Infidelity in romantic relationships
Frank D Fincham and Ross W May

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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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...
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 [37**] 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].

<p>| Table 1 |</p>
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<th>Factors found to facilitate infidelity.</th>
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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.

References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


This comprehensive paper integrates demographic risk factors, personal variables, marital quality, and sexual opportunities in a multivariate model to predict sexual infidelity in marriage from self-reported and interview data. In a national probability sample, the National Health and Social Life Survey, stronger sexual interests, permissive sexual values, lower marital satisfaction, weaker network ties with the partner and more opportunities predicted infidelity across both methods of data collection.


This study demonstrates that when marital dissatisfaction is controlled variables that previously predicted infidelity (e.g., suspected partner affairs) no longer do so. Further complexity emerges from the finding that the difference in likelihood of infidelity among husbands with pregnant wives was greater for those low versus high in dissatisfaction (2% vs. 11.9%) compared to husbands without a pregnant wife (1.2% vs. 2.8%).


This study showed that men and women cheat at similar rates, and that infidelity displays a seasonal pattern that peaks in the summer. Because these findings are based on data up to Wave IV of the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) these results apply to young adults up to 32 years of age.


24. Buunk BP, Bakker AB: Responses to unprotected extradyadic sex by one’s partner: testing predictions from


30. Graham SM, Negash S, Lambert NM, Fincham FD: Problem drinking and extradyadic sex in young adult romantic relationships. J Soc Clin Psychol 2016, 35:152-170. Only one published data set links alcohol use to marital infidelity [25]. The demonstration that problem drinking is associated with cheating in romantic relationships among emerging adults is therefore important. Study 1 established a concurrent association whereas Study 2 demonstrated a prospective relationship. In both studies drinking was associated with infidelity independently of relationship satisfaction, age, sex and socially desirable responding.


35. Previti D, Amato PR: Is infidelity a cause or a consequence of poor marital quality? J Soc Personal Relationships 2004, 21:217-230. Because longitudinal research on infidelity is rare, this 17-year longitudinal study of a representative sample of married individuals is valuable. It showed that extramarital sex doubled rates of later divorce over and beyond rates associated with marital happiness and divorce proneness (thinking and talking about divorce). However, it was also shown that infidelity is a cause and an outcome of relationship distress.


41. Kuroki M: Opposite-sex coworkers and marital infidelity. Econ Lett 2013, 118:71-73. This paper is prompted by the observation that sexual integration in the workplace may influence perceptions of alternative partners to the spouse and be associated with infidelity. Using data from the General Social Survey, reported sex ratios in the workplace were related to infidelity. When separate analyses were run for men and for women the finding held only for men.

42. Atkins DC, Kessel DE: Religiousness and infidelity: attendance, but not faith and prayer, predict marital fidelity. J Marriage Family 2008, 70:407-418. One of very few papers that examines more than one religious variable in relation to infidelity. General Social Survey data showed that attendance at religious services decreased infidelity. Congruence between belief and behavior (nearness to God + attendance) revealed a decreased likelihood of infidelity whereas a divergence (nearness to God–attendance) was associated with greater infidelity.


