

# Friends with benefits? Gendered performances in women’s casual sexual relationships

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## Abstract

Although some research has examined “friends with benefits” relationships (FWBRs), women’s subjective accounts of FWBRs remains notably understudied. Utilizing attachment theory, scripting theory, and social constructionist theories of gender, this study drew upon qualitative interviews with a community sample of 20 women (mean age = 34,  $SD = 13.35$ ) from diverse ages, races, and sexual identity backgrounds to illuminate five themes in women’s FWBR narratives: (a) regulation and suppression of emotions, (b) performance and idealization of detachment and emotionlessness, (c) lack of clear communication combined with “other-defined” experiences, (d) replication of racist and sexist scripts, and (e) transitional qualities of the relationship. Implications for the power differentials present in FWBRs, and tensions between subverting and further entrenching relationship scripts, are explored.

Both popular media and scholarly research have shown an interest in “friends with benefits” relationships (FWBRs)—that is, friendships that involve sexual activity—in the past several years. In tandem with declining rates of monogamy and marriage (Amato, 2004), women’s casual sexual relationships have developed a more prominent place in our cultural and social landscape. Celebrations of “single life” and the benefits of sex without attachment have risen up as potential avenues to empowerment and agency for women. As a fusion between casual and committed relationships, FWBRs signify the fundamental fluidity of romantic and sexual connections. Recently, scholars have started to examine, primarily using quantitative methods, how many people

engage in FWBRs, why they do so, and who they talk to about them (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Puentes, Knox, & Zusman, 2008; VanderDrift, Lehmillier, & Kelly, 2012; Wentland & Reissing, 2011). Still, few studies have targeted women’s subjective feelings and narratives about FWBRs, leaving a notable gap in the existing literatures that this study seeks to address.

Although an examination of FWBRs might lend itself most closely to a study of women’s friendship patterns—as women often “evolve” a friendship (with either men or women) into an FWBR—we argue that the way women talk about FWBRs reveals more about the intersections between sociological and psychological scripts about gender, race, and power. The scant amount of research on women’s experiences with FWBRs—particularly their subjective accounts of these engagements across a diverse sample of ages and including heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian participants—suggests relevant inroads for a feminist analysis and new possibilities for uniting relationship research, feminist theory, and qualitative psychology.

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More specifically, this study drew from three theoretical frameworks—social constructionist theories of gender (Butler, 1990; Glenn, 1999; Lorber, 1994; Tiefer, 2004), social scripting theory (Muraco, 2012; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Wiederman, 2005), and attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992; Fraley & Shaver, 2000)—to examine qualitative narratives from 20 women with diverse backgrounds (including age, race, current relationship status, class backgrounds, and sexual identities) to narrate what FWBRs meant to them, revealing highly gendered and conflicted dimensions of these sorts of casual sexual relationships. By utilizing these three theoretical frameworks, we more closely examine the consequences of a relatively scriptless relationship configuration and the potentially subversive and regressive aspects of FWBRs.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical framework*

Scholars who have conceptualized gender as a social construction typically argue that gender and sexuality are not rooted in the “natural,” but rather, in relations of power that dictate the sorts of gendered presentations, attitudes, and behaviors people should have (Lorber, 1994; Tiefer, 2004). This theoretical framework has evolved into a vast body of feminist research that articulates the potential benefits in seeing gender and sexuality not as fixed biological entities, but as a product of the social world. One such benefit of this perspective includes the ability to reframe potentially oppressive “inevitable” as socially fluid and potentially changeable (Butler, 1990; Glenn, 1999).

Similarly, social scripting theory argues that people draw from existing social narratives for how to behave, think, and act (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Wiederman, 2005). When such social scripts are not available, people typically draw from their repertoire of existing social scripts to create a new script (Muraco, 2012). For FWBRs, both social construction of gender and social scripting theory can help to better explain women’s narratives about these relationship experiences, particularly as women infuse FWBRs with clear ideologies about gender and power. Furthermore,

attachment theories, particularly those of Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992), also provide a solid theoretical framework for examining romantic and sexual relationships, as clear ideas about traditional femininity (emotional, nurturing, caring, connected) and masculinity (nonemotional, disconnected, protective, detached) inform understandings about how these relationships evolve (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

### *Defining FWBRs*

In the postsexual revolution age, women have begun to internalize a variety of paradoxes: They should enjoy sex with multiple partners but “settle down” by age 30 so that they can bear children (Bell, 2013); they learn to internalize the neoliberal ethic of individual-as-responsible-for-her-own-pleasure while also directing more attention to others’ (particularly men’s) sexual needs over their own (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012); they fake orgasms at alarming rates while sometimes still claiming to feel satisfied (Fahs, 2011); and they want to both feel like they have agency but also defer to men’s sexual needs (Armstrong et al., 2012; Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005). Thus, the “friends with benefits” literature taps into this curious and contradictory cultural moment, revealing conflicts about women’s relational and sexual needs.

While the existing literature on FWBRs remains relatively small, most studies have defined FWBR as a friendship relationship (primarily with the opposite sex) that transitioned to a relationship where people engaged in sexual activity but did not define their relationship as romantic (Hughes et al., 2005). In other words, these relationships feature friends who have sex but who do not imagine a long-term romantic connection (Bisson & Levine, 2009). A larger body of research has examined “casual sexual relationships” (CSRs) with a variety of definitions to describe these types of relationships, including sex that happens one time only (Kilman, Boland, West, Jonet, & Ramsey, 1993), sex outside any committed relationship (Regan & Dreyer, 1999), one-night stands (Montoya, 2005),

and “hooking up” (Bogle, 2008). One recent study identified four related but distinctly different types of casual sexual relationships: “one-night stands,” “booty calls,” “fuck buddies,” and “friends with benefits,” noting that frequency of contact, type of contact (sexual and/or social), level of personal disclosure, discussion of the relationship, and degree of friendship define the four into distinct categories. Specifically, the study defined FWBRs as “a sexual relationship that develops between friends” (Wentland & Reissing, 2011, p. 76).

#### *Prevalence of nonromantic sexual relationships*

Studies show somewhat variable findings for the prevalence of these relationships as well as how to measure FWBRs. One study interrogated whether people have *ever* engaged in FWBRs and found that 60% of participants (all college students, men and women, no mention of race, class, or sexuality) had ever engaged in this type of relationship, and 36% currently reported an FWBR (Bisson & Levine, 2009), while two other studies utilizing large nationally representative data sets found that over half of their teenage samples had engaged in sex with someone they did not date (“nonromantic contexts”; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2005, 2006).

Prevalence shows a surprisingly high consistency across demographics, though college students had the highest prevalence of FWBRs. One study surveyed 315 college students and found that 51% had ever had an FWBR and 49% had engaged in more than one FWBR (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000). Another study examining adolescents in a medical outpatient clinic found that 56% had engaged in an FWBR with no variation based on age, gender, race, socioeconomic status (SES), or religiosity (Chernin, Rich, & Shing, 2010). Other studies have focused on people’s most recent sexual partner, as one recent larger study of 1,311 young adults found that 20% of the sample said that their most recent sexual partner was a casual partner (i.e., a casual acquaintance or a close but nonexclusive partner), with more men than women reporting casual sex (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick, & Neumark-Sztainer,

2009). When comparing FWBRs to casual sex with acquaintances (“hookups”) or friend relationships, young adults more often engaged in hookups than in FWBRs, though those in FWBRs had more sexual activity than in hookups or friend relationships. Furthermore, those in FWBRs engaged less often in nonsexual activities compared to hookups and friend relationships, suggesting that FWBRs emphasize sexual activity above other kinds of connection (Furman & Shaffer, 2011).

Other studies have veered away from long-term and sustained FWBR dynamics and have instead examined women’s casual hookups and one-night stands. A group of studies questioned people about their recent sexual behavior during travel or school holidays, as one study of 1,346 Australian high-school students found that 60% of men and 40% of women who had engaged in sexual intercourse during a school vacation did so with a casual partner (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Oppermann, 2003), while a Canadian study of university students on spring break found that 15% of men and 13% of women engaged in casual sex during trips to Daytona Beach, Florida (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998). Another study of “vacation sex” among tourists in Costa Rica found that women who traveled alone or with a single female companion, and those who anticipated having vacation sex, more often had vacation sex compared to other female tourists (Ragsdale, Difrancesisco, & Pinkerton, 2006).

Other casual sexual relationships also had varying degrees of prevalence, largely dependent on how casual sex was measured. If casual sex was defined as *any* sexual activity, prevalence rose to 75% or higher (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000), while casual sex defined only as penile–vaginal intercourse (PVI) dropped prevalence rates to 15%–35% (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1998; Weaver & Herold, 2000). To emphasize this point, one study of “booty calls” found that, of the 61 college students they interviewed, 64% had engaged in a booty call that resulted in some type of sexual activity (Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009). If researchers measured only sexual intercourse, many of these sexual

encounters disappeared from view (Nelson, Morrison-Beedy, Kearney, & Dozier, 2011).

### *Communication, sex, and love scripts*

Most existing studies of FWBRs have focused on the psychology of who engages in this behavior and how they communicate about it, although explorations of FWBRs have occasionally extended into philosophy as well (see Stephens, 2010, for an analysis of Epicurean philosophy and the importance of avoiding sex with one's friends). One study found no communication quality differences between those people in FWBRs and committed relationships (Owen & Fincham, 2012), while two studies found that people most often discussed their FWBR status with their same-sex friends, from whom they receive positive support, rather than with the person they had sex with (Hughes et al., 2005; Smith & Morrison, 2010), revealing the importance of people's same-sex social network for the success of FWBRs (Smith & Morrison, 2010). A Norwegian study of FWBRs found that the majority of people in FWBRs did not define the relationship or have explicit rules to define it (Karlsen & Træen, 2013). Conversely, another study found that women and men communicated quite effectively about their casual sexual relationships, particularly when partners refused or enthusiastically accepted an invitation for sex (Beres, 2010).

People's beliefs about love, romance, and expectations for commitment also affected their interpretations of FWBRs. Conflicted findings in the literature about gender differences underscore the broader conflicts about the meaning of FWBRs in men and women's lives. Two studies found that women were far more likely than men to enter the relationship hoping that it would evolve into a committed dating relationship (Gusarova, Fraser, & Alderson, 2012; Lehmillier, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2011), while another study found the opposite in that men and women reported similar feelings about the success of FWBRs, (Smith & Morrison, 2010). Many college students talked practically about FWBRs saying that this was one way that friends can "be there for each other" (Smith & Morrison,

2010). Still, conflicts for both men and women about love and romance also appeared, as approximately one third of adolescents with "nondating sexual partners" had hopes or expectations that the relationship would lead to a more conventional dating relationship (Manning et al., 2006). Among adults, attitudes about love also predicted motivations for having FWBRs and the outcomes of the relationships (Hughes et al., 2005), suggesting that people's expectations for their control and regulation of emotions affected the success of FWBRs.

Some studies have shown that people feel highly conflicted about their FWBRs, as the most common concern emphasized a fear that sex might complicate friendships by bringing forth unreciprocated desires for romantic relationships and emotional attachments (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Gusarova et al., 2012). Levine and Mongeau's (2010) study of college students confirmed this, and they noted, "One of the primary downsides of friends with benefits relationships is the worry and, in many cases, reality that one (and only one) partner develops romantic feelings for his or her friend" (p. 98). Most people in FWBRs borrowed elements from their friendship and sexuality scripts to form their notions of what an FWBR should feel like, though the relationship in public most often followed friendship scripts, while the relationship in private most often followed love scripts (Karlsen & Træen, 2013). Because FWBRs evolved and changed over time, they required a constant renegotiation of the terms of the relationship and its meaning for both people (Levine & Mongeau, 2010). Consequently, one strength of FWBRs is that they emphasized a fluid conceptualization of what constitutes a relationship (Wentland & Reissing, 2011).

### *Gender differences and relationship success*

Gender differences also appeared as a major theme in existing casual sex and FWBR research, perhaps validating claims from the attachment literature that portrays commitment and emotionality as feminine and detachment and nonemotionality as masculine (Jones & De

Cecco, 1982; Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). Men more often began FWBRs based on sexual motivations, while women began the relationships based on emotional connection, though both genders expressed more commitment to the friendship than to the sexual relationship (Lehmiller et al., 2011). Some people had frankly negative reactions to FWBRs and casual sex encounters, as men more often reported feeling depressed after casual sexual encounters, while women described feeling more vulnerable than satisfied (Rhoads, 2012). Women expressed significantly more negative feelings than men about entering another FWBR (Gusarova et al., 2012). Despite men's general enthusiasm for FWBRs (Gusarova et al., 2012), they also admitted conflicts about the meaning of FWBRs in their lives; although some men maintained the "no strings attached" model of masculine detachment, many men expressed conflicted feelings about wanting more emotional and relational connection in their FWBRs (Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009).

The question of relationship success, particularly whether relationships that transition from FWBR status to an official dating status can succeed, has also appeared in the literature. Young adults who started their exclusive romantic relationships with an FWBR status reported lower relationship satisfaction compared to those who did not, even when controlling for alcohol use and attachment style (Owen & Fincham, 2012). Studies on relationship satisfaction with FWBRs have found mixed results: 38% of Canadian undergraduates reported positive experiences, 37% reported neutral experiences, but 40% said that they would not enter an FWBR again. A full 22% of people said that their FWBRs developed emotional complications and these complications predicted negative outcomes (Gusarova et al., 2012).

#### *Psychological impact of FWBRs*

The impact of FWB relationships on psychological health has also formed a key component of the existing literature on casual sexual relationships. Although popular culture manuals like *The Hookup Handbook* (Rozler

& Lavinthal, 2010) teach women how to deal with everything from "the players and locations to the long walk of shame home," scholarly research has questioned whether FWBRs emotionally damage or positively support young people, and whether FWBRs link up with positive or negative psychological consequences for men and women. One study questioned whether FWBRs emotionally damaged young people but found no evidence of this, as no connection between partner type and well-being was found (Eisenberg et al., 2009), though other studies found links between casual sex, FWBRs, and drug use, alcohol consumption, lack of condom use, and a casual first sexual partner (Grello et al., 2006; Owen & Fincham, 2011; Vander-Drift et al., 2012). Women's greater alcohol use especially predicted FWBRs (Owen & Fincham, 2011). For college students, attendance at Greek parties, residence-hall parties, and off-campus parties strongly predicted alcohol-related sex with a stranger, though alcohol-related FWB encounters were not examined (Bersamin, Paschall, Saltz, & Zamboanga, 2012). Furthermore, links between casual sex and depression appeared for women, while men who engaged in casual sex reported far fewer symptoms of depression (Grello et al., 2006).

As a more broad assessment of the positive and negative aspects of FWBRs, Weaver, MacKeigan, and MacDonald (2011) found that positive aspects of FWBRs included safety, comfort, trust, gaining confidence and experience, closeness and companionship, freedom and having control, and easy access to sex. Negative aspects of FWBRs included getting hurt, ruining a friendship, and the relationship becoming complicated or awkward, and a distorted sense of sexual safety (44% reported having additional sexual partners though few perceived any STI risk). This study also found that women felt more negatively judged than men for engaging in FWBRs (Weaver et al., 2011).

#### *Feminist critique of "hookup culture"*

While little feminist research has examined FWBRs, Kelly (2012) provided a feminist

critique of “the hookup culture” by emphasizing that even though hookup culture ostensibly provides women with greater independence than traditional relationships, hookup culture still operates within harshly sexist terms: “Hookup culture ... avoid[s] addressing how much control a woman really has in a system of pressure so geared toward fulfilling societal expectations of male sexuality” (p. 41). Ultimately, the lack of commitment, ambiguous language around defining the relationship, alcohol, and social pressure all combine to undermine freedom, equality, and safety for undergraduate women (Kelly, 2012). Other feminist critiques have also emphasized conflicts about men’s sexual access to women and its impact on women’s sense of sexual agency (Miriam, 2007) as well as the potential negative consequences of casual sex on heterosexual women’s sense of control, efficacy, and sexual ethic (Farvid, 2010). In particular, because women’s sexual practices occur in heteronormative contexts that de-emphasize self-care and personal autonomy, gendered power relationships obscure women’s desires, needs, and concerns (Beres & Farvid, 2010). In particular, challenges for women to define their desire as active and embodied appear as particularly relevant for women’s nontraditional sexual expression (Muise, 2011).

### *Research questions*

Given the notable lack of research on women’s subjective experiences with FWBRs as well as the clear indications that women’s expectations, feelings, and ability to express sexual agency in FWBRs may both respond to and rebel against traditional gender role expectations, more research in these areas is essential to understanding women’s FWBR experiences. Because FWBRs have clearly developed highly conflicted and intensely gendered sexual and relationship spaces, this study asked four central research questions: What do women’s narratives about their FWBRs reveal about the relationship between gender, power, and sexual agency? What do women’s narratives reveal about scripting, attachment, and the social construction of

gender? How do these subjective experiences connect to larger stories about investment in relationships, heteronormative, and gendered relationship scripts, and ideologies of rebelling against monogamy? Finally, how do women’s experiences with negotiating FWBRs produce new knowledge about the possible feminist interpretations of the hotly contested landscape of casual sexual relationships?

### **Method**

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 34,  $SD = 13.35$ ) recruited in 2011 in a large metropolitan Southwestern U.S. city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings distributed free to the community as well as the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist. Both outlets reached wide audiences and were freely available to community residents. The advertisements asked for women aged 18–59 to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviors, practices, and attitudes. Participants were screened only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age; no other prescreening questions were asked. A purposive sample was selected to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: Sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (55% aged 18–31, 25% aged 32–45, and 20% aged 46–59). The sample included 55% White women and 45% women of color, including 3 African American women, 4 Mexican American women, and 2 Asian American women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 60% heterosexual women, 30% bisexual women, and 10% lesbian women (though women’s reported sexual *behavior* often indicated far more same-sex eroticism than these self-categorized labels suggest). All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed and all received US\$20.00 compensation. Identifying data were removed and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Participants directly reported a range of socioeconomic and educational

backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses.

Participants were interviewed by the lead author using a semistructured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5–2 hr, where they responded to 36 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about sexuality. All participants were interviewed by the same interviewer (Author) in a room that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses. Questions included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about contemporary sexual culture and media, questions about their relationships and feelings about “friends with benefits” experiences, and their ideas about body image. Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this study on women’s attitudes about FWBRs. For example, women were asked one primary question about FWBRs: “Many women have had relationships that they describe as ‘friends with benefits’ relationships or non-categorical relationships that involve sex. What are your experiences with these kinds of relationships?” with the follow-up question, “How was power and control negotiated?” These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics, as follow-up questions were free-flowing and conversational. As the questions were broad and open-ended, participants could set the terms of how they would discuss their experiences with FWBRs and what information they wanted to share.

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that drew from scripting theory (Muraco, 2012; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Wiederman, 2005), attachment theory (Jones & De Cecco, 1982; Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002), social constructionism (Glenn, 1999; Lorber, 1994), and poststructuralist feminist theory and gender theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women’s attitudes and feelings (e.g., suppression of emotions and transitional qualities of FWBRs). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the intersection between FWBRs and other

components of women’s sexual lives (e.g., beliefs about monogamy and communication tactics with others). To conduct the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and we then independently identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of discussing FWBRs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We selected and generated themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlaps between participants. After creating these themes, we compared them to previous themes expressed by other participants in order to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns.

## Results

Of the 20 women interviewed for this study, 17 women (85%) in the sample reported that they had engaged in an FWBR at least once in their lifetime, with 6 women (30%) saying that they currently had an FWBR. Even though 3 women (15%) had not ever had an FWBR, we included their responses because it provided important insight about why women may choose not to have an FWBR and what meanings they interpret about such relationships. Also, although FWBRs have typically been cast as a heterosexual phenomenon in the research (indeed, nearly all studies of FWBRs either exclude or fail to mention sexual minorities), we included both heterosexual and bisexual/lesbian women’s responses in the results, as several bisexual/lesbian women had engaged in FWBRs with both men and women. From these responses about FWBRs, five themes were generated. As noted in the descriptions below, some participants’ responses overlapped between themes in that one participant’s responses fit into multiple themes. The five themes were (a) regulation and suppression of emotions, (b) performance and idealization of detachment and emotionlessness, (c) lack of communication combined with “other-defined” experiences, (d) replication of racist and sexist scripts, and (e) transitional qualities of the relationship.

*Theme 1: Regulation and suppression of emotions*

Perhaps as a condition of trying “not to care” about the other person while in an FWBR, several women described feeling obliged to suppress qualities typically associated with an emotional, caring posture, particularly attachments to others, strong emotions, and feelings that united erotic and romantic impulses. For example, Florence, a 38-year-old White bisexual woman, described her tendency to get too attached in her FWBRs: “Sometimes I get too attached to whoever I’m with, so I try to stay directly with somebody I’ve been with. I don’t like friends with benefits because then somehow I get attached and want more.” Her notable use of language that evokes excess (e.g., *too attached*) signaled a common theme that some women internalized an expectation of what counted as *too much* emotion. Leticia, a 41-year-old Latina bisexual woman, expressed a similar feeling, in that she disliked how attached she often got while in FWBRs and that she tested out her partners for their interest in romance:

I don’t like friends with benefits relationships. I’ve had experiences with them but I don’t like them because I know I always want more. I want a relationship and, you know, that’s crossing the line, and we end up not being friends and it’s over. I’ve never had power and control in the relationship. I’m in a friends with benefits relationship now, but I want more, but I’ve noticed that a couple of times I’ve been like, ‘No, you know what, never mind!’ and I’ve cut it off to see how he would react, and he doesn’t react the way I want him to. He’s like, ‘Okay then.’ You know? I want him to want me, you know what I mean?

Leticia’s particular suppression of the emotions—in this case trying on the notion that she wants to break off the relationship—contrasted sharply with her actual desires for a relationship, again framing emotionality as undesirable.

Women also talked at length about the notion that emotions, particularly attachment to their FWBR partner(s), felt *dangerous*,

bad, counterproductive, or undesirable to themselves. Patricia, a 28-year-old African American heterosexual woman, talked about trying to stave off her emotions by setting clear, rule-based boundaries with her FWBR partners:

I basically just tell them, ‘I’m not looking for a relationship. We’re friends and if I need to fill my sexual urge I’m going to call you.’ I want nothing less, nothing more, because it could veer off into dinner and a movie, and you know how eventually sometimes those lead to relationships too.

Patricia went on to tell a story about a time she let her guard down with one of her FWBR partners:

Me and the guy had known each other a year and I didn’t know whether to tell him I like him or what. I really didn’t want to go down that road, so I just told him, like, ‘We gotta cut this out.’ I knew that once I got drawn in, I was going to really be *in* and that would be trouble.

This split between emotions as dangerous and nonemotions as safe signaled a common theme in women’s narratives. As another example, Abby, a 26-year-old White heterosexual woman, described her emotional instability in a long-term FWBR that went on and off for years: “I totally couldn’t regulate my emotions. I was a mess, but I think as an adult had I had one of those relationships I could definitely do it. I just never had the opportunity.” The notion that she would *mature* into being able to control her emotions again situated emotionality as sometimes immature, weak, and undesirable while in FWBRs.

Sometimes feelings emerged in a “contagion” model as something women hoped they would not “catch.” Shantele, a 30-year-old African American heterosexual woman, described her fear of FWBRs based on her fear of accidentally “catching feelings,” saying:

No matter what you do, one of us catches feelings and it goes bad from there. I caught feelings once and then it hurt because

I wanted more and I felt bad because I shouldn't want more. Then a friend caught feelings and he fell for me and I wasn't wanting to do that. I think it's a bad thing. It's good in the beginning because we're both on the same level and we're like, 'Oh my god, this is perfect!' but something happens and I realize that we've crossed that line. The person who caught the feelings is the weakest.

The link between weakness and contagion of feeling seems to clearly underlie women's reported fear of FWBRs going awry via too much investment of emotions and too little detachment.

*Theme 2: Performance and idealization of detachment and emotionlessness*

Women also described FWBRs in highly detached and emotionless terms, citing that these relationships made them feel powerful and less vulnerable *because* they did not feel romantic feelings or want more from the relationship. FWBRs represented a possible way for women to fulfill their sexual urges while not needing to attend to any demands of a traditional romantic relationship. They could stay less invested this way. For example, Cris, a 22-year-old White lesbian, described having FWBRs with both men and women and noted that she felt rather emotionless about any of them:

With a few of my friends, it would be like we were bored or really drunk at night and there was no one else to hook up with so we did it. It's just a hook up. I felt neutral toward them, just kind of 'whatever' about it. At the time it just wasn't anything serious and I didn't really look too much into it because my main focus was going to school so I didn't really care about getting into a relationship.

The focus on her other priorities—in this case school—allowed Cris to separate her sexual and relationship needs into separate spheres. Rhoda, a 57-year-old White heterosexual woman, similarly reported using her

FWBR experiences to meet her sexual needs but nothing else: "I think I can separate my emotions from just having fun, having a good time, and I've never tried to let my emotions factor into friends with benefits stuff. It was just a means to an end to get satisfied I guess."

Other women focused on their aversion to commitment, sometimes describing detachment as an ideal. Tania, a 25-year-old White heterosexual woman, discussed her distaste for commitment and her emotional walls toward her FWBR partners:

I have plenty of friends with benefits experience. I'm not a big title person so I don't have a boyfriend necessarily because I don't like the thought of commitment. That's the only reason. I'm young right now and I want to have fun, meet new people, and I don't want anyone second-guessing what I'm doing. I'm the one with the power. This last one would get jealous, tell me that he didn't believe the ball was in his court at all, it's what I wanted and how I wanted it, and he wanted more of a lasting long-term thing and I didn't. I guess I build up a wall and I just kind of go with it. I am tough on the outside.

Tania's pride at having power via not wanting commitment and not showing (or having) strong feelings toward her FWBR partners signifies how performing detachment and emotionlessness can feel satisfying to some women.

As another version of performing emotionlessness and detachment, a few women described FWBRs as a purely transactional arrangement, where they performed sexual labor in order to receive something monetary or tangible from their FWBR partners. One of these women framed this behavior as *empowering* or even ideal. Keisha, a 34-year-old African American bisexual woman, recalled an FWBR where she received both a friendship and actual monetary support:

Friends with benefits are nice. I had one while I was in school, and I had a car and my rent was paid and it was good. I guess it was the particular time that I was in my life, like

I'm in school and I needed help, and it was just talked about openly like a negotiation.

The implications of FWBRs as a form of sexual labor or sexual exchange—prioritizing the transactional over the relational—again reflect the gender and power dynamics present in these relationships. Selling sex, devoid of emotional attachment, seemed to evoke emotionless and detached ways of interacting romantically and sexually.

*Theme 3: Lack of communication combined with “other-defined” experiences*

While some women talked openly and honestly with their FWBR partners about the expectations they had and the desires they felt, most women reported that they did not talk about their feelings or expectations with their FWBR partners. This lack of communication about the terms of their relationship and the terms of sex, combined with “other-defined” experiences—that is, allowing the FWBR partner to determine the terms of the relationship—appeared in women's narratives about these relationships. Zhang, a 36-year-old Asian American bisexual woman, described her frustration at not being able to talk effectively with her FWBR partner about their dynamics of power:

There's always a power struggle, like 'Hey, are you going to spend time with me?' and 'No, I've got to go see some other girl.' It comes to a sad point where I say, 'This is how our relationship is going to end?' and he says, 'What do you mean a 'relationship'? We don't have a relationship!'

This lack of open discussion about language and behavior seemed to stem from an overall lack of communication about the status of their relationship.

Most of the women who preferred FWBRs said that they did not talk much about the relationship dynamics with their FWBR partners. Dessa, a 19-year-old Latina heterosexual woman, described the lack of communication as a key feature of these relationships, noting

that she never knew her partner wanted more from the relationship:

Most of my relationships have been friends with benefits. I think it's fun because we can hang out really well, get along nicely, watch some TV or something, and then hook up and have a good time. One of them never really told me that he wanted more and he just like told me that he loved me and I was like, 'Huh?' We were just doing normal stuff and I barely even talked to him unless I wanted to come over so it got weird when we talked. It turned sour.

Dessa's description framed FWBRs as positive *because* they lack communication about feelings, an interesting twist on traditional gendered scripts.

At times, the lack of communication seemed more like a function of allowing the FWBR partner to define the experience. Jean, a 57-year-old White heterosexual woman, suppressed her own needs, feelings, and desire for communication in order to maintain her FWBR:

I don't like the whole friends with benefits situation. I'm not really good at telling my significant others how I feel, so it was really easy to tell those people nothing at all really. It only lasted like a week or two with one and I was trying to be in that relationship seeing that 'No, it doesn't work.'

Again, the theme of holding back feelings, not talking, and not setting the terms of the relationship appeared as a necessary condition to maintaining FWBR connections for some women.

*Theme 4: Replication of racist and sexist scripts*

Because of their casual and somewhat transient statuses, FWBRs also connected to racist and sexist scripts. With interracial dating still sometimes frowned upon, FWBRs sometimes worked to conceal potentially stigmatized relationships. Some women formed FWBRs with people they would not otherwise consider

appropriate romantic/dating partners. Inga, a 24-year-old White bisexual woman, couched her FWBR through the lens of racial and cultural difference:

One of my friends with benefits relationship was with a gentleman who actually has a very different cultural background than me, and I'm too independent for him, so we agreed that it was more or less something we wanted to try just for sex and then see where it went from there. It was just something where we were attracted to each other but I didn't want a relationship with him. We were too different.

Whether her claim of how her independence threatened him was something she internalized or something he expressed remains less clear.

Angelica, a 32-year-old Latina heterosexual, expressed that she found it less racially threatening in her own mind to call her sex partner a "friends with benefits" partner than if she called him her boyfriend:

I'm in a friends with benefits relationship right now. I don't feel bad about it because I had sex with him on the first night. I was drunk and I didn't care. I had just gotten out of a 10-year relationship and I just wanted to do it. I thought it would be a one-night stand and that would be it or whatever, but then he ended up calling and we talked on the phone for a long time. I don't see—no offense—but I don't see myself in a relationship with a Caucasian person just because of the cultural differences. I think there are a lot of those, so that kind of holds me back.

Here she combines the performance of detachment with the desire to frame the relationship as nonserious because of their racial differences.

FWBRs also seemed prone to a repeated pattern: Women imagined that they were breaking away from traditional relationship scripts, only to end up replicating those same scripts in FWBRs. At times, women wanted to feel empowered but ended up feeling dismissed, powerless, and lacking control or

voice in FWBRs. Hannah, a 57-year-old White bisexual woman, talked about her frustration at finding herself in an FWBR that closely resembled the relationship she had just gotten out of:

I wanted a different type of relationship so I tried a friends with benefits with a good friend. I ended up not having any power anyway, like I'd be waiting by the phone for him and feeling disappointed that he didn't call. I didn't have the right to ask for more, like I couldn't even ask him to show up on time or text me back. The sex wasn't that good either. I was still faking my climaxes just like with my ex!

This conflict between wanting something new and ending up with sexist relationship scripts points again to the significant tensions of trying to "break free" from monogamy and traditional coupling.

#### *Theme 5: Transitional qualities of the relationship*

Women also expressed the transitional nature of FWBRs, as the permanence so often assigned (at least in fantasy) to monogamous, serious relationships was replaced in FWBRs with a clear sense of the relationship as temporary and changing. At times, women described FWBRs as evolving into a more serious and/or committed relationship, such as Rhoda, who recalled,

We started out as friends with benefits and got drunk one night and had sex, but we've known each other for over 30 years now. After a while of doing the friends with benefits, we realized that we didn't want anybody else. We kind of fell in love, but then things happened in my life with my kids and I was distant so that played a part in us splitting up.

These fluid, flexible, changing relationship definitions characterized most FWBRs.

Other women described their knowledge that the relationship would never evolve into a romantic committed relationship, but would

likely either continue or end altogether. Jane, a 59-year-old White heterosexual woman, reflected on the contrast between her ideas about relationships during her 20s compared to now:

I think in my 20s I never would have thought about having a friend with benefits. It was either marriage or hit the road kind of thing. Maybe I'm involved in a friend with benefits relationship now. We've never really negotiated, and I don't know that we've ever really articulated that we're not going to date around while we're in a relationship. . . . The choice is really whether they're with or without sex, but they'll always end.

The fusion between lack of communication and the notion that FWBRs are temporary and transient seems clear in Jane's description of her romantic life.

A few women reported that their partners wanted to modify the relationship from a committed relationship to an FWBR with that same person following a breakup. Mei, a 22-year-old Asian American woman, described her boyfriend's desire to have an FWBR instead of a committed romantic relationship:

My first boyfriend, after we broke up, he kind of wanted to become friends with benefits and I was like, 'NO.' I just think there is more trust if you are only with one partner at a time. Then sex becomes more meaningful than just an act of pleasure, but I don't know if I could have sex with more than one person in different relationships.

Perhaps the cliché of saying that "we can still be friends" has now modified into "we can still be friends with benefits" for some women in today's dating world.

## Discussion

While these rich narratives gave much subjective weight to women's experiences with FWBRs, the most significant pattern derived from this study is the overwhelming tendency

for women to describe FWBRs as a tension between emotionality as weak, passive, denigrated, dangerous, and undesirable, and emotionlessness and detachment as powerful, strong, controlled, and transactional, echoing the findings from the attachment literatures that showcase connections between emotions and attachment (Bretherton, 1992; Jones & De Cecco, 1982; Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). While fighting against the scripts of traditional forms of emotional expression did occur in FWBRs—as women resisted the mandate for monogamy, commitment, romance, dependency, and marriage—these same resistances still seemed to replicate and perhaps further entrench the dualistic split between emotions and emotionlessness and between the powerless and the powerful. Women in FWBRs described strong emotions and relationship investment (e.g., feeling emotional, wanting more, and expressing needs) as overwhelmingly negative, and emotionlessness and detachment (e.g., sex as physical, transactional, and nonemotional) as overwhelmingly positive. Clear notions of investment in the relationship played out in this dividing line between "too much" and "too few" emotions.

Women's desire to suppress emotions and relationship investment as a sign of weakness—whether through not wanting more from the relationship, suppressing love feelings, or seeing emotions as dangerous and even contagious—speaks to the way that so-called "alternative" relationship arrangements may nevertheless absorb clear scripts about investment, emotions, and engagement, even for women engaged in FWBRs with other women. The notion that FWBRs remain "scriptless" and without a clear reference point (Muraco, 2012) appears in how women drew from their existing scripts to narrate and understand their FWBRs. The desire to discipline one's emotions, not lose control or act too needy, seemed paramount in women's descriptions of their FWBR experiences. The avoidance of the emotional, needy, relationship-driven self also paired with performances of detachment, in that women seemed to implicitly demonstrate a desire to emulate gendered scripts traditionally assigned

to (promiscuous and/or “macho”) men: not wanting serious relationships, not caring too much, feeling powerful and in control, using partner(s) for physical sexual release, and engaging in transactional and emotionless encounters with others.

This tension between emotionality and emotionlessness, combined with themes women raised about *not* communicating or discussing their FWBR arrangements, raised numerous questions about the personal, social, and political implications of FWBRs: If women use these relationships as a physical outlet for their sexual desires, what does this arrangement deny them (and others)? Does the lack of communication in these relationships also signal a romanticized notion of emotional detachment, as women decide not to talk and to “just have fun”? Or, does the lack of communication signal a silencing of women and their feelings, emotions, and needs? Have women engaged in a sort of emotional splitting, unable to reconcile sexual desires with relationship desires (Bell, 2013), leaving them with the notion that they can only have one or the other? Can usurping detachment as a form of sexual power function as a feminist gesture, or does it leave women in the familiar assimilationist predicament where they must “be like men” in a stereotypical sense (e.g., callous, nonfeeling, and self-serving) to have power at all?

Perhaps more significantly, the theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and attachment theory may help to illuminate some of the reasons that women experienced their FWBRs in this way, as women at least implicitly associated emotional, connected, and nurturing feelings with losing power, and the detached and emotionless with gaining power. The balance between performing power and emotionality in FWBRs—and the relatively chaotic way that women did this—also references the underlying lack of social scripts present in FWBRs. Perhaps this relative “scriptlessness,” where women did not readily have relationship scripts from which to draw from, led to both the ability to create new and subversive scripts about FWBRs (e.g., women taking on emotional detachment if they wanted to). At the same time, women still

seemed to draw from existing social scripts to construct and create FWBRs, thereby infusing them with many of the same problematic gender roles as more traditional relationships.

The findings of this study point to some of the limitations of seeing FWBRs as liberated, empowered choices for women, as their narratives showcased the trappings of gender and power in *any* of their relationship choices. Whether through women being asked to engage in an FWBR following a breakup, or women using FWBRs as a way to stave off anxiety about interracial sexual relationships, FWBRs seem loaded with cultural baggage and weighed down by the heavy sense that, in most cases, even when women have fun, conflict and ambiguity remain. That said, trying on different identities like these women did (e.g., using men for sex and testing the relationship connection) seem like a useful project for exploring sexual and relationship needs, but these attempts to try on different relationship styles still left women in all-too-familiar places of feeling frustrated, powerless, confused, or even callous toward others. While a few of their stories imply that FWBRs allowed them to have fun and/or behave in free-spirited ways, most of these stories eventually expressed some elements of displeasure and discomfort. These narratives also suggest that leaving out women’s subjective accounts of FWBRs from scholarly research essentially eliminates the nuances and intricacies of hearing from women about their conflicts and the points of contention they face in their FWBRs.

This study also uniquely studied women from a wider set of backgrounds than nearly all previous studies on FWBRs. Most previous research focused exclusively on college students and teenagers, largely neglecting the reality that women in their 30s, 40s, 50s (and presumably beyond) may also experience FWBRs. The rich diversity in this sample with regard to race and sexual identity also contributed to some gaps that other research has sometimes neglected. The race findings were unique to this study and suggest that some women use FWBR status to manage the stigma of interracial dating. Also, the fact that women throughout their adult lives grapple

with FWBRs, and that so many women had engaged in FWBRs, suggests that these may represent more of a norm than researchers once imaged. This is *not* a “college thing,” but rather, something that many women choose throughout their adult lives, with both men and women, and within a variety of contexts.

FWBRs also make visible some of the relational processes that otherwise stay hidden in traditional monogamous coupled relationships. Women readily described the transitional and temporary nature of FWBRs while women rarely do so (often because social scripts about marriage do not allow it) when talking about marriage and monogamy. FWBRs also revealed the importance of ongoing, repeated, continual renegotiation of relationships, as those women who insisted upon “checking in” with partners typically fared better emotionally than those who assumed that lack of communication meant they were “having fun.” Furthermore, this study reinforced findings from other work that has found that more ambiguous relationships like FWBRs and hookups can both subvert and reinforce traditional gender roles (Currier, 2013; Wright, Norton, & Matussek, 2010). In all, women’s narratives about FWBRs showcased the immense complexities involved in studying relationships that are not only hard to define but even more difficult to detach from traditional (and nontraditional) narratives of gender, race, and power. In addition, because FWBRs are largely scriptless and are only borrowing from other sorts of relationship, gender, race, and power scripts, they have the potential to be both subversive and, more often, fall into the traps of more traditional relationship scripts that prioritize the construction of women as passive/emotional and men as active/emotionless (Muraco, 2012).

### *Limitations and future directions*

Certain research decisions may have affected the results of this study, as the choice of wording for the interview questions may not have sufficiently interrogated women’s experiences with cross-gender friendships, one-night stands, or other kinds of casual sexual relationships. The strong emphasis

on women’s ambivalence about power and control in FWBRs deserves more specific interrogation as well, just as additional larger scale quantitative research could provide more insights into who engages in FWBRs and why. No large-scale longitudinal work has examined FWBRs, so researchers know little about FWBRs that transition into committed, permanent, monogamous relationships, just as they know little about committed, permanent, monogamous relationships that became FWBRs later, or simply fizzled out altogether. Such longitudinal work could help to illuminate the complexities of changing relationships over time, and how FWBRs might inform women’s later relationship decisions.

Also, while this study included self-identified lesbian and bisexual women in the sample, little research has examined women’s same-sex FWBRs and how they might be similar to or different from FWBRs in heterosexual contexts. More specific work around sexual minorities and FWBRs could prove rewarding in future research. Along these lines, intersectional analyses of gender, race, sexuality, and class could also illuminate more about how people from different social strata may conceptualize their FWBRs. Although this study did not and, due to sample size, *could* not, outline differences between groups of women, such work could yield important and relevant insights into tensions around power and emotionality in FWBRs, and how different groups of women assess and communicate their sexual and relationship needs.

This study ultimately suggests that FWBRs exist in a highly gendered landscape where women both subvert and further entrench themselves in dichotomies like passivity/strength, lack of control/control, emotions/rationality, neediness/coldness, danger/safety, and expression/restraint. The familiar tension between trying on new identities and behaviors, and reinforcing and replicating older patterns, appears strongly in women’s subjective accounts of FWBRs. As relationships continue to change and, presumably, as FWBRs become increasingly more common in today’s modern dating world, we should continue to ask who these relationships

truly benefit, and how we can assess, promote, and critique women's quest for sexual and personal empowerment.

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