



Infidelity: - “I Do” (But I Wish I Didn’t)

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Editorial

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Abstract

There are all kinds of ways for a relationship to be tested, even broken, some, irrevocably; it’s the endings we’re unprepared for” –Katherine Owen, *Not To Us* (2011).

Keywords: Relationship; Emotional; Sexual; Physical

Introduction

In modern societies, sexual infidelity has emerged as a significant factor contributing to divorce, and this unfortunate social issue has persisted throughout history. The prevalence of divorce cases processed by our court systems continues to rise annually, highlighting the widespread nature of infidelity and the absence of immediate remedies for this problem. Research conducted by Olmstead, Blick, et al. [1] indicates that adultery is the primary cause of divorce. Furthermore, Cherlin [2] asserts that addressing adultery presents the most complex therapeutic challenge within the fields of guidance and counseling.

The Concept of Infidelity

A consensus on the precise definition of infidelity has yet to be reached within the research community. However, infidelity is commonly understood as the intentional violation of the sexual fidelity agreement by one or both individuals in a committed marital or intimate relationship [3]. Infidelity can manifest in various forms, including emotional and sexual (physical) infidelity. Sexual infidelity involves engaging in sexual activities outside of the committed relationship, while emotional infidelity, which does not necessitate sexual interaction, entails diverting time, affection, care, and resources from the primary partner.

While adultery is believed to have existed throughout history, the rapid technological advancements of the 20th century have given rise to new forms of infidelity, such as pornography and cybersex. Exposure to explicit sexual content can jeopardize a partner’s commitment to the primary relationship [4]. Regardless of the specific type, all instances of infidelity involve engaging in sexual intimacy with a third party without the other partner’s consent, an act typically reserved for the primary partnership.

Due to its multifaceted nature, determining the prevalence of infidelity in society poses challenges. Additionally, survey participants often hesitate to honestly acknowledge their involvement in infidelity. However, studies suggest that approximately 25% of married women and 50% of married men have engaged in adultery at least once. Divorce rates can serve as a reliable indicator of the prevalence of adultery, as historical data shows that over 55% of marriages in America end in divorce, with infidelity and financial instability among the leading causes.

Theories of Infidelity

The Evolutionary Theory of Infidelity: The formulation of this hypothesis stems from the experiments conducted in the field of psychology by Buss, et al. According to this hypothesis, husbands possess an innate sense of jealousy towards their

wives due to concerns about potential infidelity and the possibility of raising children who are not genetically their own. This paternal uncertainty drives men to discourage their female partners from engaging in extramarital affairs [4].

Based on the evolutionary hypothesis derived from the aforementioned paradigm, the majority of women in sexual relationships harbor concerns about their male partners developing emotional or sexual connections with other women. Women are aware that such attachments could harm their well-being, as they may result in the diversion of resources away from their partnership. Women fear being abandoned for new partners or being left to raise children without sufficient support [3].

Research findings [3,5] support the notion that women are more distressed by emotional infidelity, while men consider physical infidelity more detrimental to a relationship. This theory aligns with the aforementioned findings, highlighting the gender differences in responses to different types of infidelity.

The Double-Shot Theory of Infidelity: According to the “double-shot” hypothesis, when a man becomes aware of his partner’s infidelity, he often assumes she is engaging in sexual relations with another man. Similarly, when a woman discovers her husband’s infidelity, she may presume he has been sexually involved with the other woman. However, it should be noted that infidelity does not always involve actual sexual intimacy. Research indicates that women are more likely than men to interpret emotional infidelity as implying sexual intimacy DeSterno & Salovey. In both cases, the partner who discovers the adultery often responds with similar behavior, resulting in a mutual betrayal that gives rise to the term “double-shot.”

Gottman’s trust-versus-betrayal model is a related theoretical framework that aids in understanding infidelity. According to this theory, marital betrayals can progress from severe emotional infidelity to painful sexual (physical) infidelity, which can have long-lasting effects on a relationship.

Rebuilding after Infidelity

Treatment Models: Snyder, Baucom, et al. [6] created a therapeutic treatment paradigm to address infidelity. Their model’s three stages of treatment are cognitive, behavioral, and affective. Olmstead, et al. [1] created a model that is closely analogous and incorporates the following factors:

- i. recognizing the emotional (traumatic) effects of the act;
- ii. developing appropriate relationship skills to manage the trauma and support wise decision-making;

- iii. fostering awareness among partners of the relationship’s internal and external factors that make them susceptible to infidelity;
- iv. addressing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive skills required for effective forgiving and moving on.

From a different angle, counselors should prioritize forgiving clients who have committed infidelity, according to Hill [7]. The difficulties in forgiving others and moving on must also be addressed by counselors. Researchers like Gottman [8] and Pruitt, et al. [9] have demonstrated that misunderstandings that forgiving someone is a sign of weakness or justifies their behavior are some of the reasons partners find it difficult to forgive [6]. Additionally, studies have shown that even when the offended spouse has a realistic understanding of forgiveness, s/he may still be hesitant to provide forgiveness for fear that doing so will be seen as approving of such behavior in the future. In that instance, it is essential for the therapist to assist clients in realizing that forgiving others is a process [7].

Implications for Therapists

The initial shock of discovering a partner’s infidelity or extramarital affair often leads to uncertainty, sadness, anger, intrusive thoughts, and difficulty concentrating [9]. Therefore, therapeutic interventions need to be delivered in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. Counselors must recognize that providing guidance may not be effective during the early stages of counseling, as the betrayed partners are emotionally overwhelmed and unable to think rationally. This suggests that in the initial phase of treatment, counselors should focus on helping the couples alleviate their anxiety and establish a sense of comfort.

Once the initial shock, resentment, anger, and feelings of betrayal have subsided, counselors should assist the couples in determining how they wish to address the issue. It is crucial for counselors to demonstrate genuine empathy for both partners’ concerns and encourage them to actively participate in outlining their treatment goals. Gottman [8] emphasizes that infidelity counselors should also be aware of their own limitations, beliefs, biases, perceptions, and emotions related to infidelity [9-12].

Conclusion

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Extant Literature

The literature covered in this article provides a comprehensive overview of infidelity and therapeutic interventions, but it is important to note that it is not exhaustive. The review primarily draws on previous research

studies and may not capture the most up-to-date trends and practices in the field. One significant aspect that the models discussed in this paper do not address is how couples can navigate their intense emotions of anger, resentment, and pain towards forgiveness and compassion. Additionally, a detailed examination of the impact of social media on fidelity is notably absent, despite it being an emerging and relevant topic in this area of study [13,14]. Further research is warranted to explore these important dimensions of infidelity and its treatment.

Implications for Future Research.

The current body of literature examining infidelity and therapeutic approaches faces several challenges related to context and methodology. One crucial aspect that requires attention is the establishment of a precise and consistent definition of infidelity [15,16]. Additionally, there is a need to develop standardized methodological approaches for studying infidelity, as the existing research has demonstrated variations in reported infidelity rates based on the specific methods of data collection employed. Furthermore, future research should place greater emphasis on the development of therapeutic interventions that specifically address emerging forms of infidelity, such as cybersex. By addressing these issues, researchers can enhance the understanding and treatment of infidelity in contemporary contexts.

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