

# Identifying ‘friends with benefits’ Scripts Among Young Adults in the Norwegian Cultural Context

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**Abstract** ‘Friends with benefits’ (FWB) is defined as friends having sexual relations without commitment or romantic feeling towards each other. The purpose of this study was to explore the FWB phenomenon among young adults from a Norwegian, heterosexual perspective. Using the underlying theory of sexual scripts, and phenomenology as a research method, semi-structural interviews were conducted with twelve heterosexual women, aged 21–28 years, with experience in FWB relationships. Various elements of the relationship were explored: motives and function, definition of an FWB relationship, emotions, intimacy, and social influences. Results revealed that the main function of the FWB relationship appears to be the fulfilment of physical need in a safe context. Furthermore, the majority of subjects did not explicitly define the relationship, or have explicit rules to regulate it. Three types of FWB relationships emerged: *the good friends*, *the lovers*, and those who are *on the hook*. The study showed that people in FWB relationships ‘borrow’ elements from friendship scripts and love scripts, and combine them to form an FWB script. In the public sphere, behaviour is guided solely by this friendship script. It is only in the private sphere that the love script is present in addition to the friendship script.

**Keywords** ‘Friends with benefits’ · Sexual scripts · Young adults · Norway

## Introduction

‘Friends with benefits’ (FWB) can be defined as friends having sexual relations, without any feelings of commitment or romance towards each other. Thus, an FWB

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relationship fits neither the traditional definition of a friendship, nor the definition of a romantic, committed relationship (Bisson and Levine 2009). An FWB relationship appears to be more a hybrid of the two, which makes it an interesting phenomenon to study.

In the early stages of research on sex between friends, the focus was on sexual attraction in cross-sex friendships (Bleske and Buss 2000; Kaplan and Keys 1997; Sapadin 1988). The concept of FWB was initially used by Hughes et al. (2005). Their focus was on the rules that regulated these relationships, and on the reactions of other friends who learned about the FWB relationship. Three categories of rules were identified: emotional rules, communication rules, and sex rules.

In Bisson and Levine's (2009) study, nearly every second person who had been in an FWB relationship reported to have questioned the relationship's status and future. However, only 15 % of them said they had talked to the friend about this. Nearly three out of four informants did not define specific rules regarding what was allowed or forbidden in the FWB relationship. However, to communicate about a relationship's status seems to be taboo in romantic relationships as well (Baxter and Wilmot 1985).

Early studies of sex between mixed-gender friends indicated that 11–22 %, depending on gender, had experienced an FWB relationship over some period of time (Afifi and Faulkner 2000; Bleske and Buss 2000). More recent studies on FWB relationships among American colleges students have shown a prevalence of 50–60 % (Bisson and Levine 2009; Puentes et al. 2008; Owen and Fincham 2011). However, these results cannot automatically be transferred to other subgroups of the population, or to other societies and cultures. In a recent representative study among young adults in Norway, 19 % reported that their most recent coital partner was a friend (Sørensen 2009), indicating that FWB relationships among young adults in Norway may be quite common.

Through social processes sexuality is given the expression and that meaning which society imposes. This means that the expressions of sexuality are social constructions that the individual subordinates in interaction with his/her environment. Gagnon and Simon (2005) use the term "*script*" to describe sexual conduct. The sexual "*script*" is society's way of "regulating" sexuality and sexual behavior. The elements of the "*script*" define the situation, name the actors, and plot the behavior, and without these elements present, nothing sexual between two persons is likely to occur. Gagnon and Simon claim that actors learn to organize their behaviors, desires, privacy, and a physically attractive person of the appropriate sex, within an appropriate "*script*". Sexuality and sexual behavior are "*scripted*" on three distinct levels: cultural scenarios which are instructions in collective meanings; interpersonal "*scripts*" which are applications of specific cultural scenarios by a specific individual in a specific social context; and intrapsychic "*scripts*" which are guidelines to the management of desires as experienced by the individual (Gagnon and Simon 2005). The *interpersonal* "*script*", which is mostly at focus in this paper, deals with the organization of mutually shared social conventions that allow the involved actors to participate in a complex act involving mutual dependence. Thus, the interpersonal "*script*" enables individuals to find

mutuality in sexuality. The *intrapsychic* “script” contains factors which motivate the individual to sexual arousal and commitment, and to engage in sexual activities.

The sexual “script” feeds into decisions in actual situations, and it suggests which meaning the individual shall connect to his or her behavior in sexual contexts. Sexuality in the Nordic cultures is traditionally regarded more or less as a gift to be handled with care. But sexuality is also subject to social sanctions and restrictions. Sexual behavior is accepted only when certain terms are fulfilled. Most of the population legitimize sexual intercourse by love, and perceive of sexual conduct as an expression of love (Lewin et al. 2000; Træen and Hovland 1998). The prevailing heterosexual script in the Norwegian context is therefore one that connects sexual activity to love, mutuality and responsibility (Helmius 1990; Kvaem and Træen 2000; Træen 1993). This script is often referred to as the *love script*, and the majority of people follow this script (Træen and Hovland 1998; Træen and Gravningen 2011).

Sexual scripts are made up of large numbers of elements, so many that a full over-view is almost impossible. However, as most people are trying to follow the socially accepted scripts, and only a few are not, interpretations of sexual scripts may be based on what these scripts *are not*. As the FWB relationship is a relatively new and poorly understood relationship, it is likely that people may not have learned and integrated the necessary interpersonal FWB scripts prior to engaging in such relationships. However, in the absence of a script, people may borrow elements of interpersonal scripts from closely related relationships (West et al. 1996). In the case of an FWB relationship, people might first borrow elements from the friend script, but might also do so from the love script, to guide them in their FWB relations.

People in FWB relationships tend to rank their feelings for the partner with a moderate degree of intimacy, but a low degree of passion and commitment (Bisson and Levine 2009), which corresponds to the friendship type of love according to Sternberg (1986). If people’s feelings for their FWB partner correspond to any other friend, it might feel natural to use the friend script in an FWB relationship. However, the friend script does not completely match the FWB relationship, as it has no guideline for handling the sex element of the friendship. For that reason, it may be necessary to borrow elements from the love script to adjust for the shortcomings of the friend script.

The purpose of this study was to explore the cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts guiding FWB relationships among young adults in the Norwegian, heterosexual context. We seek to identify how FWB relationships are socially constructed and scripted, and how people experience being in such relationships. How do young adults involved in FWB relationships define the relationship, what are the functions of such a relationship, and how do the involved parties balance between the friend script and the love script?

## Method

A qualitative in-depth interview study, resting on a phenomenological approach, was chosen to elucidate the research questions in this study (Moustakas 1994; Creswell 2007).

Invitations to participate in the present study were sent through student e-mail lists for several courses at the University of Tromsø. Eight informants were recruited by these e-mail lists, while an additional four informants were recruited by means of the snowball method. In the invitation, the nature of the study was explained, and they were told that we wished to recruit informants with experience from a heterosexual FWB-relationship. A FWB relationship was defined as ‘friends who have sex with each other, without the presence of commitment or romantic feelings’. It further said, ‘This is what is expected in this type of relationship. This does not mean that one partner cannot have romantic feelings towards the other. However, this is *not* a romantic relationship or a one-time sexual incident between friends; this is a sexual relationship with someone you think of as a friend, and not someone you think of as an acquaintance’.

The original objective was to interview both males and females. However, as no males wanted to participate, the study contains only female informants. It was very difficult to recruit informants for the study, and the recruitment period spanned over four and a half months. It is possible that we would have found a greater variability in experiences if we had continued to recruit informants over a longer period of time. This was, however, not possible due to the scheduled project period. Having said that, it is believed that we have reached saturation, as the stories told by the informants had started to be repeated. The informants consisted of 12 Norwegian heterosexual women aged 21–28 years. Half of them were single when the interview took place, and the rest were in committed relationships. Eight informants were full-time students, one a part-time student, and three were full-time employees. Number of current, former, and total FWB partners varied in the sample. This is presented in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted between October 2010 and February 2011, and took place at the University of Tromsø. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 min to one and a half hours. A digital audio recorder recorded the interviews for later transcription. All of the interviews were carried out by the first author. In cases of informants with experience from more than one FWB relationship, they were asked to focus on the FWB relationships they recollected the best, and answer questions based on these relationships. Examples of questions from the interview guide are presented in Table 2:

Pseudonyms were given to ensure informant anonymity. Any other information that could identify the informant directly, or indirectly, in the transcript was altered or left out.

Every transcript was read and reread thoroughly to get an overall understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. Significant statements were identified, and treated with equal value. Overlapping or non-relevant statements were excluded. Chosen statements were further organized in different themes based on their underlying meaning. From this, a textural description of what the informant experienced was made for each significant statement and theme. Further, structural descriptions were extracted from the textural descriptions; in these descriptions, the author tried to describe how the informant experienced the phenomenon, its context, and its meaning (For examples of textural and structural descriptions, see Table 3). From these textural and structural descriptions, an essence of the FWB phenomenon emerged.

**Table 1** Total number of FWB partners for each informant, with number of current and former FWB partners

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3	Informants reported only having had 1 FWB partner
1	Had a current FWB partner
2	Had a former FWB partner
4	Informants reported having had a total of 2 FWB partners
1	Had 2 current FWB partners
1	Had 1 current, and 1 former FWB partner
2	Had both FWB partners as former ones
2	Informants reported having had a total of 3 FWB partners
1	Had a current FWB partner, and the rest as former
1	Had all three FWB partners as former ones
1	Informant reported having had a total of 4 FWB partners, all former ones
2	Informants reported being unsure about the total amount of FWB partners
1	Said the total amount were between 5 and 10, with 1 current FWB partner, and the rest former ones
1	Said that the total amount of FWB partners was at least 15, and that all of them were former ones

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**Table 2** Examples of interview questions about the current FWB relationship

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Can you tell me how you met this person?
What do you talk about with this person?
Is there anything you can talk about with this person, which you cannot talk about with other friends, and why?
How will you describe your feelings towards this person?
Can you tell me about your last sexual encounter with this person? What happened prior to the sex, and what happened after?
Did you ever talk about what was allowed, or not allowed in your FWB relationship, and if so, what?
Have this person ever done something you did not think was an ok thing to do towards you, and if so, can you tell me about it?

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Throughout the study, the researchers have attempted to stay free of prior assumptions and prejudice about the topic, a phenomenological process called *epoché*.

The project was submitted to, and recommended by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

## Results

The quality of the relationship with the FWB friend varied. Some informants reported a high degree of experienced intimacy, and for them the friendship was more important than the sex itself. In these kinds of relationships, the friends continued normal friendship activities, such as bowling, going to concerts, playing games, having in-depth conversations or visiting common friends. This category of informants is denoted *the good friends*, and sex was merely one of several activities they shared.

**Table 3** Example of the organization of significant statements, into units of meaning, into themes

Significant statement	Units of meaning	Themes
You learn how to know a man. All men are alike at certain points	Improve technical skills	Sexual experience
I learned a whole lot about my own body	Get to know themselves sexually	
He is the one I have had those kinds of conversations with, what you should do, and what you should not do sexually	Learn how to perform	
He gave me the impression that he does not want a relationship, and that's fine by me, because I have a lot of schoolwork, and I work a lot after school, and I feel that I'm not quite ready to be in a romantic relationship	No time for a romantic relationship	No obligations
I do not want a romantic relationship. I cannot stand the thought of having a man in the house who want to interfere in how I live my life	Want independence	

He knows a lot about me, and I believe I know all there is to know about him. We are good friends. I can most definitively talk with him about everything. If I have a bad day, I can go to his place, sit down with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, without it ending up with having sex. (Stina, 23 years old)

Another category of informants was termed *the lovers*. For them, sex seemed more important than the actual friendship. As opposed to *the good friends*, *the lovers* usually met only to have sex. It seemed that those who entered this type of FWB relationship shared little personal information, preferring to talk about everyday topics instead.

We jumped straight to bed. We had some breaks in between to watch a movie or something. But we mostly had sex nonstop when he visited..... We didn't talk much. Our conversations usually consisted of superficial topics. Nothing special. (Kathy, 22 years old)

The third category of informants expressed having romantic feelings for the FWB friend, while the friend had no interest in any kind of commitment. This category of informant was termed *on the hook*.

He was quite clear about not wanting a relationship, but he liked my companionship. We were friends, and visited cafés and friends together. But at the same time, I was thinking, "Oh, I want him so bad; I'm so in love with him". He never knew that. (Yvonne, 24 years old)

## Motives and Functions

### *Satisfying Physical Needs*

The majority of the informants said that the FWB relationship covered their physical and sexual needs. When they were single, they discovered how strong the desire for sex and intimacy can be; the FWB relationship functioned as a way of

satisfying these needs in a secure setting. For *the lovers*, one has sex with one's friend 'for the sake of sex' and 'for practical reasons'. For *on the hook* informants, it was the sexual chemistry they had with the partner that drove the relationship. For *the good friends*, sex was an extra benefit in addition to the friendship.

### *Better than Casual Sex*

Several informants did not see themselves as someone who could have casual sex. They also stated that having sex with a regular partner made them feel safer from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Those who had previously had experience in casual sex emphasised it was better to have sex with someone who knew their body and who they felt comfortable with, than to have sex with someone they just met.

For me, who does not want to be in a relationship, it is the best way to be intimate with someone. I do not want to chase men in bars and have one-night stands, which gives me nothing. (Veronica, 28 years old)

### *Sexual Experience*

As sex was part of the friendship, many informants felt more open and accepted, and therefore able, to talk about sex or experiment sexually. For example, Veronica said:

If I want to know the man's perspective I asked him, because we have no limitations for what one can ask about, or what one may like to do or can do.

Some women felt it was easier to explore their sexuality and body with the FWB friend than with a boyfriend. Veronica said she had thought about having a threesome with her FWB friend, something she would never try with a boyfriend.

It would be a perfect situation, when you have a man you know well, and who you completely trust, and to test out this kind of thing.

### *No Obligations*

Some informants wanted an uncomplicated relationship with no obligations. For some, the reason was a demanding job and no time to have a committed relationship, while others had traumatic experiences, such as physical or psychological abuse, from previous relationships. These negative experiences led to problems with feeling secure in future relationships, and difficulties in investing emotionally in another person. Still others found it easier to relate only to sex, without emotional investment. This motive was not present for those *on the hook*.

### *Proximity*

Being physically close to another person was more important to some than the sex itself. Hilda (24) said she missed lying next to a warm body. She liked being in a couple, and felt lonely when single.

I was lonely, and it was nice to have someone to cuddle with, and sleep with, and talk to. It wasn't just the sex. It was to have someone close to me. Someone to call.

*'Take what you get'*

Those in the *on the hook* category, and who suffered from unrequited love, accepted the FWB relationship to be close to the person for whom they had romantic feelings. At the same time, they strove to exhibit moderation and to level out the emotional balance of power between them. They did not open up to their FWB friend, for fear of being vulnerable to rejection. These are women who gently tried to hint at deeper feelings than just those of a non-binding FWB relationship, and were rejected. As they could not let their friend go, some took what they could get. Yvonne (24) said:

I was completely heart-broken, but I was all into him, into the whole situation. He was mine, in a way, and at the same time not. There were nights when I cried and despaired we would never be more than lovers.

Catharina (21) explained the following regarding her FWB friend:

I started to fall in love with him, had feelings for him, and he was not interested in me. It was all I got, so I felt it was better than nothing.

However, as these *on the hook* women could not break out of the relationship, they ended up in a situation where the relationship was solely on the man's terms. In other words, they felt obligated to maintain composure when the FWB friend flirted with other women.

## Defining the Relationship

### *Explicit*

Most of the women had never talked directly to their FWB partner about the nature of their relationship. Other informants said that one party at some point after the sex began to occur regularly claimed they were not interested in 'something more', or that they were not looking for a committed relationship. The result was a common understanding that the FWB relationship would not develop into a committed relationship. Only a few informants had talked directly about it and defined the FWB relationship as one with no strings attached.

### *Implicit*

Communication most often seemed to be non-verbal and indirect, as passing phrases, and often using humour, 'reading between the lines', or in behaviour.



## *Rules*

It did not seem common to talk to the FWB partner about explicit rules that should regulate the relationship. However, among those who did have an explicit rule, it fell into one of three categories. The first category concerned whether or not to be seen together in public. This rule seemed most important in the FWB relationships where one of the partners had current relationships and/or children. Another category of rules dealt with sex and obligations, which for most of the women meant sex without obligations. However, how detailed these rules were and how they were made explicit varied. Stina (23), for example, wanted to know about any other sexual relationships her FWB friend had. Others did not have any specific desire to know if the partner had sex with others. Julia (23) emphasised that should one of them develop feelings for the other and want more than an FWB relationship, they would stop the sexual part of the friendship. The last category of rules dealt with the use of condoms. Few of the informants used condoms during sex. However, using a condom also served as an implicit message that sex with others was a possibility and allowed.

There was this thing about always using condoms. We never committed to only seeing each other. But we were never seeing anyone else permanently; both of us should be single. That was the deal, but what he did apart from that I did not care about. As long as he should have sex with me on these terms, we should always use condoms. And we never discussed if we had sex outside of our relationship either. (Veronica, 28 years old)

Most of those who did not have explicit rules did somehow develop an understanding of the implicit rules when it came to having sex with others. This understanding was achieved by ‘reading between the lines’ of conversation, and studying their partner’s behaviour in different contexts. Yvonne (24) said that her last FWB friend openly flirted with other women when they went out. Based on an interpretation of his behaviour she concluded he did not want to be sexually exclusive. However, some informants did have a rule about sexual exclusivity: Kathy (22) used to ask her FWB friend if he had had sex with others during their relationship. In doing so, she got confirmation about sexual exclusivity, while at the same time giving him an understanding of her desire for exclusivity. Eve (26) did not think it was all right to have sex outside the FWB relationship, mostly because of STIs. In her opinion, the one who had sex outside the relationship should make it clear, so that the other could decide if he or she wanted to continue to be in the FWB relationship or not.

Another implicit rule was that partners should not show signs of affection in public. Women who had had an FWB friend interested in more than friendship and sex usually had the experience of him attempting to kiss or hold hands in public. These women reacted negatively to these acts.

He had a bad habit if we were out drinking. He used to take my hand. I did not think that was OK. I did not think it was OK that people saw it. I did not want people to misunderstand, and think we were sweethearts. (Yvonne)

## Emotions

### *Trust*

Lisa (24) did not meet her FWB friend often. More than anything, she trusted that he would be there for her if she needed him. Women who had closer contact with their FWB friend expressed being fond of, and caring for, him. *On the hook* women had romantic feelings for their friend. Others had mixed feelings, and the feelings could also change over time. Tina (25) had a close friendship with her FWB friend, in which romantic feelings eventually developed.

I had no expectations of a relationship, but this was a good friend and someone who knew me very well. He knew me, all of me. No sweetheart has ever achieved that intimacy with me. Because we were so similar in everything, in everything we meant and did, I felt he knew me best, and then feelings emerged.

Tina said she would be jealous when he flirted with others, and wanted exclusivity over all they shared; if he shared the same with others, she would not feel special. She felt vulnerable after her previous break-up from a committed relationship, and needed self-confirmation.

### *Suppressed Emotions*

Some informants from *the good friends* category talked about how they tried to keep emotions at bay. Stina (23) claimed that she and her FWB friend were in different social situations. He was older, had a family, and was finished with that part of his life. She was young and wanted a family. She knew they had no future, and for that reason she chose to keep a certain distance with regards to physical intimacy.

I am perhaps a bit afraid of myself, that I'll be trapped and fall in love with him. As long as it's just the talk and the sex, it's all right.

She took responsibility for her own feelings, and was careful not to end up in a situation where she might be emotionally hurt. Tina did not think suppressing her feelings was easy. She found it easier to pretend everything was normal when they had Internet contact, as she did not have to worry that her body language or tone of voice might reveal her true feelings. Informants from *on the hook* category found it difficult to suppress their emotions, still they are careful not to express their emotions to their FWB partner.

## Intimacy

### *Sexual Intimacy*

Sexual intimacy was studied relative to context. In the prior-to-having-sex context, two scenarios appear. One is the film-or-dinner scenario. This scenario is somewhat different for *the good friends* and *the lovers*. *The lovers* made appointments with the

intention to have sex, but never expressed this intention directly—they paid each other visits, cooked, or watched a film, and when this ritual was over they went to bed. Having dinner or watching a film seemed to function as an excuse for seeing each other to have sex, and were ways of covering up this primary intention. *The good friends* category, on the other hand, did not seem to plan to have sex. They spent time together because they were friends, not primarily to have sex. Sex was merely one of several activities they shared. This category of informants also dined or watched a film prior to having sex, but doing this was not necessarily a cover for the underlying purpose of having sex, as with *the lovers*.

The second scenario is alcohol-related. The friends had sex after a party or a night out. From the beginning, both parties seemed aware that they would go home together, as this had become a ritual. The sex seems to have become a permanent ending to a night out. This scenario was typical of those who were *on the hook*.

### *Physical Intimacy*

After sex, many of the women said they stayed in bed with their partner, talking. Some fell asleep, and others ‘cleaned up’ and went home. Some stayed overnight for convenience, while others stayed for the intimacy. Whether or not they cuddled varied, and those who did were usually romantically interested in their FWB friend, or wanted body contact. Kathy (22) said:

There was not much kissing in the relationship. We did not kiss as lovers do. We did not have that intimate contact. It was more kissing all over the body. Not so much on the lips. It was different from a committed relationship in several ways. It was sort of just the sex. There was no romantic context.

### *Psychological Intimacy*

It deals with sharing personal thoughts, wishes, and meanings, and seems to be a result of the friendship quality to the FWB relationship. *The good friends* had greater psychological intimacy than *the lovers* and those who were *on the hook*. *The lovers* had very little intimacy. When physical intimacy was added to an already existing relationship with a high degree of psychological intimacy, the relationship experienced was even stronger, and more special.

We understand each other on a different level. It is me and him, sort of. That we had sex was also a kind of confirmation of our friendship. It sounds crazy, but it was good. (Tina, 25 years old)

### Social Influence

Informants behaved differently towards each other in the public and private spheres. As we have seen, some chose to be physically intimate also in non-sexual settings in the private sphere, while others did not. In the public sphere, the majority of informants did not want to cuddle or show other signs of affection. In the public sphere, they acted solely according to the traditional friend script.

Some people in the informants' circle of friends found the FWB relationship exciting, and were eager to discuss intimate aspects of the relationship. However, friends usually reacted with concern when they learned about the FWB relationship. These friends were, among other things, primarily concerned with the impact of the relationship on the informant's mental and sexual health. Tina (25) said her friends reacted negatively when she told them she did not use condoms during sex with her FWB friend. Other friends did not find the FWB friend suitable for the informant. Gill's (22) friends were concerned with the psychological effects of her FWB relationship, as she had developed romantic feelings for him. Other informants had friends who wanted them to use their energy to find a proper partner instead.

A few informants said that FWB relationships were common in their friend circle. These informants felt that sex among friends was a common phenomenon, and that 'everybody was doing it'. Other women claimed they knew of no one else who had had an FWB relationship. Accordingly, the FWB phenomenon could most likely be more widespread in some subgroups than in others.

## Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to identify cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts guiding FWB relationships among Norwegian, heterosexual, young adults. Before going into details about the script, some of the findings about what constitutes a FWB friend, and the function of the FWB relationship, will be discussed.

### Defining an FWB Friend

The first finding from this study is the varying definitions of what constitutes an FWB friend; one may question if those in *the lovers* or *on the hook* categories are truly FWB friends. However, what we consider to be a friendship, its elements, and whom we regard to be a friend are influenced by gender, age, social class, and culture (Adams et al. 2000; Adams and Plaut 2003; Goodwin 1999). It is therefore difficult to define 'friendship' in any context. At the same time, there is often an intuitive understanding of what the concept of 'friendship' is. In this study, FWB was defined as a sexual relationship with someone the informant regarded as a friend and not as an acquaintance. As informants were self-recruited, it shows that they considered the person they had a sexual relationship with to be a friend.

### The Function of FWB Relationships

The main function of the FWB relationship seems to be to meet people's physical needs in a safe context. The women felt physically, sexually, and psychologically secure with the person they were intimate with. Emotional closeness was as often more important than the sex for many, and they avoided awkward situations common in casual sex partners. The perceived emotional proximity in an FWB

relationship was in many ways similar to what is found in a committed relationship. Sex in an FWB context will therefore feel more legitimate and genuine than casual sex. Love is associated with passion, on the one hand, and with closeness, tenderness, and intimacy, on the other. In Scandinavia, the focus is not on the passionate aspect of sexuality; rather, the responsibility aspect is idealized (Træen 1993). The security experienced in FWB relationships may create a legitimate context for sexual gratification. FWB relationships seem to appeal to women who have had negative romantic experiences, or simply to those who feel they do not have the time to commit. They have the intimacy they desire, while at the same time they avoid the obligations that accompany a love affair.

When a person feels physically and mentally intimate with someone, deeper feelings may develop. However, deep feelings of intimacy in an FWB relationship do not appear desirable, and the individual adopts strategies to prevent these feelings from developing. In a committed relationship, romantic feelings are a prerequisite and people are expected to share what they feel, and support each other. In an FWB relationship, the one who has romantic feelings stands alone, and is alone responsible for handling one's feelings, and to not be hurt. One way to do this is to suppress romantic feelings. By suppressing one's feelings, the informants take responsibility, ensure they are not hurt, and do not put the FWB relationship in an awkward position. The responsibility is hers, and is not shared with the male partner. As women, to a greater extent than men, are socialized to care for others, they may also feel more responsible for the feelings of the male FWB partner (Træen 2008a).

Lorentz Lyttkens (1985) has argued that we live in the era of social competence. We are self-conscious individuals with a focus on self-realization. To expose social competence in the different arenas we frequent is important, and the sexual arena is no exception. People consider it important to develop into a good sex partner. This is reflected in the media's focus on improving sexual techniques and becoming a good lover (Træen 2008b). Several of the informants experienced an enhanced sexual experience as a result of the relationship. Accordingly, the FWB relationship provides them with the opportunity to develop their skills as a sexual actor. FWB relationships can therefore be regarded as a product of the socio-historical era we live in. Being in an FWB relationship may be interpreted as a sign of social and sexual competence, in the sense that the individual is conducting self-realization and exploiting their full potential as a human being.

### Identifying FWB Scripts

An FWB relationship seems to function as a way to avoid the obligations that follow committed relationships, and at the same time have sex with a person they trust. However, this did not apply to those who were *on the hook*, who were locked in the relationship because they were unable to let go of the romantic feelings they had for their partner. To them, it was a choice between having a somewhat more intimate relationship with him and having nothing at all. These romantic feelings represent a break with the friendship script, and an 'unlawful' transfer to the love script.

A committed relationship is sometimes defined explicitly by one of the parties asking if they are a couple, or implicitly through actions. These actions alone do not define the relationship, but when one sees them in the context of each other, they create meaning. For example, she makes dinner for him, they say they love each other, and they hold hands or kiss in public. These actions are signs that approach a romantic relationship and are part of a love script. A friendship seems more often to be defined implicitly, through actions, rather than explicitly. People usually will know that someone is their friend when they frequently spend time together, and share personal conversations. It is not, however, always easy to share thoughts and opinions on taboo topics, such as a relationship's status (Baxter and Wilmot 1985). Some informants had suspected that the FWB friend had feelings for them, and were afraid to talk about the status of the relationship. They were afraid that this would change, or break up the relationship, as well as the friendship. To talk in clauses, or 'to read between the lines', was also a strategy to redefine the relationship at a later date. In doing so, they would be able to check to see if the terms and feelings about the relationship were the same, or if they had in some way changed.

Human social interaction is scripted, and rules within the script functions to maintain the relationship's benefits, and to minimize any conflicts that may arise (Argyle and Henderson 1984). As an FWB relationship is not as clearly scripted as a committed relationship, being explicit about what is allowed and what is not is most likely an advantage. Many informants already had the understanding that sex was allowed, but not romantic feelings.

When a couple exposes public manifestations of their private relationship, they signal to the surrounding environment that those involved are committed and not available as a romantic partner for others. As those engaged in an FWB relationship are most often single, many may want to show their availability to a potential romantic partner, so they make a rule to not openly express affection towards their FWB friend in the public sphere. Most FWB friends are likely to accept this rule without experiencing problems or resistance. It is in the violation of the rule, however, that we identify it as a valid element of the FWB script. As also found by Bisson and Levine (2009), it is not common to discuss the FWB relationship status. The thought of doing so caused fear of breaking up the relationship (Baxter and Wilmot 1985), which explains why few of the informants had defined the relationship with their FWB friend. However, by implicit communication, they gain an understanding of each other's position.

Generally speaking, an FWB relationship is a relationship without obligations. It may therefore seem like a contradiction that some informants claimed to have rules about sexual exclusivity. However, in most cases, this was not a strict rule, and there were exceptions. In addition, other aspects of the FWB relationship carried fewer obligations compared to committed relationships. For instance, FWB friends did not have to spend as much time together as a couple.

What partly defines the FWB relationship is that romantic feelings are not involved. Sexual conduct among young adults in Norway is traditionally connected to falling in love and love (Helmius 1990; Kvale and Træen 2000; Lewin et al. 2000; Træen 1993). After the so-called sexual revolution in the 1960s, it has become more legitimate to have sex without commitment (Christensen and Gregg 1970;

Træen and Lewin 1992). Every new generation is socialized into a modified version of the previous generation's script. The development may have led to a higher tolerance for some degree of sexual experimentation outside a romantic context. Too much experimentation, on the other hand, is regarded as a sign of promiscuity. Sexual behaviour is largely controlled by people's fear of being perceived as 'not normal' or 'deviant'. It was common for the informants' friends to express concern over the FWB relationship. According to Lyttkens (1985), these concerns for others' welfare can be seen as a cover for underlying moral beliefs. The friends' concerns likely reflect a common attitude towards FWB in the Norwegian society, and stem from the perception of sex within a romantic or love script as most 'natural'. A friend is not regarded as a legitimate sex partner. This is illustrated best by the informants' own attitude to the FWB relationship in public arenas. They chose to act as ordinary friends, and follow the friend script.

If FWB relationships lacked scripts, people would not know how to interact. We approached the valid FWB script by looking at what the script is not. Those who developed romantic feelings for their FWB friend, and told him about it, were met with rejection. This indicates that romantic feelings are not elements of the FWB script. Furthermore, it was not legitimate to express jealousy, as those who were jealous when their FWB friend flirted with others kept quiet about it. Because FWB friends do not have the obligations that committed couples have, they are allowed to flirt with others. Within a friend script, jealousy over flirting with a third party is not allowed. Furthermore, it is not allowed to protest if one of the parties decides to terminate the sexual part of the relationship to form a committed relationship with another person. Instead, this friend should be glad on behalf of her friend that he has found a girlfriend. Lastly, it is not expected that friends *must* spend a lot of the time in each other's company, as lovers do. In a friendship, the parties may be apart from each other for a shorter or longer period of time, and this does not necessarily affect the quality of the friendship. These elements are also present in the FWB script.

In the private sphere, the FWB script somewhat overlaps with the love script. The extent to which it overlaps depends on the motives a person has when they enter into an FWB relationship, and the proximity experienced towards the friend in question. The romantic aspect of the love script, however, is not an element of the FWB script. This implies that FWB persons may not kiss or hold hands in public settings.

The one thing that deviates from both the friend script and the love script is the openness about sexual issues in the FWB script. Many said they would not feel comfortable communicating on an in-depth level about personal sexual issues to an ordinary friend of the opposite gender. Nor would many feel comfortable talking about their inner sexual feelings with someone they date, or about previous sexual experiences with a boyfriend. As the partners of an FWB relationship know each other well sexually, and for some the focus on sexuality is high, the FWB relationship appears to be a secure arena for openness about sex. Informants could discuss everything from concrete tips and techniques, such as what feels good, or any sexual fantasies they might have.

## Conclusion

The FWB script borrows elements from both the friend script and the love script. In the public sphere, the friends' behaviour is guided by the friend script. The sexual aspects of the friendship are not open to the public, and are kept privately. In the private sphere, the individuals must balance the friend script and the love script. How much of the love script that is incorporated into the FWB script depends on what each party wants from the FWB relationship. If the sex is the main focus of the FWB relationship, the sexual elements from the love script are adapted. If the parties want emotional intimacy in addition to the sex, the elements of physical intimacy are included in the FWB script. In sum, there appear to be various operative FWB scripts. The challenges for FWB friends are to define what they want from the FWB relationship, and through this reach a common understanding of which FWB script to follow.

## Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has revealed important topics within the FWB phenomenon, and uncovered some characteristic elements of the interpersonal FWB script. It has also given a more profound understanding of how women experience being in a FWB relationship. However, to complete the picture of FWB relationships among young adults in the Norwegian heterosexual context, also studies employing quantitative methods should be encouraged.

A clear limitation of the present study is that all informants are women. Men may experience FWB relationships different from women. Accordingly, a study reflecting men's perspective is likely to give a more complete understanding of the FWB phenomenon. It would also be of great interest to study the couple dynamics of these relationships by separately interviewing involved men and women. There is a growing interest around the FWB phenomenon, perhaps first and foremost in the media and the popular culture. Much more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of FWB as a phenomenon.

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