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Infidelity in romantic relationships

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This article summarizes the current state of research on the prediction of infidelity and provides a foundation for advancing knowledge on this topic by offering specific recommendations for future research. The prevalence, terminological diversity, and impact of infidelity on numerous indicators of wellness is first discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the individual, relationship, and contextual factors that have received systematic attention in attempting to predict infidelity. Highlights include various demographics, the closing gender gap, cohabitation, religion, and the role of the internet in facilitating infidelity. The article concludes with 8 recommendations for more informative research to advance understanding of sexual infidelity.

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Popular culture provides a steady diet of casual sexual behavior. Not surprisingly, there is now a large scientific literature scattered across several disciplines on what is variously labeled, infidelity, extradyadic involvement, unfaithfulness, affairs, stepping out, cheating, or some other synonym indicative of secret romantic activity with a secondary partner, while in an exclusive relationship such as marriage. This terminological diversity reflects diverse conceptualizations of the secret activity which can range from emotional involvement with another (online or in person), through holding hands, cuddling, kissing to penetrative vaginal and/or anal sex. This article focuses on sexual infidelity providing a brief synopsis of its incidence and impact before considering what predicts infidelity. Several recommendations for more informative research are outlined.

Incidence and prevalence

Although the majority of Americans disapprove of infidelity (in a Gallup Poll 90% view it as immoral and 65%

say it is unforgivable, [1]), it is estimated that about 2–4% of spouses engage in sexual infidelity in any given year [2,3,4]. Infidelity shows a seasonal pattern with a peak in the summer months, a period associated with travel that likely facilitates sex with a partner in a geographically different location thereby decreasing the chance of detection [5]. As regards life time prevalence, conservative estimates suggest that infidelity occurs in 20–25% of all marriages [6,7]. National surveys show that between 1991 and 2006 there has been an increase in rates of infidelity in all age groups, with the most dramatic rise in the oldest cohort of men (ages 65–90) where a 2–3 fold increase is likely attributable to the introduction of easily accessible treatments for erectile dysfunction [Atkins *et al.*, unpublished, 8]. The scope of infidelity extends beyond the marital realm, with persons in cohabiting and dating relationships reporting higher rates of infidelity than married persons [5] (Table 1).

Impact

Given expectations of fidelity, the costs of infidelity are potentially high for the individuals involved, the relationship, and offspring. Infidelity is reliably associated with poorer mental health particularly depression/anxiety and PTSD [9], and relationship dissolution/divorce [10,11] which has been shown to adversely impact offspring [12]. Indeed, across 160 societies infidelity is the single most common cause of marital dissolution [13]. Infidelity has also been causally linked to domestic violence [14,15]. Importantly, low rates of condom use with secondary partners leads to direct risk of exposure to sexual transmitted infections [16] and places the primary partner at indirect exposure to sexually transmitted diseases; the majority of women who acquire HIV are infected by their primary partners [17]. Thus infidelity is also a significant public health problem [18]. Possibly because of its high costs, numerous attempts have been made to identify factors that predict infidelity as knowing who is at greatest risk will inform prevention [19].

What predicts infidelity?

Individual, relationship, and contextual factors have received systematic attention in attempts to predict infidelity [20].

Demographics. Gender has been repeatedly related to infidelity with men identified as more likely to engage in this behavior than women. This finding supports an evolutionary perspective according to which infidelity increases genetic success for men [14] and comports with research showing that men are better able to separate love

Table 1

Factors found to facilitate infidelity.

Demographics	
Gender	Males > females; however gender gap is closing
Minority status	African American > Whites
Education, age, income	All have been related to infidelity but no consistent pattern of findings
Individual	
Personality	Neuroticism, narcissism
Prior infidelity experience	Infidelity in family of origin; Previously engaged in infidelity
Number of sex partners	Greater number of sex partners before marriage predicts infidelity
Alcohol	Problematic drinking, alcohol dependence, illicit drug use
Attachment	Insecure attachment > secure attachment
Psychological distress	Greater psychological distress associated with infidelity
Attitudes	Permissive attitude toward sex; Decoupling of sex and love, closeness; Willingness to have casual sex
Relationship	
Relationship dissatisfaction	Dissatisfied > satisfied; Some evidence of bidirectional effects
Commitment	Lower commitment > higher commitment
Cohabitation	Prior nonmarital cohabitation > marital cohabitation only; Premarital cohabitation with spouse > no premarital habitation
Assortative mating	Partners of same religion, levels of education less likely to cheat
Context	
Work	Number of days spent traveling for work related to infidelity; Job requiring personal contact with potential sex partners; Larger fraction of opposite sex coworkers in work place related to infidelity for men; Both spouses employed associated with less cheating; One working spouse with other a stay at home spouse related to increased infidelity
Religion	Less infidelity is associated with: Attendance at religious services; Viewing the Bible as the literal word of God; Prayer focused on partner well-being
Internet	Given existence of sites that facilitate infidelity, casual sex, it is likely that visiting such sites promotes infidelity

from sexual activity [21,22] and have greater desire and willingness to engage in infidelity [23,24]. Notwithstanding these observations, previously documented gender difference in rates of marital infidelity appear to be closing [3**] with men and women younger than age 40–45 reporting similar rates of infidelity [4*,25]; one study even shows a greater likelihood of cheating among women if they were unhappy in their primary relationship [26]. Numerous other demographic variables have been investigated in relation to infidelity and there is some evidence to suggest that African Americans engage in higher rates of infidelity compared to their white counterparts [3**,27]. Education, age, and income also have been linked to infidelity but no consistent pattern of findings has emerged across studies.

Individual. Numerous individual characteristics have been associated with infidelity, including personality variables such as neuroticism, prior history of infidelity, number of sex partners before marriage, psychological distress, and an insecure attachment orientation [4*,27,28,29]. Problematic drinking, alcohol dependence and illicit drug use are all related to infidelity [18,30*]. As might be expected, attitudes toward infidelity specifically, permissive attitudes toward sex more generally and a greater willingness to have casual sex and to engage in sex without closeness, commitment or love (i.e., a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation) are also reliably related to infidelity [3**,31–33]. Having experienced

infidelity in the family of origin has been associated with double the rate of infidelity compared to those not exposed to parental infidelity [34].

Relationship. Compared to individual characteristics, relationship factors tend to be more strongly related to infidelity. In particular, decreased satisfaction with the primary relationship is consistently related to infidelity with some evidence of bidirectional effects; in a study spanning 17 years infidelity was both a consequence and a cause of marital distress [35**]. However satisfaction is only one component of a model that is strongly supported by data, the investment model. In the investment model, commitment is central to relationship functioning and comprises both an experienced attachment and a motivation to continue the relationship. Commitment, in turn, is a function of relationship satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives to the relationship and both tangible (e.g., shared possession) and intangible (e.g., shared experiences) investments in the relationship. Given that this model predicts many pro-relationship behaviors, it is not surprising that the investment model has proven useful in predicting infidelity [36]. Finally, cohabitation before marriage is related to increased infidelity [3**] whereas assortative mating (pairing of partners with similar characteristics) may be a protective factor in that both having a partner of the same religion, or similar education is negatively associated with infidelity [25,37].

Context. The closing gender gap in infidelity is ascribed to women's increased presence in the workforce because it creates greater financial means and opportunities for infidelity [38]. At least three more refined structural or opportunity factors have been identified. First, number of days engaged in work related travel is directly related to infidelity [39,40]. Second, job requirements that involve personal contact with potential sex partners [3**] are related to infidelity. Third, a larger fraction of co-workers of the opposite sex is associated with higher rates of infidelity, at least among men [41*]. Finally, one working spouse with the other as a stay at home spouse is associated with increased infidelity [25] whereas both spouses being employed is associated with less cheating [37].

A context that is consistently related to less infidelity is religion, a variable that has been most often operationalized as a single item measure of attendance at religious services [3**,20,25]. This raises the question of whether other aspects of religion are important. In a nationally representative sample attendance was the only religious dimensions out of nine to predict lower infidelity [42*]. Interestingly, self-perceived nearness to God coupled with lack of religious attendance predicted greater infidelity [42*]. Nonetheless, there is some evidence consistent with the unique impact of religion; with attendance controlled, viewing the Bible as the literal word of God or as the inspired word of God is associated with 38% and 24% reductions in likelihood of infidelity, respectively [43]. A particular form of prayer, prayer that focuses on the partner's well-being, also protects against infidelity [44].

Finally, the opportunity provided by the internet for infidelity is relevant in the present context for two reasons. First, some 20–33% of Internet users go online for sexual purposes and 65% of those who look for sex online had sexual intercourse with their internet partner offline, with less than half using a condom [45]. Because those seeking sex on the internet have more sex partners, a greater history of STDs, and more exposure to HIV [46], the costs of infidelity in this context are likely to be particularly high not only for the individuals involved but also for public health. Second, internet sites (e.g., AshleyMadison.com) exist for the express purpose of facilitating offline sexual infidelity.

Toward more informative research

It has been argued that focusing on sexual infidelity yields a misleading picture because of its narrowness as other forms of infidelity are more common and often have consequences that are just as severe as sexual infidelity [47]. Given lack of consensus on definitions of other forms of infidelity (e.g., emotional infidelity, online infidelity) a broadened canvas would likely provide fuel for Smith's lamentation that 'There are probably more scientifically worthless 'facts' on extramarital relations than any other facet of human behavior' [48, p. 108]. Although

an exaggeration, this view must be taken seriously given the secretive nature of the phenomenon investigated.

At the most basic level inquiries about 'sex' or even 'sexual intercourse' with a secondary partner allows for ambiguity given individual differences in conceptualizing the subject of inquiry. Viewed from this perspective, substantial differences in prevalence rates become understandable. Perhaps more telling is the means of data collection as it has been found that rates of sexual infidelity vary dramatically across face-to-face interviews (1.08%) versus computer-assisted self-interviews (6.13%), with the correlates of infidelity also varying as a function of data collection methods [27]. This leads to the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1. Sexual infidelity should be assessed by inquiry about specific behavior (e.g., vaginal/anal penetration) with a secondary partner and whether such behavior is sanctioned in the primary relationship.

Recommendation 2. Data should be collected anonymously whenever possible.

It is the case that some predictors of infidelity are no longer significant when others are simultaneously considered. For example, partner infidelity predicts own infidelity but does not do so when marital dissatisfaction is considered [4*]. It is also instructive that marital dissatisfaction interacted with religion in predicting both lifetime prevalence of infidelity [25] and incidence of infidelity in the past 12 months [4*]: the difference in likelihood of recent infidelity between people low versus high in marital satisfaction was greater for those low in religiosity (5.3% vs. 1.3%) than those high in religiosity (1.5 vs. 0.9%). This point to the need to routinely examine the boundary conditions for predictors of infidelity and leads to three further recommendations.

Recommendation 3. Predictors of infidelity should always be examined in a multivariate context.

Recommendation 4. A variable warrants attention only when it (a) adds information over and beyond that provided by relationship dissatisfaction in predicting infidelity or (b) acts as a moderating variable in predicting infidelity.

Recommendation 5. Because infidelity is a complex phenomenon researchers should not limit investigation to the study of predictors acting in a simple manner (main effects) but routinely examine how they work in concert with each other (moderating effects).

Because most research on infidelity is cross-sectional and gathers retrospective data it is difficult to determine the temporal order of predictors. Further, studies using small

unrepresentative samples and clinical samples are common. This leads to two further recommendations.

Recommendation 6. Greater priority should be given to research that includes a temporal component.

Recommendation 7. Findings regarding infidelity should be viewed as tentative and only be considered scientifically valid once replicated in research using representative samples.

With legal recognition of same sex marriage research on infidelity in same sex couples is long overdue.

Recommendation 8. Researchers should expand their focus from sexual infidelity in heterosexual relationships to include gay and lesbian relationships.

Conclusion

Some 15 years have passed since Atkins and colleagues noted that ‘infidelity is a common phenomenon in marriages but is poorly understood’ [25, p. 735]. Since then progress has been made in understanding infidelity in both marital and nonmarital relationships. But serious methodological problems continue to plague this research field. This is understandable in researching a phenomenon that is rooted in deceit and thus inimical to the truth that science seeks to illuminate. Notwithstanding this challenge, simply adhering to the methodological recommendations already articulated [49,50] will do much to advance understanding.

Conflict of interest statement

Neither Frank Fincham or Ross May have a conflict of interest relating to this manuscript.

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