

6th International Conference on Intercultural Education “Education and Health: From a transcultural perspective”

Friends with benefits and psychological wellbeing

Herenia García^a, Encarnación Soriano^{a,*} y Gilberto Arriaza^b

^a Education Faculty. University of Almeria, Spain

^b College of Education & Allied Studies. California State University East Bay

Abstract

This article is a descriptive study on the emotional wellbeing of individuals involved in casual sexual relations, labeled as friends with benefits. The size was 119 adults. An online survey, approved by a local, peer-review panel, was used to collect data. To explore how participants felt in this type of relationship, the instrument was organized in a total of ten categories – five positive (happy, desired, satisfied, adventurer, excited), - five negative (empty, confused, used, clumsy, deceived) Participants could select one or several categories as an answer. Overall, positive emotions were selected significantly more than negative ones, and women made up the majority of positive responses.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of HUM-665 Research Group “Research and Evaluation in Intercultural Education”.

Keywords: Friends with benefits; emotional reactions; gender and psychological wellbeing

1. Introduction

Sexuality has traditionally been associated to steady romantic relationships, courtship and marriage. In fact, studies about sexual behavior, over the past decades, have taken place within the context of committed, serious, or formal relationships, where love, commitment and exclusivity define them (Furman & Shaffer, 2011).

In current studies on sexual behavior, a minor dichotomy exists, based on the type of interpersonal connection. On one end sits long-term relationships, characterized by romance and commitment; and on the other end sits short-term relationships, referred to as infrequent and casual sex, therefore defined as distinctly sexual. Yet,

Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-950015755.

E-mail address: esoriano@ual.es

mounting new evidence suggests that other kind of relationships exist, which do not fit said dichotomy; one of these relationships is defined as friends with benefits (Jonason, Li & Cason, 2009; Jonason, Li & Richardson, 2011; Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006).

The relationship friends with benefits refers to an emerging sexual relation (Bisson and Levine, 2009). Framed as casual, it is about sex among friends; one that brings together friendship (i.e. psychological intimacy), and physical closeness void of romantic liaisons (Lehmiller, VanderDrift & Kelly, 2011; Owen & Fincham, 2011a; Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005 ; McGinty, Knox & Zusman, 2007). This type of relationship seems widespread among young adults, and for researchers remains available for further study (Lonardo, Manning, Giordano & Longmore, 2010; Wentland and Reissing, 2011; Furman & Shaffer, 2011; Hughes et al., 2005; Green & Morman 2008).

While clearly a subset of casual sexual relations, the “friends with benefits” type contains features inherently romantic - namely intimacy and sexual passion. For this reason, it is considered a hybrid relationship, one that is not clearly romantic, nor true friendship, yet it does exhibit aspects of both (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Lehmiller et al., 2011).

2. Psychological Wellbeing.

The Pan-American Health Organization, and the World Health Organization in collaboration with the International Association of Sexology (WAS) have defined sexual health as the permanent, lived process of physical, psychological and sociocultural fulfilment linked to sexuality (OPS & OMS, 2000, p.15).

Psychological wellbeing is a component of sexual health (Levin, 2007; Carrobles, Gámez-Guadix and Almendros, 2011; Victoria and González, 2000). Psychological wellbeing, indeed, manifests a person's constructive and positive feeling about herself; it is lived subjectively and is connected to the person's physical, psychological, and social functioning. Moreover, it brings together reactive and transitional elements linked to the emotions, and to cognitive, more stable, evaluative elements. Both – emotion and cognition – certainly are interconnected.

Within a sexual health framework, one wonders whether friends with benefits provide positive emotional reactions and, that way contribute to the participants' psychological wellbeing, or rather affects them negatively. This very aspect remains controversial and unsettled among experts, due to, as argued above, the fact that friends with benefits do not constitute a pure relationship, and the studies on the subject seem scarce.

Traditionally, researchers have linked friendship and romantic relationships to psychological wellbeing (Corrigan and Phelan, 2004; Manning, Longmore & Giordano, 2005), while casual sex has been related to negative emotional reactions, or psychological uneasiness (Grello, Welsh, Harper & Dickson, 2003; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Owen & Fincham, 2011b). These negative emotional reactions have also been related to psychological illness (Owen & Fincham 2011a; Grello et al. 2003, García, Reiber, Massey & Merriwether, 2012). Some studies have pointed out that sexual tension is common among participants in friends with benefits, and such tension creates uncertainty (Afifi and Faulkner, 2000).

Nevertheless, some studies have found that young adults involved in friends with benefits relationships do not risk higher negative psychological consequences than those who do not participate in this type of relation (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick and Neumark-Sztainer, 2009). At the contrary, emotional reactions outweigh negative ones for males and females (Owen & Fincham 2011a,b; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter & Kilmer, 2012).

The high number of young adults involved in friends with benefits may explain the positive value assigned to this type of relationship (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; McGinty et al., 2007; Puentes, Knox & Zusman, 2008; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Weaver, Mackeigan and MacDonald, 2011). These participants expect, and indeed, extract a positive result from such relationships (Weaver et al., 2011). In other words, it cannot be definitely concluded that psychological stress is significantly correlated to friends with benefits (Owen and Fincham, 2011a,b).

3. Gender and emotional experience.

This section examines whether a difference on emotional experiences exists between males and females involved in friends with benefits. That is, whether gender - as social and cultural construct of the feminine and the masculine (Lamas, 1999) – is related to the friends with benefits phenomenon. But, first let's agree that meanings and emotions emanating from this type of relationship may vary by gender (Glenn & Margardt, 2001; Paul, MacManus & Hayes, 2000; Owen & Fincham, 2011a,b).

More women than men appear to qualify their experience in a friends with benefits as important. But they also do not want to go back to have it in higher numbers than men (Bell, 1981; Owen and Fincham, 2011 b; Lewis, et al., 2012). Women seem to have less positive emotional reactions compared to men (Fincham & Owen 2011a, b; Lewis et al., 2012); women also feel more uncomfortable and guilty than men. In addition, they seem less costumed to casual sex than men. Thus, casual sex can be considered as predictor of sexual guilt among female university students (Eshbauhg and Gute, 2008; Campbell, 2008).

New studies over the last years have revealed new findings contradicting the extant literature on sexual gender roles. The New York Times published a piece on July, 2013, dealing with this very subject. Kate Taylor, the author, discusses about a whole new generation of women whose sexual opportunities and relationships have changed. It can be said that there seems to coexist a bipolar and ambiguous environment – i.e. traditional and alternative sexual life - and that changes in sexual behavior have ushered the end of many stigmas associated with sex, such as premarital sex, and female sexual expression (Green & Morman 2008).

Again, the complexity of friends with benefits seems obvious. Yet, it remains unclear whether involvement in this type of sexual relationship offers pleasure and fulfilment particularly to women. Many unknown elements still remain concealed.

4. Purpose

The central purpose of this study was to analyse the emotional state of those involved in friends with benefits relationships. Two specific objectives guided this work:

- Understand the emotional reactions of those involved in friends with benefits.
- Differentiate the emotional reactions of men and women.

5. Methodology

This is a descriptive survey research (Arnal, del Rincón & Latorre, 1992). Se utilizó un cuestionario online adaptad from Owen and Fincham (20011b).

Participants

This study was part of a larger research project aiming at understanding couple's relationships. The sample size of this larger project was 1073 individuals. From these participants, 11% (a total of 119 respondents) stated they are involved in friends with benefits. This study focuses exclusively on the latter subset of the large sample. Of the 119 respondents, about one quarter (a total of 31) were male, and the rest (88) female. Mean average age was about 24 years. Almost 91% stated their sexual orientation as heterosexual, almost 2% as gay, 7% as bisexual, and almost 1% as pansexual.

Instrument

An online survey containing a total of fourteen dimensions was provided. The survey followed indicators found in the literature thus far reviewed. A team of nine methods experts and sexologists offered critical feedback to each item.

Respondents who identified themselves as currently involved in friends with benefits were directed to the instrument's section dealing with it. This was option "b" of question: What types of relationship are you now involved?

Other respondents were directed to the sections corresponding to the type of casual sexual involvement they identified as having – unknown individuals, acquaintances, or romantic. People not involved in any type of these relationships were discontinued.

More concretely, this article is based on the findings of the dimension - emotions related to psychological wellbeing of individuals engaged in friends with benefits.

Results

Data were analysed using Statistical Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS V. 20).

Emotional reactions

Table 1. Emotional Reactions

Variables	% Men	% Women	%Total
Happy	32,3	52,3	47,1
Desired	41,9	40,9	41,2
Satisfied	32,3	43,2	40,3
Adventurer	22,6	27,3	26,1
Excited	25,8	27,3	26,9
Empty	6,5	3,4	4,2
Confuse	19,4	29,5	26,9
Used	9,7	4,5	5,9
Clumsy	9,7	2,3	4,2
Deceived	9,7	6,8	4,6

Men, as well as women, reported that their emotional reactions were more positive than negative. The most frequent was happy (47.1%), followed by desired (41.2%), satisfied (40.3%), excited and confused (both 26,9%), adventurer (26,1%), deceived (7,6%), used (5,9%); lastly, empty and clumsy (4,2%). It can be stated that, participants experienced the five positive categories more frequently, thus contributing to their psychological wellbeing. A higher percentage of women than men showed positive emotional reactions. As for negative emotional reactions, men showed a higher level than women, in all categories, except "confused" where women showed a higher percentage than men. A Chi-square test showed no significant difference.

Benefits

Table 2. Benefits for Men

	Avoiding commitment	Having relations with an acquaintance	Trust and safety	Avoiding exclusivity	Being close to my friend	None	χ^2	p
Happy	20%	20%	30%	-	20%	10%	4,232	0,517
Desired	30,8%	23,1%	7,7%	15,4%	7,7%	15,4%	7,020	0,219
Satisfied	20%	30%	20%	20%	-	10%	5,099	0,404
Adventurer	14,3%	14,3%	28,6%	28,6%	14,3%	-	2,514	0,774
Excited	-	12,5%	25%	25%	25%	12,5%	6,160	0,291
Empty	50%	50%	-	-	-	-	3,568	0,613
Confused	50%	33,3%	16,7%	-	-	-	6,337	0,275
Used	66,7%	-	33,3%	-	-	-	3,857	0,570
Clumsy	33,3%	-	33,3%	-	-	33,3%	4,580	0,469
Deceived	33,3%	-	67,7%	-	-	-	3,857	0,570

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.001

Male participants have shown more positive than negative emotions. Avoiding commitment is the central benefit for men involved in friends with benefits. They also listed gaining confidence and safety. Additionally, χ^2 appears as statistically insignificant throughout all beneficial emotions for men.

Table 3. Benefits for Women

	Avoiding commitment	Having relations with an acquaintance	Trust and safety	Avoiding exclusivity	Being close to my friend	None	χ^2	p
Happy	18%	15,9%	52,3%	4,5%	4,5%	4,5%	16,171	0,095
Desired	17,1%	17,1%	57,1%	-	2,9%	5,7%	4,642	0,461
Satisfied	15,8%	15,8%	55,3%	2,6%	2,6%	7,9%	4,349	0,5
Adventurer	12,5%	29,2%	45,8%	-	4,2%	8,3%	6,665	0,247
Excited	13%	21,7%	52,2%	-	4,3%	8,7%	3,430	0,634
Empty	-	66,7%	-	-	-	33,3%	11,870	0,037*
Confused	20%	12%	48%	-	16%	4%	6,351	0,274
Used	-	-	66,7%	-	-	33,3%	6,157	0,291
Clumsy	50%	-	-	-	-	50%	9,987	0,076
Deceived	-	33,3%	66,7%	-	-	-	5,052	0,888

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.001

Female participants have shown more positive than negative emotions. Avoiding commitment is the central benefit for women involved in friends with benefits. They also listed gaining confidence and safety, when having a relationship with an acquaintance. Those who expressed a negative emotional state, chose avoiding commitment as a way to gain trust and safety, while the other categories may not provide benefits. When looked at emotional expressions, women selected emptiness. The benefit they described has to do with having a relationship with an acquaintance, otherwise no benefit exists, where χ^2 11,870 and p< 0.05.

6. Conclusions.

The purpose of this study was to research the relationships among young adults

More concretely, it was examined the emotional reactions – positive and negative – and the differentiation along gender lines.

As discussed above, these emotional reactions are linked to the participants' psychological wellbeing, and sexual health.

These results are consistent with studies suggesting that participants in friends with benefits - and in general in casual relationships – express positive emotional reactions and contribute to their psychological wellbeing.

When looking across gender, the results suggest new elements. As a reminder, Owen and Fincham (2011a,b) found that emotional reactions were positive among men, and less among women. But in the study here presented, it was found that positive emotional reactions are more prevalent than negative ones. Furthermore, women showed higher incidence of positive emotional reactions than men. These new findings seem coherent with the theories that consider traditional sexual roles going through profound transformations (See for instance Green, 2008; Taylor, 2013).

Given the sample size, these findings must be considered carefully. But, regardless, these findings should help to discern future research on the subject, especially around the psychological wellbeing and sexual health of those involved in friends with benefits.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on data drawn from the project on National R & D Project EDU2011-26887 "Cross-cultural Health Education in the young, immigrants and autochthonous, of Almería: Analysis and intervention for optimization and improvement"

References

- Afifi, W. A., & Faulkner, S. L. (2000). On BeingJust friends!: The frequency and impact of sexual activity in crossex friendships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17(2), 205-222.
- Arnal, J.; Del Rincón, D.; Latorre, A. (1992). "La investigación colaborativa". En J. Arnal; D. Del Rincón y A. Latorre: *Investigación Educativa. Fundamentos y Metodología*. Barcelona, Labor.
- Bell, R.R. (1981). Friendships of women and of men. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 5, 402-417.
- Bisson, M. A., & Levine, T. R. (2009). Negotiating a friends with benefits relationship. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 38(1), 66-73.
- Campbell, A. (2008). The morning after the night before. *Human Nature*, 19(2), 157-173.
- Carrobles, J. A., Gámez Guadix, M., & Almendros, C. (2011). Funcionamiento sexual, satisfacción sexual y bienestar psicológico y subjetivo en una muestra de mujeres españolas. *Anales de Psicología*, vol.27, nº,1.
- Corrigan, P. W., & Phelan, S. M. (2004). Social support and recovery in people with serious mental illnesses. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 40(6), 513-523.
- Eisenberg, M. E., Ackard, D. M., Resnick, M. D., & Neumark- Sztainer, D. (2009). Casual sex and psychological health among young adults: Is having "friends with benefits" emotionally damaging? *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 41(4), 231-237.
- Eshbaugh, E. M., & Gute, G. (2008). Hookups and sexual regret among college women. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 148(1), 77-90.
- Furman, W., & Shaffer, L. (2011). Romantic partners, friends, friends with benefits, and casual acquaintances as sexual partners. *Journal of Sex Research*, 48(6), 554-564.
- Garcia, J. R., Reiber, C., Massey, S. & Merriwether, A. M. (2012). Sexual hookup culture: A review. *Review of General Psychology*, 16(2), 161.
- Glenn, N., & Marquardt, E. (2001). Hooking up, hanging out, and hoping for mr. right. An Institute for American Values Report to the Independent Women's Forum.
- Green, K. J., & Morman, M.T., (2008). The perceived benefits of the friends with benefits relationship. *Human Communication. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association*. Vol. 14, No. 4, pp.327-346.
- Grello, C. M., Welsh, D. P., & Harper, M. S. (2006). No strings attached: The nature of casual sex in college students. *Journal of Sex Research*, 43(3), 255-267.
- Grello, C. M., Welsh, D. P., Harper, M. S., & Dickson, J. W. (2003). Dating and sexual relationship trajectories and adolescent functioning. *Adolescent and Family Health*, 3(3), 103-112.
- Hughes, M., Morrison, K., & Asada, K. J. K. (2005). What's love got to do with it? exploring the impact of maintenance rules, love attitudes, and network support on friends with benefits relationships. *Western Journal of Communication*, 69(1), 49-66.

- Jonason, P. K., Li, N. P., & Cason, M. J. (2009). The "booty call": A compromise between men's and women's ideal mating strategies. *Journal of Sex Research*, 46(5), 460-470.
- Jonason, P. K., Li, N. P., & Richardson, J. (2011). Positioning the booty-call relationship on the spectrum of relationships: Sexual but more emotional than one-night stands. *Journal of Sex Research*, 48(5), 486-495.
- Lamas, M. (1999). Género, diferencias de sexo y diferencia sexual. *Debate Feminista*, 10, 84-106.
- Levin, R. J. (2007). Sexual activity, health and well-being--the beneficial roles of coitus and masturbation. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 22(1), 135-148
- Lehmiller, J. J., VanderDrift, L. E., & Kelly, J. R. (2011). Sex differences in approaching friends with benefits relationships. *Journal of Sex Research*, 48(2-3), 275-284.
- Lewis, M. A., Granato, H., Blayney, J. A., Lostutter, T. W., & Kilmer, J. R. (2012). Predictors of hooking up sexual behaviors and emotional reactions among US college students. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 41(5), 1219-1229.
- Lonardo, R. A., Manning, W. D., Giordano, P. C., & Longmore, M. A. (2010). Offending, substance use, and cohabitation in young Adulthood. *Sociological Forum*, 25(4) 787-803.
- Manning, W. D., Longmore, M. A., & Giordano, P. C. (2005). Adolescents' involvement in non-romantic sexual activity. *Social Science Research*, 34(2), 384-407.
- McGinty, K., Knox, D., & Zusman, M. E. (2007). Friends with benefits: Women want " friends", men want " benefits". *College Student Journal*, 41(4), 1128-1131.
- OPS., & OMS., (2000). Promoción de la salud sexual. recomendaciones para la acción OPS (Organizacion Panamericana de la Salud).
- Owen, J., & Fincham, F. D. (2011a). Effects of gender and psychosocial factors on "friends with benefits" relationships among young adults. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(2), 311-320.
- Owen, J. & Fincham, F. D. (2011b). Young adults' emotional reactions after hooking up encounters. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(2), 321-330
- Paul, E. L., McManus, B., & Hayes, A. (2000). "Hookups": Characteristics and correlates of college students' spontaneous and anonymous sexual experiences. *Journal of Sex Research*, 37(1), 76-88.
- Puentes, J., Knox, D., & Zusman, M. E. (2008). Participants in " friends with benefits" relationships. *College Student Journal*, 42(1), 176-180.
- Taylor, Kate (12 de julio del 2013) Sex on the campus: She Can Play That Game, too. *The New York Times*. Recovered <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/fashion/sex-on-campus-she-can-play-that-game-too.html?pagewanted=all>
- Victoria García-Viniegras, C. R., & González Benítez, I. (2000). La categoría bienestar psicológico: Su relación con otras categorías sociales. *Revista Cubana De Medicina General Integral*, 16(6), 586-592.
- Weaver, A. D., MacKeigan, K. L., & MacDonald, H. A. (2011). Experiences and perceptions of young adults in friends with benefits relationships: A qualitative study. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 20(1), 41-53.
- Wentland, J. J., & Reissing, E. D. (2011). Taking casual sex not too casually: Exploring definitions of casual sexual hrelationships. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 20, 75-89.