

## Identifying and Explicating Variation among Friends with Benefits Relationships

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*This two-study report identifies and validates a typology containing seven types of “friends with benefits relationships” (FWBRs). Study 1 asked heterosexual students to define the term FWBR and to describe their experience with the relationship type. Qualitative analysis of these data identified seven types of FWBRs (true friends, network opportunism, just sex, three types of transition in [successful, failed, and unintentional], and transition out). Study 2 quantitatively differentiates these relationship types in the amount of nonsexual interaction, strength of the friendship at the first sexual interaction, and history of romantic relationships with the FWBR partner (before the FWBR, after it, or both). Results from both studies clearly suggest that FWBRs represent a diverse set of relationship formulations where both the benefits (i.e., repeated sexual contact) and the friends (i.e., relationship between partners) vary widely. In many cases, FWBRs represent a desire for, or an attempt at, shifting the relationship from friends to a romantic partnership. Other implications are discussed, as are limitations and directions for future research. The diverse nature of FWBRs provides challenges for researchers that likely require multiple methods and theoretical frames.*

One of the few constants surrounding heterosexual courtship in the United States is change, as each generation alters premarital romantic and sexual norms and practices (Bailey, 1988; Wells & Twenge, 2005). Whether the result of a sexual revolution or a series of more gradual evolutions (Bailey, 1999), the past half-century witnessed drastic shifts in premarital sexual attitudes and behaviors (Wells & Twenge, 2005). For example, in the 1950s and early 1960s, the predominant sexual standard was abstinence, where intercourse was reserved for marriage (Perlman & Sprecher, in press). A sexually charged campus tradition of the day was the “panty raid,” where men would storm female dormitories, rifle through dresser drawers, steal coeds’ lingerie, and proudly display the loot (Bailey, 1999). In the 1970s,

the predominant sexual standard was “permissiveness with affection,” where sexual interaction was acceptable if and only when partners were firmly committed to one another (Perlman & Sprecher, in press; Sprecher, 1989).

Campus sexual standards in the 21st century’s first decade are quite permissive (Bogle, 2008; Perlman & Sprecher, in press) and center on “hookups,” which are typically defined as strangers or acquaintances who engage in sexual interaction without expecting future interaction (e.g., Bogle, 2008; Paul & Hayes, 2002). This investigation focuses on identifying and explicating the nature of “friends with benefits relationships” (FWBRs), a permissive sexual practice closely related to hookups. In FWBRs, friends, who are not in a romantic relationship, engage in multiple sexual interactions without the expectation that those interactions reflect romantic intents or motivations (Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009). Given our definition, FWBRs differ from hookups in two ways: First, FWBRs are more likely than hookups to occur between friends. Thus, FWBRs likely create expectations of more nonsexual interaction than do hookups. Second, sexual interaction in FWBRs, more than in hookups, is likely to be repeated.

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College students understand the sexual scripts surrounding both hookups and FWBRs (Epstein et al., 2009). According to script theory, “sexuality is learned from culturally available ‘sexual scripts’ that define what counts as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in relational and sexual encounters” (Kim et al., 2007, p. 146; see also Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Epstein et al. demonstrated substantial variation in how hookups occur, but provided no data on FWBRs. Our reading of the literature suggests similar variation among FWBRs (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Lehmler, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2010; Mongeau, Ramirez, & Vorell, 2003). As the FWBR label likely covers (and obscures) a variety of relational types, the extant FWBR literature lacks depth. Therefore, the primary goals of this investigation were to review the literature with a specific focus on how FWBRs vary, to identify types of FWBRs in students’ descriptions and definitions (Study 1), and to validate those types by demonstrating that they differ systematically (Study 2).

### Variety among Friends with Benefits Relationships (FWBRs)

The extant literature assumes that FWBRs are a singular relationship type. At the same time, however, it provides evidence of variation in both the presence of romantic motivations and nature of the friendship (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005; Lehmler et al., 2010; Mongeau et al., 2003). We consider each characteristic in turn.

### The Nature of “Strings”

Ideally, FWBRs are simple: Friends have sex repeatedly with “no strings attached” (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2005; Levine & Mongeau, 2010). The absence of strings suggests a lack of romantic ties, motivations, or expectations that restrict extra-dyadic behavior (Hughes et al., 2005). Friends add sex to an existing friendship (Knight’s, 2008, “add sex and stir” approach) to avoid drama inherent in romantic relationships.

In many cases, the reality of FWBRs is actually quite complex. Some FWBR partners *do* have romantic feelings. When romantic interest is mutual, a FWBR *can* become a romantic relationship (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009). Conversely, unreciprocated romantic feelings are common in FWBRs and generate discomfort (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005; Mongeau et al., 2003), perhaps leading to dissolution because one partner wanted something *more* (e.g., a *real* relationship; Knight, 2008). In other cases, FWBRs represent a compromise, with one partner waiting for the other to develop romantic feelings (Epstein et al.,

2009; Reeder, 2000). Thus, strings cannot differentiate FWBRs from romantic relationships because many cases, as we attempt to demonstrate, lie between emotion-free FWBRs and emotion-laden romantic relationships.

### Friends with Benefits

A second reason why FWBRs vary is the nature of partners’ friendships. The FWBR literature describes variation in *benefits* (from only kissing to oral/vaginal intercourse; Bisson & Levine, 2009); however, the nature of the *friends* has gone unquestioned. Mongeau et al. (2003), however, indicated that FWBR partners differ in how well they know each other. Consistent with the common definition, many FWBR partners know each other well and care for each other before initiating sexual contact (Reeder, 2000), perhaps allowing them to investigate romantic potential (Bleske & Buss, 2000). On the other hand, some FWBR partners initiate sexual interaction soon after initially meeting (Knight, 2008; Mongeau et al., 2003). In addition, some FWBRs include romantic history. Some FWBRs morph into romantic relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009), whereas others represent the “smoldering embers” of a past romantic relationship (e.g., Mongeau et al., 2003, p. 19).

In summary, given the variety we see in the FWBR literature, this two-study report attempted to identify and explicate variation among FWBRs. Specifically, Study 1 attempted to identify different types of FWBRs. Study 2, in turn, attempted to validate these types by investigating differences in pre-sexual interaction, friendship strength, and romantic history.

### Study 1

#### Method

*Participants and procedures.* Participants included undergraduate students in communication classes at two very large public U.S. universities (one Southwestern, one Midwestern), who received extra credit for their participation. The Southwestern sample included 177 participants, predominately women ( $n = 111$ ; 62.7%). Although ethnicity and age were not measured, past samples from this pool were predominately Whites of typical college age. The Midwestern sample included 102 participants (39 males, 61 females, and two with no report;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.47$ ,  $SD = 3.52$ ). Participants self-identified as Caucasian (81.4%), African American (9.8%), Asian American (3.9%), Hispanic American (2%), and “other” (1%). Over one-half of the participants (51.4%) reported personal experiences with FWBRs. Approximately one in eight participants (11.9%) indicated being in a FWBR at the time of the data collection.

Methods were approved by both campuses’ institutional review boards. Students in upper- and

lower-division communication classes were invited to participate in a study on current campus dating norms. The FWBR term was not used in the study invitation materials. Students were given a copy of the survey, instructed to complete it outside of class, and asked to return it to their instructor.

The FWBR section of the survey first asked participants to define FWBRs in their own words. On a subsequent page, FWBRs were defined as follows:

involve[ing] platonic friends (i.e., those not involved in a romantic relationship) who engage in some degree of sexual intimacy on multiple occasions. This sexual activity could range from kissing to sexual intercourse and is a repeated part of your friendship such that it is not just a one-night stand.

Following the definition, participants reported their experience with FWBRs and, if they had any, described how sexual involvement began, how the FWBR differed from a “typical” romantic relationship, and (if it had ended) why it ended.

### Data Analysis

The analytic plan for Study 1 was emergent. Following Mongeau, Jacobsen, and Donnerstein’s (2007) work on *dates*, we originally attempted a content analysis to identify FWBRs’ essential characteristics. Analysis began in an *emic* fashion (i.e., categories emerged from the data, as no previous typology existed; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Initially, two authors and a research assistant jointly coded several pages of data to establish consistency using thought-turns as the unit of analysis, or data “chunks” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219). Through constant comparison, each chunk was either given an existing code or a new code was developed. We then met weekly to discuss subsequent coding. Despite many weeks of refining and redefining categories, we could not reach acceptable intercoder reliability.

In considering our inability to achieve reliability, we uncovered a flaw in a guiding assumption. Following the literature of the day, we had assumed that FWBRs represented a singular relationship type such that open and axial coding should identify essential characteristics. In (re)reading the data, variation across responses became clear that violated the singularity assumption. For example, some participants described close, intimate friendships, whereas others referred to FWBRs as interactions between strangers. Rejecting the singularity assumption led to our second analytic phase—the identification of FWBR types.

The first three authors returned to the data as a whole, and independently developed typologies containing four to six FWBR types. Discussion revealed considerable overlap among typologies, and disagreements were resolved such that categories collapsed and

expanded. Discussion resulted in identification, labeling, and definition of FWBR types. Seven relational types emerged: true friends, just sex, network opportunism, transition in (including successful, failed, and unintentional), and transition out.

### Results

Although participants described their FWBRs in myriad ways, the one (and only) point of agreement was sexual activity. That being said, however, the *nature* of the activity varied across responses. Some responses described intercourse (oral or vaginal), whereas others described less intimate sexual activity (e.g., kissing) or used ambiguous terms (e.g., *making out*). Beyond sex, responses markedly diverged on emotional investment, communication (intra- and interdyadic), secrecy, exclusivity, obligations, investment, and dating.

*Seven types of FWBRs.* Analyses of participants’ responses identified seven distinguishable FWBR types that differed in social, interactive, and relational characteristics. Specifically, these types differed in the nature of the relationship and interactions between partners, including history of, or desire for, romantic relationships. The types include true FWBRs, just sex, network opportunism, three types of transition in (successful, failed, and unintentional), and transition out. Each of these types is described, and an example provided, in turn.

The *true friends* type reflects the traditional FWBR definition (i.e., close friends who have sex on multiple occasions; e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009). Participants express love, trust, and respect for an important friend who is considered a safe sexual partner (Levine & Mongeau, 2010). Partners frequently interact in varied contexts. True friends appear similar to, but are not labeled as, romantic relationships. For example, one participant defined FWBRs as follows: “It means someone who you know and care about as a friend/person who you also happen to have a sexual relationship with” (Participant 039B).

Conversely, *just sex* partners interact almost exclusively to arrange and carry out sexual interaction. Other than sexual encounters, little interaction occurs between partners. In these cases, the “friend” in FWBR is a misnomer as partners engage, essentially, in serial hookups (Paul & Hayes, 2002). One participant defined FWBRs as follows: “You don’t really care about the person in a special way, but s/he is just there when you are feeling sexual” (Participant 039A).

Third, *network opportunism* involves sexual interaction between friends (although not particularly close ones) who share network links. Those shared links allow partners to interact, typically while consuming alcohol. These partners engage in sexual activity if neither has found a different sexual partner for the night. In short, these partners act as a sexual fail-safe. Given the

common social network, network opportunism likely involves more interaction than just sex, but with less breadth, depth, and frequency than true friends. One participant described his or her FWBRs this way: “We hung out and talked like normal friends but at the end of the night (or party), we ended up in bed together instead of leaving each other” (Participant 066B).

*Transition in* FWBRs precede romantic relationship development (e.g., Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009). Interactions in these FWBRs lead to, or reflect, romantic feelings. There is variation, however, among transition in cases. For example, some transition in FWBRs represent intentional attempts at romantic relationship initiation (some successful, others not). In other cases, the romantic transition appears to be an unintended byproduct of the sexual interaction.

Given this variation, we divided the transition in type into three parts: successful, unintentional, and failed. *Successful* transition in represents intentionally and effectively using a FWBR to initiate a romantic relationship. For example, “I knew he was afraid of ruining the friendship, but I wanted more, and it worked. We are and have been a couple” (Participant 065A). Second, in *unintentional* transition in, a FWBR leads to a romantic relationship, although it was not the respondent’s original intent. For example, one participant described their FWBR as follows: “We didn’t call ourselves a couple but we were having sex just about everyday [sic]. . . Eventually it turned into us dating and actually showing emotions for each other [sic] instead of just having sex with nothing” (Participant 067C). Finally, in *failed* transition in, one or both partners attempted, unsuccessfully, to generate a romantic transition, but continued sexual interactions. For example, one participant said of their FWBR, “I wanted to make [the relationship] more serious, he wanted to be single and not tied down” (Participant 096B).

Finally, *transition out* FWBRs reflect sexual interactions between partners from a terminated romantic relationship. Partners no longer label their relationship as romantic, but continue sexual interactions: “We were a couple, then I broke up with her but we continued the FWB kind of relationship for about five more months” (Participant 019A).

## Study 1 Discussion

Consistent with the literature of the time (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005; Mongeau et al., 2003), we began this project assuming that FWBRs represented a single relationship type. Numerous readings of our data led us to reject the unitary assumption and to an alternative reading of the literature. Thus, although college students have a common understanding of FWBRs (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2005), actual practice reflects substantial variation (cf. the Epstein et al., 2009,

discussion of hookups). Thus, the primary goal of Study 1 became to unpack the variety underlying students’ descriptions of FWBRs. Analyses suggested seven types of FWBRs (true friends, just sex, network opportunism, transition in [successful, unintentional, and failed], and transition out) that differ in friendship strength and romantic history. The nature of romantic “strings” has the most important implications for sexual and non-sexual interaction, so we discuss it briefly here.

*FWBRs and romantic strings.* In these data, FWBRs are frequently juxtaposed with romantic relationships. Given the normative nature of sexual interaction in very early relationship stages (e.g., Bogle, 2008; Wells & Twenge, 2005), some *transition in* FWBRs likely act as a bridge between platonic and romantic entanglements. Given that romantic relationship transitions engender relational uncertainty (Mongeau, Serewicz, Henningsen, & Davis, 2006; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), some FWBRs may facilitate uncertainty reduction about the partner and his or her romantic potential and interest. In this sense, FWBRs may serve an investigative function previously fulfilled by first dates (Mongeau, Serewicz, & Therrien, 2004).

In addition, *transition out* FWBRs involve sexual interaction with a past romantic partner (i.e., ex-sex). There are several potential advantages to ex-sex. First, participants considered their FWBR partner as a “safe” sexual partner (likely both in terms of safe-sex practices and not intentionally inflicting emotional or physical pain). Second, ex-sex is likely familiar, both in terms of the partner and his or her sexual (dis)likes that make interactions more predictable and, perhaps, enjoyable. Third, sleeping with a former partner may be seen as advantageous to those desiring sexual interaction without increasing the number of lifetime sexual partners. Finally, fanning sexual flames might facilitate rekindling partners’ emotional connections.

Ex-sex appears in several recent investigations (e.g., Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Dailey, Rossetto, Pfister, & Surra, 2009; Koenig-Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008; Smith & Morrison, 2010). Dailey et al. suggested that some dating relationships are intermittent (i.e., on again-off again) such that FWBRs might represent an intermediate position between exclusively dating and totally terminated. Again, this suggests that some FWBRs represent an intermediate position between friendships and romantic interactions.

*Utility and implications of the FWBR label.* Given our results, the FWBR label covers (obscures) a variety of relationship genres. The wide swath of relationships called FWBRs parallels the strategic use of *hookup* to describe nearly any sexual interaction in nearly any relational context (Epstein et al., 2009; Paul & Hayes, 2002). The term *hookup* says a lot (i.e., some sexual interaction

occurred) without saying what did or did not happen. Our suspicion is that the same is likely true of FWBR to the point where it appears difficult to determine the difference between hookups and FWBRs. Hookups can involve relational partners (e.g., friends and even romantic partners; Epstein et al., 2009), and FWBRs can occur between relative strangers. Moreover, hookups (i.e., sexual encounters) occur within FWBRs. Thus, the use of both terms is likely strategically ambiguous.

The ambiguous use of FWBR may be useful in at least two contexts. First, “[U]sing a nonrelational label at first may be one way of dealing with the uncertainty that comes in the first stages of dating” (Epstein et al., 2009, p. 421). Given the normative nature of nonrelational sex on U.S. college campuses (Bogle, 2008), relational implications of early sexual interactions are likely unclear (e.g., does it have romantic implications or was it a drunken hookup?). Using the FWBR label might allow partners to avoid talking about their relationship and its trajectory, as the label does not need to be discussed or defined (Knight, 2008). Second, the FWBR label might also be useful in on again-off again relationships (Dailey et al., 2009), when it is unclear whether a couple is *together* or not. In both these cases, nonrelational labels such as FWBR may reflect (or gloss over) relational uncertainty or minimize perceptions of relational involvement to both the partner and the social network (Epstein et al., 2009).

The FWBR label might also be useful in dealing with the social network. For example, when a romantic transition was attempted but failed, the FWBR label may be superior to admitting that a couple tried dating, but it did not pan out. In such cases, the FWBR label is used only retrospectively. The FWBR label can also hide relational uncertainty from the social network just as it can with the partner. Calling a potentially budding romantic relationship a FWBR might be superior to admitting uncertainty about the relational definition, trajectory, and the partner’s motivations. Finally, the FWBR label might provide a socially appropriate label for serial hookups with a stranger. Such communicative practices further blur the distinction between relational and nonrelational sex (e.g., Epstein et al., 2009).

Ambiguous use of the FWB label can be disadvantageous, as it can obscure differences in partners’ desires and expectations—that is, although two people explicitly agree to the FWBR label and appear to be on the same page, they might actually think about the relationship in fundamentally different ways. The common FWBR script (Epstein et al., 2009) could aggravate such misunderstandings. For example, Partner A might desire a “booty call,” whereas Partner B wants to move toward a romantic relationship. In such cases, the person who wants “more” is probably at a distinct disadvantage (Sprecher, Schmeekle, & Felmlee, 2006).

In summary, Study 1 provides evidence of multiple FWBR types suggested in the literature (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Furman & Hand, 2006; Hughes et al., 2005; Mongeau et al., 2003). Not all participants, however, had experiences with FWBRs. Thus, the data might contain both scripted (e.g., definitions from participants without FWBR experiences) and experiential elements. Such a combination might make the data look more similar to the dominant script than if we had included only experiential data. Moreover, given that we did not initially set out to identify FWBR types, many questions remained. Therefore, Study 2 specifically investigated differences among, and frequency of, the seven FWBR types.

## Study 2

Two primary questions drove Study 2. The most important goal was to validate the relational types. Specifically, FWBR types should differ systematically in nonsexual interactions, romantic history, and friendship strength. Second, Study 1 methods did not allow us to determine the frequency of the seven FWBR types. Therefore, we also considered how frequently each FWBR type occurred (including gender differences in these reports).

### Validating FWBR Types

Given our definitions, the seven FWBR types should differ in friendship strength, nonsexual interaction, and romantic history. To validate our typology, Study 2 focused on differences among FWBR types in these variables. Small and/or nonsignificant differences across FWBR types would greatly hinder the validity and utility of our typology.

First, by definition, FWBRs types should differ in the frequency of nonsexual interactions and friendship strength. Specifically, FWBR types characterized by closeness and trust (e.g., true friends and successful transition in) should reflect more nonsexual interactions, and a stronger friendship at the initiation of sexual activity, than marginally-related partners or those who have contrasting relational goals (i.e., just sex and failed transition in). Other FWB types (network opportunism and transition out) were expected to fall between these extremes.

Second, FWBR types should, by definition, differ in romantic experience. Participants in successful and unintentional transition in categories should report having a romantic relationship *following* their FWBR, whereas transition out partners should report a romantic relationship *before* the FWBR. Network opportunism, failed transition in, and (particularly) just sex FWBRs should be unlikely to include romantic experiences.

## Frequency of FWBR Types

Given the dominant FWBR definition (e.g., Epstein et al., 2009), one would expect the true friends type to dominate students' reports. On the other hand, Epstein et al. found that relatively few hookups follow the normative sexual script. Extending this thinking to FWBRs, it is important to consider the frequency of FWB types because it will provide important evidence of the existence of this relationship type. It is one thing to know that there are different types of FWBRs, but quite another to know how frequently these types appear. How many FWBRs follow the typical script (i.e., true friends), how many deviate from it and in what ways?

Strong gender differences exist in early relational sex (e.g., Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Wells & Twenge, 2005). Kim et al. (2007) claimed that the dominant heterosexual sexual script depicts boys/men as eschewing commitment and monogamy and going to great lengths to convince women to engage in casual sex. Girls/women, on the other hand, prefer to pair sex with commitment and monogamy, and prioritize relationships (Kim et al., 2007; see also Epstein et al., 2009). In addition, "females may also use short-term relationships as a means of evaluating a male's suitability for a long-term relationship or securing his interest so he will commit to a long-term relationship" (Cunningham & Barbee, 2008, p. 99). Moreover, women, when compared with men, tend to have more relational motivations for both hookups (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006) and FWBRs (Lehmiller et al., 2010). Therefore, we expect that men would be more likely to report FWBRs as occurring independently from romantic relationships (e.g., just sex), whereas women are more likely to link FWBRs to romantic relationships (e.g., transition in and transition out types).

Given our review, we posed the following hypotheses:

- H1: Participants in successful transition in and true friends FWBRs will report engaging in a wider variety of nonsexual interaction than just sex and failed transition in types. Remaining FWBR types will fall between these extremes.
- H2: Participants in true friends and successful transition in will report stronger friendships, and just sex and failed transition in will report weaker friendships at the point of the first sexual interaction than will other FWBR types.
- H3: Participants in successful and unintentional transition in types will be more likely to report having been in a romantic relationship *following* a FWBR than the other types. Participants in transition out will be more likely to report having been in a romantic relationship *before* a FWBR. Participants in remaining FWBR types will be unlikely to describe any romantic history.
- H4a: Reports of true friends will be more frequent than those for just sex, successful transition in, failed

transition in, unintentional transition in, transition out, and network opportunism.

- H4b: Frequency of FWBR types will differ by gender. Men will report being in just sex FWBRs more frequently than will women. Women will report being in transition in (failed, intentional, or unintentional) and transition out FWBRs more than men.

## Method

*Participants and procedures.* Participants included 258 undergraduates (99 men, 155 women, and four who did not report;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.90$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ , range = 18–30) enrolled in upper- and lower-division communication classes at a large Southwestern U.S. university. Participants predominately self-identified as heterosexual (92%) and White (nearly 70%). The sample overrepresented freshmen (33.3%) and sophomores (34.1%), and underrepresented seniors (8.5%). Nearly 25% of participants reported fraternity or sorority membership.

Participants received extra credit for completing an online survey. To qualify, students must have had experience with a FWBR. Students without FWBR experience could complete a different survey for equal extra credit.

## Measures

*FWBR type.* Participants read paragraphs describing seven FWBR types, and were asked to indicate the type that most closely matched their FWBR (contact the first author for a copy of the survey). An "other" option was also provided.

*Romantic history.* A single item probed if participants had a romantic relationship with their FWB partner. Response options were no; yes before the FWBR; yes after the FWBR; and yes, both before and after the FWBR.

*Pre-sexual friendship.* A single-item measure (i.e., "Before we had sex, our friendship was strong") tapped the strength of the pre-sexual friendship. The item was accompanied by a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Nonsexual activities.* Six items tapped the extent to which partners engaged in nonsexual activities (e.g., "We did lots of activities together," and "All we did was have sex"). In a principal components analysis with varimax rotation, four items factored together ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The two items focusing exclusively engaging in sexual activity did not factor together or with the other four items. Given the importance of "All we did was have sex" ratings, we retained it as a single-item measure.

**Results**

*Validating FWBR types.* H1 predicted FWBR type differences in the amount of *nonsexual interaction*. Consistent with this prediction, results of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that mean values for nonsexual activities differed substantially across FWBR types,  $F(6, 214) = 12.13, p < .001 (\eta_p^2 = .25; \text{ see Table 1})$ . Participants who indicated true friends and unintentional transition in reflected the greatest nonsexual interaction, whereas those indicating network opportunism and (particularly) just sex reported the least.

*Only had sex ratings* (which did not factor with nonsexual interaction) are also relevant to H1. Results from a one-way ANOVA indicated that mean ratings of only had sex also differed across FWBR types,  $F(6, 214) = 6.28, p < .001 (\eta_p^2 = .15; \text{ see Table 1})$ . In this case, participants who indicated failed transition in, transition out, and just sex types reported significantly higher scores than those who indicated network opportunism, true friends, unintentional transition in, and successful transition in types.

H2 predicted that *friendship strength* at first sex would significantly differ across FWBR types. Overall, first sex friendship strength was moderate ( $M = 4.57$ ). Moreover, consistent with our prediction, mean values for friendship strength dramatically varied across FWBR types,  $F(6, 214) = 25.69, p < .001 (\eta_p^2 = .22; \text{ see Table 1})$ . Participants who indicated true friends and transition out types reported the strongest friendships, whereas participants indicating unintentional transition in and just sex reported the weakest friendships.

H3 predicted differences in the extent and timing of *romantic relationship history* across FWBR types. Overall, 39.5% of participants reported a romantic relationship either before or after the FWBR (or both). Consistent with H3, romantic history responses substantially differed across FWBR types,  $\chi^2(18, N = 220) = 97.95, p < .001 (\text{Cramer's } V = .39; \text{ see Table 2})$ . Successful and unintentional transition in types were much more likely to be romantic *following*, and transition out *before*, an FWBR. Nearly 30% of transition

**Table 1.** Mean Values of Nonsexual Activities, Only Had Sex, and Friendship Strength Broken Down by FWBR Type

FWBR Type	Nonsexual Activities	Only Had Sex	Friendship Strength
True friends	5.40 <sub>a</sub>	3.18 <sub>b</sub>	5.39 <sub>b</sub>
Just sex	3.12 <sub>d</sub>	5.09 <sub>a</sub>	2.91 <sub>d</sub>
Network opportunism	4.11 <sub>b</sub>	3.27 <sub>b</sub>	4.49 <sub>b,c</sub>
Successful transition in	4.76 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.90 <sub>b</sub>	4.71 <sub>a,c</sub>
Unintentional transition in	5.16 <sub>a,c</sub>	2.95 <sub>b</sub>	3.89 <sub>c</sub>
Failed transition in	4.59 <sub>b,c</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>b,c</sub>
Transition out	4.71 <sub>b,c</sub>	4.29 <sub>a</sub>	5.18 <sub>a,b</sub>
Overall mean	4.62	3.66	4.57

*Note.* Within columns, means lacking a common subscript differed significantly ( $p < .05$ ). FWBR = friends with benefits relationships.

**Table 2.** Romantic History across FWBR Types

FWBR Type	Romantic History			
	None	Before FWBR	After FWBR	Both Before and After FWBR
True friends	44 [66.7%]	13 [19.7%]	5 [7.6%]	4 [6.1%]
Just sex	30 [93.8%]	1 [3.1%]	1 [3.1%]	0 [0.0%]
Network opportunism	28 [75.7%]	4 [10.8%]	4 [10.8%]	1 [2.7%]
Successful transition in	7 [33.3%]	2 [9.5%]	10 [47.0%]	2 [9.5%]
Unintentional transition in	6 [31.6%]	2 [10.5%]	9 [47.5%]	2 [10.5%]
Failed transition in	14 [82.4]	3 [17.6%]	0 [0.0%]	0 [0.0%]
Transition out	4 [14.3%]	13 [46.4%]	3 [10.7%]	8 [28.6%]
Total	133 [60.5%]	38 [17.3%]	32 [14.5%]	17 [7.7%]

*Note.* Within-row percentages are in brackets. FWBR = friends with benefits relationships.

out FWBRs were romantic *both before and after* the FWBR. Failed transition in, network opportunism, and just sex FWBRs were unlikely to be romantic.

*Frequency of FWBR types.* H4a focused on the extent to which reports of true friends would be more frequent than the other FWBR types. The number and percentage of participants indicating each FWBR type are provided in the far right-hand column of Table 3. True friends was the most frequent single type indicated, but only accounted for one-fourth of responses. True friends were followed (in descending order of frequency) by network opportunism, just sex, other, transition out and successful, unintentional, and failed transition in.

H4b predicted differences in the frequency with which men and women would indicate FWBR types. Specifically, men were expected to be more likely than women to report just sex, and women more likely than men to report transition in and transition out FWBRs. Given that 60% of the sample was women, if gender is unrelated to frequency, all seven types should exhibit

**Table 3.** Frequencies of FWBR Types, Both Overall and Broken Down by Participant Gender

Participant Gender FWBR Type	Men	Women	Total Frequency
True friends	23	42	65 [26.1%]
Just sex	20	12	32 [12.4%]
Network opportunism	11	25	36 [14.5%]
Successful transition in	10	11	21 [8.4%]
Unintentional transition in	6	13	19 [7.6%]
Failed transition in	2	15	17 [6.8%]
Transition out	15	13	28 [11.2%]
Other	10	21	31 [12.4%]
Total	97	152	249 [100.0%]

*Note.* Within-column percentages are in brackets. FWBR = friends with benefits relationships.

the 60–40 pattern (within sampling error). Analyses indicated proportions of men and women in the seven FWBR types significantly differed,  $\chi^2(7, N = 249) = 18.36, p < .01$  (Cramer's  $V = .27$ ; see Table 3). Men represented a strong majority of the just sex FWBRs, and women nearly all the failed transition in FWBRs. Surprisingly, men were more likely than women to report transition out FWBRs. Sex differences for true friends, successful transition in, failed transition in, and network opportunism matched the sample characteristics. Therefore, these data partially support H4b.

## Study 2 Discussion

Sexual interaction on modern college campuses centers on the hookup, where partners, neither involved nor interested in future interaction, engage in sexual interaction (Bogle, 2008; Paul & Hayes, 2002). Along similar lines, FWBRs occur when friends have sex on repeated occasions without the expectations of a romantic transition (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). Data from Study 1 led us to reject the common assumption that FWBRs represent a single relationship type, and suggested seven FWBR types (i.e., true friends, just sex, network opportunism, transition out, as well as successful, unintentional, and failed transition in). Study 2 was designed to validate the FWBR types and to identify how frequently these various types occur.

*Validating FWBR types.* Our conceptualizations of the various FWBR types assume differences in nonsexual interaction, friendship strength, and romantic history. As a consequence, failure to find robust differences on these variables across FWBR types would greatly damage the validity of our typology. Fortunately, all of the differences among FWBR types were statistically significant; moderate to large in size (Cohen, 1988); and, for the most part, consistent with our hypotheses.

True friends and just sex types anchor the extremes of the FWBR types. Partners in true friends—the prototypical FWBR (Epstein et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2005)—reported engaging in the most nonsexual activities, were least likely to report only having sex, and reported very high friendship strength at the point of first sex. Just sex FWBRs, on the other hand, were associated with (by far) the least nonsexual interaction, weakest first sex friendship, and the most exclusive sexual interaction. Network opportunism FWBRs fell between these extremes, as they reflected relatively low ratings on both nonsexual interaction and only having sex. This is consistent with Afifi and Faulkner's (2000) notion that sexual activity represents another form of socializing among heterosexual college students (like self-disclosure or engaging in drinking games).

The three transition in FWBRs (successful, unintentional, and failed) differed in important and interesting ways. Both successful and unintentional transition in types were similar to true friends on reports of nonsexual interaction and only engaging in sex. Unintentional transition in cases, however, were lower in first sex friendship strength than were successful transition in. This suggests that unintentional transition in types began as hookups that blossomed, over time, into romantic relationships. Failed transition in cases, on the other hand, were quite high on only had sex and near the overall average in nonsexual activities and friendship strength at the first sex.

Finally, the transition out type was relatively high in only had sex, but above average on friendship strength. Previous romantic history might make an ex-partner a particularly attractive sexual target, as sexual interaction may represent a strategic attempt to rekindle the romantic flame. Consistent with this notion, nearly one-third of transition out relationships were romantic *both* before and after the FWBR (see Dailey et al., 2009). In these cases, FWBR might be a simple label that helps partners evaluate, communicate, and potentially maintain the ambiguous and dynamic nature of their relationship.

This is not to say, however, that our results are universally consistent with our expectations. For example, approximately one-third of both unintentional and successful transition in participants reported that they never had a romantic relationship with their partner. (To a lesser extent, the same pattern appears for transition out as well.) Perhaps participants were willing to indicate that their FWBR most closely approximated a transition in; however, when asked directly, they may have been unwilling to characterize their relationship as romantic. This suggests investigating college students' meanings for both *romantic* and *casual* relationships would be insightful.

*Frequency of FWBR types.* Following Epstein et al.'s (2009) discussion of hookups, we assumed that, although college students describe FWBRs similarly, not all cases will follow that form. Participants reported true friends (most consistent with the FWBR definition) most frequently; however, they represented only one-fourth of cases. Thus, in Study 2 data, most cases diverged from the dominant FWBR definition. For example, over one-third of FWBRs involved a romantic relationship (either before or after the FWBR), and one in eight FWBRs involved partners only having sex.

Men and women also reported the FWBR types in significantly different proportions. Based on the predominant sexual script (Kim et al., 2007), we expected men to report FWBRs that involved few relationship entanglements (i.e., just sex), whereas women would be

more likely to link FWBRs to romantic relationships (i.e., transition in and transition out). Frequencies of FWBR types for men and women were at the same time consistent and inconsistent with the predominant sexual script of casual sex. Men were indeed more likely to report just sex FWBRs; however, they reported the majority of transition out FWBRs (despite representing only 39% of the sample). Women substantially exceeded men only in the *failed* transition in type.

Given our thinking, there are two primary explanations for these gender differences. The first potential explanation focuses on the way that FWBRs are labeled. For example, women might be more willing to label failed transition in FWBRs to put a positive spin on a relational failure. Given the sexual double standard, a woman might be negatively evaluated for trying to initiate a romantic relationship with a man through sexual activity. Calling the episode a FWBR might provide a more relational explanation that would not be so harshly evaluated.

An alternative explanation for differences is that men and women strategically use FWBRs in different ways. Women might report nearly all the failed transition in FWBRs because, as Cunningham and Barbee (2008) suggested, they use FWBRs to test the man's suitability and interest in committing to a romantic relationship. In such a case, a man's lack of interest in commitment would lead to a failed transition in. Moreover, men are more likely to report transition out FWBRs than are women. This may be relevant to Rubin, Peplau, and Hill's (1981) contention that men are less willing to break off relationships than are women. Men, in this case, might be willing to use FWBRs as a means of forestalling permanent romantic termination by hanging onto and potentially repairing a floundering relationship.

Given these data, we cannot differentiate between labeling and actual relational explanations for our gender differences. Labeling differences are certainly possible even within the same FWBRs. As we have argued, partners might consider their FWBRs as different types (or one may consider the entanglement an FWBR, whereas the other may not). Labels will also likely change across the course of an FWBR (e.g., the transition in cases) such that labeling itself, and agreement on a label, might be a very complex enterprise.

### General Discussion

Counter to the general claim that FWBRs represent a singular relationship type (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005), these studies identified substantial variation in FWBRs. Consistent with the notion that nonrelational sex practices vary from shared definitions (Epstein et al., 2009), Study 1 identified seven types of FWBRs. In Study 2, nearly 90% of participants selected one of these types in a forced-choice measure. The seven

FWBR types also differed in relationship characteristics. These differences challenge notions of place, meaning, and enactment of heterosexual interaction on college campuses.

### Relational Implications of FWBR Types

The common FWBRs script describes sexual interaction between good friends who eschew the drama of romantic relationships (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009). Our data, however, suggest substantial variation in relational histories and motivations across FWBRs. Successful transition in FWBRs represent an intentional attempt at a romantic relationship transition, whereas unintentional FWBRs represent the byproduct of sexual interaction and associated interactions. We suspect that the same is likely true of transition out FWBRs, where nearly 30% of cases are romantic both before and after the FWBR, particularly among men who want to hang onto a faltering relationship.

Romantic attraction and motivations, (i.e., a desire for something *more*) represents the *raison d'être* for some FWBRs. Thus, some FWBRs (e.g., successful transition in and some transition out) have a *betweenness* quality. By betweenness, we mean that some FWBRs contain elements of both friendships and romantic relationships, and are strategically designed to initiate romantic relationships. The notion of betweenness likely adds a level of uncertainty and complexity to FWBR experiences because, although they are not *supposed* to be romantic or involve romantic motivations, some clearly are. The transition from a FWBR to a romantic relationship, moreover, is unlikely to be simple. Many FWBRs are difficult to maintain because romantic attraction and interest is frequently unilateral (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005; Mongeau et al., 2003). In such cases, FWBRs may represent a relational compromise (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Mongeau et al., 2003), particularly for women (Cunningham & Barbee, 2008).

Even when romantic desire is mutual, the transition from a FWBR to a romantic entanglement is likely difficult. In the 1970s, the predominant sexual script prescribed that sexual intimacy should match psychological and communicative intimacy (Perlman & Sprecher, in press; Sprecher, 1989). In most FWBRs, however, partners engage in sexual activity before the acknowledgment of romantic attraction and attachment. Metts (2004) reported that engaging in significant sexual activity before saying "I love you" is negatively related to relationship development and positively related to regret following the sexual interaction.

There are several implications stemming from the potentials and pitfalls of the FWBR to romantic relationship transition. First, this particular transition does not happen very often. Only about 15% of FWBRs successfully make the transition to romantic relationships, and

only one-half of those were intentionally performed. Although this is not a particularly large proportion (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Perlman & Sprecher, in press), data for other transitions (e.g., from first dates) are not available. It is possible that only about 15% of first dates end up generating a romantic relationship. In addition, our discussion suggests that the better partners know one another (e.g., true friends over network opportunism over just sex), the more successful the FWBR to romantic relationship transition might be. Thus, not all FWBRs are the same in terms of their romantic potential. Couples' past communicative and physical interactions likely influence the nature, and sustainability, of a future romantic relationship.

### Making Sense of FWBRs

By definition, FWBRs defy traditional scripts for sex (i.e., sex reflects intimacy and closeness; Bogle, 2008) and friendship (i.e., friends do not have sex; Werking, 1997). In addition, the multiple types of FWBRs indicate that they occur in a variety of social and relational contexts. Some FWBRs have replaced dates as a vehicle for investigating romantic potential, whereas others are serial hookups. Given this variety, how do we, as scholars, make sense of FWBRs? Has the FWBR term been stretched so far that the moniker has effectively lost its meaning? Our contention is that it has not. These data suggest that the term FWBR is considerably broader than the label (and initial scholarship) suggested. However, the same is true of the study of hookups. Initially, hookups were defined as single sexual episodes between strangers (e.g., Paul & Hayes, 2002); however, over time, definitions of the term expanded (e.g., Esptein et al., 2009) as scholars were able to adjust their definitions and approaches to study the "new" version of the phenomenon. It is also possible that the very nature of FWBRs has changed over time. When the phenomenon (or at least the label) appeared in the late 1990s, it may have predominately appeared as true friends (as FWBR suggests). Over time, however, the FWBR label might have expanded to fill the cracks between other relational labels.

Making sense of FWBRs is likely difficult for sexual/relational partners as well. First sex with a FWB partner has many potential relational interpretations (e.g., a hookup, caring for a close friend, or a romantic relationship transition) that likely take time to differentiate. Whereas some instances are likely acknowledged as FWBRs even before the onset of sexual activity, other instances are only identified midstream, whereas still others are only labeled in retrospect. An important set of questions, then, is how partners come to understand that they are in an FWBR, when they come to that realization, and the information that they use to make that attribution. Therefore, we believe that theories focused on uncertainty and their reduction (Berger &

Calabrese, 1975; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Sunnafrank, 1986) and sensemaking (Weick, 2001) are likely quite useful in extending future understanding how FWBRs develop.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our results should be considered in light of several important limitations. First, our samples were limited to college students at two U.S. universities. It is unclear how these results would generalize to other U.S. universities (or those in other countries), participants' non-college-age cohorts, older adults, or high school students. Second, that students recalled past behaviors makes the direction of causality ambiguous. Third, we placed cases into FWBR types based on only one partner's report. The other partners' definitions and motivations might differ.

The FWBR label covers multiple relationship types, suggesting that it is much more complex than previously suggested (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). Therefore, future FWBR research should include longitudinal and dyadic data collection. Such methods, however, are likely complicated because some partners are strangers at the first sexual interaction, making dyadic first sex data difficult to obtain. In other cases, partners apply the FWBR label after sex begins (and, in some cases, after it ends). As such, there is likely to no such thing as an ideal FWBR study. A combination of longitudinal, recall, and interview studies will likely most effectively triangulate on the complex and malleable nature of FWBRs.

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