

'Friends with benefits' lets couples get close but not too close

July 20 2011, By David Maley

An expert on sexuality among young people says a “friends with benefits” situation can provide some healthy outlets for sexual needs and desires, but can also be a very difficult relationship to navigate. Rebecca Plante, an associate professor of sociology at Ithaca College, has conducted extensive research on issues surrounding intimacy, dating and “hooking up” among college-age Americans.

“Because the sexual context of ‘friends with benefits’ is largely undefined — as opposed to the boyfriend/girlfriend model, which in our culture has many norms, scripts and expectations — it can make it very difficult to deal with when or if feelings change, such as when one of the pair wants to end the sex but remain friends or wants to become more than friends,” said Plante.

The new romantic comedy film “Friends with Benefits,” starring Justin Timberlake and Mila Kunis, depicts a couple whose professional relationship turns into a friendship, which they turn into a sexual relationship with no strings or expectations attached. Just as in the real world, complications arise.

“My research shows that perhaps the most frequent consequence is awkwardness, accompanied by strained or ceased contact and eventually either future hook ups or the resumption of a non-sexual friendship,” said Plante.

But why make it about being “just friends”? Why not call it dating or call

themselves boyfriend/girlfriend?

Plante was the local coordinator for a multi-campus study that involved interviews with some 14,000 college students on sexuality issues. She said respondents talked about being too busy, that relationships take too much work, that they aren't sure about the depth and extent of their feelings, or that they already have long-term relationships in other places.

“[Friends](#) with benefits is a way to explore some [sexuality](#) within a friendship, an existing framework of some care and knowledge of one another,” she noted.

“Despite the assumption — furthered by films like this — that the U.S. is a very sexually open culture, sexual intimacy is not well-discussed. Multiple media depict sex, but that doesn't mean that individuals get any schooling in how to understand what they want sexually, romantically and intimately.”

Plante is the author of the books “Sexualities in Context: A Social Perspective” and coeditor of the books “Doing Gender Diversity” and “Sexualities: Identities, Behaviors, and Society.” Her courses include Tutorial in Intimacies, The Sociology of Sexualities, Beauty and the Body: Exploring Culture and Hooking Up: The Sociology of Intimacy.

Provided by Ithaca College

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