Thank you for being here.

Humans are sexual across the lifespan. Relationships make a contribution to our wellbeing, and good sexual health is an integral part of overall good health for all ages. Divorce is increasing, and the sexual revolution generation is trying out different relationship styles, including friends with benefits. As a sexuality educator and researcher for over 20 years I was aware that there was no sexual health promotion aimed at midlife and older people, and in fact little was known about what baby boomers who were not in long term monogamous relationships were doing, so my topic grew from that.

I’m a student at the La Trobe Rural Health School in Bendigo, in Central Victoria, south east Australia. There are 4000 students on campus, and a pod of wild kangaroos.

I’m up to the data analysis stage of my PhD, and have been enrolled about two and a half years. I’ve been teaching part time at La Trobe in Education and Health for 10 years, with a focus on women’s health, and sexual health.
I’m not expecting you to be able to read the text on this, but it is a screenshot of my research page showing how it looks.

My research is exploring the impact of friends with benefits relationships on the health and wellbeing of rural baby boomers. I’m defining a friends with benefits relationship as one where people do not consider themselves to be a couple, but have a friendship, and an ongoing sexual relationship. People are meeting intimacy needs while maintaining social and financial independence. The purpose of the study is to explore the experience of my participants and gather empirical data which could be used to make recommendations for policy and health promotion.

I’m using in depth interviews, without a question schedule. I’m inviting people to tell me about their FWBR, and focus on what is important to them.

Rural baby boomers

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<th>Rural:</th>
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<td>Not living in a capital city</td>
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<th>Baby boomers:</th>
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<td>Born between 1946-1965</td>
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Source: www.abs.gov.au

Photo: baby boomers in 1972
Photographer: Alan Lesheim

This picture is of baby boomers in the 1970s when many were starting out on their sexual journeys. They are not so young and mostly not so shaggy-haired now, but still interested in new experiences.
Young people in friends with benefits relationships (FWBR) research and some comparisons with baby boomers today.

- Approx 50% of students in college report having at least one FWBR (Bisson & Levine 2009).
- Friendship is important, and activities other than sex, including just hanging out, are part of the relationship (Wentland & Reissing, 2011)
- ‘...basically filling the void until something better comes along.’ (Wentland & Reissing 2011 p. 81).
- Not a suitable relationship type once you’ve left college and are in your 30s (Bogle, 2008).

As far as I know my research into baby boomers in FWBR is unique, but there is a growing body of research about young people in FWBR, mostly conducted with college students. It is a very common relationship style, and frequently seen as casual sex, one of a number of casual sex relationship types, which you’ll hear more about in this symposium. FWBR have an emphasis on the friendship, so hanging out seeing a movie or just being together is important too. It is a life stage relationship, mostly not expected to be ongoing, unlike my cohort, who are not necessarily looking for things to change. Kathleen Bogle found in her research that after college when people were in their later twenties and thirties, that their expectations and attitudes towards relationships changed and they were not so receptive to FWBR. My participants’ life stage is different, mostly after the end of long term, monogamous relationships, so they are viewing FWBR quite differently.

Similarities and diversity

- Positive responses
- Life stage context
- Personal growth
- Go out, don’t just stay in, including festivals, travel
- Sexual revolution – for some
- Opposite sex, same sex, questioning
- Moving beyond gender socialisation

One similarity is the positive reactions I’ve had when asking about wellbeing. People are happy. When I ask about their wellbeing it is wonderful to see the look on their faces, hear their tone of voice and positive comments. They say things like: A deep sense of contentment; It keeps me sane; it boosts self esteem; I have a glow. We knew that about sex generally, but this sex is within very diverse relationship types.

FWBR in the context of a baby boomer’s life stage is often after the end of a marriage type relationship, and they are looking for intimacy still, but wanting to maintain independence. People have got some relationship baggage, deaths, abuse, children who have views on what they think their parents should be doing, or not doing. Managing or working to let go of this baggage has been important aspect of personal growth. For some this includes seeing a counsellor or psychologist, working through past issues, and
learning – and using - assertiveness skills. People have made huge effort to reflect on their values, what they want, and don’t want. Women don’t want domestic obligations. ‘I don’t want to be the domestic goddess’. Several people have said how much they like ownership of their own space, with a relationship that gives pleasure (best sex of my life is a common theme) and often provides support.

Unlike young people and their FWBR, which seems to focus on staying in, and not going out, baby boomers are going on holidays together, off to festivals, out to dinner, having a great time, AND having their own space. These are common threads, but there are also very diverse lifestyles within my participants.

The children of the sexual revolution didn’t all enjoy the free love of the hippie days; some of my participants did, and slip easily into a non traditional relationship after a time of marriage. Others, ‘good catholic girl’, or who were socialised into conservative gender expectations, have found it to be liberating to do something that suits them, and not be worried about their mother wagging a disapproving finger in the direction of the bedroom.

I interviewed a conservative looking sheep farmer from an isolated community who told me about her high libido after her husband died, meeting the needs of local elderly farmers whose wives had stopped doing what she saw as their duty, having five men on the go at once, and having to keep them apart. The proliferation of white utes, or pick up trucks, meant they were not so easy to identify as different people coming and going to the farm.

Some people identified as polyamorous, or if they didn’t use the term, what they described seemed to me to be a poly style situation, but in different configurations; some within a committed partnership with additional FWB partners, others determined to be seen as single, but drawing strength and contentment from a long term FWBR while open to additional pairings. Toby identifies as gay; was married and faithful for seven years to a woman and has two children, she left him and now he lives with a man, but describes his FWBR as keeping him sane, because he doesn’t think any one person can fulfil another’s needs. Some women who had only had heterosexual relationships were questioning their sexuality and looking for a same sex partner.

Women commented on learning to move beyond their conditioning and become more assertive, ‘behaving like a man’, enjoying their independence. So many themes are emerging from all that, but I want to just focus on two; sexual pleasure and safety.

**Sex: Pleasure**

- Lilly: But it’s yeah, it’s the best sex I’ve ever had, because it’s relaxed... And I’m with someone I really want to be with so I enjoy it... I have ‘that glow’ as one of my friends said the other day.
- Bettie: Fun, and pleasure, just plain old pleasure. Yeah, so it’s good. Good for your skin as well - my skin always looks clear after I’ve been up there.

Nobody I spoke to was in a FWBR and not enjoying the sex, and the wellbeing that the sex brought. Re Lilly: it is the relaxation, a developed, familiar, comfortable relationship where she feels loved that makes a difference. Both Lilly and her FWB partner are big people, and she explained that they had found a position that worked for them, which also lead to the confidence about enjoying their encounters.

Re Bettie: clearly the fun element is important, which comes from a relationship that has been going for years, living in different states, meeting regularly, and travelling overseas for his work.

I wasn’t specifically asking about the sex initially, instead leaving it up to participants to raise matters, and my confidence grew as I became more practiced at interviewing, but many people spoke of good sex. The elements that made it good sex were the intimacy and friendship connection they had, the freedom to take their time about it, to laugh, and have fun. One participant had begun a FWBR after ending a traditional, living together relationship that was toxic. A FWBR worked for her, because the sex was when they were at their best, and maintaining that aspect of their relationship, which they did for a couple of years, was a very positive experience. She said of those moments; ‘I was perfect’.
Sex: safety

Goldie: I find older men won’t use condoms, because they see that as against their manhood or something.

Goldie: Usually by the time I’ve slept with someone I’ve been out with them three or four times and you’ve got a pretty reasonable handle on who they are... as a person.

Bella: I hate condoms...I sort of need the semen actually, it creates a sensation which makes it easier to orgasm. For me!

In the photo Daz is holding a sign that says ‘condoms ruin skin to skin contact’. A baby boomer friend said this to me recently, and I thought the idea was so ridiculous I was inspired to find a willing friend and wrap him in plastic wrap to illustrate how unrealistic that statement is. I have Daz’s permission to use his picture.

I’ve only put up quotes about themes that are emerging that relate to unsafe sex; some participants were also quite strict about protected sex. Older men, masculinity, erectile function and condoms is a theme that is emerging strongly. Goldie finds: read

Knowing someone well enough to know they are safe is another emerging theme, and this sense of safety is similar to what the research tells us about young people and sexual health. Goldie again:

For Bella condoms interfere with her pleasure. She had asked for STI tests, so was aware of the need for that, but also felt she knew her partners well enough to know their sexual history. She was the farmer, and trusted her partners when they said they’d been effectively celibate for decades.

Implications

- Humans are sexual across the life span (Bauer, McAuliffe & Nay, 2009).
- Relationships may not be what you assume.
- Negative judgement and rejection are bad for wellbeing (McNair, 2004).
- The over fifties cohort is the fastest growing age group for HIV infection (Minichiello, Hawkes & Pitts 2011).

The implications from my findings are many, but it is important to me that people who work with or interact with other humans are aware of and respectful of these things.
Recommendations

• If you are writing policy or protocol around relationships and sexual health, include midlife and older adults.

• Include sexuality and relationships across the lifespan in training of health professionals, psychologists and allied professions.

• Develop and deploy health promotion for this cohort, talking diversity into consideration.

Thank you

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References


