

Third Wave Feminism and Emerging Adult Sexuality: Friends with Benefits Relationships

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Abstract Using U.S. third wave feminism as the cultural backdrop, this study examines emerging adults' participation in heterosexual "friends with benefits" (FWB) relationships. We investigate both the role of gender and feminism in FWB relationships at a United States college, and ask whether identification with feminist ideology impacts students' motivations and assessments of their relationships. Through the use of an anonymous survey, our research explores whether and how young women and men engage in FWB relationships, the degree to which they find such relationships fulfilling, and the presence of social stigma or acceptance related to this sexual behavior. While we find some gender differences in motives for and satisfaction with FWB relationships, we also suggest that the association between sexual agency and participation in a friends with benefits relationship is complicated and requires further research and exploration.

Keywords Friends with benefits relationships · Sexuality · Third wave feminism

Introduction

The idea that friends with benefits (FWB) relationships may express heterosexual female sexual agency and liberation is a theme increasingly affirmed by popular

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media in the United States (Taylor 2013). Yet academic research exploring the motivations and satisfaction associated with these relationships is more mixed, suggesting that these forms of intimate relationships among emerging adults at United States colleges stem from complex origins and have a variety of outcomes. When gender is used as a category of analysis, the examination of FWB relationships grows still more complicated. Some research shows more similarities than differences among young men's and women's likelihood of participating in heterosexual FWB relationships,¹ a finding that differentiates these relationships from other heterosexual casual sexual behavior where women traditionally report less participation than men (McGinty et al. 2007). Other studies suggest that men generally associate more positive reactions and women tend to assert more unmet expectations in heterosexual FWB relationships (Gusarova et al. 2012; Owen and Fincham 2011).

In addition to popular media, the acknowledgement of female sexual freedom is a dominant theme in U.S. third wave feminism, particularly in personal narratives written by third wave feminists (Baumgardner and Richards 2010; Johnson 2002). By rejecting a perceived narrowness of "acceptable" sexualities ostensibly proffered by second wave feminism, third wavers assert that young women should not be inhibited either by traditional norms of sexuality that stigmatize female sexual experimentation in non-committed relationships, nor by a sense that one form of sexual practice is more "feminist" than another. While third wave narratives and analyses do not explicitly address FWB relationships, their focus on sexual agency suggests a line of inquiry that enables us to explore both third wave feminism and heterosexual FWB relationships in novel ways. Layered upon this third wave approach to sexuality is the role of feminism in young women's lives: whereas many young women espouse feminist ideals, they do not always define those ideals as feminist or label themselves as such (Aronson 2003). We bring these multiple layers and questions to bear on the study of friends with benefits relationships, seeking to use U.S. third wave feminism as the cultural backdrop to interpret FWB relationships.

Third wave feminist analyses and other examinations of gender and sexuality suggest varied interpretations of heterosexual FWB relationships. In essence, feminism could be a motivator for participation in FWB relationships, but it also could present the basis for avoidance of such relationships. Since the dominant theme in third wave feminism has been to argue that young women should be—and increasingly are—free to experiment sexually without repercussions, FWB relationships might represent "feminist" sexuality among heterosexual emerging adults. On the other hand, feminist theory points out that young women's sexuality continues to be repressed and silenced in a variety of ways that structure their choices (Conley et al. 2013; McClelland and Fine 2008). Given that FWB

¹ Our focus on heterosexual FWB relationships stems from our lack of data on gay and lesbian relationships; an overwhelming percentage of our survey respondents identified as heterosexual. This is in keeping with other research that has found, for example, 98.7 % of those who reported participating in a FWB relationship did so with someone of the opposite sex (Bisson and Levine 2009). Relatedly, the FWB literature focuses on heterosexual relationships almost exclusively, and the cultural discourse, represented by mainstream movie portrayals of FWB relationships, refers to cross-sex relationships.

relationships are a central part of the dominant sexual culture on college campuses, there may be pressure to participate, and third wave feminists may thus regard such relationships with suspicion. This conflicts with the idea that friends with benefits provides a path to sexual freedom, and so refusing to participate might represent “feminist” sexuality among heterosexual emerging adults.

This study investigates the role of gender and feminist identity in heterosexual FWB relationships at a United States college, exploring young women’s and men’s reasons for participating in and satisfaction with FWB relationships, asking whether identification with feminist ideology impacts their motivations and assessments of their relationships. While we find some gender differences in motives for and satisfaction with FWB relationships, we also suggest that any association between either feminism or sexual agency and participation in a friends with benefits relationship is complicated and requires further research and exploration.

Sexuality in Third Wave Feminism

Third wave feminists advocate sexual agency for young women, though they are reticent to define the term too closely lest they proscribe a particular kind of sexuality or sexual practices. A review of third wave texts suggests that sexual agency includes the recognition of female desire, the ability to freely express that desire, and social supports that allow for a variety of sexual practices to occur without negative ramifications. For this analysis, we rely on the work of Curtin et al. (2011), who describe sexual agency as sexual self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one’s ability to prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancy, and sexual assertiveness, defined as the ability to refuse unwanted sex and communicate one’s sexual needs.

Sexuality and sexual politics are “key sites of struggle” for third wave feminism (Heywood and Drake 1997, p. 3). In defining an approach to sexuality, most third wave writing and practice has sought to reject sexual proscriptions and embrace experimentation (Baumgardner and Richards 2010; Johnson 2002; Valenti 2007; Walker 1995). For the third wave, there is no such thing as a “feminist” sexuality, thereby accepting everything from S/M to sex work to pornography (Baumgardner and Richards 2010; Daley 2002; Johnson 2002; Pullen 2002; Walker 1995). In fact, third wave feminists “lay claim to feminist consciousness even as they engage in ... sexual practices ... that they take to be decidedly ‘unfeminist’ according to standards of second-wave feminism” (Davis 1995, p. 281; Baumgardner 2011).

In addition to valuing openness and a range of sexual experimentation and practices, third wave feminists argue that they can reclaim and transform stereotypical femininity and sexual practices in defining themselves as sexual beings: “The cultural and social weapons that had been identified (rightly so) in the Second Wave as instruments of oppression—women as sex objects, fascist fashion, pornographic materials—are no longer being exclusively wielded against women and are sometimes wielded by women” (Baumgardner and Richards 2010, p. 141). In a similar vein, Daley contends: “we are at our most extraordinary when free to express our most complicated desires. We have the ability to transform practices

developed in patriarchal cultures into turn-ons, sexing up what would have tied us down” (Daley 2002, p. 128).

Some third wave feminists have cautioned that embracing sexuality in all its complexity should not strip feminism of its political content (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003). In particular, Dicker and Piepmeier discuss bell hooks’ assertion that feminists should “relearn desire so they would not be turned on by hypermasculine, oppressive men” (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, p. 17). In this sense, feminist views of sexuality should not be so broad as to eliminate grounds for assessing some sexual practices as oppressive (Pullen 2002).

Noting the pervasiveness of sexual stigma for young women, third wave feminists also argue that young women face a social context that inhibits their ability to seek sexual agency, as their sexuality continues to be repressed and silenced in a variety of ways that structure their choices. Most notably, a sexual double standard still exists, where sexual girls, particularly those in casual sexual relationships, risk being labeled as “sluts” or even as “pathological” (Conley et al. 2013; Harad 2003; McClelland and Fine 2008; Tanenbaum 2000; Valenti 2007). The slut brand may serve to undermine young women’s ability to seek sexual pleasure or to openly seek information about their sexuality, thus operating as a form of social control that stunts sexual agency.

Relatedly, the lack of information provided by parents and school-based sexuality education constrains the avenues available for adolescent women to learn about sex, sexual pleasure, and contraception (Brugman et al. 2010). Abstinence-only education, taught in about a third of public high schools that teach sex education, undermines not only access to knowledge but also teaches that girls’ virginity is a “gift” to be given and should be closely guarded (Doan and Williams 2008; Fine and McClelland 2007). Laws and policies limiting access to reproductive health care operate in tandem with restricted information to impede young women’s ability to explore and understand their own desires. As a result, discourses of adolescent sexuality are bounded by “(im)morality, protection, or victimization” (McClelland and Fine 2008, p. 84; Miller 2013), rather than sexual agency.

Given that the dominant context for young female sexuality is one of restriction and silences, third wave feminism strives to support whatever framework individual women may find useful to learn sexual agency. Importantly, young women’s sexual desire is championed and normalized: “pro-sexy representations underscore that women have a sexuality and can be as lustful as men” (Baumgardner and Richards 2010, p. 166). It is in theorizing sexual desire that we see third wave feminists maintain that any sexual practice is acceptable: “Sex liberationists...believe doing ‘what feels good’ is integral to a positive sexual self-image, and that restrictions on sexual desire only cause feelings of guilt and shame” (Smith 2002, p. 306). Fine and McClelland (2007) use the concept of “thick desire” to address the myriad factors that adolescent and emerging adult women require in order to achieve sexual agency. Understanding and defining oneself as a “sexual being” able to “engage in pleasurable (and safe, and age appropriate, and protected) sexual experiences” is paramount (Fine and McClelland 2007, p. 1035). Legal, educational and institutional supports undergird thick desire as well, and are significant in the sense that young women are particularly vulnerable to being denied such supports.

FWB relationships provide an excellent case study to explore young women's sexual agency in the context of the third wave feminist approach to sexuality. Since third wave feminism does not address such relationships directly, a reading of third wave literature suggests that feminism could be a motivator to participate in or to avoid FWB relationships. On one hand, we should not assume that FWB relationships are problematic or undermine young women's sexual agency. Instead, FWB relationships may be evidence of young women's sexual autonomy and independence. FWB relationships could provide young women an opportunity to define their own desires in a relatively "safe" sexual environment, since they are by definition preceded or accompanied by friendship. But we should not assume that FWB relationships automatically correlate to sexual agency either. They may be so tied to dominant culture that the familiar discourses of "(im)morality, protection, or victimization" (McClelland and Fine 2008, p. 84) in cultural interpretations of female participation in FWB relationships will overshadow the potential for autonomy. In particular, the sexual double standard may remain a central analytical tool to understand young women's participation in FWB relationships, rather than sexual autonomy. Thus, our research is designed to better understand the ways that young women participate in and understand FWB relationships, and to explore whether identification with feminist ideology impacts their motivations and satisfaction with their relationships.

Emerging Adult Sexuality: Friends with Benefits and Hookups

Recent research on adolescent sexuality finds that casual relationships appear to be gaining acceptance among heterosexual emerging adults (Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Kalish 2009; Manning et al. 2006). Although emerging adults do not report more sexual partners today as compared to 20 years ago, they are more likely to engage in casual sexual activity with a friend (Monto and Carey 2014). Indeed, a majority of college age heterosexual men and women report having had at least one FWB relationship (Bisson and Levine 2009; Owen and Fincham 2012).

A "friends with benefits" relationship refers to a form of cross-sex casual relationship that combines the psychological intimacy of a friendship with the sexual intimacy of a romantic relationship without commitment (Hughes et al. 2005). A FWB relationship can be distinguished from a "hook up" to the degree that the FWB relationship implies a stronger and more lasting connection between two people. Hook ups are defined as "brief uncommitted sexual encounters among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other" (Garcia et al. 2012, p. 161), and may occur between those who are strangers or acquaintances (Paul et al. 2000). Friends with benefits relationships, on the other hand, suggest a level of intimacy via the "friendship" aspect of the relationship and the presumption of repeated cross-sex sexual contact and an ongoing connection to another person: "Because these situations represent a greater entanglement of friendship, trust, and emotional comfort, FWBs are distinct from notions of hooking up in some aspects" (Garcia et al. 2012, p. 163). Mongeau et al. (2013) found, however, that friends with benefits relationships vary, where some were based upon a friendship while others were basically serial hook ups

with little prior or subsequent emotional connection. Still others provided a transition into or out of a more conventional romantic relationship, with 39.5 % of participants indicating that they had a romantic relationship with their FWB partners. Thus, the authors argue that both “friends with benefits” and “hook up” are ambiguous terms that overlap (Mongeau et al. 2013).

Although heterosexual friends with benefits relationships are reported to be equally prevalent among men and women (Bisson and Levine 2009; Owen and Fincham 2011), we know little about men and women’s reasoning behind engaging in these relationships. There is some evidence to suggest that women put emphasis on friends while men tend to view the relationship as more casual with an emphasis on sexual benefits (McGinty et al. 2007). Young women who engage in casual sex, moreover, are more likely to be stigmatized socially than men who do the same (Conley et al. 2013; Weaver et al. 2011). Hook ups, in particular, may be structured by both young women and men to sexually satisfy men but not women, particularly through oral sex; women are sexually submissive and less likely to report sexual pleasure (Brugman et al. 2010; Currier 2013). And despite the general increased acceptance for casual sex among emerging adults, women are still expected to be the gatekeepers and to preserve their reputations (Currier 2013).

Initial findings with regard to friends with benefits relationships suggest some gender differential outcomes. Research on “no strings attached” types of relationships suggests that men reap the benefits more and women bear the emotional risks (Gute and Eshbaugh 2008; Manning et al. 2006). Women are more likely to report unmet expectations than men (Gusarova et al. 2012). Although men and women similarly have more positive than negative emotional reactions when they experience a heterosexual FWB relationship, the difference is larger for men (Owen and Fincham 2011). Moreover, men are more likely to perceive their FWB as primarily focused on sex, while women are more likely to report that FWBs were attempts—often failed—to move into a romantic relationship (Mongeau et al. 2013; Williams and Adams 2013).

It also has been suggested, however, that heterosexual FWB relationships may provide an alternative form of casual intimacy that allows women to express their sexual desires more freely. Lehmiller et al. (2011) found in their study of 411 emerging adults who indicated current involvement in a FWB relationship that women reported sexual desire as a motive for initiating a FWB. Similarly, Bay-Cheng et al. (2009) found that FWB relationships were associated with the highest level of desire, wanting, and pleasure compared to all other serious and casual relationship experiences reported by women. Weaver and Herold (2000) also noted that sexual pleasure was the most common reason women reported for engaging in casual sex. In this context, FWB relationships may represent sexual behavior where young women are able to articulate their sexual needs in a relatively “safe” environment.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore whether emerging adults’ feminist identity relates to their motivations for engaging in friends with benefits and their

satisfaction with these relationships. Current trends suggest that a majority of college age men and women engage in friends with benefits relationships and that they are equally prevalent among men and women. Yet we know little about young men and women's reasoning behind engaging in FWB relationships, satisfaction with these relationships, and whether they are a context for women to develop or experience a sense of sexual agency.

Participants

Participants were 233 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25 who were attending a large public university on California's central coast. Of those who participated in the survey, 82.8 % identified as white, 10.9 % as Hispanic, 8.8 % as Asian-American, 1.7 % as black, 1.3 % as Native American, and 6.7 % as multiracial. Of these 233 participants, 151 (64.8 %) reported that they were currently in or had previously been in a FWB relationship. Our analyses focused on this subsample of emerging adults who identified as heterosexual, which was 91 % of the sample and included 96 women and 42 men.

Procedure

Participants were informed of our on-line survey via several club discussion forums, campus housing mailings, and through a general psychology class survey pool. The survey was created on the host site Survey Monkey.

Measures

Demographic information was collected at the beginning of the survey. Participants provided age, gender, ethnicity, year in college, sexual orientation, age of first sexual intercourse, current relationship status, and parents' annual income.

Feminist Identity

Nine items adapted from the Feminist Identity Development scale (Bargad and Hyde 1991) measured participants' feminist identity and beliefs. Sample items included, "I am concerned about widespread acceptance of violence against women in our society," "Women are never at fault when they are sexually assaulted," and "Being a feminist is one of a number of things that make up my identity." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The internal reliability estimate for this scale was .78.

The Feminist Identity Development scale is the standard scale for measuring feminist identity, and continues to be widely used (see, for example, Fischer et al. 2000; Martino and Lauriano 2013; Ng et al. 1995). Despite its ongoing use, it is dated, given that it was constructed in 1991 based upon a 1985 model for feminist identity development created by Downing and Roush (Ng et al. 1995). In particular, it lacks measures directly associated with third wave feminist theories of sexuality.

No such measures currently exist. This represents a limitation for our study. Given, however, that our study is the first to analyze the relationship between feminist identity and friends with benefits relationships, it was important to use a standard, psychometrically valid measure of feminist identity.

Motivations for Engaging in FWB

The survey used a definition for a friends with benefits relationship adapted from Hughes et al. (2005): A FWB is defined as a casual relationship that combines the intimacy of a friendship with the sexual intimacy of a romantic relationship without commitment. Items indexing participants' motivations for engaging in FWB relationships also were adapted from motivation categories identified by Hughes et al. (2005). A qualitative analysis by Hughes et al. (2005) resulted in the identification of six reasons young adults engaged in a FWB relationship: relationship avoidance, sex, relationship simplicity, emotional connection, wanted a FWB relationship, and miscellaneous. In the present study, we developed nine items based on these motivational categories. These items resulted in two subscales: *Relationship Simplicity* (seven items; e.g. "I wanted a FWB relationship just for sex"); and *Future Commitment* (two items; e.g. "I hoped our FWB relationship would lead to a more committed or monogamous relationship"). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert Scale format, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The internal reliability estimates for simplicity and future commitment were .83 and .64, respectively.

Relationship Satisfaction

Participants' perceptions of their *overall satisfaction* with their FWB relationships were measured using the relationship satisfaction subscale from the Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC) measure developed by Fletcher et al. (2000). Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The *relationship satisfaction* subscale included three items (e.g. "How satisfied are you with your relationship?") and had an internal reliability of .92. Additionally, we included a measure of participants' *sexual satisfaction* with their FWB relationships. This measure included three items: "My partner satisfies my physical needs," "I find it easy to tell my partner what I like and don't like sexually," and "Sex is fun for my partner and myself." These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The reliability estimate for the scale was .67.

Results

Table 1 includes the means and standard deviations for each of the variables by gender. Independent sample t-tests results indicated that women reported a

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of the variables by gender

Variable	Females		Males		<i>t</i>
	M (N)	SD	M (N)	SD	
Feminist identity	3.74 (69)	.65	3.38 (29)	.64	2.57**
Motivation					
Relationship simplicity	3.22 (74)	.79	3.59 (33)	.79	-2.24*
Future commitment	3.13 (74)	1.16	2.59 (33)	.85	2.68**
Relationship satisfaction					
Overall satisfaction	3.09 (74)	1.09	3.51 (32)	.89	-2.08*
Sexual satisfaction	3.96 (79)	.63	4.08 (37)	.65	-.97

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

somewhat stronger feminist identity than did men ($d^1 = .56$).² When comparing the students by gender who reported having had a FWB with those who reported never participating in a FWB relationship, neither women nor men differed with respect to feminist identity: $t(122) = .76$, $p < .45$, for women and $t(53) = .53$, $p < .60$ for men. In other words, feminist identity did not differentiate those men and women who engaged in a FWB from those who did not.

With respect to motivations for engaging in FWB relationships, men were more likely than women to report entering a FWB relationship for relationship simplicity ($d = .47$), while women were somewhat more motivated than men to enter a FWB relationship in hopes of a future committed relationship ($d = .53$), although the mean for women suggests, for the most part, a neutral desire for future commitment. With respect to relationship satisfaction, men reported more overall satisfaction with their FWB relationship than did women ($d = .42$); there was not a gender difference with respect to sexual satisfaction.

The intercorrelations among the variables are presented in Table 2. These results indicated that women who had a stronger feminist identity were less likely to be motivated to enter a FWB relationship for simplicity (i.e. sex) and were less likely to report overall satisfaction with this relationship. Women who were motivated to enter a FWB for simplicity were more satisfied with their FWB relationship both overall and sexually. The only statistically significant relationship that emerged for men was a positive correlation between motivation for simplicity and sexual satisfaction.

Given that both feminist identity and motivation for relationship simplicity were correlated with women's overall relationship satisfaction, we ran a multiple regression analysis to identify the relative contribution of these variables to overall satisfaction. Results indicated that women's motivation for relationship simplicity

² Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d . The findings on feminist identity are in keeping with national polls asking women and men about feminism. For example, a widely-cited CBS news poll conducted in 2005 reported higher identification with feminism for women than men. In answer to the question, "do you think of yourself to be a feminist, or not?" 24 % of women and 14 % of men answered yes. Forty-seven percent of men said the women's movement had made their lives better compared to 69 % of women (Alfano 2005).

Table 2 Intercorrelations among the variables separately for women (above diagonal) and men (below diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Feminist identity	–	–.33*	.19	–.25*	–.03
2. Relationship simplicity	–.34 ⁺	–	–.43**	.36**	.33*
3. Future commitment	–.19	–.17	–	–.36**	–.14
4. Overall satisfaction	.14	–.12	–.12	–	.46**
5. Sexual satisfaction	.29	.42*	.00	.19	–

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

was a predictor of their reports of overall relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$). In the presence of relationship simplicity, women’s feminist identity was not a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .26$).

Discussion

According to third wave feminist analysis, friends with benefits relationships should not be defined as inherently “feminist” or “non-feminist.” They should not automatically be perceived as initiated or dominated by men, since women may dictate the terms of such relationships as well. On the other hand, to assume that young women who participate in FWB relationships are displaying sexual agency is far too simplistic. For emerging adults in the United States, the level of stigma attached to young women who are open about their sexuality and sexual preferences, and the discourse of “risk” associated with unfettered female sexuality, continue to play an important role in understanding sexual agency (Miller 2013).

Our study suggested multiple and nuanced meanings for sexual agency and feminist attitudes. In our findings, deciding whether to have a FWB relationship or not was not determined by feminist identity, so those with higher feminist identity were as likely to have such relationships as non-feminists. Feminist attitudes may come into play in terms of what motivates women to participate in a FWB though, since those women with a stronger feminist identity were less likely to be motivated to engage in a FWB for simplicity, i.e. sex, and also were less satisfied overall with FWB relationships. These were weak correlations, however, and do not give us enough information to assert that pursuing a casual sexual relationship was somehow not perceived as “feminist,” nor to analyze how sexual agency may be at play.

Based on third wave feminist theory, we might suppose that the young women in our study with higher feminist identity would exhibit more sexual agency: “Feminism tells you it’s okay to make decisions about your sexuality *for yourself*. Because when it comes down to it, what’s more powerful and important than being able to do what you want with your body without fear of being shamed or punished?” (Valenti 2007, p. 30). Yet sexual agency is difficult to measure, and, based on prior research, it is not clear whether involvement in a FWB relationship–

or rejection of such relationships—are associated with sexual agency or provide a context to express sexual liberation. Given that FWB relationships are part of the dominant sexual culture on college campuses, where the majority of students have engaged in such relationships, those with higher feminist identity may reject such relationships on the grounds that cultural pressure to participate negates the third wave mantra to “make decisions about your sexuality *for yourself*” (Valenti 2007, p. 30).

In our research, for women, sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in a FWB were better predicted by motivation for simplicity (i.e. sex) rather than feminist identity. The more motivated women were to enter a FWB for simplicity, the more satisfied they were with their FWB both overall and sexually. Men too reported more sexual satisfaction the more they were motivated by simplicity. And the men and women in our sample did not differ in their reported sexual satisfaction. This is consistent with Furman and Shaffer’s (2011) finding that women who had a FWB engaged in as much sexual behavior with their partners as men did.

We suggest that feminism may be captured by motivation for sexual simplicity in a FWB, rather than determined only by the traditional measures of feminist identity used by our scale. Originally constructed in 1991, the Feminist Identity Development (FID) scale may not account for the centrality of sexual experimentation and freedom in third wave feminism, and by extension, may not correspond well to feminist identity as it relates to sexuality or sexual behavior today. To better understand what sexual agency means in the third wave era, we argue for the need to recognize third wave’s claim that feminists can embrace a traditional model of “sexiness” and that feminism is associated with a strong sense of one’s sexuality. Thus, when we look at motivation to pursue a FWB relationship as it relates to sexual satisfaction, in the sense that sexual satisfaction is one aspect of sexual agency, we may be observing another way to measure feminist identity. Erchull and Liss (2013), for example, found that young heterosexual women who self-identified as feminists reported enjoying the experience of sexualization, defined as being “valued through their sexuality, attractiveness is conflated with sexiness, or people are considered to be sex objects” (p. 2341). Young women did not appear to perceive a tension between enjoying sexualization by men and their feminism: “Feminist women who enjoyed sexualization felt individually empowered and believed that they should work together with other women to create change. Furthermore, they were more likely to perceive the world as being unjust, in a general sense” (p. 2347). Thus, those young women in our survey who expressed the desire for sex (“simplicity”) from their FWB, might be articulating third wave feminist identity in a way that the FID scale did not measure.

Our final analysis leaves us with questions regarding whether and how feminist identity relates to motivations and levels of satisfaction associated with engaging in friends with benefits relationships. We argue that the questions used by researchers to measure feminist identity do not capture aspects of changing—and sometimes conflicting—norms of sexuality and sexual behavior present in friends with benefits relationships. Using a third wave feminist lens to analyze FWB relationships crystallizes the gulf between feminist identity as it was formulated in the early 1990s and feminist identity today.

Limitations

What is a limitation to our study—and the majority of research on these relationships—is an examination of the perceptions of both partners in these relationships. It may be that young women’s ability to achieve sexual agency happens with male partners who are more feminist. Sexual agency may still feel unattainable to young women today if the men they are involved with consciously or unconsciously continue to subscribe to traditional gender scripts that dictate female sexual passivity. Consistent with previous research on FWB relationships, the males in our study were motivated to engage in a FWB for sex, though those who were more feminist were less likely to be motivated by sex. This finding mirrored the young women in our study: those who were more feminist were less likely to be motivated by sex. Yet, unlike the women in our sample, there was a trend for men with a stronger feminist ideology to be more sexually satisfied with their FWB relationships.

Studying partners might also clarify the ways that sexual scripts may be changing for some young men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In a qualitative study of 19 college age men, Epstein et al. (2009) found that men expressed wanting greater relational connection with their casual sexual partners. Yet evidence also suggests that men continue to hold women to a sexual double standard (Allison and Risman 2013), and that there is little communication between partners about what they want in these relationships (Bisson and Levine 2009; Weaver et al. 2011).

Another important advantage to studying partners is it will move research on FWB relationships away from the heteronormative assumption that these relationships are always cross-gender for heterosexual emerging adults. The lines are often blurred for heterosexual youth as to whether casual sexual activity is opposite-sex only. As Reay (2014) describes in his history of American casual sex, “notions of isolated and separated sexual spheres are highly misleading” (p. 14). Yet we also don’t know how FWB relationships are experienced among lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) emerging adults. Galperin et al’s (2013) study on casual sex found that sexual orientation predicted sexual regret. That is, lesbian and bisexual women had lower regrets about engaging in casual sex and higher regrets about not taking opportunities to engage in casual sex compared to heterosexual women. The authors posit that this may be because the reproductive and social consequences differ between sexual encounters with other women vs. with men. These reproductive and social consequences may continue to underlie the relationship between sexual agency and the motivation for engaging in a FWB relationship.

Conclusion

Third wave feminism has wrought significant changes to feminist theories, practices, and identities by insisting on the centrality of reclaiming stereotypical femininity and a variety of sexual practices as women define themselves as sexual beings. Women’s participation in FWB relationships may herald a feminist transition among emerging adults in terms of their sexual practices. Yet with the

mainstreaming of friends with benefits relationships, in the context of the resilience of the sexual double standard, young feminists may also reject such relationships on the grounds that they are cognizant of persistent gender norms surrounding casual sexual relationships. Though our research did not answer definitively whether or not FWB relationships represent “feminist” sexuality among heterosexual emerging adults, it suggests an important link between “new” feminist identities and “new” sexual practices that we believe merits further investigation.

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