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Friends with benefits or “friends” with deficits? The meaning and contexts of uncommitted sexual relationships among Mexican American and European American adolescents

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Abstract

Using focus groups, this study sought to understand and compare how Mexican American ($n = 41$, $M = 16.0$ years old, $SD = .96$) and European American ($n = 34$, $M = 16.1$ years old, $SD = .64$) youths conceptualize and experience “friends with benefits” relationships (FWBRs). Contrary to the implied nature of friendship, partners did not show caring and viewed FWBRs as a means to meet sexual needs. The “benefits” of this arrangement included guilt-free pleasure, little responsibility, the freedom to date others, or to remain available for a more desirable partner. The inherent deficits of FWBRs, on the other hand, included the potential pitfall of getting emotionally attached. Despite the recognized deficits, European American and Mexican American girls both desired and participated in FWBRs. However, Mexican American girls described more committed “going-out” relationships as ideal, which left them vulnerable to mismatched expectations and emotional upset in FWBRs. Findings outline the socio-emotional contexts of adolescent involvement in FWBRs, as well as underscore the potential for conflicting desires. Recommendations for healthy relationship and sexual health programs are discussed.

Introduction

Research has lagged behind media attention to a common and, perhaps even trendy, relationship type that occurs among adolescents and young adults — “friends with benefits” (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). Particularly understudied are the meaning and socio-emotional contexts of this relationship type among adolescents and minority youth, an acutely understudied group in the United States (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Frost & Driscoll, 2006). It remains unknown whether FWBRs are experienced by Mexican American youth and how these relationships are understood culturally. Recent years have, on the other hand, evidenced an explosion of exploratory studies concerning trends among primarily European American young adults in college (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009; Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden, & Shaw, 2011; Owen & Fincham, 2011; Wentland & Reissing, 2011). The term itself has not been consistently operationalized among collegiate youth, but these studies suggest that desires and expectations within friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs) vary greatly. The nature of camaraderie suggests a higher level of trust and intimacy, which has been associated with foregoing contraception (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002; Bauman & Berman, 2005; Fortenberry, Tu, Harezlak, Katz, & Orr, 2002; Vanderdrift, Lehmler, & Kelly, 2012). Knowing this has important implications for programs aimed at preventing the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and early pregnancy, and broader relationship health education. Recent funding for relationship-strengthening components within comprehensive sexual health education prioritizes underserved youth populations and the need for research concerning Mexican American adolescents' relational experiences (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2010).

Qualitative research is ideal when the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of how a particular group defines and contextualizes a phenomenon of interest. Using focus group methodology, the present study sought to develop a better understanding of how FWBRs are uniquely experienced in middle adolescence from developmental and ethnocultural perspectives. Specifically, this study addresses a current gap in the literature by 1) describing middle adolescents' conceptualizations of FWBRs, 2) exploring the

meaning of FWBRs in adolescents' lives, and 3) comparing the experience of FWBRs for Mexican American and European American youth and across gender. It is the first to solicit cross-cultural perspectives concerning the meaning assigned to this relationship type, necessary to inform subsequent theoretically driven and longitudinal research. Focus groups (homogenous by gender and ethnicity to elucidate within- and across-group comparisons) were chosen since they foster relational empowerment and elicit rich interactive data in the context of adolescents' social world (Banister, Jakubec, & Stein, 2003); in addition, they offer increased comfort and openness for populations who have less power and status in society since youth may offer their ideas and feelings in the surrounding of peers who share similar life experiences (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). Findings point to the saliency of FWBRs among adolescents, outline qualitative differences by gender and ethnicity, and inform the effective design and delivery of sexual and dating health education, services, and programs that are developmentally and ethnoculturally grounded.

Uncommitted sexual relationships in adolescence

Romantic and sexual involvement in the adolescent years has increasingly been recognized as developmentally important (Collins, 2003; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), and as distinct in a number of ways from young adults' experiences. First, adolescence marks a time during which individual identity development takes precedence over intimacy goals (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Autonomy-seeking may lend itself to adolescents' involvement in multiple relationship types, yet may conflict with desires for closeness from an intimate partner (Montgomery, 2005; Williams, 2012). Second, high-school students experience romantic and sexual relationships within a unique, and often insular, school context in which friends and peers are intricately embedded (Williams & Hickle, 2011). Combined with a developmental desire for peer approval and minimal romantic relationship experience, adolescents' romantic and sexual experiences should be contextualized as qualitatively unique.

According to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 38% of adolescents have participated in non-romantic sexual relationships (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005). First sexual debut typically occurs within the confines of an exclusive

relationship (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000), but then often progresses to include sexual activity with non-committed partners (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2006). Findings from Manning and colleagues' study of 1316 adolescents evidenced that, of those having sex with someone they were not dating, a large percentage (74%) did so with a friend. Despite a script that mandates emotional detachment within uncommitted sexual contexts, actual feelings varied extensively. Many desired for a dating relationship to emerge or felt closer after intercourse; over half, however, felt that intercourse had not changed their relationship or that they actually felt less close (Manning et al., 2006). Such findings challenge what it means to have a "non-romantic" relationship (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Manning et al., 2006), and more specifically, what it means to have a FWBR in adolescence.

Friends with benefits relationships among college students

In contrast to the lack of research on FWBR in adolescence, there is a growing literature on FWBRs among young adults, particularly how they are experienced on college campuses. Such studies indicate that FWBRs among college students are commonplace; over half report sexual involvement with a friend on multiple occasions (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Grello et al., 2006; Mongeau, Ramirez, & Vorell, 2003; Mongeau et al., 2011). However, FWBRs have not been consistently operationalized and definitions were often not solicited from young adults themselves. In Afifi and Faulkner's study, participants were told to think of friends as "individuals who are more than acquaintances but not dating partners" that they had "no intentions of dating" (p. 210) and whom they had intercourse with at least once. Thus, the closeness of the friendship and degree of sexual contact ranged, but the degree of emotional involvement was somewhat restricted by assessing participants' intent. Bisson and Levine's study defined FWBRs for college-aged students as "when people who are 'just friends' have sex" (p. 67), allowing room for romantic feelings, but similarly allowing for singular sexual interactions. Single sexual encounters are semantically aligned with Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) definition of a hookup relationship in that they last only one night, but differ in that some level of camaraderie is inferred. Although friendship was not included in Jonason et al. (2009) definition of a "booty call" (described as an urgent

quest for sexual activity with a “non-long-term relationship partner”), it was reported as an important consideration in accepting, but not rejecting, a solicitation.

The complication of terminology may reflect somewhat purposeful ambiguity in the scripts young people enact within their non-traditional relationship types — an ambiguity that may serve to disguise unrequited romantic feelings, or even outside sexual affiliations. For example, studies have suggested that exclusivity to one friend with benefit partner is not necessarily given (Grello et al., 2006; Lehmiller, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2011; Vanderdrift et al., 2012), yet emotions in a FWBR can range anywhere from dispassion to a concealed desire for a more committed relationship (Epstein et al., 2009; Mongeau et al., 2011). Mongeau et al. (2011), for example, uncovered a typology of seven types of FWBRs, each consisting of sexual activity but differing in degree of commitment, investment, exclusivity, secrecy, and emotional closeness. Moreover, a transition to a more romantic relationship was often desired or sought after. Paradoxically, the FWBR script denotes “casualty” in the sense that commitment is lacking entirely.

Socio-emotional challenges in navigating friends with benefits relationships

Given the difficulty in defining a FWBR, it is not surprising that the emotional reactions that accompany this sexual relationship are complex. For example, after an initial courting period it is typical to discuss the status of the relationship; in a cross-sex friendship, however, this is considered taboo (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Knight, Mongeau, & Wiedmaier, 2011). Even though cross-sex friendships evidence the potential for romantic feelings on behalf of one or both partners, relational topics are often avoided out of fear of rejection and the potential for embarrassment (Afifi & Burgoon). These hesitations evidence real threats to the self and the friendship. Afifi and Burgoon found that it was often the case among young adults that only one individual in a cross-sex friendship was interested in becoming romantically involved while the other was not. In some cases, therefore, one or both partners may be settling for a FWBR, although a romantic relationship is preferred (Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008).

Hughes et al. (2005) found that the complexity of FWBRs requires unwritten social and emotional rules to adapt to the addition of sexual activity in an otherwise cross-sex

friendship. The majority of such rules delineated what *not to do*, such as getting jealous, falling in love, or telling others about the relationship. Similarly, one may realize that he or she is in a FWBR by what is *not* happening following sexual activity (e.g., romantic gestures or a change in public interaction style; Knight et al., 2011). Breaking the implicit script would result in dissolution of the FWBR.

Gender considerations

Women may be more likely to deviate from the traditional FWBR script than men, at least among young adult samples. Sexual motivations are more often cited by men as the reason for participating in a FWBR, whereas emotional intimacy or desire for a romantic relationship is more often a motivator for women (Lehmiller et al., 2011). Both men and women felt that the reason a “booty call” did not transition into a long-term partnership was because the man had only wanted sex (Jonason et al., 2009). Similarly, this assumption was supported in Wentland and Reissing's (2011) focus group study: men were the only ones to use terms including “fuck n' chuck”, “dick 'em and dump 'em”, “hit it and quit it”, and “use 'em and lose 'em” (p. 9). The men admitted to only using these terms in front of other men, and not their FWBR partner.

Young women and adolescent girls may be more desirous of closeness and caring from a sexual partner (Camarena, Sargiani, & Petersen, 1990; Williams & Hickle, 2010), and of sex within a loving relationship (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002; Adams & Williams, 2011). However, some research has found that both adolescent boys and girls evidence similar rates of desire for a dating relationship to emerge from a non-dating sexual relationship (Manning et al., 2006). Moreover, adolescent boys' motives for intercourse reflect both sexual and relational desires, contrary to popular stereotype (Smiler, 2008). Regardless, qualitative accounts from adolescents reflect a societal double-standard that remains today where girls are labeled as “sluts” and “whores” for sexual involvement outside of a committed relationship (Manning et al., 2006, p. 475), a finding that has been validated among Mexican American adolescents as well (Adams & Williams, 2011). Further, boys' reputations with their peers may actually benefit by their involvement in casual sexual relations (Manning et al., 2006; Wentland & Reissing, 2011).

Ethnic considerations

From a developmental standpoint, adolescence marks a time not only of global identity formation, but also of ethnic identity formation for minority youth (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997) — perhaps particularly for Mexican American youth living in states bordering Mexico (Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010). Retrospective accounts of Latino/college students revealed that traditional cultural norms continue to exert an influence within Latino families; daughters were socialized into traditional sex-typed roles, and were restricted in their interaction with the other-sex (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). Acculturating youth often face opposing home versus societal norms, however; for example, whereas parents may restrict dating and sexual relations before marriage (especially of females), U.S. norms may facilitate exploration of more casual dating and sexual relationships (Raffaelli, 2005). Accordingly, parent education and generation status are positively associated with greater freedom to their adolescent children to interact with dating partners (Raffaelli), and higher levels of acculturation among Latino youth are consistently predictive of earlier sexual experimentation (see Afaible-Munsuz & Brindis, 2006 for a review). Mexican American youth in a recent focus group study, however, voiced the freedom to choose between traditional and more egalitarian gender roles; they noted that while many of their peers quickly transition into marriage and parenting roles after high school, some girls now pursue career aspirations first (Williams, Adams, & Altamirano, 2012). Finally, while peers are a primary source of influence among youth in the United States, this is not universal and depends largely on cultural norms (Arnett, 2008). Thus, while it is unknown how Mexican American youths conceptualize FWBRs and whether or not they participate in them during the adolescent years, it is expected that their romantic and sexual experiences are complicated by cultural value systems (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

Method

Participants

The first author of this study recruited 75 adolescents (35 boys) from a large Southwestern state for participation in focus groups. Adolescents self-identified as Mexican American (MA; $n = 41$) and European American (EA; $n = 34$), and were told

that the purpose was to gain a better understanding of adolescents' dating relationships. All participants were between the ages of 14 and 17 ($M = 16.04$; $SD = .83$) and were separated by ethnicity and gender for group discussions. Three groups of each type (6 to 8 participants each) resulted in a total of 12 focus groups at which point saturation of themes was met. The majority of the sample (54%) was recruited from community-based summer programs, as well as from summer high school programming (32%), and by word of mouth (15%). All students were transitioning into the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades ($M = 11.09$; $SD = .76$) and were required to have at least some experience with dating or romantic relationships. Adolescents lived in diverse neighborhoods (i.e., ranging in socioeconomic status, crime rates, languages spoken, and rural and urban areas) and were purposefully recruited as a "typical" sample (see Padgett, 2008).

At the time of data collection, 39% of adolescents self-reported on a brief survey that they were currently dating someone; 41% of those were not exclusive relationships (54% girls; 62% MA). Participants were not asked to specify how they categorized those relationships (i.e., FWBR) given that the primary purpose of the study was for them to self-categorize their dating relationships from their own perspective during the focus group discussion. The majority of adolescents preferred to date someone of the other sex (92.5% MA; 94.1% EA) and a minority preferred a partner that was of the same sex (2.5% MA) or of either sex (5.0% MA, 5.9% EA).

Procedure

Adolescents who met initial in person or telephone-screening criteria (i.e., ethnicity, age, grade) were mailed an introduction letter and consent form. Active consent and assent were obtained from parents and adolescents, respectively. Participants were asked during the focus group to discuss their thoughts and feelings about romantic relationships, including their understanding of relationships (e.g., expectations, preconceptions, beliefs), the meaning of relationships to their lives, and the quality/experiences of their present or past relationships. Adolescents were not directly asked about FWBRs, but rather, researchers were cued to this label as a "sensitizing concept" (Padgett, 2008) that emerged from discussion and was thus, further explored.

Focus groups were held in known places (e.g., Boys and Girls Club) or in a simulated

living-room setting (i.e., the research space on campus). The first 15 minutes was spent creating a safe space where participants felt comfortable expressing and sharing their thoughts and beliefs in a permissive and nonjudgmental environment. Sessions were tape-recorded with detailed notes taken by an assistant moderator for later verbatim transcription. The first author guided all focus groups, including posing questions, listening, keeping the conversation on track, and ensuring that everyone had a chance to share (Krueger & Casey, 2000). General probes included “Can you give an example?”, “Describe what you mean”, and “Does anyone else have a different experience or point of view?”. The moderator and the assistant moderator met following each group and filled out a report that included personal reflections of the discussion as well as anything important to note about the group itself (e.g., a late arrival). Focus groups lasted approximately 1.5 hours and participants received pizza, soda, and \$10 compensation.

Plan of analysis

Qualitative inquiry is especially well-suited for understanding subjective perceptions that build consensus around socially constructed experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), such as FWBRs. The researchers utilized reflexivity, carefully documented each step taken through the research process (i.e., established an audit trail), and engaged in triangulation as multiple researchers collaborated to analyze the data. Each of these steps was taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Padgett, 2008). Inductive content analysis was used to code the data (i.e., verbatim transcripts and field notes) into themes that emerged within and across the groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morgan, 1993) using QSR Nvivo (i.e., a qualitative software program, Gibbs, 2002). Themes emerged from several thorough readings of the transcripts (rather than from a pre-existing conceptual framework) and weight was given to comments on the basis of frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The data was then coded by an outside researcher to verify the reliability of the coding scheme. Phrases that were coded into the same category were noted as agreements, and phrases that were missed or coded into discrepant categories were noted as disagreements. A conservative method of reliability assessment was determined by the number of agreements over the total number of coded responses and

revealed good reliability ($\kappa = .71$). The results are interpreted in terms of the meaning for participants (by gender and ethnicity); themes that emerged from the data are presented, with support provided by quotes from the participants.

Results

Discussions concerning FWBRs emerged from open-ended questions that invited diverse relationship and sexual experiences. Four distinct relationship types were discussed by adolescents and were largely differentiated by the degree of emotional investment and commitment: going-out, dating, friends with benefits, and hooking up. FWBRs were particularly salient in youth's experiences and generated an in-depth discussion from several members within each focus group across gender and ethnicity; thus, this study focused the analysis on this relationship type. Results concerning FWBRs are framed in a comparative manner to other relationship types as they were in youth's focus group discussions.

“Friends with benefits” relationships defined

“She's just like a friend, that's like with benefits I guess” (MA boy).

Adolescents used the label of FWBR in order to describe relationships that were “like a fling”, and “yeah, you know, like ‘friends with benefits’” (EA girls). These relationships were generally private, physically-based relationships that were largely defined by their lack of ‘relationship’ qualities (e.g., “when [you] don't want relationships”; EA boy). The repeated nature of the sexual interaction differed FWBR from hookups; hookups typically were contextually based as circumstantial relationships, alongside parties and substance use. The nature of the “friendship” often differentiated FWBRs and dating relationships, the latter inclusive of an emotional connection. For example, in FWBRs “they would see them continuously, but just for sex, you know . . . it's not like they care about each other” (MA girl), whereas in a dating relationship they would share activities with the purpose of “getting to know” (MA girl) one another with the potential to become more committed (i.e., “going-out”).

The longevity of a FWBR was noted as briefer than dating or going-out relationships. FWBRs did “not [last] like a long time” (MA girl) due to a number of

potential pitfalls. First, these relationships eventually became public, typically through the peer group, and were compromising to a girl's reputation. One discussion among EA boys highlighted this disparate experience across gender: "It's a double standard thing", "Nice job man", "They're like 'awesome'" and "[for girls] slut." Second, due to the sexual freedom of these relationships, adolescents would become involved in another relationship that required exclusivity. Finally, termination would occur once one partner (usually the girl) developed an emotional bond to the other, thereby violating the terms of the relationship. As one EA girl noted, "they [don't] last for long. Somebody gets attached."

Perceived "benefits"

"You have that back up . . . like say like you do cheat on [your boy- friend] or whatever and it doesn't go well and you still have your guy like there" (MA girl).

Adolescents desired FWBRs over other relationship options because of the perception that FWBRs offered many unique benefits. However, each benefit was often accompanied by a negative consequence, questioning the beneficial nature of these "benefits". In particular, the benefit to one partner was often the deficit to another. It is noteworthy, however, that benefits and deficits were also sometimes experienced by the same person within the same relationship and that the "pros" outweighed the "cons".

Repeated gratification of sexual needs without commitment or exclusivity

The appeal of a FWBR was that it allowed for physical "needs to be met by the two people and they just feel like they can go to those two people for it and you get used to it" (EA boys). The sexual arrangement in which "they just want to bone" (EA girl), resulted in guilt-free pleasure in which youth did "not feel like you are doing something bad" (EA girl). As such, an enticing characteristic of FWBRs was the mutual understanding that there were no relationship obligations. As one EA boy stated, it's "for people who don't wanna have like the commitment." This also included not having exclusivity requirements to remain sexually active with just one person. Adolescents "can still have these things with people" (EA girl) and remain open and available for a more attractive partner to come along (e.g., "You're not just like attached to one person . . . you [can] go talk to other

people; MA boy).

On the other hand, being sexually active with multiple partners introduced both physical (e.g., STIs, unplanned pregnancy) and emotional (e.g., the potential to “find someone else”, EA girl) risk into the relationship. One EA girl described the emotional consequences of non-exclusivity within a FWBR: “I cared about him a lot. Like we started off as more like friends with benefits — just hanging out and having fun or whatever. Then slowly but surely it stopped and he started seeing some other chick from his work and it's like I got pushed away”. Adolescents also noted that “let[ting] yourself get involved in a romantic relationship” (EA girl) while in a FWBR placed you in a difficult position: end the FWBR or cheat on a romantic partner. Some adolescents spoke about pressure from their FWB partner to “sneak around [their] girlfriend” (EA girl). As one EA boy stated, “when you get a girlfriend, that other girl you're friends with is kind of like ‘come on ...’.”

No emotional investment

A mutual understanding of FWBRs was that there was little emotional connection: “If you're just like making out with someone, like your make out buddy—you understand that that is what it is” (EA boy). As one group of MA boys discussed, the lack of emotional ties allowed them the freedom to “just like talk to someone else if you want to, you don't have to worry about—” “them getting all mad”. In a FWBR, you “kind of don't have a right to say anything” (MA girl).

Although the boundaries of FWBRs were clear (e.g., “A lot of girls try to make it develop into something that it already shouldn't be”; EA girl), maintaining emotional distance was often easier said than done. There was a danger of developing one-sided feelings of emotional connection, described by an MA girl: “Sometimes it sucks because like you already fell for that person but they didn't for you.” This was complicated by the ambiguous nature of the relationship (e.g., “You know, you don't really know like exactly what your relationship is and it's kind of confusing,” EA girl).

Cultural and gender considerations

Several considerations across gender and ethnicity were observed. Boys across groups were more likely than girls to discuss the benefits of FWBRs. Although both boys

and girls discussed a tendency to become emotionally involved and to desire a more committed relationship to evolve from a FWBR, girls were more likely to discuss “becom[ing] attached” (EA girl) and to view sex as a means through which to develop greater commitment. Girls occasionally spoke of the “empowering” experience of using their bodies and sex to give boys what they wanted and/or to trade for a more committed relationship. As one EA girl stated: “Well, sometimes a women's body or sexuality can be the most empowering thing that a girl has.” Boys also noted that sometimes there was a compromise of commitment for sexual involvement because “maybe you want something more” (MA boy). Further, many girls recognized the deficits associated with FWBR but viewed them as their only relationship option. For example, “I think it's more [that] girls do it because that's what guys want. And it is what they want, but you know, it's not what girls want.” “But that's all they can get” (EA girls). Similarly, one MA girl explains: “I guess there are some relationships where they care about each other but most of them are just for sex.” Girls noted that making this compromise was acceptable but that admittedly it was not an ideal relationship: “A lot of people will . . . give into dating or have ‘friends with benefits’ and what not, someone you can hang around with . . . that's fine and everything, but you know deep down inside, you want someone who will always be there for you” (EA girl).

Despite the recognized “deficits” girls associated with FWBRs, youth still framed these relationships as desirable. European American girls, compared to Mexican American girls, enjoyed the freedom to explore other dating relationships and engage in lower levels of sexual contact (e.g., making-out) while allowing them the time to spend on their own activities (e.g., school work, extra-curricular activities). Mexican American girls, on the other hand, felt that FWBRs offered protection from getting emotionally hurt (if they could maintain the emotional distance, a noted difficulty).

Mexican American adolescents emphasized that FWBRs characterized their high school dating relationships, and tended to frame all of their casual relationships in this way (i.e., including hookups). This relationship type left Mexican American girls particularly vulnerable for a number of reasons. First, Mexican American boys expressed more reluctance to engage in serious relationships while in high school. As one Mexican American boy explained, “Cause when you're in school, it's just like just friends with

benefits, like you [refers to another boy in the group] said, um it's not really serious. You never think it's the person you're going to be with for the rest of your life." This group of boys discussed that once they were older they would be able to experience a relationship where they would be "real intimate with that person" but for now they just wanted to "date and just hang around." Second, and perhaps given their desire for a more committed relationship type, Mexican American girls often described FWB relational characteristics more typical of a romantic or going-out relationship (e.g., wanting to spend time together, doing things for each other). To the contrary, Mexican American boys did not describe investing in this manner: "In like a [FWBR] you just like, you don't go out of your way . . . to go out with them and stuff. Like in a romantic relationship, like you make time for that and—" "In a romantic it's more intimate and—" "More serious" "Yeah" "More serious?" (moderator) "Instead of saying, 'uh I gotta go'." In this example, the boys described that in a FWBR, you have the benefit of being able to come and go as you please, without any obligation to "make time" for their partner. Therefore, Mexican American girls often experienced intimacy and closeness that was not mutually exclusive and held little promise for something more.

Discussion

Definitional challenges, as well as the relatively recent emergence of FWBRs in the literature and media, have kept adolescent researchers at arm's length from understanding what these relationships mean to youth and the contexts in which they occur. This is concerning given the priority for sexual and dating health services and programs to reach adolescents with salient and impacting messages. Using language that is understood and used by adolescents themselves is important to build rapport and to deliver services that meet them where they are. Furthermore, adolescents are unique from young adults in a number of developmentally important ways, and much of what we have learned about FWBRs stems from trends on college campuses among primarily European American young adults. This qualitative investigation found that FWBRs are an understood relationship and are experienced among Mexican American and European American high school-aged adolescents. Adolescents defined a FWBR as a primarily sexual arrangement between two friends. Compared to dating or "going-out" relation- ships,

FWBRs lacked in commitment, exclusivity, and emotional care. Along each of the latter dimensions, this relationship type mirrored hooking up relationships (Williams & Adams, in press); FWBRs were clearly differentiated, however, by their re-occurring and private nature. Overall, the degree of companionship was low in that friends typically did not share other activities with one another, often because one or both partners also had a more exclusive dating partner or wanted to remain open should a more attractive partner become available. The contexts in which FWBRs occurred pointed to a number of contradictions that call into question both what characterizes a “friend”, and whether the associated “benefits” are indeed advantageous. They also underscored qualitative distinctions among Mexican American and European American adolescents' experiences. Particularly, findings evidence that Mexican American girls may be the most vulnerable in that the quality of their friendships was more intimate, but without the commitment and exclusivity benefits offered in a going-out relationship. We highlight here the contextual considerations (i.e., Mexican American culture, conflicting definitions and rules, gender inequality, and infidelity) of FWBRs towards a rich understanding of this relationship type for youth. We end with recommendations for culturally- and developmentally-sound practice and programs.

Mexican American culture

Focus group dialogue indicated that FWBRs are typical dating relationships among both European American and Mexican American adolescents, a noteworthy finding given that traditional Latino norms stress earlier transitions to serious relationship types (i.e., marriage, parenting; Williams et al., 2012). Peers are extremely important in the adolescent years in forming norms for sexual behavior (Furman & Shaffer, 2003), at least in the United States (Arnett, 2008). It follows that the meaning attached to FWBRs during adolescence may be affected by acculturation to peer and media culture that posits this relationship type as normal and desirable. This aligns with research finding that acculturation of Latino teens to U.S. mainstream society is associated with earlier initiation of sexual activity and intercourse (Afaible-Munsuz & Brindis, 2006). Peers often have more sexually permissive attitudes about sex than parents or religious communities, and it may be especially difficult for minority parents to discuss sexuality

given conflicting cultural norms (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2006). On the other hand, sexual activity among Mexican American adolescents may be delayed when sexual attitudes are similar to their parents and when educational and religious values are accentuated (Liebowitz, Castellano, & Cuellar, 1999).

Where conflicting cultural values are concerned, it may be that FWBRs are a stepwise transition for acculturating youth away from traditional Latino values that emphasize child-rearing and the importance of family life (Flores, Eyre, & Millstein, 1998) towards U.S. depictions of youth as sexually promiscuous and free (Espin, 1984; Raffaelli, 2005). Hooking up relationships, on the other hand, would by definition blatantly counter a Latino cultural system that values respect among romantically involved partners (Flores et al.) and sexual virtue (especially for girls; Raffaelli, 2005). Despite the implied mutual respect between friends with benefits partners, however, Mexican American adolescent boys did not differ from European American adolescents in their descriptions of such relationships as lacking in care or exclusivity. Mexican American girls, on the other hand, included intimacy components in their FWBRs. If a FWBR was to result in pregnancy, a switch to family-orientation among Mexican American adolescents may present unique challenges for the sexually involved couple and their (largely foreign-born) families. This is a particularly valid concern given higher teen birthrates among Latino groups, as compared to all other ethnic groups in the United States (Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010). More research is needed to explore the complex navigation of uncommitted sexual relationships among Mexican American adolescents, especially where conflicting cultural values and relationship trajectories are concerned.

Conflicting definitions and rules

Adolescents felt that the primary function of a FWBR was to satisfy sexual needs and that an advantage associated with this relationship type was that such needs could be met without having to commit one- self exclusively or romantically. The logic behind this perceived benefit, however, is questionable given that many of these teens (i.e., particularly girls) actually desired a more romantic relationship and others were already in a supposedly committed sexual relationship with a going-out partner. Hence, an important nuance of FWBRs may be that this relationship type serves as a cloak under which to hide

any number of emotions and desires. At least in some cases, it seems that one or both partners do not want a committed relationship *with that person*. To incorporate such a clause into an otherwise enticing and simplistic “friends with benefits” title would be to confront a host of confusing and, in many cases, convicting actualities. The delicate nature of this arrangement highlights the potential for mistrust and hurt, as a going-out relationship is supposedly differentiated by care and commitment to a chosen individual. Ultimately, a FWB partner may feel that he or she is not attractive or desirable enough to gain the status and commitment associated with a going-out relationship.

Gender inequality

The results of this study highlight some of the disadvantages girls face when participating in FWBRs. Of the reasons adolescents offered for their short duration (i.e., relationship going public, emotional attachment on behalf of one partner and not the other, one partner entering into a more committed relationship instead), each impacted girls more negatively. Similar to previous research (Lehmiller et al., 2011), girls were more likely than boys to describe that they entered into a FWBR with the desire for a more committed and caring going-out relationship to emerge. Girls' dialogue reflects grappling with a script that clearly forbade emotional attachment; some girls described compromising their emotional desires, as well as sexual activity, in order to have the experience of being in a relationship — even if at a minimal and unsatisfactory capacity.

Infidelity

Social constructions of FWBRs do not necessitate fidelity within the relationship, and results of this study and others (e.g., Grello et al., 2006; Manning et al., 2006) suggest that many partners also participate in a more serious dating partnership simultaneously. Furthermore, teens felt a FWBR allowed one to freely associate with other cross-sex friends or potential dating partners. In keeping with a developmental perspective on FWBRs, it is important to conceptualize dating behaviors within the context of peer influence. Adolescents report that peers are intimately involved in their sexual and romantic lives; their participation is at times wanted (e.g., warning them that a partner was cheating) and other times not (e.g., spreading false gossip about cheating in

order to damage their reputations or break a couple up; Williams & Hickle, 2011). Cheating on a more exclusive partner is fairly common; Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2006) found that roughly one-fourth of teens had sex with an outside partner while in a dating relationship. What is perplexing is that 70% disagreed that it was “okay to date more than one person at a time” (p. 138). Thus, although youth likely recognize dishonesty as a mal-adaptive relationship characteristic (Giordano et al.), they strongly gravitate towards cheating behaviors regardless. The effective resolution of dissonance between relationship ideals (e.g., honesty; Giordano et al., 2006) and actual behaviors (i.e., cheating) may dictate whether success is likely. It may be helpful to discuss the developmental contexts of relationships with adolescents themselves to help them develop honesty and integrity with one another. Given increased susceptibility to emotional pain within FWBRs, it may also aid youth to build self-esteem and set boundaries to keep them from settling as a FWB partner when a more romantic relationship is desired.

Risk factors

The commonality of infidelity, in combination with conflicting definitions and expectations of FWBRs by gender and ethnicity, paints a rich picture of this relationship type and reveals inherent risks. The extent to which boys may be less emotionally involved in their FWBRs is concerning in that girls may compromise their sexuality to be with a desired individual in any way that they can. Moreover, studies have suggested that regular sexual partners may forego the use of condoms because they trust their partner (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002; Bauman & Berman, 2005; Fortenberry et al., 2002; Vanderdrift et al., 2012). Bauman and Berman's (2005) study of urban Latino and Black adolescents found that relationship context was an important factor in whether trust was implied. Relationships that were only for sex (i.e., “messing”; p. 211) evidenced consistent condom use whereas more caring relationship types (i.e., “boy—girlfriend” and “hubby—wifey”, p. 211) did not. This study's findings point to important distinctions in uncommitted sexual contexts; FWBRs were not necessarily characterized by care, although the title is deceptive given that trust may be normally assumed among friends. Others have found that FWBRs are marked by higher levels of touching, manual stimulation, oral, and

vaginal sex (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Grello et al., 2006), suggesting that youth may be risking serious long-term consequences such as sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies with an uncommitted partner. What is more, this study lends support to studies finding that multiple sexual relationships may be taking place simultaneously (Grello et al., 2006; Lehmillier et al., 2011; Manning et al., 2006; Vanderdrift et al., 2012). If aware of such outcomes, partners may otherwise decide the risk is not worth sexual activity; discussion of the nature of the relationship, however, is unlikely (Hughes et al., 2005).

Limitations

This study has explored FWBRs via youth's naturally emerging dialogue about this relationship type. Findings are limited, however, in their applicability to youth populations at large given that the views presented were the subjective experiences of a particular sample of Mexican American and European American adolescents from the Southwest. The fact that discussions about uncommitted sexual relationships, specifically FWBRs and hookups, emerged spontaneously from adolescents' dialogue has both advantages and disadvantages to research concerning modern sexual norms in adolescence. On the one hand, that conversations about FWBRs surfaced following a questioning route aimed at the solicitation of romantic relationships point to the complex emotional realities of such experiences. That is, couched within discussions of romantic relationships, the contexts in which they are actually experienced (i.e., girls' vulnerability, a lack of care, multiple sexual partners) were readily discussed and compared to other relationship types (i.e., going-out, dating, and hookup relationships). Had FWBRs been the primary foci of the study, on the other hand, more specific prompting aimed at eliciting youth's experiences in entering into a FWBR (e.g., partner selection), the nature of the friendship itself, and how culture and gender affect attitudes about this relationship type would have been appropriate. Further, allowing a discussion of FWBRs to emerge from the data prevented including questions about them a priori. Therefore, we do not know whether adolescents' experiences with FWBRs result from their own dating experiences, from those of peers, or other sources (e.g., the media). However, their perceptions and expectations for dating relationships are important, as attitudes and subjective norms often closely approximate behavior (i.e.,

theory of reasoned action, Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Finally, additional limitations underlie the focus group itself. It is possible that boys may have been less likely to discuss their desires for romantic relationships within the context of same-sex peers.

Implications for program design and conclusion

Knowing that FWBRs constitute a normative dating experience for ethnically diverse adolescents has a number of implications for practice and program design. First, it is suggested that sexual and relationship education programs consider the dating realities of contemporary adolescents in order to more comprehensively protect and educate youth. Specifically, adolescents should be advised to use contraceptives across relationship types (e.g., hooking up, friends with benefits, going-out). Attending to both the perceived benefits and risks of FWBRs as perceived by adolescents themselves provides a way to sidestep “just say no” messages and to meet adolescents in the socio-emotional contexts in which sexual partnering occurs. Second, this study highlights the increased vulnerability of girls, and particularly Mexican American girls, to involve themselves in relationships characterized by divergent and unvoiced expectations. Discussing the gendered nature of this phenomenon may help girls to seek support and not feel alone in their experiences. Cultural underpinnings central to mismatched expectations among boys and girls should also be explored with Mexican American teens. Given that romantic desires and lived contexts (e.g., infidelity) of FWBRs are unlikely to be discussed among partners, providing youth with actual examples of dialogue from others may facilitate supportive environments that uncover such realities and help them to process their complex relational experiences. Moreover, providing a forum through which to process relationship experiences may serve as a means through which they are able to understand themselves in relation to others, communicate their desires and needs, and to develop skills necessary for mutually satisfying relationships into adulthood (Tabares & Gottman, 2003). It is hoped that sexual health programs build from these findings in order to ground their design in developmentally- and culturally-salient messages. Continued research is also required in order to more fully understand this relationship type among diverse groups of adolescents and in their transitions to

young adulthood.

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