Infidelity in Close Relationships

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Infidelity has been around since the beginning of history, entire wars have been fought because of it. In Greek mythology, Helen of Troy infamously brought about a war that lasted for over ten years, and the destruction of Troy, as a result of her extramarital affair (Bell, R. 1991). In three thousand years, infidelity is still an issue sprouting up within intimate relationships. The reasons why affairs happen really hasn’t changed, but how affairs start has been greatly influenced by the technological paradigm shift. Social networking has a major role in modern infidelity, along with the internet and mobile devices that has allowed groups of people to reach levels of interconnectivity that was not possible even fifty years ago. What remains unchanged despite all of that, is the emotional hurt infidelity causes. The discovery of your significant other committing adultery is enough to stir up an emotional response in most people and when it actually happens it can have devastating emotional effects. Through this paper, I will focus on what causes partners to cheat, the emotional turmoil it causes to both sides of the relationship, effects of social media and infidelity, healing the relationship after infidelity, and recommendations for action.

Infidelity is a transgression that goes against the norm of traditional monogamous relationships. Within society, unfaithful behavior is typically seen as immoral and dishonest. Even with such strong cultural norms affirming that infidelity is wrong, many people still engage in unfaithful acts. A recent meta-analysis found that 34% of men and 24% of women have had extramarital relations (Jackman, 2015). The reasons individuals cheat can vary considerably. Perhaps it’s the need to reignite the thrill of the chase in regard to finding a partner, maybe the individual was looking to fill an emotional void their current partner failed to fill, or maybe it’s as simple as narcissism (McNulty & Widman, 2014). A study conducted by Mahalia Jackman (2015) focused on using attitudinal and behavior theory to predict an individual’s predisposition for being unfaithful. Using a conceptual model, Jackman broke it down into two stages, the first being planned behavior and the second focuses on what drives attitudes towards infidelity. The first stage basically determines that an individual’s behavior is linked by their intentions to engage in the behavior and these intentions are shaped by the individual’s attitude towards the behavior and subjective norms (Jackman, 2015). This means that if an individual has positive individual feelings regarding a behavior and friends engage in or support the behavior positively then the individual is more likely to engage in the behavior. From an individual standpoint this makes sense, say for example you’re a smoker. If your attitude towards smoking is that it is bad for your health, and you have considered quitting and you have several friends or relatives who recently quit smoking and/or have negative dispositions towards it and encourage you, you would most likely try quitting. Jackman used this to construct hypotheses that would predict an individual’s likelihood of cheating. There were three groups: individuals with favorable attitudes towards infidelity, those whose social networks supported it, and finally those who think it is easy for them (Jackman, 2015). The second part of the study focused on socio-demographics and experience with infidelity. Gender was a major focus and especially in the media, there is a particular gender bias regarding men and cheating. Interestingly, Jackman alludes this to the idea of evolutionary theory that suggests that women benefit from long term relationships as a result of child bearing and the need to find a partner who can provide the resources to ensure their survival. On the other hand, men theoretically benefit the species more by being able to impregnate multiple partners thus ensuring survival of the species through his offspring. This leads men to be more likely to engage in infidelity than females as is typically supported by statistical data regarding gender and infidelity (Jackman, 2015). In addition to these socio-demographics, those who did not have a religious identity were more likely to have more favorable views on infidelity as opposed to those with a strong religious identity. The basis for this is the majority of religions encourage fidelity and prohibit extramarital affairs. Unsurprisingly individuals who had cheated in the past held favorable views towards infidelity and individuals who had previously been cheated on had negative views. The results of the study affirmed Jackman’s theory of planned behavior predicting infidelity.

There’s no denying that social networking sites have become a dominant way people interact and stay in contact with each other. For some, Facebook is their primary means of communication with family and friends, others get the bulk of their world news from twitter. However, many people use these sites to engage in unfaithful practices and entire second relationships can evolve, in some cases, an entire second life for a person can emerge due to social networking. There are two distinct forms of relationships online, virtual relationships where the two individuals never meet, and those that use the sites as a conduit in which to engage in physical relations.

When it comes to online relationships, it’s a relatively new topic that has come to exist within the last twenty years, and is constantly evolving into something deeper and more real. This is especially true of virtual relationships and the first thing that comes to mind is Second Life, a 3D world that lets people interact with others using avatars and engage in the same activities people do in the real world. The name is fitting, as some actual people becoming so engrossed within the world that it actually spirals into a second life for them. In this world individuals can buy stuff, play games, have sex, and get married, as well as limitless other things. What’s shocking is that the human to human interaction is so deep within the virtual world, that real world emotional bonds are created (Kalning, 2007). These virtual avatars are able to progress through each stage of relational development, from initiating to bonding (Guerrero, Andeerson & Afifi, 2011, pp. 110-115) both virtually and physically. There’s a case where a Woman named Amanda developed such an intense virtual relationship with another individual in the world, that her husband divorced her in real life. Amanda met a guy in Second Life who she thought was nicer than her current husband who she said was controlling. There communication went from in game chat, to AIM, to long telephone calls. At one point she was spending more than eight hours a day in the virtual world, and when she wasn’t in-game, she was in constant contact with her virtual boyfriend. Max, her husband, caught her at one point having drinks together via webcam. After some research, Max determined that his wife had married her virtual avatar within the game, and disconnected the internet. Amanda trashed the house out of anger and finally threw a punch at Max. This conflict led the two to a divorce (Kalning, 2007). There are numerous reports and stories of similar events taking place within Second Life, giving a new meaning to the word infidelity in modern context, but what about relationships that manifest through a social networking site such as Facebook or Tinder? The rise of social networking makes it incredibly easy to reignite a relationship with a past highschool sweetheart or start something with a crush you have at the office, hidden on your account, all while your partner is unaware. A study by Cravis, Leckie, and Whiting (2013) found that online infidelity and offline infidelity shared similar consequences with 22% of participants becoming divorced or separated as a result of online infidelity. Along the same lines, couples strongly agreed that falling in love, engaging in cybersex, flirting and revealing personal details were unacceptable online behaviors. With the popular dating app Tinder, it is easier than ever to hook up with local “singles” and even easier to keep it hidden from your partner and has become a popular way for individuals to cheat on their significant others. Much of this relates back to the study by Mahalia Jackman (2015) regarding factors that predisposed a person to be unfaithful.

Infidelity in any relationship will almost always have some sort of repercussions when it is discovered. The aftermath can bring about intense emotional responses from both parties involved. Fits of rage, thoughts of revenge, abusive behavior and even thoughts of suicide have been reported in the wake of infidelity (Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan, & Schofield, 2012). It can be difficult emotionally for the initiator as well, with extreme feelings of guilt and stress consuming them. In a study conducted by Carla Leone (2013), one of the victim’s husbands stated,

“I know it’s worse for her, but I feel like I’m going crazy too…I hate myself for having done this, for hurting her, for being an idiot. I don’t want to make excuses, but there were reasons and no one cares about my side of the story—not her, not our friends, not even my own family. I’m just a big jerk to everyone now and probably always will be.

While infidelity is a big reason why couples get divorced, not all split up after an extramarital affair is discovered. Working with couples after an incident of infidelity can be a difficult task, as both parties are going through an emotional crisis. Each affair is different and each relationship is different. For some the affairs were strictly sexual, others strictly emotional, and for some they were both emotional and sexual, and the motivations to initiate an affair can vary wildly based on the individual’s needs. Interestingly enough, the study found that the affair can have a “forward edge” or a positive effect for the marriage in the aftermath. The infidelity could have been the result of revenge or a cry for attention at an issue within the marriage, and after addressed can lead to a growth thereafter within the marriage and even cause the initiator to feel happier and healthier with their marriage post-divorce (Leone, 2013).

A recent study identified four major themes associated with the decision to stay together: Motivation, acts of kindness, meaning making, and support (Abrahamson et al. 2012). Motivational factors have a large influence in whether a relationship can be repaired, and both parties must be motivated enough to undertake the enormous effort it requires to follow through with repairing the relationship. Some of the biggest driving forces behind motivation are their children, property and the time already invested in the relationship. Sometimes even the fear of failure is enough to cause them to preserver and save the relationship. Acts of kindness are a good way to disrupt the normal course that takes place following the discovery of an affair. In the study exclusive partners who showed mercy and kindness to the nonexclusive partner following the affair disrupted the usual anger and defensiveness and helped the rebuilding move forward because the non-exclusive partner felt humanized. Meaning making deals with the couple realizes that it is both a couples issue and an individual issue and moving past the usual bouts of rage and anger. Facing the truth is comforting and liberating for both individuals (Abrahamson et al. 2012). Talking about what went wrong was helpful for them to piece the relationship back together. The support both the victim and the unfaithful partner receive is important. The victim is often consoled by family and friends for their partner’s infidelity, and often felt like they were judges for considering continuing the relationship. Non-exclusive partners found they were criticized for their actions and people expressed doubt about whether they could change their actions. Proper support though from the right sources and the right social networks however can help reconcile a broken relationship (Abrahamson et al. 2012).

Infidelity is especially traumatic for victim’s whose partners fidelity represents an idealized self-image, self-esteem, or healing from a previous trauma and will be devastating to the victim should infidelity occur. Those who come from cultures where affairs are more common and monogamy is less important typically have an easier time in dealing with infidelity. For the relationship to heal, it is important to first address the particular meanings of fidelity for the victim and to discover what aspect of the infidelity was the most significant. For some, the betrayal of sexual relations with another person may not be the major reason they are upset, it could be the breaking of marriage vows and often the greater betrayal being lied too (Leone, 2013). It is important to determine how much of the affair came from something missing inside the marriage and how much came from inside the person. For a lasting relationship to be reformed, understanding and addressing the factors that led to the infidelity and reestablishing trust and safety are key.

One of the first steps identified by Leone is to talk it out. Each partner needs to discuss their emotional feelings that resulted from the infidelity while receiving empathetic support from their significant other, sometimes it will help for the therapist to frame the situation in a way that both can make sense of. The journey towards repairing the relationship may seem hopeless and having a recovery plan can make it seem more manageable.

Many hurt partners may need a recovery period themselves before they focus on the unfaithful partners feelings and actions that led to the infidelity. They feel a need to focus on their experiences and betrayal, once they feel deeply understood, they are more open to examining the factors that caused it in the first place. It is also common for the victim to want the unfaithful partner to experience as much pain and mental anguish as they feel and it is important for the therapist to reinforce that it is detrimental to the rebuilding process and looking at the unfaithful partners experiences so as not to facilitate an attack or shaming (Leone, 2013).

Once both partners are ready, taking an in depth look at the relationship and the factors that led to the affair as well as constructing a theory on the relationship. It is also important for both parties to talk about what hurts most as a result of the affair, what they feel they have lost, and if it reactivates anything from the individuals past. Finally, for the healing process to work, each partner needs to identify what it takes for each of them to personally feel safe, close and connected. The hurt partner may need repeated apologies and proof that the affair has ended or that infidelity will not reoccur. The unfaithful partner also needs to be viewed at with compassion and understanding, that they are a person with emotional needs and not just some monster who cheated. Negotiations may also be necessary and beneficial to the healing process. Can the hurt individual check their partners phone and/or email, how often, etc (Leone, 2013).

Whatever path the couple chooses to undertake, there are always options after infidelity is discovered and reconciliation is possible. Managing your emotions and utilizing the right resources is important for the survival of the relationship. Sometimes though, it may just be better to admit the relationship has run its course and move on. Typically though, there will be some fight left in both individuals and as long as they stay motivated they can move past the transgression and the relationship can continue to grow and develop into a happy healthy relationship once again.

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