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# Differences in Men's and Women's Perception of Infidelity in Varying Situations

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## Abstract

**Exposure to infidelity is rife in our society, whether it has been experienced personally, through friends, or from the media. In this 2 x 3 between subjects study, 128 students read scenarios regarding infidelity (sexual or emotional) in varying situations (internet, phone, or face-to-face). The students answered a 12-item questionnaire about their reactions to the scenarios. Overall, the hypothesized evolutionary theory of men being more upset by sexual infidelity and women being more upset by emotional infidelity was not supported; both men and women were more negative toward sexual infidelity.**

**The addition of varying the situations in which the infidelity would take place revealed that men and women do differ on responses to perceptions of infidelity.**

## Differences in Men's and Women's Perception of Infidelity in Varying

## Situations

Almost everyone in our society has had some exposure to infidelity in a relationship. Whether or not an individual

has experienced infidelity in a personal relationship, contact with infidelity is now only a phone call or a mouse click away. If a person has never consoled a friend concerned about an unfaithful mate, all the person needs to do is view the newest daytime talk show to witness a wide variety of infidelity. Shackelford and Buss (1997) report that researchers differentiate two distinct forms of infidelity: sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity. Obviously sexual infidelity involves sexual involvement with another, while, emotional infidelity involves emotional attachment involving "romantic love, time, and attention to someone else" (p. 1034-1035).

Research indicates men and women perceive infidelity of a sexual nature and infidelity of an emotional nature differently (Piertzak, Laird, Stevens & Thompson, 2001). Evolutionary theory provides the logic for this phenomenon through reproductive fitness and its role in romantic jealousy (DeSteno, Barlett, & Braverman, 2002).

Sex differences in jealousy are theorized to stem from differential reproductive challenges faced by males and females: Male jealousy should function to reduce risks that female partners will be impregnated by rival males, whereas female jealousy should function to reduce risks that male partners will divert resources to the children of rival females (Sagarin, Becker,

Guadagno, Nicastle, and Millevoi, 2001, p. 22)

Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) conducted the classic study on sex differences in response to different types of infidelity. They found men to be significantly more distressed by sexual infidelity, whereas women were more distressed by emotional infidelity. Buss and colleagues demonstrated this sex difference by using a forced-choice question and physiological tests. The physiological measures indicated men are more physiologically aroused by imagining sexual infidelity, and women more aroused by imagining emotional infidelity. The theoretical rationale behind their study is deeply rooted in a strong evolutionary perspective. They conclude, "The events that activate jealousy physiologically and psychologically differ for men and women because of the different adaptive problems they have faced over human evolutionary history in mating contexts" (p. 251).

For an evolutionary hypothesis to be valid, it must be found applicable to all human cultures (Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996). In fact, Buunk et al. demonstrated that men are more distressed over sexual infidelity, and women more distressed over emotional infidelity, in three different cultures. The studies, conducted in the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands, all supported Buss et al.'s (1992) study. The size of the sex difference varied for each country, however, "the German and Dutch cultures provide especially rigorous tests of the hypotheses since these cultures have more relaxed attitudes about sexuality, including extramarital sex, than does the American culture" (Buunk et al., 1996, p. 362).

Many studies (e.g. Wiederman & Allgeier, 1993; Buunk et al., 1996) have replicated the Buss et al. (1992) findings of sex differences in regards to the most distressing type of infidelity. Harris (2002), however, questioned the validity of the evolution theory. She found when heart rate, blood pressure, and electrodermal activity were measured, regardless of what participants reported verbally, the tendency was for both men and women to become more distressed by sexual than emotional infidelity. She also found women with sexual experience verbally expressed higher reactivity to sexual infidelity than women without this experience. DeSteno and Salovey (1996) also called into question the validity of the Buss et al. (1992) findings because they used the forced-choice question format. These authors argue that in order for a significant sex difference to exist in response to the most distressing type of infidelity, the difference must be evident in a continuous measure, which they have not found to be true (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996).

In 2002, however, researchers found confirming evidence for the evolutionary hypothesis in a first of its kind experiment. The experiment employed not only the forced-choice format as had Buss et al. (1992), but also continuous and physiological measures on all the same participants (Pietrzak, Laird, Stevens, & Thompson, 2002). The results indicate men and women respond similarly to forced choice, continuous rating scale and physiological measures. In other words the difference in response by sex was apparent in all the measures (Pietrzak et al., 2002, p. 91). The Pietrzak et al. study (2002) is of particular interest to our current research because we also used a continuous measure to determine a sex difference in response to the most

distressing type of infidelity. As in the previous studies, Pietrzak et al. (2002) found men to be more upset by sexual infidelity whereas women were more upset by emotional infidelity.

Goldenberg, Landau, Pyszczynski, Cox, Greenberg, Solomon, and Dunnam (2003) added an additional viewpoint to the already existing evolutionary perspective for the sex difference rationale: a sociocultural perspective. According to Goldenberg et al., "men derive relatively more self-esteem from their sex lives, whereas women's self-esteem is more contingent on romantic commitment" (2003, p. 1585). It is because of this sex differentiated derivation of self-esteem that men and women respond differently to the most distressing type of infidelity. Men, once again, were found to be more distressed over sexual infidelity, and women more distressed over emotional infidelity.

The previous studies examined men and women's responses to reading a short statement of either sexual or emotional infidelity, and then indicating which they found more distressing. The current study places the sexual or emotional infidelity scenario into a real-life context (internet, phone, or face-to-face interactions). No studies have yet varied the situation in which the infidelity was manipulated, and we believe it is important to study new situations in which romantic relationships will exist. With the ever-increasing advancement of technology, we must seek to understand if the "age old" types of infidelity will make their way into the "new" wave of communication (i.e. phone and internet).

The current experiment was designed to determine whether sex differences occur in perceptions of different types of infidelity (sexual versus

emotional), and in varying situations (internet, phone, face-to-face). Perceptions of the stimulus scenarios were measured by participants' responses to several questions about the scenarios. It was hypothesized that regardless of the situation, men would be more upset by sexual infidelity, and women would be more upset by emotional infidelity. It was also hypothesized that both sexes would be more upset with face-to-face instances of infidelity, regardless of the type. In addition, it was hypothesized that online infidelity would be least upsetting to either sex, regardless of the type of infidelity.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 125 undergraduate students attending a mid-sized university in the southeast. There were 91 females and 32 males who ranged in age from 18 to 55 years old, with a mean of 24.1. Two of the participants did not indicate gender. Of the 125 students, 84 were currently in a romantic relationship. All students were enrolled in undergraduate classes. At the discretion of individual professors, students received extra credit for participating.

### *Design*

The study was a 2 (emotional or sexual conversation) x 3 (site of conversation: on the phone, internet, or face-to-face) between subjects factorial design. The subjects' perceptions of the varying types and sites of infidelity were measured on a 12 item questionnaire. The gender of the subject was a predictor variable. Responses were on a 6-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly*

*agree*). Respondents were asked to imagine they were in relationship and respond to questions about it. An example of one of the questions was, "I would lose trust in my significant other." In addition, a demographic questionnaire was administered.

### *Scenario*

Imagine you have been dating your significant other for one year. You are both college students. Your partner is a senior, majoring in engineering, and you are a junior, majoring in psychology. After only dating for a few months, you both knew you found "the one". Recently, the two of you moved into a one-bedroom apartment together, and have been living there for two months. This is the first time either of you have ever cohabitated with a significant other. The two of you have even been talking of a future together, and possibly marriage upon graduation. You feel secure in your relationship, and undoubtedly know you and your partner are deeply in love.

Late one night, while playing on the computer you come across a file that contains a conversation between your significant other and someone of the opposite sex (*you attempt to make a phone call but when you pick up the phone, you notice that your significant other is already on the phone with a member of the opposite sex/while out to dinner with a close friend, you hear two people talking loudly in the booth next to yours. You soon recognize your significant other's voice, and notice he/she is in the company of a member of the opposite sex.*) You read (*hear/overhear*) enough to lead you to believe that your partner is having an intense, emotional (*sexual*) relationship with this other person, and sharing things with them that your partner had never

shared with you. You soon turn off the computer (*hang up the phone/leave the restaurant*), and try to collect your thoughts.

### *Procedure*

Data were collected at the beginning of class periods, the number of participants in each group varied from 17 to 75. The entire procedure took approximately fifteen minutes. Participants were briefly informed of the purpose of the research before signing informed consents. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the six different scenarios. All participants received the same questionnaire and demographic page. The participants were then asked to read the scenarios and respond to the questions according to their personal opinions. A six point Likert scale was used on the 12-item questionnaire, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

### **Results**

The negative statements on the 12-item questionnaire were reversed and nine of the questions were totaled to obtain a Perception of Infidelity Score. An ANOVA was run with type of infidelity (sexual or emotional), situation level (internet, phone or face-to-face), and gender (male or female) as the independent variables and the total scores on the Perceptions of Infidelity as the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect for type of infidelity [ $F(1,127) = 6.8, p = .01$ ] with sexual infidelity perceived as more negative ( $M = 18.5$ ) than emotional infidelity ( $M = 22.2$ ).

An ANOVA was run with type of infidelity (sexual or emotional), situation level (internet, phone or face-to-face),

and gender (male or female) as the independent variables and the question as to whether they would “ask to be introduced” as the dependent variable. There was a significant interaction effect for situation level by gender [ $F(2,128) = 3.18, p = .045$ ]. See Table 1 for means.

An ANOVA was run with type of infidelity (sexual or emotional), situation level (internet, phone or face-to-face), and gender (male or female) as the independent variables and the question as to whether the subject’s “significant other would not have behaved this way if it were not for something they had done” as the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect for gender with males responding ( $M = 1.59$ ) more positively to the question than females ( $M = 1.38$ ),  $F(1,122) = 7.34, p = .008$ . There was a significant main effect for situational level with face-to-face ( $M = 1.26$ ) being perceived as more likely caused by something participant did than internet ( $M = 1.57$ ) and with phone ( $M = 1.48$ ) falling in between,  $F(2,122) = 3.37, p = .038$ . There was a main effect for type of infidelity with participants more likely to perceive something they did causing the significant other’s behavior if it was sexual ( $M = 1.65$ ) than emotional ( $M = 1.21$ ),  $F(1,122) = 10.67, p = .001$ .

## Discussion

The current study examined how men and women perceive infidelity when the type of infidelity and situation in which it took place were varied. Based on most past research in the area of infidelity in romantic relationships, it was hypothesized that men would be more upset over sexual infidelity and women more upset over emotional infidelity (Buss et al., 1992; Buunk et al., 1996; Pietrzak et al., 2002). The results of our

study, however, did not support this first hypothesis, nor the Evolutionary Theory. The data support Harris’ (2002) findings that both sexes appear to be more distressed by sexual than emotional infidelity.

A possible explanation for our conflicting results could lie in the methodology, which varies considerably from past infidelity studies. Our study employed a continuous scale to measure perceptions of jealousy while Buss et al. (1992), and Buunk et al. (1996) used a forced-choice format, which according to DeSteno and Salovey (1996), generally supports the Evolutionary Theory. Furthermore, we gave our participants only one of six scenarios concerning infidelity to read, while past studies (using continuous scales) gave participants two simultaneous scenarios. The current study is one of the first to apply real-life situations to the infidelity scenarios. The varying situations may have over powered the traditionally seen gender differences. Moreover, it may be that when infidelity scenarios are applied to real-life, and in a non-forced choice format, men and women simply show no difference as to which type of infidelity is most upsetting. The other major difference in the present study from previous ones, is that the participants were asked to imagine the situation occurring to him/herself. In addition, the described situation does not indicate infidelity has definitely occurred, but rather, that the participant’s significant other is communicating with someone in a manner which could lead the participant to assume infidelity was occurring.

Our second hypothesis referred to the situation levels, and stated that both genders would find face-to-face situations most upsetting, regardless of the type of infidelity, followed by the

phone and internet situations. The results of our study did not support this hypothesis for the total score on the Perception of Infidelity Scale. The situation did, however, have an effect on responses to two of the questions. The first question read: "My significant other would not have acted this way if it weren't for something I did." Infidelity in a face-to-face encounter was the situation found by both sexes to produce the most agreement with the statement followed by the phone and internet encounters. It could be that men and women perceive face-to-face infidelity as most indicative of a partner being truly unhappy or most likely to really be unfaithful.

Men, furthermore, agreed with the statement "My significant other would not have acted this way if it weren't for something I did" significantly more than women. It would appear the men in this study take more responsibility for their partner's infidelity than do the women. These data conflict with Johnson's (1970) finding that men experience less guilt when committing infidelity than women (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Finally, men and women agreed more often that sexual infidelity by their partner would occur because of something they did than emotional infidelity would. This sample of men and women possibly feel guiltier about sexual infidelity because in this case their partners are deliberately acting out their unhappiness in the relationship.

The second question which was influenced by the situation read: "I would ask to be introduced to the other person." Women were more likely to want to meet the other person if infidelity was occurring in a face-to-face encounter. This finding seems feasible since women would perceive this as the most direct contact their mate could have with the

other person. People may perceive face-to-face encounters as more intimate settings, and this setting could provide more opportunity for physical contact, and be more likely to lead to sexual infidelity. This reasoning is called the "Double Shot" hypothesis, and supports research conducted by DeSteno and Salovey (1996). Men, surprisingly, wanted to meet the other person if infidelity was occurring by the phone. It is possible the phone creates mystery for the men. Because they only hear a voice, the men might want to "size up" their competition, versus a face-to-face encounter in which they have already judged the physical appearance of their competition.

Each study on infidelity further reveals the relationship dynamics and how men and women perceive infidelity. This study might prove helpful to clinicians who counsel couples with infidelity issues. The findings can offer clinicians useful tools to use to aid in explaining infidelity, and especially the differences in men and women when it comes to guilt, the type of infidelity, and the varying situations in which it occurs.

Future research on a larger and more diverse participant pool would be beneficial. Our findings can only be generalized to college students within a limited age range. Future research would need a participant pool with more males, different cultures, and a wider age range in participants. Since the majority of our participants (and those in past infidelity studies) was either single, or dating, future research should focus on married persons' views of infidelity. Future studies, in addition, should use physiological tests as well as scenarios.

It is interesting to note that situation did not have a main effect on the Perceptions of Infidelity Scale. The

situation did, however, affect responses to two of the individual questions not on the scale. Both males and females were more likely to believe their partner would not have behaved “this way” if it were not for something they did when they discovered a face-to-face-interaction than one over the phone or internet. This response could be because participants who read the Internet scenario had read the whole conversation, whereas those who read the phone or face-to-face scenarios had heard only part of the conversation. Phone and face-to-face scenarios should have had more content about how much the individual observed of infidelity type behavior to equal out all of the conversation read over the internet.

Overall, the hypothesized evolutionary theory of men being more upset with sexual infidelity and women being more upset with emotional infidelity was not supported. The addition of varying situations in which the infidelity would take place revealed that men and women do not differ. In fact, men and women were more negative toward sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity.

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**Table 1. The Mean of Males and Females Asking to be Introduced Depending on the Situation Level.**

Situation Level	Gender	
	Male	Female
Internet	2.3	2.3*
Phone	3.9	3.0*
Face-to-Face	2.8	3.9*

Note. \* $p < .045$