

## Susceptibility to Infidelity in the First Year of Marriage

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Infidelity is a major cause of divorce and spousal battering. Little is known, however, about which individuals are susceptible to infidelity, or about the relationship contexts that promote infidelity. This study of 107 married couples examines three sets of possible predictors of infidelity: Personality factors such as narcissism and conscientiousness; relationship contexts, including recurrent sources of conflict and sexual satisfaction; and the relative “mate value” of the individuals composing a couple. We obtained self-report and spouse-report data on susceptibility to infidelity. We obtained self-report, spouse-report, and interviewer-report data on personality, relationship context, and relative mate value. Personality factors most strongly linked to susceptibility to infidelity were low Conscientiousness, high Narcissism, and high Psychoticism. Relationship contexts most strongly linked to susceptibility to infidelity include sexual dissatisfaction, and specific sources of conflict such as partner complaints about jealousy. Discussion addresses limitations of this study and directions for future research on predicting infidelity. © 1997 Academic Press

Infidelity may have no rival in disrupting a marital relationship. Extramarital sex is the most cited cause of divorce cross-culturally (Betzig, 1989). A sexual infidelity by a woman, either actual or suspected, is the leading cause of spousal battering and spousal homicide (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Anguish, psychological pain, depression, anger, and humiliation are among the emotional experiences of the partner of someone who has been unfaithful (Buunk & van Driel, 1989; Lawson, 1988). Cuckolded men are universal objects of social scorn and derision (Daly & Wilson, 1988). And although the English language does not contain a comparable word to describe a woman whose husband engages in extramarital sex, empirical evidence suggests that the suffering of women is no less than that of men, especially if the affair is accompanied by emotional involvement (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992).

Because of the powerful disruptive sequelae of infidelity, one might think

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its occurrence to be rare. Although extramarital sex may be the marital activity most often cloaked in secrecy, empirical estimates of affairs over the course of a marriage range from 30 to 60% for men and from 20 to 50% for women (Glass & Wright, 1992; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Hunt, 1974; Athanasiou, Shaver, & Tavis, 1970; Levin, 1975; Petersen, 1983). Estimates of the combined probability that at least one member of a married couple will have an affair over the course of a marriage range from 40 to 76% (Thompson, 1983). Estimates of infidelity over the course of a single year of marriage, however, obviously yield lower estimates such as 5% (e.g., Greeley, 1991). A conservative interpretation of these figures suggests that although perhaps half of all married couples remain monogamous, the other half will experience an infidelity over the course of a marriage. Thus, a critical theoretical and practical issue is what predicts who has affairs and who remains maritally faithful.

Gender is the most consistent previously established predictor of infidelity. As the above statistics indicate, more men than women have affairs. Among those men and women who do have affairs, men typically have affairs with a greater number of partners than do women (Lawson, 1988). Men who have affairs are more likely to do so without emotional involvement, whereas women's affairs are more often accompanied by emotional involvement (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Glass & Wright, 1985). Gender is also linked with the sequelae of infidelity. A woman's infidelity is more likely to lead to divorce than is a man's infidelity, across a variety of cultures (Betzig, 1989). Women whose husbands have affairs report that they are more willing to forgive their partner than are men whose wives have affairs (Lawson, 1988). Finally, men are more likely than women to see their own extramarital sex as justified and experience less guilt when they engage in it (Johnson, 1970; Athanasiou *et al.*, 1970; Spanier & Margolis, 1983).

Most demographic and background characteristics are *not* good predictors of infidelity. Extramarital sex is not consistently more prevalent among any particular socioeconomic status group (Buunk & van Driel, 1989), nor is income strongly linked with the likelihood of affairs (Janus & Janus, 1993). Men's level of education is not consistently linked with infidelity, but women's level of education shows a curvilinear relationship, with the least and most educated women showing a higher incidence of affairs than the moderately educated (Janus & Janus, 1993). There is some evidence that religiosity also shows a curvilinear relationship with infidelity, with the most and least religious showing a higher incidence than the moderately religious (Greeley, 1991; Janus & Janus, 1993).

Some therapists have asserted that certain personality characteristics predict affairs. The most common assertions are that those with poor psychological health, low frustration tolerance, masculine insecurity (for men), and narcissism are more prone to affairs (Buunk & van Driel, 1989). Apparently

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