may be more inclined to state an overt interest in sex as a motive for FWB initiation. Thus, future research might address the question as to whether belief in traditional gender roles moderates the major sex difference findings described here.

Furthermore, this research successfully documented at least some differences in how men and women approach FWB relationships, but it does not speak to what these differences ultimately mean for the involvement itself. For example, in cases where men and women are motivated by different things and have different hopes for the future, does this inherently lead to greater conflict and relationships of shorter duration? Likewise, are men and women who share similar motivations and future expectations better able to minimize conflict and maintain the relationship over time? Future research that considers how FWB motives, commitments, and expectations affect the longitudinal time course of such involvements would be useful for addressing these points.

Finally, although mentioned earlier, it is important to reiterate that there are likely other plausible theoretical perspectives that could explain our observed pattern of effects. For example, our findings that women tend to have fewer FWB relationships and are less likely to cite sex as a motivation for starting them are consistent with the public health literature. It could very well be that these sex differences at least partially stem from the fact that women typically have more concerns about engaging in casual sex than men, such as fears of pregnancy and disease transmission (e.g., Jemmott et al., 1998; Loewenson et al., 2004). As another possibility, our results could be interpreted in light of more global psychological approaches to understanding sex differences, such as Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) or Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although we believe that our findings are most adequately described within a more nuanced approach that deals specifically with differences in sexual behaviors and attitudes, we simply wish to acknowledge that there are other perspectives that could have generated similar predictions.

**Conclusion**

FWB involvements are a common, but understudied, relationship type (Bisson & Levine, 2009; McGinty et al., 2007; Puentes et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2007). Results of this research significantly advance our knowledge of FWB relationships by demonstrating that men and women approach certain aspects of them quite differently. In particular, sex differences emerged with regard to the extent of FWB involvement (i.e., number of different FWB partners), reasons for initiating the relationship (i.e., desire for sex vs. emotional connection), and future relationship expectations (i.e., change vs. stay the same). However, important similarities emerged as well, such as the fact that a majority of both men and women were motivated to begin their FWB out of a desire for sex, and that commitment to the friendship was stronger than commitment to the sexual relationship for both male and female participants. These findings suggest that FWB relationships are likely to be fairly complex involvements, but how successful men and women are at negotiating such complexities over time remains to be seen.

**References**


