The Cheating Heart: Scientific Explorations of Infidelity
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Abstract
Given the potential negative ramifications of infidelity, it is not surprising that researchers have attempted to delineate its root causes. Historically, descriptive approaches have simply identified the demographics of who is unfaithful and how often. However, recent developments in both evolutionary and investment-model research have greatly furthered understanding of infidelity. The field could gain additional insight by examining the similarities of these prominent approaches.

Keywords
infidelity; extradyadic behavior; relationships

Infidelity, in the context of a dyadic relationship, represents a partner’s violation of norms regulating the level of emotional or physical intimacy with people outside the relationship. Marital infidelity is a leading cause of divorce, spousal battery, and homicide (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988). Despite the obvious personal and societal impact of infidelity, little empirical research examined its dynamics until the late 1970s. At that time, empirical researchers paid increased attention to this phenomenon, presumably because of their changing attitudes. Glass and Wright (1977) observed that prior to the 1970s, infidelity was subsumed under the category of sexually deviant behavior. The increasing visibility of infidelity and growing acceptance of nontraditional families during the 1970s, and a willingness to acknowledge the sheer prevalence of infidelity, served to usher in the perception that risk factors for infidelity are pervasive across nominally exclusive heterosexual relationships.

In this article, we summarize relevant empirical research, highlighting some of the key findings and theoretical perspectives that have emerged, particularly since the 1970s. Additionally, we identify new research directions.

THE DESCRIPTIVE APPROACH
This approach encompasses largely atheoretical efforts to document the demographics and attitudinal correlates of infidelity. Typically, descriptive research relies on retrospective and self-report data. Kinsey and his associates found, for example, that 36% of husbands and 25% of wives reported having been unfaithful (e.g., Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). A more recent survey, spanning five age cohorts, found that 37% of men and 12.4% of women born between 1933 and 1942 reported having been unfaithful; among individuals born between 1953 and 1974, the figures were 27.6% for men and 26.2% for women (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994).

Gender differences in motivations for infidelity indicate that marital dissatisfaction tends to be higher among unfaithful women than unfaithful men, and that unfaithful men are more likely to report a sexual rather than emotional motivation for infidelity (e.g., Glass & Wright, 1985). This distinction between “emotional” versus “sexual” motivation is reflected in the finding that a male’s infidelity is more likely than a female’s to be a “one night stand,” to involve someone of limited acquaintance, and to include coitus (Humphrey, 1987).

Gender is also a factor in the likelihood of seeking divorce as a consequence of a partner’s infidelity. Shackelford (1998) asked people to rate the attractiveness of their partners (“mate value”) and indicate their own anticipated responses to infidelity. Results indicated that men were more likely than women to see infidelity as a reason for divorce. However, the likelihood of a woman (but not a man) seeking divorce covaried with the discrepancy between partners’ reported mate values (i.e., to the extent that a female partner was more attractive than her spouse, she was more likely to end a relationship following her partner’s infidelity). Women also appear to have broader criteria for their definition of infidelity, being more likely than men to end a marriage if their spouse “dates” or “flirts with” someone else, even if sexual intercourse does not occur.

The observed increase in the frequency of married women being unfaithful may be due to the increasing percentage of women who work outside the home. Opportunity is a contributor to the likelihood of infidelity, and women who work outside the home have greater opportunity to form opposite-sex relationships than do women who stay at home. In addition, as women achieve greater economic independence, marital instability tends to increase (e.g., Humphrey, 1987).

Some caution is necessary, however, when relying on self-reported infidelity to draw conclusions. Historically, social sanctions against...
female infidelity have been far more severe than sanctions against male infidelity (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988). The apparent increase in female infidelity, therefore, may be an artifact of a decline in the severity of these sanctions rather than reflecting a true change in the rate of infidelity (i.e., women may be more likely to report truthfully now that society is more permissive). Self-reports are also subject to biases relating to the respondent’s level of trust in the confidentiality of the survey, whether the spouse is present in the room, and whether the infidelity is known to the partner. Laumann et al. (1994) found that individuals whose marriages were intact were markedly less likely to report a history of infidelity than individuals whose marriages had ended.

Buunk and Bakker (1995) found that injunctive and descriptive norms independently influence the likelihood of extradyadic sex, but descriptive norms typically outweigh injunctive norms.

The normative model extends to sex roles. Sexual conquest is a component of the masculine sex role (e.g., Lusterman, 1997). This may account for the fact that historically rates of infidelity have been higher for married men than for married women, and for the fact that men are more likely than women to be unfaithful even if marital satisfaction is high. Furthermore, injunctive norms against both female infidelity and female sexual autonomy have historically been far more strict, and accompanied by more severe social sanctions, than the corresponding norms for men (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988). At the same time, the decline in male participation in extradyadic sex observed over the course of the 20th century may reflect changing attitudes toward male sexual entitlement and conquest.

The investment model (for a review, see Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994) represents a theory regarding the process by which individuals become committed to their relationships, as well as the circumstances under which feelings of commitment erode and relationships end. According to this model, the primary force in relationships is commitment, which is a psychological attachment to, and motivation to continue, a relationship. Forces that serve to make an individual more or less committed to a relationship include satisfaction (how happy the individual is with the relationship), alternative quality (potential satisfaction provided outside the relationship, e.g., dating another person, being alone), and investments (things the individual would lose if the relationship ends, e.g., shared possessions, friends). Research has demonstrated the model’s power in accounting for a variety of important behaviors in relationships, including breaking up, willingness to sacrifice, accommodation (the ability to respond to the partner’s bad behavior constructively), and derogation of alternatives (the tendency to make attractive others seem worse than they actually are).

In reference to infidelity, commitment may serve as a macromotive, that is, a central motive that guides both long-term and short-term behavior. Highly committed individuals are less likely to be unfaithful because they are motivated to (a) derogate potential alternatives in order to protect the relationship (thus, effectively keeping alternatives unattractive) and (b) consider, when tempted to be unfaithful, the long-term ramifications of such behavior on the relationship and the partner. Thus, commitment serves to both reduce the frequency with which temptations arise and provide resources enabling the individual to shift his or her focus from any potential short-term pleasure to the long-term consequences.

In a direct test of the model’s ability to predict infidelity (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999), measures of commitment (and of other constructs in the model) successfully predicted subsequent infidelity in dating couples both over the course of a semester and over spring break. This research was important for a variety of reasons: First, it demonstrated successful prediction of actual behavior, rather than relying on the traditional method of asking individuals post hoc why they were unfaithful. Second, it provided additional support for the breadth of the investment approach.
model. Third, disparate methods (survey vs. diary) yielded the same findings.

**THE EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH**

The evolutionary approach, like the investment model, emphasizes the exchange of benefits within the dyad and predicts that satisfaction is largely dependent on the level of equity in this exchange. Evolutionary psychologists also acknowledge that satisfaction is inversely related to the quality of alternatives. The evolutionary model is distinguished, however, by its assumption that the functional basis of these benefits is not to promote satisfaction but to facilitate the production of offspring. From a Darwinian perspective, both morphological and behavioral characteristics of a species are assumed to confer advantages upon the organism in terms of its reproductive success (RS). The measure of RS, in turn, is whether the individual produces offspring who themselves reproduce (e.g., Buss, 1998). Heterosexual behavior, evolutionary psychologists argue, is shaped by oftentimes unconscious predispositions functioning to promote an individual's RS.

One assumption of evolutionary psychologists is that men and women do not possess the same motivation to cheat. A man can increase his RS considerably by impregnating an extradyadic partner, whereas once a woman is pregnant or has exclusive access to a male, there is little benefit to her mating with an extradyadic partner (e.g., Buss, 1998). She can still benefit from infidelity, however, if it is advantageous in terms of “trading up” to a superior mate.

A second assumption of evolutionary psychologists revolves around paternal certainty. Males never have absolute certainty of their biological parentage, whereas females do. As a result, men are more likely than women to exhibit violent sexual jealousy (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988). Women, freed from anxieties surrounding the biological parentage of their offspring, are instead alert to the possibility of male abandonment, inasmuch as this abandonment results in the decreased survivability of their offspring.

A third assumption of evolutionary psychologists is that parental investment, or the time and resources devoted to offspring, is inversely correlated with mating effort, or the time and resources devoted to seeking out and attracting sexual partners—including extradyadic partners. Because of the inescapable costs associated with gestation and nursing, parental investment is higher for women than for men. Consequently, men have more time and resources than women to devote to mating effort. As a result, at any given time, competition for access to mates is greater among males than among females, and this allows females to be more discriminating than males in their choice of partners.

One contribution of the evolutionary perspective has been to generate research answering questions that have not received attention previously. For example, it has been found that men are more likely to engage in sexual infidelity than in emotional infidelity and consider sexual infidelity to be more upsetting relative to emotional infidelity than women do (e.g., Buss, 1998). Women who engage in casual sex with no intention of having a lasting relationship or children nonetheless show a preference for partners who possess qualities they associate with being a good parent (e.g., Buss, 1998). Women experience heightened levels of libido during the most fertile phase of menstruation, are most likely to be unfaithful during their most fertile days, and use contraceptives more conscientiously with their marital partners than with their extramarital partners (Baker & Bellis, 1995).

**NEW DIRECTIONS**

Each of the approaches to the study of infidelity has focused on the structural characteristics of the dyad, including the quality of the partners’ interactions, the exchange of resources, and the attractiveness of alternatives, and has overlooked the unique personalities of the individuals involved. However, personality dimensions (e.g., narcissism) can be expected to influence perceived satisfaction within a dyad and hence moderate individuals’ degree of commitment to their relationship (e.g., Lusterman, 1997). Consideration of individual differences could improve both investment and evolutionary models. For example, individual differences may account for why many females engage in sexually motivated infidelities even though, as noted earlier, this does not directly affect their RS. Additional dimensions of individual differences may serve to influence both expectations regarding one’s primary relationship and the assessment of the risks and rewards associated with an extradyadic relationship.

One common criticism of infidelity research is its overreliance on self-report methods. Notable for its methodology is a study by Seal, Agostinelli, and Hannett (1994). Using a sample of couples in exclusive dating relationships, the researchers provided each member of each dyad with an opportunity to surreptitiously make a date with an extradyadic partner. The researchers also measured participants’ tendency to dissociate sex and love and to seek sexual variety (i.e., “sociosexuality”). Both these
tendencies were correlated with the likelihood of pursuing an extradyadic contact. Interestingly, although men were more likely than women to report a willingness to seek extradyadic contacts, the behavioral measure of actual extradyadic sexual encounters showed no difference between men and women. Innovations in methods, such as the diary method (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999) or the introduction, in a controlled setting, of an opportunity to be unfaithful (Seal et al., 1994), may allow researchers to overcome participants’ biases in reporting their own previous behavior. Greater reliance on behavioral as opposed to subjective data is needed to corroborate and extend existing findings.

The evolutionary model would benefit tremendously from longitudinal research focusing on the frequency of coitus both within and outside the primary relationship. In this age of contraceptives, coital frequency is the best index of RS. Thus, it would strengthen the general evolutionary perspective if data showed that coital frequency within the primary relationship initially declines when a man is unfaithful but eventually returns to an optimal level as coital frequency in the secondary relationship declines. These data would also shed light on whether sexual motivation is truly more characteristic of unfaithful males than unfaithful females.

Finally, the exploration of the root causes of infidelity would benefit from the theoretical combination of the evolutionary and investment approaches. One possible link between the two approaches revolves around the common manner in which they attempt to explain the motivation for infidelity. The specific motivational explanation provided in the investment model is that extradyadic partners may offer the individual a higher level of material and emotional benefits than his or her primary partner provides. Evolutionary theorists emphasize the importance of the same pragmatic benefits, but argue that the ultimate basis for what constitutes a “benefit” is whether it enhances the individual’s RS. These two approaches are largely compatible with one another, and future research is likely to benefit from their cross-fertilization.

Recommended Reading

Drigotas, S., Såfström, C., & Gentilia, T. (1999). (See References)
Humphrey, F. (1987). (See References)

Note

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References