Economics Letters 121 (2013) 458–462

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Economics Letters

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ecolet

New facts on infidelity☆

Effrosyni Adamopoulou*

Bank of Italy, Research Department, Structural Economic Analysis, Labor Market Division, Via Nazionale 91, 00184, Rome, Italy

HIGHLIGHTS

- We establish new empirical facts in line with the recent theoretical literature.
- People that are unfaithful to their current partner were unfaithful also in the past.
- Infidelity displays seasonality, peaking around summertime.
- In the US young males and females are equally likely to be unfaithful.
- In this context, socioeconomic status does not seem to be a driver of infidelity.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 February 2013
Received in revised form
10 September 2013
Accepted 20 September 2013
Available online 27 September 2013

JEL classification:
A13
D10
J12

Keywords:
Infidelity
Multiple dating
Seasonality
State dependence

ABSTRACT

We establish new empirical facts, in line with the recent theoretical literature on infidelity. Infidelity displays seasonality and state dependence. In the US socioeconomic status is not a driver of infidelity and females and males are equally likely to be unfaithful.

1. Introduction

Since the pioneering work of Becker (1974) there have been many studies trying to model different aspects of family behavior from an economic point of view. Among them is the one of Fair (1978) that models infidelity using a model of time allocation. He first develops a theory of extramarital affairs and then tests it empirically using data from magazine surveys. These data have certain limitations regarding non-representability of the sample as well as the scarcity of information on economic variables (e.g., wage). This is why there have been various follow-up studies, most of them very recent, trying to check the validity of his results (Wells, 2003; Li and Racine, 2004), providing new interpretations (Elmslie and Tebaldi, 2008; Smith, 2012), or extending his model allowing for additional variables (Treas and Giesen, 2000; Potter, 2011; Brooks and Monaco, 2012). None of these studies however addresses the issue of state dependence.

Infidelity is related to divorce, which in turn might affect children's welfare (Weiss and Willis, 1985). Moreover, infidelity might have health implications in terms of sexually transmitted diseases. Recent studies (Pongou, 2009a; Pongou and Serrano, 2013) propose a theoretical model of (in)fidelity networks as the mechanism underlying the gender gap in HIV/AIDS prevalence. This is why understanding the determinants of infidelity matters.

In this paper we use the information on the whole history of infidelity events of the respondents and we show that those who cheat have done so also in the past. We find that infidelity displays seasonality, peaking in the summer. In line with the theoretical predictions in Pongou and Serrano (2013), we find that among

☆ First version: October 2012. I am grateful to Nezih Guner for his valuable advice and guidance. Many thanks to Federico Cingano, Michael Haliassos, Francesco Manaresi, and an anonymous referee for useful suggestions. This research was initiated and mainly conducted while at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. The views expressed in the paper are those of the author and do not necessarily correspond to those of the Bank of Italy. All the remaining errors are mine.

* Tel.: +39 0647922594.
E-mail address: Effrosyni.Adamopoulou@esterni.bancaditalia.it.

0165-1765/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2013.09.025

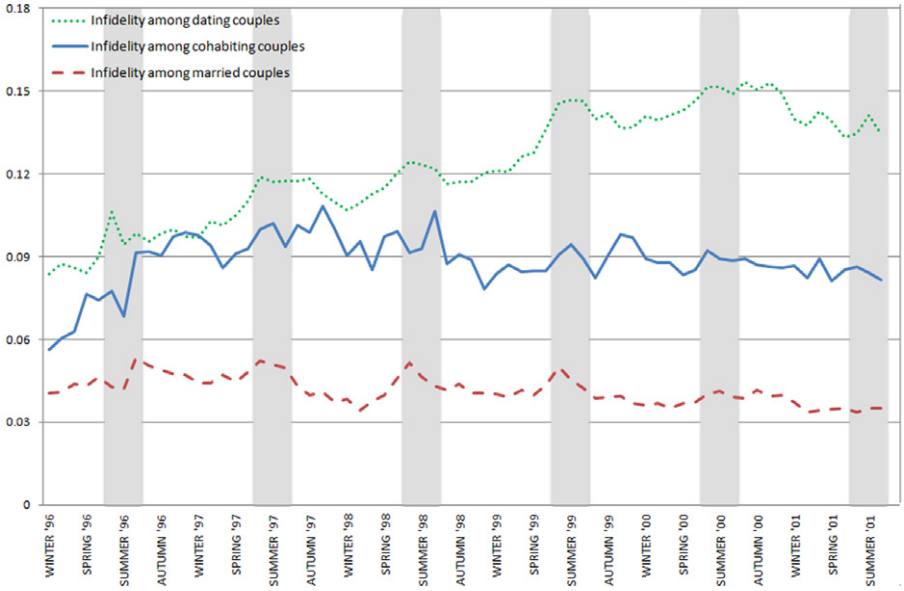

Fig. 1. Seasonality in infidelity behavior, 1996–2001.

unfaithful individuals in the US, about half are men and about half are women. We also show that socioeconomic status does not seem to be related with the infidelity behavior of young adults in the US.

2. Data

We use data from the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is a survey of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7–12 in the United States during the 1994–95 school year.[1] In Wave I the study started with an in-school questionnaire that was administered to more than 90,000 students from 80 high schools and 52 middle schools. A subsample of them (around 20,000) were also asked to complete in-home interviews and were followed in subsequent waves (II, III, and IV). Wave IV was conducted in 2008, when the sample was aged 24–34. The respondents in Wave IV had to answer questions about their educational background, employment, tobacco and alcohol consumption, criminal activities as well as their marital status and details regarding their relationship with their current partner.[2] In particular, the information about infidelity comes from the answer to the question "During the time you and your current partner have had a sexual relationship have you ever had any other sexual partners?"

Our objective is to combine the information about current infidelity behavior with past events of infidelity. To do so we use data from Wave III. Wave III in-home interviews took place during the years 2001–2002 when the respondents were aged 18–26. In Wave III the respondents had to list all their current and previous sexual relationships with detailed information on the starting and ending date, whether they cohabited and how long, when they got married, etc. Using this information we create a monthly panel for the years 1996–2001 which allows us to detect infidelity. If the respondent had more than one relationship in a given month, we keep the one with the longest overall duration and treat the event as infidelity. Our definition of infidelity is not restricted to extramarital affairs but includes multiple dating and infidelity among cohabiting couples.

Fig. 1 shows the average incidence of infidelity among married, cohabiting, and dating couples at each month during the years 1996–2001. Infidelity in all types of relationships displays seasonality peaking during summertime. A simple explanation for this feature might be that most people travel during summer, which in turn facilitates cross-space cheating. Cheating is less likely to be detected when an individual chooses partners in different places rather than in the same area. This interpretation is in line with the predictions of the model of strategic cross-ethnic cheating developed in Pongou (2009b).[3,4]

Our final sample consists of respondents with non-missing relationship history (from Wave III) and information about their current partner (from Wave IV). We first consider those respondents who started being in a relationship with their current partner in 2001 or after (the reference point is the Wave III interview date)

[1] This research uses data from Add Health, a program project directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and funded by grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgment is due to Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. The information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.

[2] These detailed questions were referring to only one current partner. If there were multiple current partners, priority was given as follows: marriage partner, cohabitation partner, pregnancy partner, dating partner. If two or more partners fell in the same type of relationship, the longer/longest relationship was selected. If two or more partners fell in the same type of relationship, and they were of the same duration, then the respondent was asked to pick the partner they cared about the most. If there were no current partners then the most recent partner was selected. If there were no current partner and no most recent partner, end dates for each marriage, cohabitation, and relationship with a pregnancy were reviewed to select the one partner with the most recent end date. If two or more partners had the same end date, the longer/longest relationship was selected.

[3] In Pongou (2009b) limited communication across ethnic groups fosters cross-group anonymity, providing incentives for individuals to choose their sexual partners across groups rather than within, in order to minimize the probability of being caught.

[4] Another pattern that Fig. 1 reveals is that infidelity has increased over time among dating couples but remained relatively constant among cohabiting and married couples. A possible explanation for this pattern may be that as respondents age, those that choose not to get married or cohabit are those most prone to infidelity. In other words, the increase in the incidence of infidelity among dating couples might be due to a composition effect.