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# The Perils of Sexual Roundelays

By PAMELA PAUL

HOOKING up has been held responsible for a number of interpersonal woes, from the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases to the withering of courtship and the death of true love. Now, according to a round of tscking headlines, hook-ups and their Gen X cousin, "friends with benefits," have been associated with another risk: overlapping lovers or, in academic parlance, "concurrent partners."

A new University of Iowa study, "The Contexts of Sexual Involvement and Concurrent Sexual Partnerships," (yes, there is now a body of research dedicated to the hook-up and its discontents) found that compared with those in serious relationships, people hooking up with a stranger or acquaintance and lovers in "friends with benefits" arrangements are much more likely to sleep around simultaneously, spreading potential discord and S.T.D.'s. "The goal was to establish the basic association between different kinds of sexual relationships and concurrency," says Anthony Paik, an assistant professor of sociology, whose results were published in the March issue of *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*.

Most hook-up studies are of adolescents; this is one of the few to examine adults, and they are apparently also rather frisky. According to Dr. Paik's research, one-third of adult relationships lack exclusivity. While over all, men were more than three times more likely to sleep around, women in "friends with benefits" situations were more likely to have multiple partners. Could Harry have been right that men are secretly in love with their female friends and therefore less likely to philander on one?

Grandma is almost certainly right: Jumping into bed isn't likely to lead to matrimony. Sex within the first week of a relationship is associated with a higher risk of non-monogamy. There's also the Mom effect. Women who got along with their companion's parents were less likely than men to have multiple sex partners.

All this doesn't necessarily mean hooking up leads to non-monogamy. "Establishing the relationship between non-serious relationships and concurrent partners is the key finding," Dr. Paik says. "But it's not clear whether this is a causal story or a selection story." He is inclined to believe the latter. In other words, it may be that the people who are likely to enter non-serious sexual relationships are predisposed to be non-exclusive — not that the nature of the

relationship itself causes non-monogamy.

Other caveats apply. The study uses 1995 data on 783 heterosexual adults in the greater Chicago area. Not only is the data old — and hooking up is a particularly millennial pastime — it's not based on a cross-section of the American population. Moreover, in any study like this, recall and social-desirability biases apply. People are liable to “forget” sexual behavior or underreport it because hooking up and sleeping around are still frowned upon (at least in some antediluvian circles).

For Dr. Paik, the underlying interest is in how social networks operate. His other major focus: associations among right-wing lawyers. Now imagine crossing *those* two sets of data.

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