

'Friends with benefits' viewed differently by the sexes, create public health concerns

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Men and women who engage in sexual behavior with their friends view and treat those relationships quite differently – in ways that could have public health implications regarding safe sex, according to a new Colorado State University study.

“Friends with benefits” relationships – where two friends are sexually involved without true romance – mean different things depending on one’s gender, according to the research by Justin Lehmiller, assistant professor of psychology. The study will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of [Sex Research](#)*.

The study is the first of its kind to look at gender differences involving these relationships and the behavior of adults of all ages including parents and even grandparents, Lehmiller said. Other studies have looked solely at college-age adults.

Some gender differences discovered were largely consistent with traditional societal gender role expectations, including the belief that casual sex is a more socially permissible behavior for [men](#) than it is for women, Lehmiller said. However, men and women seemed more similar than different in some important ways.

Other findings:

- When it comes to beginning these “friends with benefits” relationships, sex was a more common motivation for men than women. Developing a

sense of emotional connection to a partner was a more common motivation for women than for men.

- Men surveyed were more likely to hope that their [relationship](#) stays the same over time (i.e., they typically want to continue as “friends with benefits” in the future). Women were more likely to prefer the relationship transition into either a full-fledged romance or revert back to a basic friendship.
- One-fourth of all those surveyed said they were currently involved in two or more such relationships; a majority said they were only in one relationship.
- Men said they had seven such relationships on average in their lifetime; women reported an average of four.
- Men reported that they had more numerous partners at the same time than women.

Other results were more surprising, Lehmiller said:

- A majority of women reported starting the relationship out of interest in sex.
- Once in these relationships, men were more committed to the friendship than the sexual component of the relationship.

“Those findings do not completely fit with people’s stereotypical beliefs about how men and women approach sexual relationships,” Lehmiller said. “Women may have a greater interest in casual sex than previously assumed, and contrary to popular belief, men do not necessarily want to be emotionally detached from their sexual partners.

“Interestingly, we found that the friendship aspect of these relationships was highly valued by both men and [women](#), suggesting that they are not just about the sex,” he said.

This study could also have major implications for understanding whether people are engaging in safe sex in casual relationships.

“This is something we need to pay more attention to. Are people engaged in safe sex practices with their casual sex partners?” he said. “People may assume that because this person is their friend, they can trust that he or she will not have any diseases and, therefore, may not feel as compelled to practice safe sex.”

Lehmiller conducted an online survey of 411 people ages 18 to 65 who were engaged in “friends with benefits” relationships. A majority of the sample were in heterosexual relationships, but the survey included some people in homosexual or bisexual relationships.

Provided by Colorado State University

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