

Infidelity/Extramarital Sex

Infidelity is a violation of the commitment to sexual loyalty by one or both members of a committed romantic relationship. Infidelity can take various forms, including sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity. Technological advances in the twentieth century have facilitated other forms of infidelity, such as phone/cybersex and viewing pornography. Although attitudes about infidelity differ between men and women and across cultures, infidelity constitutes a serious betrayal. Consequences can include mental/emotional suffering as well as termination of the relationship. However, the effects of infidelity can be overcome and healing is possible.

Regardless of culture, age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, a committed relationship usually includes a stated or implied promise of sexual (and perhaps emotional) loyalty to one's partner. Such commitment helps define and preserve the relationship. However, despite the explicit or implicit promise of intimate exclusivity, partners may be unfaithful and "cheat" on the other.

Infidelity can take various forms. In cases of sexual infidelity, sexual intimacy is diverted away from the committed relationship through sexual relations with another person(s). Other forms of infidelity include nonsexual physical relationships, emotional affairs, and liaisons via telephone or

the Internet. With any kind of infidelity, intimacy that is typically reserved for the primary relationship is shared with another person without the partner's knowledge or consent. Extramarital sex or adultery is a specific kind of infidelity in which there is a betrayal of marital sexual exclusivity. Although most committed relationships include sexual fidelity, there are "open" relationships (also called "swinging"), in which partners agree that they can be sexually intimate with others, as long as the commitment to the primary relationship remains intact. In cases of polygamy and polygyny, sexual relations occur with more than one partner within the framework of committed relationships and with the knowledge of all parties involved.

Infidelity can occur with someone that is known personally, or with someone that is not known, as with prostitution. Participation in phone/cyber sex, reading sexually explicit literature, and viewing pornography are other ways in which individuals can violate commitments to sexual exclusivity. Recent technological developments such as the Internet and mobile phones have increased access to pornography and potential affair partners. Some spouses regard Internet infidelity just as real and damaging as face-to-face affairs.

Infidelity can undermine the betrayed partner's sense of security and stability in a relationship; the emotional impact

may be severe, including depression, anxiety, rage, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and decreased self-esteem. For many couples, infidelity brings an end to the relationship. In marriage, adultery typically constitutes one of the most devastating acts of betrayal and may cause serious damage to the foundation of trust, loyalty, and security typically associated with marriage.

Almost all societies have implicit or explicit standards regarding extramarital sex. Historically, religious beliefs have had a strong influence on societal norms. Major religions of the world, including Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Eastern philosophy have specific expectations of fidelity in marriage. There are also various legal implications with public and private consequences. In many countries such as the United States, Russia, Canada, Israel, and Poland, adultery represents grounds for divorce. Islamic law indicates that infidelity should be severely punished. However, four male Muslim eyewitnesses are required for conviction. Muslim women who have been unfaithful (identified by pregnancy) are punished (perhaps by public flogging or stoning), but men are often left unpunished because of a lack of evidence. Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen punish adultery by death. However, there have been no recent executions unless other crimes were involved.

For many, sexual attitudes and practices shifted during the

"sexual revolutions" of the 1920s and 1960s. Although attitudes in many countries during these periods became more liberal regarding certain sexual behaviors, societal views regarding extramarital sex have remained relatively stable throughout the twentieth century, with the vast majority of persons disapproving of it. A study of 24 nations found that only 4 percent of individuals surveyed report that marital infidelity is "not wrong at all." A 1994 cross-national comparison of showed that 82-94 percent of respondents from Britain, U.S., Ireland, West Germany, East Germany, Sweden, and Poland condemn adultery, with West Germany being the most liberal (82 percent disapproving) and the United States being the most conservative (94 percent disapproving). Although there is a consensus across countries that extramarital sex is not acceptable, several nations, notably Russia, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic, show considerably more tolerance. For example, only one of three Russians describe it as "always wrong," as compared to an average of two out of three persons from all 24 countries.

In spite of cultural standards forbidding extramarital sexual affairs, actual behaviors may vary. For example, marital fidelity is expected in the Hispanic culture. However, it is understood that the husband may have extramarital relationships. Likewise, men of financial stature in the Igbo society in Southeastern Nigeria see themselves as entitled when it comes to

extramarital relationships and they display their girlfriends openly to their peers as a sign of status. However, their wives are forbidden to engage in extramarital affairs. In Thailand, long-standing traditions of commercial sex and a growing acceptance of pre-marital sex have contributed to infidelity. However, the AIDS epidemic in this country has led many to re-examine common views and behaviors regarding these practices.

Researchers have struggled to accurately assess the occurrence of infidelity among married and non-married couples. Research results on lifetime incidence rates of extramarital sex have shown great inconsistency, with findings and estimates ranging from rates as low as 1.5 to as high as 50 percent. Data collected in the 1940's in the U.S. by Alfred Kinsey estimated that nearly one out of two married men and one-fourth of women commit adultery. There have been additional studies, with some supporting Kinsey's findings and others not. Some researchers suggest that the incidence of infidelity increased during and following the two World Wars; others note that there is not enough evidence to draw this conclusion. Conservative estimates from recent national surveys indicate between 20 and 25 percent of all married Americans will have sex with someone other than their partner.

Despite these discrepancies in research results, most scholars agree that infidelity is a common phenomenon in

marriage. There is a clear discrepancy between attitudes and behaviors: a very high percentage of people disapprove of extramarital sex, but greater than 20 percent of married individuals admit to being unfaithful. Although infidelity has occurred throughout recorded history, the incidence of infidelity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may be a manifestation of societal changes that have elevated individual gratification above relational commitments.

Research across cultures shows that married men are more likely than women to report ever engaging in extramarital sex. In the United States, about one-quarter of married men and 10 to 15 percent of married women report engaging in extramarital sex. African-American men and women have higher rates than Caucasian men and women. Additionally, men (Caucasian Americans, African-American, and Hispanic) have higher rates of extramarital sexual affairs than women. About four percent of American men and two percent of women report engaging in EMS during the past year. In contrast, a study in urban areas of China indicated that about 20 percent of men and 4 percent of women reported having EMS during the past year.

Research in the U.S. conducted prior to the 1990s consistently revealed that men were more likely to engage in infidelity than women. However, a study by Wiederman (1997) reported that there was no gender difference in lifetime

incidence among men and women respondents younger than 40 years of age. Some hypothesize this may be due to the greater number of women in the workforce, providing greater opportunities to develop sexual relationships. Comparisons of data from two studies of female sexual behavior show some changes in prevalence rates among women in the U.S. during recent decades. The percentage of women reporting an extramarital affair increased twofold from the 1940's (15%) to the 1980's (37%).

Infidelity is not limited to married couples. The percentage of sexually active 16-45 year olds (married and non-married) admitting to having been sexually unfaithful are, in order of infidelity rates): U.S. (50%); Britain (42%); Germany and Mexico (40%); France (36%), and Spain (22%). Infidelity may begin prior to marriage when people are young. In a 2001 report of 14 countries, one third of sexually active young people (40% of men, 28% of women) between 16 and 21 years of age experienced a sexual relationship with more than one person at a time. Teenagers surveyed from the following countries admitted to being unfaithful to a partner in a committed relationship: Thai males (52%), Americans (43% males and females), Greece (38%), the Czech Republic (38%), and British (31%).

Infidelity usually occurs in a relationship context that includes various factors that make the couple vulnerable, including: marital satisfaction, relationship roles and

expectations, communication patterns, conflict-resolution style, and emotional and physical intimacy. For example, lower levels of marital satisfaction have been correlated with greater occurrence of infidelity. Co-habiting couples are also at greater risk for infidelity when compared with married couples, and couples in which one or both spouses have previously been divorced are at greater risk.

A couple's vulnerability may also involve individual and/or relational risk factors. Age, mental health/illness, physical well-being, self-esteem, attitudes about infidelity, religiosity, and gender are examples of individual risk factors. For instance, those with mental and/or emotional health conditions such as depression or anxiety are at a greater risk of having an affair. In addition, low self-esteem has been correlated with the occurrence of infidelity. Permissive attitudes toward infidelity increase a couple's risk and are more likely to occur in liberally minded individuals with low religiosity, premarital sexual experience, and premarital sexual permissiveness.

Men and women generally engage in infidelity for different reasons. A desire for emotional connection is often the most important aspect for women. Other factors include an unhappy marriage, the need for personal growth and self-fulfillment, and a desire for sexual fulfillment. In contrast, men report that

sexual factors, rather than a need for greater emotional intimacy, are most important. In cases when infidelity includes both sexual and emotional intimacy, men typically begin with sexual involvement and move to include emotional, while the opposite is found with women. Furthermore, men tend to be more approving of affairs.

Couples who desire to stay together and mend the relationship may seek help through friends, clergy, self-help books, or professional counselors. In order for healing and reconciliation to occur, various steps must be taken by each partner. Unfaithful partners must take responsibility for their behavior and terminate the affair. Another crucial step in the healing process is a sincere apology by the offending partner. Healing is further facilitated as partners focus on factors that unify them as a couple and work to increase understanding and closeness. Eventually, forgiveness and a restoration of trust can occur.

Bibliography:

- Glass, Shirley P., and Thomas L. Wright, 1985. "Sex Differences in Type of Extramarital Involvement and Marital Dissatisfaction. *Sex Roles* 12: 1101-1120.
- MacKay, Judith. 2001. "Global Sex: Sexuality and Sexual Practices Around the World." *Sexual and Relationship*

Therapy 16: 71-82.

Penn, Christie D., Stacy L.Hernandez, and Maria Bermudez. 1997.

"Using a Cross-Cultural Perspective to Understand Infidelity in Couples Therapy." *American Journal of Family Therapy* 25: 169-185.

Scott, Jacqueline. 1998. "Changing Attitudes to Sexual Morality:

A Cross-National Comparison." *Sociology* 32: 815-845.

Wiederman, Michael W. 1997. "Extramarital Sex: Prevalence and

Correlates in a National Survey." *Journal of Sex Research* 34: 167-174.

Website:

Infidelity Facts. 2006. Accessed January 30, 2007.

<<http://www.infidelityfacts.com/index.html>> Information on infidelity and extramarital affairs.

Indexing Terms: adultery, affair, cheating, cybersex, swinging

Stephen T. Fife and Gerald R. Weeks