

8 Sexual Infidelity

90% of newly married women and over 80% of newly married men intended to remain sexually faithful²⁴

About 40% of men and 50% of women thought they would “never want a sexual relationship with anyone else” when they first married²⁴

Over 60% of the population see extra-marital sex as always wrong⁴

Reliable estimates of the frequency of infidelity are rare and there is very little research evidence collected on why people do have affairs. This is a difficult area to research accurately. People responding to questionnaires and interviews may react in complex ways, either exaggerating their experience of adultery or, alternatively, not reporting it, perhaps fearing a breach of confidentiality (especially if they have not told their partner).

Analysis of data from the *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles Survey* shows that 14.6% of men and 9.0% of women have had overlapping sexual relationships in the last year.¹

Likelihood of extramarital sex

Extramarital affairs are facilitated by circumstances which assure secrecy, so couples who lead separate lives have more opportunities, and are more likely, to have secondary sex partners.²

The likelihood of infidelity in married men is greater the higher their social class. In social classes 1 and 2, one in 16 men reports having had two or more concurrent sexual partners in the last year, compared to just one in 40 men in classes 4 and 5.³ The fact that professional men appear to have more affairs than other groups may be explained by their greater likelihood of meeting women through work, giving them increased opportunities of alternative sexual relationships.

Social class and educational differences do not significantly influence women’s risk of being unfaithful. However, women who work away from home (even as infrequently as once a year) are nearly three times as likely as women in general to have had two or more concurrent sexual relationships during the past five years³ — underscoring the importance of opportunity as a pre-requisite for infidelity.

Attitudes towards infidelity

Despite attitudes towards many kinds of sexual behaviour (such as premarital sex, and homosexuality) having liberalised over the last 30 years, most people still regard extramarital sex with disapproval. This belief in the importance of sexual fidelity has remained consistent over time: the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that opinion about extramarital sex has changed little in two decades, and over 60% of the population see extra-marital sex as always wrong.⁴

Reibstein and Richards (1992)⁵ argue that the central importance of marital fidelity in marriage is influenced by the changing nature of marriage itself. In one survey, respondents throughout the European Union were asked what they thought getting married means; the most popular answer was ‘committing yourself to being faithful to your partner’.⁶

Not all cultures place the same value on monogamy as Western societies. Of 139 societies throughout the world, surveyed in the 1940s, 39% permitted men and women to have affairs with particular kinfolk such as the wife’s sister or husband’s brother during certain holidays or festivals, or under other special circumstances.⁷

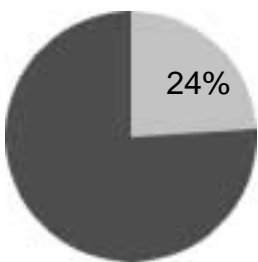
Variables associated with permissive sexual attitudes are: premarital sexual permissiveness, high educational levels, low religiosity and being male.⁸

Permissive sexual attitudes are also linked with extramarital sex. 76% of Americans who believe it is “not at all wrong” report having had extramarital sex, compared to only 10% of those who think it is “always wrong”.⁹

The impact of affairs

There is evidence that men are more upset by the sexual and physical aspect of a partner’s infidelity, while women are more upset by the

Three fifths of newly weds had never discussed the possibility of infidelity with one another²⁴



In 24% of all divorces in 2000, 'adultery' constituted the 'fact proven at divorce'²¹

Men are more likely to petition for divorce on the grounds of their wives' adultery than women are on the grounds of their husbands' adultery (29% and 21% respectively)²¹

emotional aspect.⁸

Several writers^{10, 11} have suggested that the symptoms revealed by many betrayed spouses are strikingly similar to the posttraumatic stress reactions of victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

The impact of infidelity on the shared identity and 'protected space' of an emotionally intimate relationship can leave the betrayed partner feeling violated.¹²

Infidelity can be an identity-threatening experience for both partners — the transgressor for his or her violation of the rules governing the couples' commitment, and the partner for abiding by the rules and for having been unaware of the deception.¹³

Does infidelity inevitably lead to divorce?

Dissatisfaction with the marital relationship is associated with extramarital sex^{14, 15} and those who engage in adultery are less likely to report happy marriages.^{16, 17} Infidelity has also been linked to men's sexual dissatisfaction¹⁸ and to women's perception of inequity in the marriage.¹⁹

Recent research has found that husbands who report lower levels of marital satisfaction are more likely to say they would divorce an unfaithful wife. Women are more likely to say this if they display high levels of conflict with their partner during interviews, if they are married to emotionally unstable men, or if they are rated higher in overall attractiveness as a potential mate than their husbands.²⁰

Divorce statistics reveal some interesting differences in the reactions of men and women to their partners' infidelity. When petitioning for divorce, men are more likely to present 'adultery' as the cause of the irretrievable breakdown of their marriage than are women (29% and 21% respectively).²¹ Women most commonly present 'unreasonable behaviour' as the cause of marital breakdown. Taken together with the fact that men seem to be unfaithful more often, this evidence suggests that men are

less able to forgive a wife's affair and more likely to see it as the end of their marriage.

Pathways for negotiating affairs

Affairs that are known to spouses affect marriages in complex ways. However, in their study of the views of men and women, Harrison and Allan²² found that the majority of participants saw affairs as inappropriate and undesirable. The research identified a number of pathways for negotiating affairs:

- The unfaithful spouse left to be with their new partner. This was often experienced as devastating by the spouse, left to confront the emotional and practical impact of rejection in a highly visible context.
- In other marriages, an individual had insisted their spouse leave once they became aware of the affair. They felt that trust once betrayed could never be recaptured.
- For most, the affair proved to be traumatic and resulted in a need to renegotiate their relationship. It raised fundamental questions about their relationship and could not easily be forgiven or forgotten.

Some couples separated some years after the affair became known, with the participants clearly identifying the affair — and the deceit it entailed — as the catalyst of the breakdown.

Others reported that they could come to terms with their spouse having one affair but would not tolerate any further infidelity. Many also claimed that the marriage only survived because the affair was accepted as being either emotionally unimportant, a temporary aberration, or a result of exceptional (and in this sense understandable) circumstances.

- A small number appeared to have accepted their spouse's affair(s). Some were simply indifferent; they remained married but felt little or no love for their spouse. Some 'open' relationships were also reported in which each partner was free to become involved with others. Usually, the affairs in these open relationships were managed discreetly and defined as purely sexual, only threatening the couple's relationship if they became

A range of behaviours can be considered 'unfaithful'

88% of remarried women strongly believed in fidelity; only 57% of remarried men shared that belief²⁴

In one study of 'Internet infidelity' it was found that 72% of users of sexually explicit Internet message boards had a spouse or significant other²³

44% of both men and women said their sexual needs were unmet in their marriage²⁴

It is in the wake of an affair that many couples seek therapy

emotionally significant.

Types of affair

Harrison and Allan also found that people distinguished between types of affairs: short-lived sexual liaisons providing little beyond sexual gratification, and grand passions based on powerful emotional and sexual feelings.²² However, a range of behaviours can be considered 'unfaithful' and some extramarital affairs remain unconsummated. It is the secretive nature of affairs and the deceit entailed, not purely sex, that characterise for many 'infidelity'.

In one study of 'Internet infidelity' it was found that 72% of users of sexually explicit Internet message boards had a spouse or significant other. Studies suggest that many of those in a committed relationship are not telling their partners about their Internet use — in one study only 20% had told their partner what they were doing. Researchers have found that when these activities are kept secret from a partner, problems in the 'offline' committed relationship are likely, as the Internet may be being used to avoid confronting issues.²³

Why might people have affairs?

Colman (1995)¹² suggests three psychological reasons for why people might have affairs:

- Firstly, a *fear of commitment* can make intimate relationships feel like a threat, usually as a result of negative or painful past experiences. As a result, an extramarital affair can act as a 'distance regulator', ensuring that no one relationship can become too close. In addition, fear of being trapped can come from an unconscious fear of dependency on a relationship.
- Secondly, what is commonly called the *excitement of 'forbidden fruit'* can mean that illicit relationships seem to offer the greatest rewards.
- Thirdly, an affair represents a *break for freedom* from what is perceived as being a limiting and restrictive relationship. In this case, the affair can signal to the spouse a need for change in the marriage, or that the marriage is over.

It is in the wake of an affair that many couples seek therapy.

REFERENCES

1. Johnson AM, Mercer CH, Erens B, Copas AJ, McManus S, Wellings K, Fenton KA, Korovessis C, Macdowall W, Nanchahal K, Purdon S, Field J (2001) Sexual behaviour in Britain: partnerships, practices, and HIV risk behaviours. *The Lancet*, 01 December 2001, Vol 358 No 9296.
2. Blumstein P, Schwartz P (1983) *American couples*. (New York: Morrow.)
3. Johnson AM, Wadsworth J, Wellings K, Field J (1994) *Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles*. (Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications.)
4. Barlow A, Duncan S, James G, Park A (2001) Just a piece of paper? Marriage and cohabitation. In A Park, J Curtice, Thomson K, Jarvis L, Bromley C (2001/2002 edition) *British Social Attitudes: Public policy, social ties*. (London: SAGE Publications.)
5. Reibstein J, Richards M (1992) *Sexual arrangements*. (London: Heinemann.)
6. Eurostat (1995) *Women and men in the European Union: A Statistical portrait*. (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.)
7. Fisher H (1992) *Anatomy of love*. (Simon & Schuster.) Cited in S Brook (Ed) *The Penguin Book of Infidelities*. (London: Viking.)
8. Scott Christopher F, Sprecher S (2000) Sexuality in relationships: A decade review. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, pp999-1017.
9. Smith TW (1994) Attitudes toward sexual permissiveness: Trends, correlates, and behavioral connections. In AS Rossi (Ed) *Sexuality across the lifecourse*, pp63-97. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)
10. Glass SP, Wright TL (1997) Reconstructing marriage after the trauma of infidelity. In K Halford, HJ Markman (Eds) *Clinical handbook of marriage and couple interventions*, pp471-507. (New York: John Wiley & Sons.)
11. Lusterman D (1995) Treating marital infidelity. In RH Mikesell, D Lusterman, SH McDaniel (Eds) *Integrating family therapy: Handbook of family psychology and systems theory*, pp259-270. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.)
12. Colman W (1995) *Understanding affairs*. Paper presented at One Plus One annual conference, 'The State of Affairs', May 1995.
13. Afifi WA, Falato WL, Weiner JL (2001) Identity concerns following a severe relational transgression:

- The role of discovery method for the relational outcomes of infidelity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 18, pp291-308.
14. Brown EM (1991) *Patterns of infidelity and their treatment*. (New York: Brunner-Mazel.)
15. Vaughn D (1986) *Uncoupling*. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.)
16. Greeley AM (1991) *Faithful attraction*. (New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Books) Cited in J Treas, D Giesen (2000) Sexual infidelity among married and cohabiting Americans. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, pp48-60.
17. Bell RR, Turner S, Rosen L (1975) A multivariate analysis of female sexual coitus. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 37, pp375-384.
18. Maykovich MK (1976) Attitudes versus behaviour in extramarital sexual relations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 38, pp693-699.
19. Prins KS, Buunk BP, VanYperen NW (1983) Equity, normative disapproval, and extramarital relations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10, pp39-53. Cited in J Treas, D Giesen (2000) Sexual infidelity among married and cohabiting Americans. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, pp48-60
20. Shackelford TK, Buss DM (1997) Anticipation of marital dissolution as a consequence of spousal infidelity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 14 (6), pp793-808.
21. *National Statistics. Marriage, divorce and adoption statistics. Review of the Registrar General on marriages, divorces and adoptions in England and Wales, 2000*. Series FM2 no. 28 (London: Office for National Statistics).
22. Harrison K, Allan G (2001) Sexual affairs and marriage. *Bulletin Plus, February 2001, vol 5 (1)* (One Plus One Marriage & Partnership Research.)
23. Rust A, MacPhee, D (2001) Internet infidelity: What research tells us. *Family Focus, March 2001, 46 (1)* (National Council on Family Relations).
24. Lawson A (1988) *Adultery: An analysis of love and betrayal*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell.)



Inquiring Informing Innovating