What are ‘friends with benefits’? The challenge of defining a new term in a scholarly way.

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I’m a PhD candidate at La Trobe University’s Bendigo campus in Central Victoria. It’s a pretty, rural campus with about 4,000 students. The kangaroos which are to be found around the campus are shown here in front of the Education building where I teach sometimes. I’m researching baby boomers in friends with benefits relationships, with a view to making recommendations for policy and health promotion.

How come it’s older people who are getting more STIs than ever before?
Why is my topic important? I see a need for relevant sexual health policy and health promotion to older adults, and this UK campaign is based on evidence of a growing incidence of STIs in the over 50s.

These UK FPA posters are from their Sexual health week Sept 2010. Some of the text below the picture says, “Remember when you thought this looked fab and groovy? When everything was peace, love and tie-dye tee shirts? You’re older and wiser now, of course. An experienced lover. All the sexual anxieties of youth a thing of the past. But if that’s true, how come it’s the older people who are getting more STIs than ever before? STIs don’t ask how old you are before they infect you. And they don’t care how few sexual partners you’ve had recently either”.

What are friends with benefits (FWB)?

When I explain what I’m doing for my PhD I start with ‘Health Promotion’. If pressed, or if people seem interested, I’ll elaborate, “I’m studying baby boomers in friends with benefits relationships”. That has usually received one of two responses, a blank stare or a knowing, “Oh”, often followed by, “I know people you could interview”. While I love saying, ‘I’m a sex researcher’, really the purpose of my research is to make recommendations for health promotion and policy for older adults – baby boomers specifically, in friends with benefits relationships.

Why a definition?

Currently there is no accepted definition of FWB. It is important for the rigour of research to be clear about your terms. I think that because human behaviour is imprecise there will be no one, exact, definition of FWB, and my research participants will have their own definitions. The bulk of the research has been done to date with college students. I suspect that baby boomers will be doing it very differently from them, and I’m interested to explore those differences. I have had fun exploring some ways to a definition, though, and this presentation is about that journey.

As an academic I’m used to insisting on scholarly references, and drilling into students that ‘Wikipedia is not a scholarly resource’. To find out a definition of a term that has become popular in modern culture I had to use popular culture sources, that are contemporary and not peer-reviewed, at least not in the formal sense. This meant I was going against my academic training and using non-scholarly resources.
The language we have to use

- The language we have to use will influence the identities people construct, and the relationships we have (Ritchie & Barker 2006)
- Social Scripts (Adams, Oye & Parker 2003)

There is not much that is new in human sexual relationships and behaviour, but the prevalence changes. Perhaps having language to describe FWB type behaviour has helped popularise it, and enabled people to articulate what they want. I’ve gone online to seek a definition, and Ritchie and Barker (2006) agree with using the web as a text resource for finding a discussion about the construction of identities. They also argue that the language we have to use will influence the identities people construct, and the relationships we have.

From this could be concluded that although casual and uncommitted, but ongoing sexual relationships, are not a modern phenomenon, having the terminology ‘friends with benefits’ widely discussed in modern culture, enables people to conceptualise the behaviours and discuss their possibilities. If you can think about it and have the words to describe it, then it is more likely to happen. This discussion, and depiction in films such as ‘No Strings Attached’ gives people a new social script to follow. (Adams 2003)


Urbandictionary.com is an online dictionary that the general public contributes to, and comments on contributions, by thumbs up or down voting or adding a comment or refinement to the definition, asking people to ‘Define your world’ (www.urbandictionary.com). The term, friends with benefits (FWB), has five pages of definitions, examples and warnings about friends with benefits relationships. These began on 23 August, 2003 and continued until February 12, 2006.

The first definition of ‘friends with benefits’ on Urban Dictionary is straightforward and non-judgemental. Anonymous contributes, “Two friends who have a sexual relationship (sic) without being emotionally involved. Typically two good friends who have casual sex without a monogomous (sic) relationship or any kind of commitment.”
Irish Dave’s Rules: dinner only in a crappy restaurant with no tablecloths

There are some guidelines for FWB online. Irish Dave posted the rules that distinguish a FWB relationship from a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship.

He covers Breakfasting Behaviour (definitely no eating breakfast together); Dinner Rules (a meal in a really crappy restaurant is permitted but there is to be no tablecloth and the service must be appalling); Birthday Rules (no cards, and only presents that relate to bedroom activities are allowed, as long as they don’t demonstrate thoughtfulness); Going Dutch (it is made very clear that each person pays for themselves); and Phone call behaviour (strictly to plan assignations and no general chatting) (Irish Dave, 2008). His rules relate to behaviours, and don’t offer any guidelines about who should or should not attempt a FWB relationship.

The Player

http://www.askmen.com/dating/player_400/482_vincent-cassel-iconic-player.html
The Player (2008) on a website that offers dating advice to men, advises that although the concept of commitment free sex sounds good, women are very complex creatures and it isn’t as easy as it sounds. If she calls for support over a problem with another relationship, he firmly advises the man to say no.

**Mature Advice**

- Ensure you have emotional maturity and definitely don't want a romantic relationship first
- FWB are the perfect solution if what you want is a sexual relationship and not a solution to loneliness or a broken heart. (Ruth, 2006)

Ruth does make some recommendations about how to approach a FWB relationship that are not just about behaviours. She advises ensuring you have emotional maturity and definitely don't want a romantic relationship before embarking on a FWB relationship. In contrast to warning against a FWB relationship, she claims that they are the perfect solution if what you want is a sexual relationship and not a solution to loneliness or a broken heart (Ruth, 2006).

**Communication**

![Text message conversation]

You free tonight? Fancy getting together?

I'm out to the movies tonight, how does tomorrow suit you?

Tomorrow is fine. Your place or mine?

Make it your place and I'll bring the wine.

Great. Looking forward to it.

Cool.
What is a definition of a friends with benefits relationship? Partly it can be defined by what it is not: there is no expectation of being a formal couple, and no living together.

What it IS, though, involves negotiation, respect and, it is to be hoped, an equitable relationship. My idea is that baby boomers will conduct FWB differently from uni students in college. They are at a different life stage and will have more at stake financially, be more settled and know what they want emotionally more than a teenager exploring sexual freedom for the first time. Not sexting, necessarily either.

**How do I define a FWB?**

- Baby boomers – born 1946-1964
- FWB is a sexual relationship, that is expected to continue for the immediate future.
- There will probably be an emotional connection, but not the same as spouse/partners.
- Independence is respected.

**Benefit summary prospectus**


Unlike a partner type relationship there will not be social expectations such as visiting mother in her nursing home together.
Why does this matter?

- A proportion of baby boomers are choosing a friends with benefits type relationship.
- They want intimacy, but also independence (Malta 2008).
- Proactive, not reactive, health promotion

My idea is, that with changing social mores, and growing awareness of relationship possibilities, electronic communication, FWB are happening more and more.

Health promotion to this cohort will be valuable to improve confidence and social skills, decision making, negotiation, how to get back into dating scene positively with good emotional and sexual safety.

STI prevention is still important –there is a growing incidence of Chlamydia in older adults in Australia (National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, 2010) Health promotion should be proactive, not reactive. Begin with healthy public policy, encourage screening, and organise support for GPs to get comfortable asking about sexual health needs and to encourage testing.

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References


