



FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS IN PUERTO RICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

A friend with benefits (FWB) relationship includes the presence of a friendship, sexual activity, and the absence of an established commitment. The main objective of this quantitative non-experimental investigation was to explore how different levels of religiosity and sensation seeking traits correlate among Puerto Rican university students that report FWB relationships. Three instruments were administered in the Spanish language to students from universities in the metropolitan area of Puerto Rico. According to their answers, 61.8% of the sample reported lifetime FWB relationships and 17.9% reported current FWB. Of the latter, 40% reported more than one lifetime FWB. Consistent with the stated hypothesis, we found that high levels of sensation seeking traits were associated to higher levels of reported FWB relationships ($p < .05$). The findings inform us about the motivations and expectations university students have to engage in FWB relationships.

Keywords

Friends with benefits, casual sex, sexuality, young adults

RESUMEN

Una relación de amigo o amiga con privilegio (ACP) tiene tres componentes; la presencia de una amistad, la actividad sexual y la ausencia de un compromiso establecido. El objetivo principal de esta investigación cuantitativa no experimental fue explorar como correlacionan distintos niveles de religiosidad y búsqueda de sensaciones en estudiantes puertorriqueños que reportan tener ACP. Se administraron tres cuestionarios en español a estudiantes de distintas universidades del área metropolitana de Puerto Rico. El 61.8% de la muestra reportó experiencias con ACP alguna vez en sus vidas y el 17.9% estaban en una relación de ACP al momento del estudio. De éstos, el 40% reportó tener más de un ACP. Consistente con las hipótesis planteadas, altos niveles de búsqueda de sensaciones estuvo asociado a un mayor número de relaciones de ACP ($p < .05$). Los resultados ayudan a informarnos sobre las motivaciones y expectativas de estudiantes universitarios que tienen ACP.

Palabras clave

Amigos con privilegios, sexo casual, sexualidad, adultos jóvenes

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AMIGOS CON PRIVILEGIOS ENTRE LOS ESTUDIANTES DE UNA UNIVERSIDAD EN PUERTO RICO

Popular literature usually distinguishes friendship from romantic committed relationships (Regan, 2011). This distinction has been widely accepted in the social sciences and popular culture. Regardless, plenty of research on a new kind of relationship that incorporate factors related to friendship and romantic relationships has been appearing in professional journals (Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden & Shaw, 2013; Owen, Fincham & Manthos, 2013). The relatively new concept of “Friends with Benefits” (FWB) incorporates a plethora of relationships where classical friendship is somehow juxtaposed with sexual privileges and behaviors. In fact, the phenomena of FWB intrinsically incorporate the idea that sexual behavior occurs within the context of a non-romantic friendship relationship (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001).

The increase of these themes in popular media outlets provides supporting evidence that FWB is becoming an increasingly socially accepted phenomenon. Nevertheless, the majority of such research has been conducted exclusively in the USA with Anglo-American youths. For example, although various recent investigations have asked Puerto Rican youths and adults about their sexual practices, none has inquired about their experiences with FWB (Rodriguez-Diaz, et al. 2014; Ortiz, Soto-Salgado, Suárez, Santos-Ortiz, Tortolero-Luna & Pérez, 2011; Pando, Canino, Ramírez, Chávez, & Martínez-Taboas, 2007).

At this point, we want to provide our definition of FWB and to demarcate its boundaries with other non-traditional sexual relationships. Hughes, Morrison and Asada (2005) defined FWB as friends who share sexual activity, but do not define their relationship as romantic. Also, FWB incorporates the idea that before entering in an explicit sexual relationship, there was a pre-established friendship between both parties. We agree with Owen and Fincham (2011) that a FWB can be defined as: “a friendship in which there are physical encounters, but no ongoing committed relationship (e.g., not boyfriend/girlfriend)” (p.313).

On the other hand, Paul and Hayes (2002) defined hookups as sexual encounters that may or may not include penetrations, usually occurring on one occasion between two people that have been acquainted in the last 24 hours. The four main characteristics of a hookup are: first, both parties have not previously established a friendship; second, there is no interest in establishing a commitment after the hook up; thirdly, the duration of the relationship is short term and, four, a diversity of sexual behaviors may be exchanged.

FWB relationships have interesting characteristics that make them worthy of attention. First, they are different from other types of relationships that youths may become involved. Rather than one night encounters or hookups, FWB tends to be much more stable (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). In addition, they are not fully explained by previous conceptualizations that posit that sexual behavior is added to friendship to initiate a serious romantic commitment (Messman, Canary & Hause, 2000). Several studies indicate that in FWB relationships there is not necessarily an expectation to maintain a long term and committed relationship. Also this type of relationship may bring the tranquility of knowing that there are no obligations that generally are present in a romantic relationship (Levine, 2007; Lehmilller, Vanderdrift & Kelly, 2011; Owen & Fincham, 2011).

There is evidence that the interpersonal characteristics of FWB are duly noted by even tenth grade students. For example, Furman and Shaffer (2011) administered a variety of questionnaires about sexual behaviors to 200 adolescents (mean age = 15.88) and found that 97% recognized that a FWB relationship is different from a romantic relationship, and 86% stated that a person with whom a sexual activity is shared on one occasion is not a FWB. In addition, Letcher, & Carmona (2015) found no significant differences between rates of FWB between rural high school students and college youths, although they did find that college students engage in a higher number of sexual risk behaviors compared to high school students.



Prevalence of FWB relationships

Bisson and Levine (2009) explored FWB experiences with a sample of 125 undergraduate students. They found 60% lifetime prevalence, while one third had a FWB at the moment of the study. These findings are similar to those found by Owen and Fincham (2011) where 47.2% of the sample reported a FWB relationship within the last year. For their part, Puentes, Knox and Zusman (2008), utilizing a sample 1,013 of young adults ($X=19$ years) found that 50.1% reported at least one FWB in their lifetime. Regardless of the difference in prevalence rate, we know that it is increasingly common for North American college students (40%-60%) to incorporate aspects of friendship and sexual behavior into some of their relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013).

Risks associated to sex in uncommitted relationships

Weaver, MacKeigan and MacDonald (2011) found that 44% of their sample ($N=26$) admitted having more than one FWB during and concomitant with their last relationship. One third reported an inconsistent condom use. These results are very similar to those found by Vanderdrift, Lehmilller and Kelly (2012) and Milhausen, et al. (2017). The most worrisome aspects of FWB relationships, as exposed in the existing literature, may be the presence of multiple unknown FWB sexual partners which may increase the risk for Sexually Transmitted Diseases. This risk increases when the association between emotional commitment and condom use is studied. As observed, students who feel a high level of emotional commitment will be less willing to make use of condoms, even when they do not know if their FWB has another sexual partner.

Additional risks involve differing expectations, as only half of FWB explicitly discuss what they expect in their relationship (Owen & Fincham, 2011; Weaver et al., 2011). Many times these expectations involve romantic love (Garcia, 2017). This may lead to hurt feelings when one partner does not conform to what his/her FWB expects from the relationship and perceptions of being deceived (Quirk, Owen, & Fincham, 2014).

Justification and Hypothesis

The reviewed literature led us to conclude that there is limited information about FWB relationships in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is surprising since there is plenty of evidence that indicate that a significant number of youths report FWB in various parts of the world.

The validation in Puerto Rico of the Spanish version of the Sensation Seeking Scale (Vélez-Pastrana, Ilarraza, Rivera, Bradley, Pérez & Pérez, 2011) found that most participants that practiced risky sexual behaviors had elevated scores in this instrument. Therefore, we hypothesized that students who have been in FWB relationships will have higher scores in the Sensation Seeking Scale when compared to those who have never had a FWB.

In Puerto Rico, most traditional religious denominations correspond to a Judeo-Christian ideology. Most of these denominations are consistent in positing that sexual activity must be reserved for exclusive monogamous relationships. Accordingly, we hypothesized that higher scores in the Religiosity/Spiritual Beliefs Scales (Rodríguez-Benítez, Rodríguez-Gómez, & Sayers-Montalvo, 2010) will be positively correlated with students who were never involved in FWB relationships compared to those who have.

As recent studies with North American students indicate there are no significant sex differences in the reporting of FWB, (Lehmilller, Vanderdrift & Kelly, 2012; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Puentes, Knox & Zusman, 2008), we also hypothesized that there would not be significant differences in the prevalence of FWB relationships across genders. Nevertheless, consistent with the finding of Lehmilller, Vanderdrift & Kelly (2012), we hypothesized that men and women will have significant differences on their expectations on how their relationship will change (e.g. stay the same, become friends who do not have sex, become a romantic relationship or completely end their sexual and friendship status). Men will indicate they were more committed to the sexual aspect of the relationship compared to the emotional

aspect. In addition, men will report that their motivation to start a FWB relationship was sexual interest, while women will indicate that a sentimental connection was their motivation.

Finally, previous research has found that when the degree of emotional commitment increases, the use of condom decreases (Vanderdrift, Lehmillier & Kelly, 2012). We hypothesized there will be an inverse and significant relationship between the level of emotional connection and condom use.

Method

Participants

The present investigation utilized a non-probabilistic convenience sample consisting of 156 Latino university students from graduate and undergraduate programs from two universities in the northern metropolitan area of Puerto Rico. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 49 years ($M=27.5$, $SD=5.7$). All participants were recruited at their college campus and no monetary remuneration for their participation was offered. The questionnaires and scales were administered in group and individual format, after the investigation proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the two universities where the sample was recruited.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Demographic information included five general questions that included sex, marital status, age, and education

Experience with Friend with Benefits (FWB). On the second section of the questionnaire, ten close ended questions about experiences with FWB were inquired. These asked participants if they were currently in a FWB relationship, how many FWB they had at the moment, and how many FWB they have had in their lifetime. If the student had never been in a FWB relationship, he or she was asked to skip to question number 10 and proceed to answer other instruments. If they did report FWB relationship, they were to proceed to answer questions which inquired about their perceived advantages and disadvantages of being in a FWB relationship. Both of these questions had five multiple response answers based on the qualitative interviews made by Bisson and Levine (2009).

The question regarding perceived advantages had the following possible responses: there is no commitment, I can have sexual relationships, I trust the person, our romantic relationship can intensify, we avoid jealousy, and others. Among the responses available for the perceived disadvantages were: we may develop strong emotional feelings, our friendship can be negatively affected, it may cause negative emotions, there is no commitment, negative consequences such as sexually transmitted disease, unplanned pregnancies, and others. The sixth question asked what led them to initiate a FWB relationship with the following responses: sex, emotional connection, and others. The next question asked about their expectations. Possible responses were: I hope it stays the same, I hope we become a romantic couple, I hope we become close friends that do not have sex, and I hope to discontinue our friendship and sexual interaction completely.

Other questions asked how committed they felt to the sexual and to the sentimental part of their relationship on a nine point Likert scale. Finally, they were inquired about the frequency of condom use during their last FWB relationship using a 5 point Likert scale.

Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS- Vélez et al., 2011). This instrument was developed to measure sensation seeking within Spanish speaking populations. Specific information about its psychometric properties can be found in Vélez et al., (2011). It is self administered and has a total of 36 items scored on a four point Likert scale, depending on how much the individual agrees or disagrees with the statement. Vélez et al. (2011) determined that Cronbach's alpha was .91 for the total scale, which is considered adequate according to Kline (2005). Cronbach's alpha in our study was .87.



Religiosity/Spirituality Scale (RSS- Rodríguez-Benítez, et al., 2010). This instrument was developed to evaluate attitudes individuals have towards spirituality and religion. It is a self-administered scale with 37 items that describe beliefs and attitudes a person may or may not have. The individual can answer each item on a four point Likert scale, depending on the degree to which he or she agrees or disagrees with the statement. The validity and reliability of the RSS is described elsewhere (Rodríguez-Benítez, et al., 2010). The initial study found a Cronbach's alpha of .89. In our study, we obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .94. The psychometric data suggest that the RSS is a reliable instrument to explore attitudes towards religiosity and spirituality (Rodríguez et al., 2010).

Procedure

Following approval of the Carlos Albizu University Ethics Committee, the main investigator contacted professors who were willing to provide access to their students in their institutions. The professor informed the students about the study and told them how to contact the principal investigator. No economic compensation was awarded for their participation and there were no expected risks. The students called the telephone number provided in the announcement and an appointment was scheduled to administer the tests individually. After providing consent, the demographic questionnaire and the other scales were administered. The participants were informed that if any question made them feel uncomfortable, they could skip it or were free to stop at any time. It is to be noted that the students seemed willing to participate, constantly describing it as interesting and novel.

Results

Prevalence of FWB relationships

At the moment of responding, 17.9% of participants reported a FWB relationship. Of these, 60% had one FWB, 23.3% had two, 10% had three and 6.7% reported having four. In other words, 40% of those who had FWB reported more than one current FWB. These rates varied considerably when exploring lifetime rates. Less than half (38.3%) of the total sample reported they had never had a FWB while 61.8% reported having one or more in their lifetime. One participant reported 300 FWB partners in his lifetime. This participant was eliminated to avoid skewing the overall results.

Consistent with our hypothesis, a two sample *t* test revealed significant differences ($t=-4.12$; $p<.001$) in sensation seeking traits when comparing mean scores of the SSS between participants with FWB relationships with those who did not report lifetime FWB involvement. In other words, those participants with higher scores on the SSS tended to report more FWB. Similarly, significant differences ($t=2.526$; $p=.013$) were found in religiosity levels, according to the mean scores in the RSS, which suggests that those participants with lifetime experiences with FWB endorsed less commitment to religious and spiritual traditions.

Another hypothesis stated that the amount of lifetime FWB would differ as a function of gender. Since Levene's test was significant ($F=6.01$; $p=.02$) we did not assume variance homogeneity. We found significant differences ($t=2.37$; $p=.02$) when comparing FWB involvement by gender. On average, men reported 3.38 ($SD=3.5$) lifetime FWB partners and women reported 1.94 ($SD=2.7$).

We also predicted that men and women would have significant differences on their expectations on how their friendship relationship would change. According to Pearson Chi-square analysis, these differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.40$; $p=0.17$), suggesting that our participants, independently of their gender, have similar expectations related to the evolution of their friendship.

Our next hypothesis indicated men would be more committed to the sexual aspect of the relationship than the emotional aspect. This was measured with one question on a nine point Likert scale. Our prediction was not supported by the analysis. There were no statistical significant difference when comparing gender and level of sexual commitment ($t=0.56$; $p=0.58$) or emotional commitment ($t=-.25$; $p=.80$). Both men and women reported more interest in the sexual aspect of their FWB relationship with a

mean of 4.55 ($SD=2.279$) and 4.24 ($SD=2.684$), respectively. Their mean scores for their commitment with the emotional aspect of their relationship was 3.59 ($SD=2.1$) and 3.71 ($SD=2.3$).

We also hypothesized that, compared with males, women would demonstrate differences in their level of commitment, being more committed to the emotional aspect of the relationship compared to the sexual aspect. According to Pearson's correlation there was a direct, moderate and significant ($r=.45$, $p=.001$) relationship between level of emotional commitment and sexual commitment in our women sample.

Lastly, we predicted that the level of emotional commitment would correlate in a negative way to condom use. Pearson's correlation revealed a mild, inverse and significant ($r= -.175$, $p=.014$) relationship between emotional connection and condom use, suggesting that those persons involved in a FWB relationship who also experienced emotional feelings toward their partner, demonstrated less condom use.

Discussion

The results of this investigation are consistent with previous studies. First, we demonstrate that 60% of our participants reported that they had in their lifetime at least one FWB. This percentage is very similar to what is being reported in the USA (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Our results seem to suggest that the social phenomenon of FWB is being adopted as a normative behavior by many individuals in their emerging adulthood (Furman & Shaffer, 2011; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Puentes, Knox & Zusman, 2008). This finding is consistent with Tanner and Arnett's (2011) position that emerging adults (20 to 29 years) are postponing marriage and parenthood, and instead dedicate their efforts to search and maintain sexual relationships with a variety of partners, with some of those relationships including cohabitation. The advantages of this type of relationship had been described by others, and include the support, bond and understanding of a traditional friendship, plus a relaxing expression of sexuality without the boundaries of commitments and other restrictions that apparently many young adults are at least postponing to a latter stage of their life. What is revealing in our study is that, while such conclusions have been reached mostly with Anglo-American students, our data document that Latino young college students are also open to explore such an arrangement. Therefore, our study provides further evidence that FWB is an emerging option of relating to the opposite sex, without commitment but at the same time with the pleasures of sharing their sexuality with another person whom they care a lot.

We also wanted to examine other variables and their relationship with the prevalence of FWB. First of all, the literature pertaining to sensation seeking as a personality trait has associated it with the search for novel, varied, complex, and intense sensations (Zuckerman, 2007). Consistent with this line of thought, we found that higher levels of sensation seeking traits were related to a higher amount of FWB involvement. Even though higher levels of religiosity were inversely associated to less involvement in FWB, there was no relationship between the religiosity and sensation seeking measures. This suggests that both concepts, even though they may influence sexual behavior, contribute in unique ways to the decision to explore a relationship of FWB. We posit that an individual with a high score in the SSS is inclined to explore novel and intense relationship styles. And, at the present time in our society, a FWB easily accords to such intense standards. In fact, sensation seeking has been associated with having multiple partners, unprotected sex and casual sex (Hoyle, Fejfar & Miller, 2000).

Secondly, we found that participants with high levels of religiosity are less prone to be involved with FWB. This goes along with the values and beliefs fostered in Judeo-Christian traditions, where partner exclusivity is encouraged. A FWB relationship may be seen as failing religious dogmas that promote the matrimonial bond as the preferred context in which sexual activity should take place. There is also extensive research suggesting that individuals that indicate that religion and spirituality are not important in their life, report more openness to explore diverse types of sexual relationships (Ebstyn & Roeser, 2009).

Thirdly, we posited several sex differences in our study. Accordingly, men reported a higher number of lifetime FWB relationships in comparison to women (3.38 vs. 1.94) which is consistent with other studies (Lehmiller et al., 2011). In our study, women and men reported a higher level of



commitment to the sexual aspect of the relationship without significant statistical differences between genders.

Our participants reported a higher incidence of more than one FWB (40% vs. 24%) compared to those in the sample of Lehmler, et al. (2011). This may be due to the fact that our sample was comprised of university students, while they had a much varied sample. Previous research (Weaver, MacKeigan & McDonald, 2011) has concluded that university life provides a unique environment where these types of relationships may take place. This may happen because the priority for many students is to finish their academic career. Involvement in a serious and committed relationship may become an obstacle for their long-term goals. Additionally, class assistance and group projects enrich social life, putting students in more contact and facilitating their involvement in relationships of increasing intimacy, but not necessarily of commitment.

From a theoretical standpoint, our results are not entirely consistent with the literature that addresses gender roles and sexual behavior (Buss, 2003; Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 1993). Similar to the findings of Lehmler, Vanderdrift & Kelly (2011), even though men felt initially motivated to the sexual aspect of the relationship, they did not feel emotionally unattached to the relationships. This is very similar to previous studies by Epsein, Calzo, Smiler and Ward (2009) and Smiler (2008) where men expressed attachment and emotional bonding toward their casual partners. Even though men have more sexual partners and explicitly report sexual interest to enter such relationships, they also dismiss traditional gender roles giving more importance to the emotional support they may receive from their partner (Weaver et al., 2011). This suggests that previous assumptions about gender differences in casual sex may require revision. A recent study by Garcia, et al. (2014) also suggests that traditional sexual roles are going through profound transformations, finding that women had more positive emotional reactions towards FWB than men.

Finally, it should be noted that condom use decreased when levels of emotional commitment increased. This is a worrisome finding since 40% of those with FWB had more than one partner. The implications this may have among sexual education providers must be emphasized. Researchers have found that approximately half of those persons with FWB do not discuss the rules or expectations they may have with their partner (Owen & Fincham, 2011; Weaver et al., 2011), and many times these expectations involve romantic love (Garcia, 2017).

The present study has a number of strengths. For example, this is the first investigation of FWB relationships with a Puerto Rican population. As previously stated, the results strongly suggest that, although Latino youngsters are exposed to different social, political and religious values, alternate relationships such as FWB are in the mainstream in the lives of a considerable number of Latino youths.

Secondly, this study amplifies the current literature for a proper understanding of some important elements of FWB, such as the identification of different factors that are related to its initiation, gender differences, expectations, and perceived advantages and disadvantages of such an arrangement.

Limitations

The methodology used in this study has three main limitations that have to be taken into consideration when evaluating our findings. The first limitation is the sample selection bias. The convenience sample was of 156 students and the majority of them were women. This is hardly representative of all the university students in Puerto Rico.

Secondly, the data was collected through questionnaires with closed questions without qualitative interviews that may have enriched the available information. Third, the findings do not provide information about the pattern of FWB relations or specific information about what happened in their relationship. We do not know how much time these relationships last, if men or women are the ones who initiate or terminate the relationship, or if they are still willing to participate in a similar relationship.

Finally, the questionnaire did not explore the sexual orientation of the participants. This may be an interesting variable for future investigations because it may be possible that individuals with different sexual orientations may approach a FWB relationship in a different manner.

Despite these limitations, the results of the present study have important implications for a proper understanding of the contextual social life of many emerging Latino adults. Given that more than half of our Latino sample endorsed having experimented a FWB relationship, it seems that many counselors, psychologists, family planners, pastoral counselors, and public health specialist should incorporate how to address in a culturally sensitive way such casual sexual relationships with the professional competence that this subject deserve.

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