Infidelity among College Students in Committed Relationships

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Author note

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Abstract
The present author investigated several motivational factors for infidelity within college dating relationships. A sample of 187 college students (86 male, 101 female) that had been in a significant romantic relationship completed a survey compiled of multiple instruments, each assessing five different types of motivational factors (trust, rejection sensitivity, need to belong, self esteem, and loneliness). Participants also completed the Motivations for Infidelity Inventory (MII), measuring general motivations for infidelity including factors such as relationship dissatisfaction, sex, anger, and neglect. As predicted, motivations for infidelity within a relationship are significantly inversely proportionate to the amount of self esteem and levels of trust within the relationship, and positively correlated with levels of loneliness, rejection sensitivity, and need to belong. The present findings indicate that all of these factors play a role in motivating infidelity in dating relationships, and with this information counselors may be able to work with couples and individuals in order to intervene or circumvent potential infidelity in dating relationships.

Keywords: infidelity, dating relationship, college, extradyadic relationship.
Infidelity, also referred to as extradyadic behavior, is a relationship transgression that has been cited as the most common reason for divorce noted by spouses in numerous cultures (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Wiederman (1997) found that in a lifetime, 22.7% of men and 11.6% of women have engaged in extramarital sex, with the gender gap disappearing only when looking at respondents under 40 years of age, suggesting that the traditional ‘double standard’ regarding infidelity may no longer apply to the younger generation (Wiederman, 1997). While reasons for marital infidelity have been heavily studied as researchers try to understand the motivations behind such behaviors, there has been little attention paid to extradyadic behaviors in dating relationships.

Additional research suggests that infidelity, particularly within college dating relationships, may be on the rise. Paul, McManus and Hayes (2000) found that casual sex is a common behavior pattern in contemporary college students. This behavior was found to be most common in those individuals who had high impulsivity, low self esteem, low concern for personal safety, low dependency, and avoidant attachment style (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Given this information it can be postulated that many college students, especially those who are more willing to engage in casual sex, may also be more willing to commit acts of infidelity when they find themselves in a dating relationship. Furthermore, males have been found to be more open to casual sex and have also been found to be more accepting of the idea of infidelity in hypothetical situations than females; however, males and females have similar rates of actually committing relational infidelity (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988; Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999).

Drigotas and Barta (2001) cite several different approaches to understanding the motivations behind relationship infidelity. The descriptive approach relies mainly on self-report
data, and indicates that marital dissatisfaction tends to be higher among unfaithful women, while men are more likely to report sexual reasons for infidelity. Additionally, women seem to have a broader criterion for infidelity, which may include dating or flirting, even if physical interaction does not occur (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). The normative approach assumes that people have a higher likelihood of committing infidelity if they are acquainted with someone who has also been unfaithful. This may account for the fact that historically infidelity rates have been higher for men, but as sexual norms have grown more relaxed towards women in the past decades and as women have entered the workforce in greater numbers, female infidelity rates have risen.

Changing attitudes towards infidelity and sexual entitlement may be behind the decline in male participation in extradyadic sex and relationships (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Furthermore, in discussions of problematic sexual behavior it has been noted that some individuals suffer from inhibitory controls and regulation, attachment disorders, which may lead to cases of infidelity (Samenow, 2010a; Samenow 2010b). Feelings of guilt may form around the indiscretion, or the unfaithful partner may just believe that relationship norms do not apply to them.

Reasons for unfaithfulness in dating relationships have been found to be similar to those cited by individuals in marital relationships (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). However, additional reasons presented by older adolescents included boredom, insecurity, immaturity and lack of communication. They also indicated that infidelity was a more likely reason to end the relationship, suggesting a lower level of commitment than in a marital relationship (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). Additionally, permissive sexual attitudes can positively influence the risk of infidelity within a relationship (Hansen, 1987; Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994), as can sexual or dating experience that started at a younger age (Hansen, 1987). Further research has also found that an investment model of dating can help to predict future infidelity by
looking at the level of commitment from each partner; higher commitment acts as a restraint against infidelity, while those who have a lower level of commitment may be more likely to stray (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999).

The investment model approach takes into account the process by which someone becomes invested in the relationship; the amount of time invested, quality of potential alternatives, and the satisfaction of the relationship predicts the likelihood of infidelity (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Drigotas, Stafstrom, and Gentilia (1999) found, upon further investigation of the investment model’s use in forecasting infidelity, that it is a sound predictor of such behavior, with commitment being the macromotive within the framework of the model. Commitment to one’s partner is suggested to predict beneficial behaviors towards the relationship, such as taking into account the partner’s feelings and the long-term consequences that unfaithful behavior may have on the relationship. Conversely, those who have a low commitment to their partner also often have lower satisfaction in the relationship and see greater alternatives, resulting in behaviors that tend to erode the relationship (Drigotas, Stafstrom, & Gentilia, 1999).

However, while commitment may be a macromotive, there are various other motivations for someone to enter into an extradyadic relationship. Allen and Rhoades (2008) cite dissatisfaction with intimacy in the primary relationship to be a large motivator; if a partner has unmet intimacy needs in the relationship, they may seek to have these needs met elsewhere. Additionally, the search for self-esteem was found to motivate infidelity, especially in highly involved emotional affairs (Allen & Rhoades, 2008). Higher emotional involvement was also found to be correlated with lower levels of regret surrounding the infidelity (Allen & Rhoades, 2008). Need fulfillment and self expansion have been suggested to be strong motivators in infidelity as well (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006).
Lewandowski and Ackerman (2006) assume five basic needs in a relationship: sex, intimacy, companionship, security, and emotional involvement. They postulate that a lack of fulfillment in any one of these needs may lead to problems within the relationship, including the possibility of infidelity if a partner seeks to have their needs fulfilled outside of the primary relationship. Self expansion is based on the idea that people attempt to enhance the self through close relationships, which result in increased self efficacy and sense of self (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). This is facilitated through inclusion of the other in one’s self, by taking into account how behaviors and actions may affect the other person in the relationship. This idea of self expansion is particularly relevant when it comes to decisions surrounding faithfulness to one’s partner (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). These predictors of infidelity are parallel with the Deficit Model of Infidelity, which indicates that when a relationship is lacking in certain areas the result is unfaithfulness to a partner (Thompson, 1983).

The current study seeks to extend previous research of fulfillment of needs to look at factors such as self esteem, loneliness, trust, rejection sensitivity, and need to belong within dating relationships. Additionally, an infidelity motivation inventory was included in the research process, incorporating data on relationship dissatisfaction, anger, neglect and sex. In the present study we extended the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Motivation for infidelity within a dating relationship will have a significant negative correlation with self esteem and trust.

Hypothesis 2: Motivation for dating infidelity will have a significant positive correlation with rejection sensitivity, loneliness, and need to belong.
Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited for this study through a northern university. Participants must have been over the age of 18 and had been in a significant romantic relationship in order to be included in this study. Survey packets were completed by 205 university students during the fall semester of 2007 and the spring semester of 2008. Of these, 187 (101 female, 86 male) provided usable data. The participants were not offered any direct benefit or compensation for their participation in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 through 37 years with a mean age of 19.27. Of the 187 participants, 34 of them reported cheating on a partner, and 44 reported being cheated on by a partner, with 14 of these having both cheated and been cheated on.

Instruments

The motivations for infidelity inventory (MII). The MII is a 16-item scale originally developed for a study directly looking at motivations for infidelity (Barta and Kiene, 2005). Emotional motivation items were produced based on motivations that were found within the literature, and further items were created based on positive attributes one may possess. The scale is comprised of three different types of questions – those referring to positive qualities of the extra partner, those referring to negative qualities of the current partner, and those referring to personal needs of the participant with no reference to either partner. The MII also covers four factors, loaded into different questions – relationship dissatisfaction, neglect, sex, and anger. The researchers were unable to find validity and reliability data for this measure.

Rejection sensitivity questionnaire (RSQ). The RSQ was originally developed on a set of open ended interviews with 20 undergraduate students, asked about 30 different hypothetical situations (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Answers varied based on degree of anxiety regarding the
outcome and expectations of rejection or acceptance. The experiences that did not create variance in responses on both dimensions were eliminated, leaving the final 18 experiences in the full length questionnaire. Responses are measured on a six point scale about anxiety ranging from “very unconcerned” to “very concerned”, and about expectations of acceptance ranging from “very unlikely” to “very likely.” Responses are then reverse scored by subtracting the degree of acceptance from seven, and multiplying this number by the degree of anxiety. A total score is computed through summation of all reversed scored divided by the number of questions (depending on which version of the questionnaire is used). No validity data was found for the RSQ, however it has been shown to have high internal reliability ($\alpha = .83$), and high test-retest reliability coefficients ($\alpha = .83$) between the two scores with the scale administered 3 weeks apart. When the scale was administered to a different sub-sample, four months after the initial administration, scores still held a strong correlation of .78 (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

**Trust scale.** The Trust Scale was developed to measure levels of trust in close interpersonal relationships, and consists of 17 items based on a seven point scale (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). The scale ranges from -3 (“strongly disagree”) through 0 (“neutral”) to 3 (“strongly agree”). Items were designed to measure dependability of the relationship partner, predictability of the relationship partner, and the participant’s faith in the relationship. Validity data was not found for this measure, however the Trust Scale has demonstrated strong test reliability with alpha coefficients ranging from .88 to .92 (Miller & Rempel, 2004).

**Differential loneliness scale (DLS).** The DLS is a scale that, in its full length, consists of 60 true or false questions regarding the subjective experience of loneliness (Schmidt & Sermat, 1983). The words “lonely” and “loneliness” are not included in any of the questions so as to moderate any feelings of inadequacy on the part of the participant. Rather, the scale focuses on
the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of different aspects of the relationship that have been found to suggest loneliness experiences. The Short Student Version consists of 20 of the original 60 items with true/false answers. Validity was not found for the DLS, however it has been shown to have test-retest reliability for males \( r = .85 \) and for females \( r = .97 \), over a time span of one month (Schmidt & Sermat, 1983).

**Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES).** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is a 10 item Likert scale with items ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Rosenberg, 1965). The original sample was developed from 5,024 high school juniors and seniors from ten randomly selected schools in New York. The RSES is a very popular scale and has a psychometric properties indicating high reliability. Fleming and Courtney (1984) found a Cronbach’s Alpha of .88, and a test retest coefficient of .82 when using the scale with a sample consisting of college students. Measures of validity were not found for the RSES.

**Need to belong scale.** The Need to Belong Scale consists of a ten item scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (6) (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2006). The scale has demonstrated adequate reliability with Chronbach’s alpha ranging from .78 to .83 (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi, Cummins, 2008; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Validity information NBS has not been established.

**Procedure**

The participants were made aware of the study through their Psychology 101 class, and were supplied with an information sheet which described the study and provided a web address that took them to the online survey. Upon entering the website the participants were asked to give an electronic signature of consent, and no data was used without this consent. The
participants were then asked to complete the questions provided in the survey. Participation was estimated to take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Results

When looking at the results for the 187 participants, the quantitative data shows several interesting correlations. For example, scores on the Motivations for Infidelity Inventory (MII) showed a negative relationship of -0.43 with the trust variable, where $p = 0.001$. Other variables had small but insignificant positive relationships with the MII score, except for the self esteem variable which showed no relationship. Between the other variables, trust showed a significant negative relationship with loneliness at a correlation of -0.34, $p = 0.00$. Self esteem also significantly correlated with rejection sensitivity (-0.40, $p = 0.00$), need to belong (-0.21, $p = 0.005$), and loneliness (-0.36, $p = 0.00$). Additionally, rejection sensitivity suggested a strong positive relationship with need to belong (0.28, $p = 0.00$) and loneliness (0.44, $p = 0.00$). Table 1 shows full results for all correlations.

The results from this study suggest that the MII relates to trust and loneliness as expected, with higher rates of infidelity motivation relating to higher levels of loneliness, rejection sensitivity and need to belong.

Table 1
Correlations between motivations for infidelity, trust, self esteem, rejection sensitivity, need to belong, and loneliness ($N = 187$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Motivations</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Self esteem</th>
<th>Rejection sensitivity</th>
<th>Need to belong</th>
<th>Loneliness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.426&quot;</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>.260</td>
<td>.202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>-.426&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>-.141</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>-.341&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self esteem</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.402&quot;</td>
<td>-.209&quot;</td>
<td>-.360&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection sensitivity</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>-.141</td>
<td>-.402&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.282&quot;</td>
<td>.437&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to belong</td>
<td>.260</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>-.209&quot;</td>
<td>.282&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>.202</td>
<td>-.341&quot;</td>
<td>-.360&quot;</td>
<td>.437&quot;</td>
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</tr>
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"" Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Discussion

Past findings have found that the search for self esteem as well as a lack of security in the relationship can contribute to susceptibility to infidelity (Allen & Rhoades, 2008; Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). The present results build on this idea by indicating that motivations for infidelity are higher when there is less trust between partners in a dating relationship. Similarly, we found that loneliness is high when there is less trust in the relationship. Therefore, loneliness can be thought to contribute to motivations for infidelity during dating. This finding is parallel to Lewandowski and Ackerman’s (2006) research suggesting that if a need is not met within the primary relationship it may be sought elsewhere.

Additionally, the present study found that self esteem tends to be lower when sensitivity to rejection, need to belong, and loneliness are high – increasing the likelihood of an individual being susceptible to infidelity. Those who are lonely and feel a need to conform to other’s expectations and desires in order to gain approval may then be at higher risk for committing acts of infidelity in order to obtain a sense of worth and esteem. Also, when sensitivity to rejection is high, the need to belong and feelings of loneliness tend to be higher as well, compounding the need to feel accepted and sought after, either emotionally or physically, or both.

Both of our hypotheses were supported through the results of this study. These results indicate that the measured constructs of trust, self esteem, loneliness, need to belong, and rejection sensitivity have a heavy influence on motivation for infidelity. While not all of the constructs had a significant direct correlation to motivations for infidelity within a dating relationship, the results suggest that they have a strong contribution to greater feelings of relationship dissatisfaction, and therefore should not be overlooked.
Implications for Counseling

These findings hold various implications for counseling both individuals and couples. Specifically, self esteem appears to be inversely related to rejection sensitivity, need to belong, and loneliness implies that working to build and maintain a high level of self esteem in clients may help to lower the likelihood of infidelity within relationships. As discussed earlier Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) noted that casual sex is more common in college students with low levels of self esteem, which again suggests that self esteem may be strongly linked with occurrences of infidelity, giving more reason to focus on this area when working with couples or individuals concerned with acts of infidelity. Additionally, working with clients to build a stronger sense of self identity and personal worth will help them to be more resilient to any rejection they may face and to have a greater sense of belongingness without compromising their primary relationship.

It has been found that women tend to have a broader criterion for infidelity than men, which may include flirting and emotional disclosure as well as physical acts (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Therefore, because men and women may not share perspective on what is and is not acceptable, it is important for couples to have candid discussions around what is and is not appropriate interaction with other individuals and what constitutes infidelity. Counselors working with couples may want to focus on these discussions when initiating counseling in order to set clear limits and boundaries within the relationship, and to help the couple understand what may be hurtful to their partner. Additionally, these conversations can increase understanding of their partner, and help to establish greater trust within the relationship. As trust was the only factor that related directly to motivation for infidelity, it can be argued that trust is of paramount
importance when discussing relationships and infidelity with clients. If trust levels between partners are high, the likelihood of an extradyadic relationship is much lower.

The level of commitment within a relationship has been cited as a large component in the likelihood of infidelity (Drigotas, Sofstrom, & Gentilia, 1999). Therefore it can be recommended that counselors assess the level of commitment in both partners, and educate the couple on the importance of commitment in order for the relationship to remain monogamous. Additionally, the counselor can focus on increasing the level of commitment between the couple through exploring the past and present balance of benefits and costs within the relationship, and discussing various needs for happiness for the future of the relationship. The less committed partner may be willing to continue the relationship if they perceive more benefits than costs, and if they are able to meet each other’s needs in the future. The continuation of therapy may then focus on the reinstatement of lacking benefits and fulfillment of stated needs (Weeks & Treat, 2001).

Similarly, as discussed in the literature review section, Allen and Rhoades (2008) and Lewandowski and Ackerman (2006) have linked infidelity with dissatisfaction and unfulfilled needs within the relationship. Counselors can facilitate an exploration of needs for both partners to bring awareness and insight to what can be done to realize each other’s needs within the relationship. Focusing on meeting the needs of their partner, and having their own needs voiced and met, can help the couple to feel satisfied and secure in the relationship, therefore decreasing the likelihood of infidelity.

Limitations and Future Research

Like any other study, this study suffers from various limitations. It is important to note that the data gathered is self-report data from a specific population of college students, mostly in
their late teenage years. This age group is generally unlikely to be involved in highly serious relationships, which may leave more leeway for infidelity. Additionally the self-report method allows the participant room to disclose only what they would like. Therefore, the group may not be representative of the general population and may only generalize to dating relationships in this particular age group. Moreover, the definition of infidelity is broad and very subjective. We did not specify between emotional and physical infidelity, nor did we classify it by certain actions such as kissing or sexual intercourse. As it is open to interpretation by the individual, some may consider certain actions as unfaithful where others would not. Also, it is important to recognize that possible motivation for infidelity does not equate to actual infidelity – someone may be highly susceptible to an extradyadic relationship but never act on it due to other environmental or personal factors. Finally, validity and reliability was not found for all measures used. The use of measures for which validity is unknown could contribute to discrepancies in the validity of the data gathered. However, this data could be viewed as preliminary and may lead into future research with more recently created measures for which validity and reliability information is available.

Future research conducted on motivations of dating infidelity should focus on the precursors to an extradyadic relationship, instead of the after the fact issues. If we are able to identify factors that may contribute to potential infidelity or that create certain susceptibility, it will be easier to intervene before the infidelity takes place or the beginning extradyadic relationship grows into something larger. A large amount of current research focuses on after the fact circumstances and reactions to betrayal by a partner; however, a focus on the conditions – both individual and within the relationship – leading up to the betrayal may garner more useful information for couple’s counseling as well as individuals who have disclosed contemplation and
actual acts of infidelity. Additionally, many people are currently postponing marriage due to various factors (i.e. continuing higher education, sensitivity to high divorce rates) and having longer and more serious dating relationships before entering into marriage, while some are forgoing marriage completely. Therefore, the importance of a larger focus on the nature of dating relationships is growing rapidly.

By examining the various significant contributing factors of trust, loneliness, need to belong, rejection sensitivity and self esteem, we found circumstances in which the motivation for infidelity within a dating relationship is quite high. These findings lend us greater understanding to certain circumstances of extradyadic relationships and reveals the potential to intervene and facilitate a healthier relationship pattern before a betrayal has occurred.
References


