



Is social dominance a sex-specific strategy for infidelity?

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Abstract

The current study investigated personality, psychopathy and mating effort of 84 adults recruited from a large office setting who admitted infidelity whilst involved in another relationship. These were compared with individuals who had not been unfaithful. Measurement scales were reduced by principal components analysis to three general factors; social dominance, manipulateness, and openness. There was no sex difference in social dominance or openness. Males were higher on the manipulateness factor. There were no differences in the social dominance or openness factors for individuals admitting affairs compared to those who had not; males who admitted affairs were higher in social dominance. There was an interaction between sex and having had an affair (or not) for the social dominance, this indicated males who had committed infidelity were higher on the social dominance dimension than females who were also unfaithful, the reverse was the case for males and females who had not had affairs. Manipulateness predicted the number of affairs had and their emphasis on sexuality, whereas social dominance did not. These results suggest male and female infidelity is underpinned by differential personality types as well as differential sexual strategies.

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1. Introduction

Infidelity is the main reason cited when petitioning for a divorce (Betzig, 1989), and those who are unfaithful tend to be cautious about discussing such activity. This may be because it involves elements of behaviour participants may not be comfortable admitting to; unmet sexual and emotional needs, opportunism, irresponsibility, and the execution of intentional deceit. As such, infidelity provides a means of examining the darker and more problematic side of human

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experience without having to examine actual criminal offending (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). While infidelity affects deep human emotions and bonds driven by evolutionary factors, not everybody necessarily follows the evolutionary script (Buss, 1994, 1998, 2000). Nevertheless, this theory is powerful and the current study seeks to examine the individual differences in personality and mating effort in people who admit to having actually been unfaithful using an evolutionary model.

Some aspects of infidelity reflect sex differences in attitudes to sex itself; thus males typically place less emphasis on emotional attachment for sexual relationships, have a greater desire for anonymous sexual encounters, and desire a greater number of sexual partners than females (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue 1994; Wright & Reise, 1997). Shifts from this stereotype reflect research with adolescents and young adults rather than the general population (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995). Females typically value emotional attachment, and their sexual relationships are no exception. This may reflect an evolutionary need for females to be generally sure of a male's personal commitment and his willingness to share resources (as well as genes) before having sex with him. Sexual fantasies reiterate this sexual disparity; men have more sexually focussed fantasies than women, and these are more likely to involve strangers. Women's sexual fantasies are more likely to have some personal content (e.g. knowledge of their fantasy partner; Ellis & Symonds, 1990).

While infidelity is universal, it is rarely socially acceptable, and double-standards exist between public expression and private practice (Feldman & Cauffman, 2000). A study of normative disapproval to extramarital affairs by Prins, Buunk, and VanYperen (1993) tested the assumption that following AIDS awareness "individuals have become more cautious with regard to sexual relations outside their marriage" (p. 39). General disapproval for infidelity and disapproval of infidelity due to risk of HIV was measured, as were desired and actual extramarital affairs. While neither normative disapproval nor actual affair frequency differed between the sexes, the desire to have an affair was significantly higher for males. "Normative disapproval" showed significant negative correlations for both sexes on desire and behaviour. Disapproval of affairs, even in the light of AIDS awareness, was not correlated with desire and actual behaviour.

Infidelity and the desire for more than one partner are clearly important factors of sexual risk taking and strongly underpinned by individual differences. Meta-analysis of 45 studies examining personality factors underlying sexual risk behaviour found high agreeableness (A) and high conscientiousness (C) reliably correlated with lower sexual risk taking (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000). Low A was correlated negatively with greater sexual risk taking, including multiple partners; for low C the strongest correlation was with unprotected sex. This study did not indicate that low C is related to sexual promiscuity, although sensation seeking and impulsivity (sharing constructs with low C) are strongly predictive of sexual risk taking. Miller, Lynam, Zimmerman, Logan, Leukefeld, and Clayton (2000) found that low straightforwardness (one facet of the A construct within Costa and McCrae's "Big Five" model, characterised by manipulative, deceitful behaviour) was also a strong predictor of sexual promiscuity. Marital commitment does not change matters; Buss and Shackelford (1997) studied 107 couples married for less than a year, examining susceptibility to infidelity within that first year, and how likely the participants were to commit infidelity. They examined both Eysenckian and "Big Five" dimensions of personality, a separate measure of narcissism and contextual variables predictive of susceptibility to sexual infidelity, such as sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and sources of conflict. Each participant reported

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