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# Infidelity in romantic relationships

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This article summarizes the current state of research on the prediction of infidelity and provides a foundation for advancing knowledge on this topic by offering specific recommendations for future research. The prevalence, terminological diversity, and impact of infidelity on numerous indicators of wellness is first discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the individual, relationship, and contextual factors that have received systematic attention in attempting to predict infidelity. Highlights include various demographics, the closing gender gap, cohabitation, religion, and the role of the internet in facilitating infidelity. The article concludes with 8 recommendations for more informative research to advance understanding of sexual infidelity.

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Popular culture provides a steady diet of casual sexual behavior. Not surprisingly, there is now a large scientific literature scattered across several disciplines on what is variously labeled, infidelity, extradyadic involvement, unfaithfulness, affairs, stepping out, cheating, or some other synonym indicative of secret romantic activity with a secondary partner, while in an exclusive relationship such as marriage. This terminological diversity reflects diverse conceptualizations of the secret activity which can range from emotional involvement with another (online or in person), through holding hands, cuddling, kissing to penetrative vaginal and/or anal sex. This article focuses on sexual infidelity providing a brief synopsis of its incidence and impact before considering what predicts infidelity. Several recommendations for more informative research are outlined.

## Incidence and prevalence

Although the majority of Americans disapprove of infidelity (in a Gallup Poll 90% view it as immoral and 65%

say it is unforgivable, [1]), it is estimated that about 2–4% of spouses engage in sexual infidelity in any given year [2,3,4]. Infidelity shows a seasonal pattern with a peak in the summer months, a period associated with travel that likely facilitates sex with a partner in a geographically different location thereby decreasing the chance of detection [5]. As regards life time prevalence, conservative estimates suggest that infidelity occurs in 20–25% of all marriages [6,7]. National surveys show that between 1991 and 2006 there has been an increase in rates of infidelity in all age groups, with the most dramatic rise in the oldest cohort of men (ages 65–90) where a 2–3 fold increase is likely attributable to the introduction of easily accessible treatments for erectile dysfunction [Atkins *et al.*, unpublished, 8]. The scope of infidelity extends beyond the marital realm, with persons in cohabiting and dating relationships reporting higher rates of infidelity than married persons [5] (Table 1).

## Impact

Given expectations of fidelity, the costs of infidelity are potentially high for the individuals involved, the relationship, and offspring. Infidelity is reliably associated with poorer mental health particularly depression/anxiety and PTSD [9], and relationship dissolution/divorce [10,11] which has been shown to adversely impact offspring [12]. Indeed, across 160 societies infidelity is the single most common cause of marital dissolution [13]. Infidelity has also been causally linked to domestic violence [14,15]. Importantly, low rates of condom use with secondary partners leads to direct risk of exposure to sexual transmitted infections [16] and places the primary partner at indirect exposure to sexually transmitted diseases; the majority of women who acquire HIV are infected by their primary partners [17]. Thus infidelity is also a significant public health problem [18]. Possibly because of its high costs, numerous attempts have been made to identify factors that predict infidelity as knowing who is at greatest risk will inform prevention [19].

## What predicts infidelity?

Individual, relationship, and contextual factors have received systematic attention in attempts to predict infidelity [20].

*Demographics.* Gender has been repeatedly related to infidelity with men identified as more likely to engage in this behavior than women. This finding supports an evolutionary perspective according to which infidelity increases genetic success for men [14] and comports with research showing that men are better able to separate love

Table 1

## Factors found to facilitate infidelity.

Demographics	
Gender	Males > females; however gender gap is closing
Minority status	African American > Whites
Education, age, income	All have been related to infidelity but no consistent pattern of findings
Individual	
Personality	Neuroticism, narcissism
Prior infidelity experience	Infidelity in family of origin; Previously engaged in infidelity
Number of sex partners	Greater number of sex partners before marriage predicts infidelity
Alcohol	Problematic drinking, alcohol dependence, illicit drug use
Attachment	Insecure attachment > secure attachment
Psychological distress	Greater psychological distress associated with infidelity
Attitudes	Permissive attitude toward sex; Decoupling of sex and love, closeness; Willingness to have casual sex
Relationship	
Relationship dissatisfaction	Dissatisfied > satisfied; Some evidence of bidirectional effects
Commitment	Lower commitment > higher commitment
Cohabitation	Prior nonmarital cohabitation > marital cohabitation only; Premarital cohabitation with spouse > no premarital habitation
Assortative mating	Partners of same religion, levels of education less likely to cheat
Context	
Work	Number of days spent traveling for work related to infidelity; Job requiring personal contact with potential sex partners; Larger fraction of opposite sex coworkers in work place related to infidelity for men; Both spouses employed associated with less cheating; One working spouse with other a stay at home spouse related to increased infidelity
Religion	Less infidelity is associated with: Attendance at religious services; Viewing the Bible as the literal word of God; Prayer focused on partner well-being
Internet	Given existence of sites that facilitate infidelity, casual sex, it is likely that visiting such sites promotes infidelity

from sexual activity [21,22] and have greater desire and willingness to engage in infidelity [23,24]. Notwithstanding these observations, previously documented gender difference in rates of marital infidelity appear to be closing [3\*\*] with men and women younger than age 40–45 reporting similar rates of infidelity [4\*,25]; one study even shows a greater likelihood of cheating among women if they were unhappy in their primary relationship [26]. Numerous other demographic variables have been investigated in relation to infidelity and there is some evidence to suggest that African Americans engage in higher rates of infidelity compared to their white counterparts [3\*\*,27]. Education, age, and income also have been linked to infidelity but no consistent pattern of findings has emerged across studies.

*Individual.* Numerous individual characteristics have been associated with infidelity, including personality variables such as neuroticism, prior history of infidelity, number of sex partners before marriage, psychological distress, and an insecure attachment orientation [4\*,27,28,29]. Problematic drinking, alcohol dependence and illicit drug use are all related to infidelity [18,30\*]. As might be expected, attitudes toward infidelity specifically, permissive attitudes toward sex more generally and a greater willingness to have casual sex and to engage in sex without closeness, commitment or love (i.e., a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation) are also reliably related to infidelity [3\*\*,31–33]. Having experienced

infidelity in the family of origin has been associated with double the rate of infidelity compared to those not exposed to parental infidelity [34].

*Relationship.* Compared to individual characteristics, relationship factors tend to be more strongly related to infidelity. In particular, decreased satisfaction with the primary relationship is consistently related to infidelity with some evidence of bidirectional effects; in a study spanning 17 years infidelity was both a consequence and a cause of marital distress [35\*\*]. However satisfaction is only one component of a model that is strongly supported by data, the investment model. In the investment model, commitment is central to relationship functioning and comprises both an experienced attachment and a motivation to continue the relationship. Commitment, in turn, is a function of relationship satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives to the relationship and both tangible (e.g., shared possession) and intangible (e.g., shared experiences) investments in the relationship. Given that this model predicts many pro-relationship behaviors, it is not surprising that the investment model has proven useful in predicting infidelity [36]. Finally, cohabitation before marriage is related to increased infidelity [3\*\*] whereas assortative mating (pairing of partners with similar characteristics) may be a protective factor in that both having a partner of the same religion, or similar education is negatively associated with infidelity [25,37].

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