



Published in final edited form as:

J Sex Res. 2011 ; 48(6): 554–564. doi:10.1080/00224499.2010.535623.

Romantic Partners, Friends, Friends with Benefits, and Casual Acquaintances As Sexual Partners

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to provide a detailed examination of sexual behavior with different types of partners. A sample of 163 young adults reported on their light nongenital, heavy nongenital, and genital sexual activity with romantic partners, friends, and casual acquaintances. They described their sexual activity with “friends with benefits” as well as with friends in general. Young adults were most likely to engage in sexual behavior with romantic partners, but sexual behavior also often occurred with some type of nonromantic partner. More young adults engaged in some form of sexual behavior with casual acquaintances than with friends with benefits. The frequencies of sexual behavior, however, were greater with friends with benefits than with friends or casual acquaintances. Interview and questionnaire data revealed that friends with benefits were typically friends, but not necessarily. Nonsexual activities were also less common with friends with benefits than other friends. Taken together, the findings illustrate the value of differentiating among different types of nonromantic partners and different levels of sexual behavior.

Most research on sexual behavior has not considered the nature of the relationship in which it occurs. When the context of the relationship has been considered, the research has focused on sexual behavior in romantic relationships or some subset of romantic relationships, such as marriages or cohabitating couples (e.g. Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; O’Sullivan, Mantsun, Harris, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). Yet the sexual behavior of young adults and adolescents often occurs in other contexts. Such sexual activity has been commonly described as casual sex, nonromantic sexual behavior, or “hook-ups.” The details of the definitions vary, but they have the common denominator of referring to sexual behavior in uncommitted relationships (Weaver & Herold, 2000).

Sexual intercourse usually occurs first in a romantic or committed relationship, but approximately 25% of the time, it first occurs with a friend, stranger, or someone the person is dating occasionally (Elo, King, & Furstenberg, 1999; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000). Moreover, approximately half of sexually active adolescents have had intercourse with a nonromantic partner (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005). About half of these incidents with a nonromantic partner occurred only once (Manning, et al. 2006). Similarly, approximately 75–80% of college students reported “hooking up” or engaging in some form of sexual activity with someone for just a night (England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2007; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000); 30% reported hooking up with someone for the night and having intercourse (Paul, et al., 2000).

Most investigators have not differentiated among different partners within the general category of casual or nonromantic sexual partners. Some investigators have examined one particular category of nonromantic partners (e.g. friends {Afifi & Faulkner, 2000} or friends with benefits {Bisson & Levin, 2009; Owen & Fincham, in press}), but it is not clear if their findings are specific to that category or are applicable to other types of casual or nonromantic sexual partners.

In the two studies that did include multiple categories (Grello, et al. 2006; Manning, et al. 2005), friends were the most typical type of partner. To date, relatively little is known about differences in the sexual activity with different partners. Grello, et al. (2006), however, found that more affectionate sexual behavior (e.g. handholding, hugging, kissing, & massages) occurred when they were friends than when they were acquaintances or strangers (Grello, et al. 2006). Thus, the limited research suggests that sexual activity may vary across different kinds of nonromantic partners.

Not only have most investigators failed to differentiate among categories of nonromantic partners, but also they have not typically distinguished among different types of sexual behavior. Intercourse does not occur in approximately 60% of hook-ups (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Different sexual behaviors involve different levels of risk of sexually transmitted diseases. The type of sexual behavior that common occurs also varies as a function of the type of sexual partner (Grello et al., 2006). Finally, genital, heavy nongenital, and light nongenital sexual behavior are differentially related to representations of romantic relationships (Jones & Furman, in press). These findings suggest that it is important to distinguish among different types of sexual behavior.

Friends with Benefits

Recently, the idea of “friends with benefits” has received considerable attention in the mass media (e.g. Denizet-Lewis, 2004). This relationship is commonly described by laypersons as friends engaging in sexual behavior without a monogamous relationship or any kind of commitment (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=friends+with+benefits>). Social scientists have similarly described them as friends engaging in sex or sexual activity (e.g. Bisson & Levine, 2009). What is less clear, however, is whether friends with benefits are typically seen as a distinct category of sexual partners. That is, it is not apparent if all friends one has engaged in sexual activity with are considered friends with benefits; for example, being a friend with benefits may imply some ongoing opportunities for sexual behavior, rather than a single episode. Some types of sexual activity behavior may also be necessary to be considered a friend with benefits. Additionally, it is unclear if it is even necessary to first be a friend in the traditional sense of a friend to be considered a friend with benefits. For example, it is not apparent if a casual acquaintance could be considered a friend with benefits or not. A clearer understanding of the nature of friends with benefits is needed.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to provide a detailed examination of sexual behavior with different types of partners. We first asked about sexual behavior with romantic partners, friends, and casual acquaintances and then asked about sexual behavior with friends with benefits (see rationale in methods). We distinguished among types of sexual behavior: 1) “light” nongenital acts (kissing on the lips, cuddling, and “making out”), 2) “heavy” nongenital acts (light petting, heavy petting, & dry sex), and 3) genital acts (oral sex, vaginal intercourse, & anal intercourse). Based on the existing literature (e.g. Grello, et al. 2006; Manning et al. 2006), we predicted that young adults would be more likely to

engage in light nongenital, heavy nongenital, and genital sexual behaviors with romantic partners than with nonromantic partners of any type (Hypothesis 1-A). Moreover, we expected that the frequencies of all types of sexual behavior would be greater with romantic partners than with any type of nonromantic partners because romantic relationships in early adulthood are more intimate in nature (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992) (Hypothesis 1-B). Based on prior research (Grello, et al. 2006; Manning, et al. 2006), we also predicted that a greater proportion of young adults would engage in sexual behaviors with friends than with casual acquaintances (Hypothesis 2-A). The frequencies of sexual behaviors, especially light sexual behaviors, such as kissing, cuddling, and “making out”, were also expected to be greater in friendships because of the affectionate nature of the relationships (Hypothesis 2-B). The limited literature on friends with benefits provided little basis for predictions, but we expected fewer participants would report engaging in sexual behavior with friends with benefits than with friends or casual acquaintances, because a significant proportion of sexual activity with a nonromantic partner only occurs on one occasion, whereas being friends with benefits may require establishing a relationship that involves some ongoing opportunities for sexual behavior (Hypothesis 3-A). When young adults have friends with benefits, however, we expected the frequency of sexual behavior with friends with benefits to be higher than the frequencies with friends or casual acquaintances because of the ongoing opportunities with friends with benefits (Hypothesis 3-B).

Past work has consistently found that males have greater interest in sexual behavior with nonromantic partners (see Okami & Shackelford, 2001). To date, however, distinctions among different types of nonromantic partners have not been made. Gender differences may be less pronounced in friendships than in casual acquaintanceships as friendships entail some level of intimacy that encounters with casual acquaintances may not. Thus, we predicted gender differences in sexual behavior with casual acquaintances (Hypothesis 4-A), but tendered no predictions regarding gender differences with friends or friends with benefits. Although not as well documented as the gender differences with nonromantic partners, women appear to be more likely to engage in intercourse and have higher frequencies of intercourse with romantic partners than men (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2002; Prince & Bernard, 1998). We expected that we would replicate these gender differences with romantic partners and find similar gender differences in the occurrence and frequency of light nongenital and heavy nongenital behavior with romantic partners (Hypothesis 4-B).

Another purpose of the study was to obtain a better understanding of the nature of friends with benefits. As noted previously, it is not clear how similar friends with benefits are to other friends. Because the focus of relationships with friends with benefits appears to be on sexual activity, we hypothesized that young adults would engage in fewer nonsexual activities with friends with benefits than with typical friends; at the same time we hypothesized that they would engage in more nonsexual activities with friends with benefits than with casual acquaintances, because friends with benefits appear to be ongoing relationships (Hypothesis 5).

Finally, we interviewed young adults to obtain a better understanding about their conceptualization of friends with benefits. We hypothesized that most would require friends with benefits to be friends, and would require that there be an ongoing opportunity for sexual behavior (vs. a one time experience) (Hypothesis 6).

Method

Participants

The participants were part of a longitudinal study investigating the role of relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners on psychosocial adjustment in adolescence and young

adulthood. Two hundred 10th grade high school students (100 boys, 100 girls; *M* age = 15.27 years, range 14–16 years old) were originally recruited from a diverse range of neighborhoods and schools in a large Western metropolitan area by distributing brochures and sending letters to families residing in various zip codes and to students enrolled in various schools in ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

Designed to be relatively representative of the ethnicity of the United States, the sample was 11.5% African American, 12.5% Hispanic, 1.5% Native American, 1% Asian American, 4% biracial, and 69.5% White, non Hispanic. The sample was of average intelligence and did not differ from national norms on 11 of 12 measures of adjustment (see Furman, Low, & Ho, 2009). In the fifth wave of data collection which was collected in 2005–2007, we asked about sexual activity with different types of partners. At that time, participants ranged in age from 19.32 to 21.93 years old (*M* = 20.51 yr); 186 (94 men, 92 women) of the original 200 participants took part in the Wave 5 assessment. Those who did and did not participate in Wave 5 did not differ on any of 18 primary demographic, adjustment, and romantic/sexual variables collected at Wave 1. For the purpose of the present study, we limited the sample to the Wave 5 participants who were not married, engaged, or cohabiting with someone (*N* = 163; 86 men, 77 women).

With regard to sexual orientation, 87% said they were heterosexual/straight, whereas the other participants said they were bisexual, gay, lesbian, or questioning. We chose to retain the sexual minorities in the sample to be inclusive and because the majority of them reported that they were either bisexual or questioning their sexual identity.

Participants were compensated financially for completing the questionnaires. The confidentiality of the participants' data was protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality issued by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Measures

Sexual Behavior Questionnaire—Participants were first asked about their sexual behavior in the last 12 months with three types of partners: 1) romantic partners, 2) friends, and 3) causal acquaintances or someone they just met. The participants were told they were going to be asked about all three types in advance, and the order of the questions concerning the three relationships was fixed to eliminate potential confusion of categories (e.g. romantic partners are often considered friends as well).

After they had answered the questions about the first three types of sexual partners, we asked them to answer a parallel set of questions about friends with benefits. Because it was unclear how friends with benefits would be categorized and how distinct they were from other categories, we indicated that the term can be defined in different ways and asked participants to use their own definition of friends with benefits even if their partners in this category overlapped with some of their partners in the categories they had answered about already. This strategy allowed us to examine how a term was naturally used and provided a means of obtaining information about whom young adults consider to be friends with benefits. We also believed that our strategy would be less confusing to the participants than initially asking them about all four categories when we expected that the friend with benefits category overlapped with the other categories, especially friends. We also thought it would be inappropriate to force the four categories to not overlap with each other when they were likely to overlap in actuality; moreover, we thought it would be confusing to ask participants about sexual behavior with friends who were not friends with benefits, or to ask them about friends with benefits who were not friends or casual acquaintances.

For each type of partner, participants were asked about the frequency of engaging in nine types of sexual behavior during the last year: 1) three kinds of “light” nongenital acts (kissing on the lips, cuddling, and “making out”), 2) three kinds of “heavy” nongenital acts (light petting, heavy petting, & dry sex), and 3) three kinds of genital acts (oral sex, vaginal intercourse, & anal intercourse). The distinctions among light nongenital, heavy nongenital, and genital acts were based on structural equation models examining the structure of sexual behavior (Jones & Furman, in press). They rated the frequency of sexual activity using a scale ranging from 1 (*Not in the last 12 months*) to 8 (*Almost every day or every day*).

Participants were also asked if they had commonly engaged in each of 24 nonsexual activities with individuals in each of the four relationship categories. Sample activities included drinking alcohol, watching TV, and sharing something personal. The questions about friends and casual acquaintances asked about all casual acquaintances and friends, not just sexual ones, so that we could see if friends with benefits were similar to other casual acquaintances and friends. The sexual behavior questionnaire was administered by computer assisted self interviewing techniques to encourage participants to respond honestly (Turner, Ku, & Rogers, 1998).

Characteristics of Friends with Benefits—In light of the limited information regarding friends with benefits, we also asked participants a series of questions to clarify the nature of these relationships. Specifically, we asked them whether friends with benefits are different from romantic partners, friends, and casual acquaintances (See questions in Table 5). Responses were categorized as yes, no, or qualified (e.g. “it depends”). We also asked about the frequency of sexual encounters necessary to consider someone a friend with benefits. The questions regarding the characteristics of friends with benefits were not added until the first third of the data had been collected. The 109 participants who answered these questions did not differ from the other participants on any of the primary variables of the study or in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Descriptive Information

All variables were examined to determine if the assumptions of univariate and multivariate analyses were met (Behrens, 1997). Outliers were adjusted to fall 1.5 times the interquartile range below the 25th percentile or above the 75th percentile. All the resulting variables had acceptable levels of skew and kurtosis.

Occurrence of Sexual Behaviors with Four Types of Partners

Table 1 presents the proportion of men and women engaging in each level of sexual behavior with each of the four types of partners. These proportions include both participants who engaged in additional forms of sexual activity as well as those who engaged in no more than that level of sexual activity; thus, the light nongenital proportions includes those who engaged in only light nongenital activity and those who engaged in heavy nongenital or genital activity as well. (All participants who reported engaging in genital sexual activity with a particular type of partner had also reported engaging in light nongenital and heavy nongenital sexual activity with that type of partner; similarly all participants who reported engaging in heavy nongenital sexual activity with a particular type of partner had also reported engaging in light nongenital sexual activity with that type of partner.)

We conducted the equivalent of two way (participant gender by partner type) repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance for each level of sexual behavior using generalized hierarchical linear modeling (see Kenny, Bolger, & Kashy, 2002 for a

description of the equivalence). Generalized hierarchical linear modeling takes into account the nested nature of the data, including the dependency inherent in the overlapping nature of the friends with benefits category. Unlike repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance, generalized hierarchical linear modeling does not require ordinal data and can be used to analyze proportional data by using a logit link function. Additionally, it permits missing data; subsequent analyses examine the frequencies of sexual behavior with different types of partners; if a participant did not have a particular type of sexual partner, the participant's scores for that type of partner were treated as missing scores. Less than 15% of the participants had engaged in sexual behavior with all four types of partners; thus, the analyses of the frequencies would not be possible if complete data were required.

An example of a *full model* in generalized hierarchical linear modeling was Level-1 Model

$$\text{Logit}(Y) = \beta_{0i} + \beta_{1i} C_{r-a} + \beta_{2i} C_{f-b} + \beta_{3i} C_{r-a} + \beta_{2i} C_{ra-fb} + \varepsilon_j$$

Level-2 Model

$$\begin{aligned}\beta_{0i} &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Gender}) + u_{0i} \\ \beta_{1i} &= \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}(\text{Gender}) \\ \beta_{2i} &= \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}(\text{Gender}) \\ \beta_{3i} &= \gamma_{30} + \gamma_{31}(\text{Gender})\end{aligned}$$

This model contained three orthogonal dummy variable contrasts: C_{r-a} represents a contrast between romantic partners and casual acquaintances, C_{f-b} represents a contrast between friends and friends with benefits. C_{rp-fb} reflects a contrast between romantic partners and casual acquaintances on the one hand and friends and friends with benefits on the other hand. The outcome Y is whether a type of sexual behavior occurred or not.

In traditional multivariate analyses of variance, the significance of main effects and interactions are obtained as part of the standard output. To determine if an interaction or main effect is significant in generalized hierarchical linear modeling, however, it is necessary to compare the fit (deviance) of pairs of models which contain or do not contain the terms of interest.

To determine if there was a significant omnibus effect of the interaction between gender and type of partner, we compared the *full model* with a *two main effects model* which did not contain the terms which reflect an interaction ($\gamma_{11}(\text{Gender})$, $\gamma_{21}(\text{Gender})$, & $\gamma_{31}(\text{Gender})$ in the Level 2 equations). If the deviance of the *full model* was significantly smaller than the deviance of the *two main effects model* (i.e., the fit was better), it would indicate a significant interaction between gender and type of partner existed. If the deviance of the *full model* was not significantly smaller than the *two main effects models*, it would indicate there was not a significant interaction between gender and type of partner.

To determine if there was a significant effect of gender, we compared the deviance of the *two main effects model* with the deviance of a *partner type only model*, which only contained the partner effects terms. If the deviance of the *two main effects model* was significantly smaller than the *partner type only models*, it would indicate there was a significant gender effect.

To determine if there was a significant main effect of partner, we compared the deviance of the *two main effects models* with the deviance of a *gender only model*, which only contained

the gender term. If the deviance of the *two main effects model* was significantly smaller than the *gender only model*, it would indicate there was a significant partner effect.

We found significant main effects of partner type for all levels of sexual behavior (all differences in deviances > 104.14 , $ps < .001$). The interaction between partner type and gender was significant for light nongenital behavior (difference in deviance = 16.33, $p < .001$) and genital behavior (difference in deviance = 8.89, $p = .03$) and approached significance for heavy nongenital behavior (difference in deviance = 6.60, $p = .09$).

To understand the nature of the interactions, we conducted the hierarchical linear modeling equivalent of tests of simple main effects in ANOVA. To determine the effect of partner type for each gender, we compared the deviance of the *partner type only model* for a gender with the deviance of a *random intercept model* for that gender, which did not include the terms reflecting a partner effect. The simple main effects of partner were significant for all three levels of sexual behavior for both genders (all differences in deviances $> .48.90$, $ps < .001$); we then examined the specific dummy-variable contrasts of pairs of means. Consistent with Hypothesis 1-A, these analyses revealed that both men and women were almost always more likely to engage in each level of sexual behavior with romantic partners than with friends, casual acquaintances, or friends with benefits. The one noteworthy exception is that men were as likely to engage in light nongenital sexual behavior with casual acquaintances as with romantic partners. Contrary to Hypothesis 2-A, men were also significantly more likely to engage in light nongenital and heavy nongenital sexual behavior with casual acquaintances than with friends. Consistent with Hypothesis 3-A, men were also significantly more likely to engage in light nongenital behavior with casual acquaintances than with friends with benefits. On the other hand, women were significantly less likely to engage in light nongenital sexual behavior with friends with benefits than with friends or casual acquaintances, but otherwise the proportions for friends, casual acquaintances, and friends with benefits did not differ for women.

We also examined gender differences by comparing the deviance of a *gender only effect model* for each type of partner with a *random intercept model* for each type of partner. Consistent with Hypothesis 4-A, men were significantly more likely to engage in light nongenital sexual behavior with casual acquaintances than women were, but contrary to this hypothesis, no differences were found in heavy nongenital or genital sexual behavior. Consistent with Hypothesis 4-B, women were significantly more likely to engage in light nongenital and genital sexual behavior with romantic partners than men were. No gender differences were found with respect to sexual behavior with friends or friends with benefits.

Frequencies of Sexual Behaviors with Different Partners

Next we examined the frequencies of sexual behaviors with different partners. If a participant did not have a particular type of sexual partner, the participant's scores of no sexual behavior for that type of partner were treated as missing scores. If these scores of no sexual behavior had been included, differences in frequencies of sexual behavior with different partners could result from differences in the proportions of individuals having a particular type of sexual partner as well as differences in the frequencies of sexual behavior with different types of partners for those who had those kinds of sexual partners. For each of the three levels of sexual behavior, we conducted hierarchical linear modeling analyses similar to the prior ones, except that the scores did not need to be transformed with a logit function as they were continuous scores. Table 2 presents the frequencies of each level of sexual behavior in each of the four types of relationships. Significant main effects of type of relationship were found for all three levels of sexual behavior (differences in deviance > 258.30 , $ps < .001$). Consistent with Hypothesis 1-B, follow-up comparisons revealed that young adults engaged in all three levels of sexual behavior more frequently with romantic

partners than with friends, casual acquaintances, or friends with benefits. Consistent with Hypothesis 3-B, they also engaged in each kind of sexual behavior more frequently with friends with benefits than with friends or casual acquaintances. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, neither gender nor the interaction between gender and relationship type were significant.

Nonsexual Behavior with Different Partners

We were also interested in the extent of nonsexual behavior with friends with benefits compared to other partners. Once again, scores for a particular type of relationship were considered missing if the participant did not have that type of relationship so as to avoid confounding differences in the proportions of individuals having a particular type of relationship and differences in the range of activities of those who had these relationships. Table 3 presents the proportion of activities participants typically engaged in with each type of partner. We conducted the mixed model analogue of a repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance in which type of partner (romantic, friend, casual acquaintance, and friend with benefits) was a within subjects factor and gender was a between subjects factor. This analysis revealed significant effects of partner type (difference in deviance = 352.45, $p < .001$) and gender (difference in deviance = 4.24, $p = .04$, which were qualified by a significant interaction between partner type and gender (difference in deviance = 8.23, $p = .04$). Consistent with Hypothesis 5, follow-up analyses revealed that the proportion of activities differed significantly among all four groups for women with the highest proportion of activities with friends, then romantic partners, then friends with benefits, and finally casual acquaintances. For men, the highest proportions were with romantic partners and friends, then friends with benefits, and finally casual acquaintances.

Configurations of Sexual Partners

Table 4 present the different configurations of people with whom one engaged in sexual behavior. An examination of the frequencies of these configurations can provide information regarding the characteristics of friends with benefits. Only 38 of the 76 individuals who reported engaging in light nongenital sexual behavior with a friend indicated that they had engaged in light nongenital sexual behavior with a friend with benefits. Thus, simply engaging in some form of sexual behavior with a friend may not be sufficient for that friend to be considered to be a friend with benefits, as no more than half of such friends are considered friends with benefits. On the other hand, 20 of the 28 individuals who reported having engaged in heavy nongenital sexual behavior with a friend reported having engaged in heavy nongenital sexual behavior with a friend with benefits. Similarly, 19 of the 26 individuals who engaged in genital sexual behavior with a friend reported engaging in genital sexual behavior with a friend with benefits. Thus, if one has engaged in significant sexual behavior with a friend, the friend is likely to be considered a friend with benefits.

It also does not seem necessary to be a friend to be considered a friend with benefits. Only 19 of the 37 individuals who reported engaging in genital sexual behavior with a friend with benefits said they had engaged in such behavior with a friend. Although some friends with benefits may only be casual acquaintances, only 21 of the 42 who had engaging in genital sexual behavior with a casual acquaintance reported engaging in genital sexual behavior with a friend with benefits. Thus, it does not seem necessary for a friend with benefits to be a friend, but significant sexual activity with a friend seems more likely to be considered a friend with benefits than similar activity with a casual acquaintance; that is, 19 of 26 friends were, whereas only 21 of 42 casual acquaintances were.

Finally, participants were asked if their friend(s) with benefits were friends or casual acquaintances; 74% ($N = 35$) said they were friends, 4% ($N = 2$) said they were casual acquaintances, and 21% ($N = 10$) said they included both friends and casual acquaintances.

Characteristics of Friends with Benefits

Table 5 presents the participants' answers to the questions concerning the characteristics of friends with benefits. Almost all (97%) thought that friends with benefits were different from romantic partners. The majority also thought that they were different from a casual sex partner (60%) or someone you periodically hook up with (58%). Most (79%) did not view them as different from friends apart from sexual behavior, and most (72%) thought that they had to be friends. On the other hand, approximately half thought they could be someone you didn't know well (47%). Most (86%) thought that you would not be a friend with benefits if you had only engaged in sexual behavior with someone once. Finally, we asked participants how many times they had to engage in sexual behavior to be considered a friend with benefits. The most common responses were "not a certain amount, just whenever they want to" (23%), more than once (16%), once or twice a month (16%) and on a regular basis (15%). Consistent with their earlier answers, only 12% thought once was sufficient.

Discussion

The present study underscores the importance of examining the relational context in which sexual behavior occurs. Sexual behavior with romantic partners differed substantially from sexual behavior with nonromantic partners. Moreover, differences occurred among the three types of nonromantic sexual partners, both in terms of prevalence and frequency of sexual behaviors with different partners. The pattern of differences in the sexual behavior with the different partners also varied as a function of the level of sexual behavior, underscoring the importance of examining that dimension as well. Finally, the data obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews provided us a better picture of the nature of relationships with friends with benefits.

Consistent with our hypotheses, young adults were more likely to have engaged in sexual behavior with romantic partners than with nonromantic partners of any kind. In fact, twice as many young adults report engaging in heavy nongenital and genital sexual behavior with romantic partners than with any of the other three types of partners. The pattern is even more striking when one examines the *frequency* of sexual behavior with different partners. In all cases, the frequencies were substantially greater with romantic partners than with any of the other types of partners. It may be that sexual activity occurs more often during a particular time span in romantic relationships because of the level of intimacy or expectations regarding sexual activity in these relationships. It may also be that romantic relationships are longer lasting than the typical periods of sexual activity in friendships, acquaintanceships, or friendships with benefits. In any case, depictions of young adults' sexuality in the mass media have often emphasized nonromantic contexts (e.g. Denizet-Lewis, 2004), but romantic relationships are in fact the most typical context for sexual activity.

At the same time, sexual behavior with a nonromantic partner was very common, just as prior research has found (Elo, et al. 1999; Grello et al. 2006; Manning, et al. 2000, 2005; Paul, et al. 2000). A summation of the different configurations of sexual partners presented in Table 4 reveals that 66% had engaged in some form of sexual behavior with a nonromantic partner of some type, whereas 81% had done so with a romantic partner; 49% of the participants had engaged in heavy nongenital behavior with a nonromantic partner, whereas 80% had done so with a romantic partner; finally, 37% had engaged in oral sex or intercourse with a nonromantic partner, whereas 73% had engaged in such sexual behavior with a romantic partner. It is important to remember that these numbers refer to sexual activity during the last year. Thus, these numbers are likely to underestimate the lifetime prevalence of sexual activity with a nonromantic partner, and overestimate the prevalence at any specific time. In a related vein, the data also do not provide information regarding the proportion of participants who had multiple sexual partners at the same time; sexual activity

with a nonromantic partner may have occurred when one did not have a romantic partner, although in some instances it probably did occur simultaneously.

The present results also underscore the importance of differentiating among various types of nonromantic partners. As predicted, more women engaged in light nongenital sexual behavior with a friend than with a friend with benefits. More men engaged in such behaviors with a casual acquaintance than with a friend or friend with benefits. When one examines the frequency of such behavior among those who had a particular type of sexual partner, a different picture arises. As hypothesized, both genders engaged in all types of sexual behavior more often with friends with benefits than with either friends or casual acquaintances. Such differences might have occurred because young adults are more willing to engage in such behaviors with friends with benefits, or they may have greater opportunities to engage in such behaviors if the periods of sexual activity with friends with benefits are longer lasting than those with friends or casual acquaintances. Contrary to our hypotheses, young adults were not more likely to engage in sexual behaviors with friends than casual acquaintances. Grello et al. (2006) found such differences in affectionate behaviors (handholding, hugging, kissing, and massages). Perhaps these differences are more likely to occur in behaviors with ambiguous sexual connotations, such as many of those Grello examined. In any case, it is clear that the characteristics of sexual behavior with the three types of nonromantic partners differ.

The present findings also underscore the importance of examining different levels of sexual activity in relationships and not just examining sexual intercourse. The data on the proportion of participants engaging in different sexual behaviors suggests that nongenital sexual activity may sometimes occur without genital activity, especially with nonromantic partners. These findings are consistent with prior work which also found that only 50% of college students' hook-ups involved oral sex or intercourse (England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2007)

Sometimes parallel findings were found for the different levels of sexual behavior, but sometimes comparisons among the different type of nonromantic partners varied as a function of level. For example, more women engaged in light nongenital sexual activity with a friend or a casual acquaintance than with a friend with benefits. The proportion of women engaging in heavy nongenital or genital sexual behavior with a friend or casual acquaintance was substantially lower and comparable to the proportions with friends with benefits. This pattern of results suggests that in some instances, women may engage in some limited types of sexual activity with a friend or casual acquaintance. Boundaries regarding heavy sexual activity may be more likely to be present in these relationships, particularly friendships. Alternatively, the light sexual activity may have only occurred once or twice with a friend or casual acquaintance, and may not have evolved into more intense sexual activity.

Gender Effects

Consistent with our hypotheses and prior work (Carver, et al. 2002; Prince & Bernard, 1998), women were more likely to have engaged in genital sexual behavior with a romantic partner in the last year than men were. The present study extends this work by showing similar gender differences in light nongenital sexual behavior with a romantic partner. Prior work has found that men are more likely to engage in sexual behavior with a nonromantic partner (see Okami & Shackelford, 2001). The present findings, however, provide a more nuanced picture of gender differences in sexual activity with nonromantic partners. Men were more likely to engage in light nongenital sexual activity with a casual acquaintance, but they were not more likely to engage in sexual behaviors with either friends or friends with benefits, where the level of intimacy is greater. In fact, the proportions of women engaging in the various sexual behaviors with these partners were at least as high as those of

men. These findings suggest that the commonly observed gender differences in nonromantic sexual behavior may principally reflect sexual experiences with casual acquaintances or people whom they just met.

It is also noteworthy that no gender differences occurred in the frequency of sexual behavior for those who had a particular relationship. In other words, women who had a friend with benefits engaged in as much sexual behavior with their partner as men did. This finding is consistent with other work showing no gender differences in frequencies of sexual behaviors in close other-sex friendships (Shaffer & Furman, 2010). In effect, the present findings suggests that the commonly reported gender differences in sexual behavior may primarily stem from the kinds of sexual relationships men and women establish and not in what occurs in these relationships once established. Of course, the absence of significant differences must always be interpreted cautiously, but it makes logical sense that the frequencies of the sexual behaviors we examined would not differ by gender because the vast majority of the participants were describing heterosexual encounters. In fact, the absence of differences in the frequencies provides some evidence that the gender differences that are observed in this study are meaningful and do not simply stem from a tendency of one gender to overestimate or underestimate their sexual activity. If one gender overestimated or underestimated their sexual behavior, one would have expected gender differences in their estimates of the frequency of sexual behavior within a relationship

The proportions of men and women reporting different kinds of relationships do differ. Men or women may be inaccurate in reporting whether they have had a particular kind of relationship or they may define the nature of the relationship differently (e.g. whether it was a friend or romantic partner). Finally, the females' partners are not necessarily selected from the subpopulations that the males in the study are part of; similarly the males' partners may not be necessarily be selected from the subpopulations that the females in the study are part of. For example, adolescent females' romantic partners are on average older than adolescent males' partners, which might account for why a higher percentage of adolescent females have engaged in intercourse in romantic relationships than males have (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2002).

Friends with Benefits

The present study provides some insight into the nature of friends with benefits. Like many vernacular categories, full agreement did not exist about the defining characteristics, but there was a reasonable level of consensus regarding several features. First, consistent with prior research (Bisson & Levine, 2009), most participants thought that one would not be a friend with benefits unless sexual behavior had occurred on more than one occasion. Consistent with this idea, frequencies of sexual behavior with friends with benefits were greater than with friends or casual acquaintances. Second, it appears that the sexual activity typically involve heavy nongenital or genital behavior and not just light nongenital behavior. The proportion of young adults who had engaged in light nongenital behavior and those who had engaged in heavy nongenital behavior with friends with benefits were very similar, suggesting both light and heavy nongenital behavior had occurred in almost all cases.

Third, most participants thought friends with benefits were no different from other friends except for the sexual activity, and, in fact, thought that it was necessary to be a friend to be a friend with benefits. These opinions, however, were only held by approximately 70% of the participants; moreover, about half thought a friend with benefits could be someone whom they did not know well. Similarly, a significant minority reported that some or all of their friends with benefits were casual acquaintances. The examination of the different configurations also suggests that it is not necessary for a friend with benefits to be a friend, but significant sexual activity with a friend seems more likely to be associated with being

considered a friend with benefits than similar activity with a casual acquaintance. At the same time, the typical friend with benefits may not be as close of a friend as other friends. Young adults reported engaging in fewer activities with friends with benefits than they did with friends. Interactions with friends with benefits may focus around sexual activity and may not be as extensive as that with other friends.

Limitations and Future Directions

In the present study, we initially informed the participants that we were going to ask about sexual behavior with romantic partners, friends, and casual acquaintances. For reasons described previously, we did not introduce the category of friends with benefits until the other questions had been administered on the computer. Accordingly, some participants were likely to have described their sexual behavior with a friend with benefits as both sexual behavior with a friend and as sexual behavior with a friend with benefits. In many respects reporting it as both is appropriate as the present study revealed that most young adults consider friends with benefits to be friends. Thus, the descriptive information about the different types of nonromantic partners provides accurate estimates of the prevalence and frequency of the sexual activities of these categories in this sample. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to examine the configurations of nonromantic partners (Table 4) and assume that some individuals had multiple kinds of nonromantic partners because they reported sexual behavior with both a friend and a friend with benefits. Many are likely to be the same person.

Our analyses compared the category of friends with benefits with the broader category of friends with whom one had engaged in some sexual behavior. Individuals who were considered both friends and friends with benefits would have been classified into both categories. Thus, any differences we found between friends with benefits and friends had to reflect differences between friends with benefits and other friends with whom one had engaged in sexual behavior, but who were not considered friends with benefits. Although the differences we observed are meaningful, our approach might have masked or underestimated these differences between friends with benefits and other friends with whom one had engaged in sexual behavior, because of the inclusion of those who were friends and friends with benefits in these comparisons.

The present study also provides some information about how one could define friends with benefits in terms of the nature and frequency of sexual activity. By putting together the results of this research and popular descriptions, future investigators could develop a useful definition of a distinct category of friends with benefits. At the same time, it is important to recognize that complete consensus does not exist among young adults regarding the definition of this category, and thus, any definition by an investigator would not fully correspond to the participants' natural categories and may alter results. In effect, participant-defined, as well as investigator-defined, categories have their merits.

In a related vein, the findings clearly indicate the importance of differentiating among these types of partners, but further differentiations may also prove fruitful. In particular, it would be useful to specifically examine other types of friends with whom one has engaged in sexual behavior. One such group of friends would be past romantic partners, who have some sexual encounter(s) after the romantic relationship has dissolved (Manning, et al. 2005). Another category would be friends who are considering a romantic relationship (Shaffer & Furman, 2010). Another group may be more in keeping with a conventional conceptualization of friendships, but involve some validating, pleasurable sexual element, or "spark of sexuality" (Camerer, 1994; Shaffer & Furman, 2010).

As noted previously, the numbers in this study refer to sexual activity during the last year. Thus, these figures underestimate the lifetime proportions of sexual activity with a nonromantic partner, and overestimate the proportions at any specific time. An important direction for future research would be to conduct a longitudinal study of the sexual activity in each relationship or sexual encounter a person has.

The present study also focused on the occurrence and frequency of sexual activity with different partners. Future work could examine whether the meaning of different acts of sexual behavior or the motives for sexual behavior differ as a function of the relational context. For example, participants may primarily be interested in pleasure in some contexts, such as with casual acquaintances, but they may also be seeking intimacy with romantic partners.

Although relatively representative numbers of different ethnic groups and individuals with different sexual orientations were included, the sample primarily consisted of white heterosexual young adults. Studies of specific ethnic groups and sexual orientations are needed to determine if the overall patterns reported here are characteristic of particular subgroups.

In summary, this is one of the first studies to examine sexual activity with different types of nonromantic partners. Moreover, it is one of the first to examine different levels of sexual activity with nonromantic partners. The results underscore the importance of these distinctions, and point out several directions for subsequent work.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by Grant 50106 from the National Institute of Mental Health (W. Furman, P.I.) and Grant HD049080 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (W. Furman, P.I.). Appreciation is expressed to the Project STAR staff for their contribution to the data collection and to the individuals, families, and schools who are participating in Project STAR.

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Table 1

Proportions of Participants Engaging in Sexual Behaviors with Different Types of Partners

	Romantic Partner	Friend	Casual Acquaintance	Friend with Benefits
Light Nongenital: Women	.86 _{1a}	.51 ₂	.45 _{2b}	.29 ₃
Light Nongenital: Men	.71 _{1b}	.43 ₂	.64 _{1a}	.29 ₂
Heavy Nongenital: Women	.81 ₁	.20 ₂	.24 ₂	.27 ₂
Heavy Nongenital: Men	.69 ₁	.15 ₃	.33 ₂	.26 ₂₃
Genital: Women	.77 _{1a}	.18 ₂	.21 ₂	.24 ₂
Genital: Men	.62 _{1b}	.14 ₂	.30 ₂	.23 ₂

Note: Different numbered subscripts indicate that the proportions for that type of sexual behavior differ significantly between the two relationships, whereas different lettered subscripts indicate that the proportions differ between the genders for that type of sexual behavior within that relationship.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Frequencies of Sexual Behaviors with Different Types of Partners

	Romantic Partner	Friend	Casual Acquaintance	Friend with Benefits
Light Nongenital: Women	6.78 ₁ (1.38)	2.48 ₃ (1.47)	2.38 ₃ (.99)	4.18 ₂ (1.59)
Light Nongenital: Men	6.67 ₁ (1.45)	2.58 ₃ (1.52)	2.48 ₃ (1.09)	4.13 ₂ (1.69)
Heavy Nongenital: Women	5.49 ₁ (1.79)	1.54 ₃ (.90)	1.51 ₃ (.53)	2.41 ₂ (.50)
Heavy Nongenital: Men	5.86 ₁ (1.75)	1.45 ₃ (.79)	1.56 ₃ (.57)	2.32 ₂ (.57)
Genital: Women	3.93 ₁ (1.65)	1.27 ₃ (.50)	1.27 ₃ (.38)	2.41 ₂ (1.11)
Genital: Men	3.85 ₁ (1.80)	1.27 ₃ (.50)	1.43 ₃ (.56)	2.53 ₂ (1.25)

Note: Different subscripts reflect significant differences among types of relationships (combined across gender).

Table 3

Mean Proportion of Nonsexual Activities Engaged in With Different Types of Partners

	Romantic Partner	Friend	Casual Acquaintance	Friend with Benefits
Women	.66 ₁	.73 _{2a}	.33 ₄	.48 ₃
Men	.61 ₁	.64 _{1b}	.32 ₃	.45 ₂

Note: Different subscripts reflect significant differences among types of relationships; different letters indicate gender differences in particular relationships.

Table 4

Proportion of Participants Having Different Configurations of Sexual Partners

Configuration of Sexual Partners	Type of Sexual Behavior		
	Light NG Or More	Heavy NG. Or More	Genital
Romantic, Friend, Acquaintance, Friend w/Benefits	27	13	12
Romantic, Friend, Acquaintance	18	3	3
Romantic, Friend, Friend With Benefits	3	3	3
Romantic, Friend	8	0	0
Romantic, Acquaintance, Friend With Benefits	5	8	6
Romantic, Acquaintance	18	14	14
Romantic, Friend With Benefits	3	13	10
Romantic	41	66	63
Friend, Acquaintance, Friend With Benefits	6	2	2
Friend, Acquaintance	8	3	3
Friend, Friend With Benefits	1	2	2
Friend	3	2	1
Acquaintance, Friend With Benefits	0	1	1
Acquaintance	5	2	1
Friend With Benefits	0	0	1
Nobody	11	27	37

Note: Light NG= Light Nongenital Heavy NG = Heavy Nongenital

Table 5

Proportion (and N) of Participants' Answers to Questions about the Characteristics of Friends with Benefits

Question	Yes	No	Other
Q1) Are friends with benefits different from a romantic relationship?	97% (100)	3% (3)	0% (0)
Q3) Are they different from a casual sexual partner?	60% (66)	37% (41)	3% (3)
Q7) Are friends with benefits different from other people you periodically hook up with?	58% (64)	41% (45)	0% (0)
Q2) Other than sexual behavior, are they different From friends?	27% (29)	73% (79)	0% (0)
Q4) Do they have to be a friend?	72% (79)	26% (28)	2% (2)
Q5) Could it be someone you don't know as well, such as a casual acquaintance or a stranger?	47% (51)	53% (58)	0% (0)
Q6) Would someone be a friend with benefits, if you only engaged in sexual behavior with him/her once?	14% (15)	86% (94)	0% (0)

Note. The number preceding the question refers to the order of the questions. The category of "other" answers refers to qualified ones that were not simple yes or no responses (e.g., "it depends"). Numbers vary slightly across questions because of technical problems.