

# **Sex Differences in Emotional and Sexual Infidelity**

Thesis Proposal

Infidelity research has revealed that significant numbers of individuals are going outside of their primary relationship and becoming extradyadically involved with other relational partners (e.g. Boekhout et al. 1999; Feldman & Cauffman, 2000; Hansen, 1987; Spanier & Margolis, 1983; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Greeley (1994) reports that 11% of women and 21% of men reported engaging in sex with someone other than their spouse during their marriage. Additionally, Hansen (1987) reports that 70.9% of men and 57.4% of women reported being unfaithful to a dating partner. Past studies have focused on different types (sexual, emotional, sexual and emotional) of infidelity committed by individuals and has attempted to understand why individuals become extradyadically involved.

The majority of infidelity research has focused on sex differences in jealousy responses to infidelity based on evolutionary predictions; less research has focused on sex differences regarding other issues surrounding infidelity, including perceptions of the behaviors that constitute infidelity, commission of infidelity, justifications for infidelity, and approval of infidelity. These issues are important to study because many stereotypes exist regarding sex differences in infidelity. In addition, a major objective of infidelity research is to “promote understandings which are useful to men and women in the course of relationship intimacy” (Thompson, 1983, p. 19). Research that has addressed these issues has produced contradictory results with some studies reporting sex differences, whereas other studies report no differences. Because contradictory results exist, we do not have a clear understanding of sex differences in infidelity in dating and marital relationships. The purpose of this study is to gain a clearer understanding of sex

differences in what constitutes infidelity, the commission of infidelity, justifications for infidelity, and approval of infidelity.

### Definition of Infidelity

Relational infidelity is defined as a severe relational transgression in which one or both relational partners perform extradyadic behaviors that violate relational rules of monogamy and exclusivity without their partner's prior consent. It is important to note that the existence of extradyadic behaviors do not always constitute acts of relational infidelity because some relationships do not have an expectation of exclusivity or monogamy (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentillia, 1999).

Infidelity research has addressed two types of betrayal that occur in committed romantic relationships (Feldman & Cauffman, 2000), sexual or emotional. *Sexual infidelity*, as its name suggests, refers to sexual activities that are committed with someone other than one's partner. Behaviors that constitute sexual infidelity range from kissing to sexual intercourse and include behaviors such as sexual touching and oral sex (Feldman & Cauffman, 2000; Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). *Emotional infidelity* refers to becoming emotionally involved with someone other than one's partner (Roscoe et al., 1988). Behaviors such as flirting, dating, spending time together, and falling in love with someone other than one's partner are identified as acts of emotional infidelity or betrayal (Roscoe et al., 1988).

Relational infidelity may involve sexual involvement in the absence of an emotional attachment, an emotional attachment in the absence of sexual involvement, or a combination of sexual involvement and an emotional attachment. Although both sexual and emotional infidelity can inflict stress on a relationship (Cann, Mangum, & Wells,

2001), research indicates that sexual infidelity in the absence of an emotional attachment is considered to be one of the most severe and unaccepted types of infidelity that occur within dating and marital relationships (Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995). However, both sexual and emotional betrayals are the focus of infidelity research.

### Sex differences in Infidelity

Sex differences in infidelity is one of the main focuses of infidelity research. Scholars have studied a number of dependent variables to gain a better understanding of sex differences in infidelity. These dependent variables fall into one of five categories, perceptions of what constitutes infidelity, commission of infidelity, justifications for infidelity, approval of infidelity, and jealousy reactions to infidelity.

#### *Behaviors that constitute Infidelity*

Various studies have examined men's and women's attitudes and behaviors regarding both sexual and emotional extradyadic involvement; however only one study (Roscoe et al., 1988) has asked participants to identify what acts constitute infidelity behaviors. In a study of unmarried undergraduates, Roscoe et al. (1988) found that 56.9% of the sample believed that dating/spending time with another was an unfaithful behavior, 41.9% mentioned sexual intercourse, and 39.8% reported sexual interactions including flirting, kissing, petting, and necking infidelity behaviors. These findings are noteworthy because acts constituting emotional infidelity were more strongly identified as infidelity than sexual acts. This is strong evidence that infidelity is not just sexual but emotional too. Three sex differences emerged indicating that men and women may identify different behaviors as acts of infidelity. Women identified dating and spending time with another partner, and keeping secrets from one's partner as unfaithful acts more than men, while

men reported engaging in sexual interactions with another partner as acts of infidelity more so than women. These findings suggest that women more than men identify acts of emotional betrayal as acts of infidelity and more men than women identify sexual interactions as acts of infidelity. These sex differences in what constitutes infidelity are noteworthy in the sense that sex differences in the commission of infidelity may result because men and women have different definitions of what they identify as an act of infidelity. Based on the results of the study by Roscoe et al., the following research question is posited.

RQ1: Do men and women differ in the emotional and sexual behaviors they identify as acts of infidelity?

#### *Commission of Infidelity*

Research attempting to determine whether sex differences exist in committing infidelity has found contradictory results. Some studies report sex differences, often indicating that more men than women commit infidelity, whereas other studies report no differences. For example, according to a study conducted by Seal, Agostinelli, and Hannett (1994) assessing participants' willingness to become romantically involved with an extradyadic partner, sex differences emerged. They found that when presented with a hypothetical opportunity to be involved outside of their committed relationship, men reported a greater willingness to engage in extradyadic behaviors violating rules of exclusivity than did women.

Several studies have examined the actual commission of infidelity. That is, instead of asking whether they would be willing to engage in infidelity participants were asked whether they had actually committed infidelity. The results of the one study

(Hansen, 1987) assessing actual rather than hypothetical infidelity, found that a greater percentage of men (70.9%) reported committing infidelity than women (57.4%).

Dissimilar findings emerged in a study measuring the proportion of men and women in a serious dating relationship who reported actually engaging in extradyadic (ED) dating, indicating they had dated at least one other person while in a serious committed relationship (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). The results were nonsignificant, but overall 42% of the participants reported being involved in extradyadic dating. However, moderate sex differences surfaced when respondents were asked whether they had multiple extradyadic dating partners (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). They found that more men than women claimed to have multiple extradyadic dating partners ( $d = .53$ ) while in a serious dating relationship (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Similarly, Spanier and Margolis (1983) found that men reported having significantly more multiple extramarital sexual partners than did women.

Contrary to the previous studies, other studies have found that women were just as likely as men to report being a perpetrator of emotional and sexual extradyadic involvement (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Feldman & Cauffman, 2000; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999) and marital infidelity (Prins, Buunk, & VanYperen, 1993; Spanier & Margolis, 1983; Thompson, 1984). Many studies (Boekhout et al., 1999; Glass & Wright, 1992; Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995) have reported the percentages of men and women that have committed infidelity but do not indicate whether they differ significantly. Thus it is unknown whether sex differences exist in these studies. Therefore the following research question is asked.

RQ2: Are there sex differences in the actual commission of infidelity?

Although it is unclear whether there are sex differences in the commission of infidelity, research on the type of infidelity, sexual versus emotional, that men and women commit is clearer. Many studies have found sex differences in the type of actual extradyadic behaviors that men and women commit in dating and marital relationships. Boekhout et al. (1999) found that of the participants that reported having been unfaithful (38.1% women, 48.7% men) women reported being emotionally but not sexually involved at a higher frequency than did men (33.3% vs.12.8%), whereas men reported being sexually but not emotionally involved at a higher frequency than did women (61.5% vs. 25%). In addition, 41.6% of the women reported being sexually and emotionally involved, while only 25.6% of the men reported being sexually and emotionally involved. Glass and Wright (1985) found that significantly more men than women reported having engaged in extramarital sexual intercourse and men were more likely to classify their affairs as more sexual versus emotional than women.

In a study of extramarital infidelity, Thompson (1984) reported that men reported being sexually but not emotionally involved more than women, confirming the stereotypical viewpoint that men have more sexually driven extrarelatonal involvements than do women. Similar results were reported by Sheppard et al. (1995) revealing that a higher percentage of men than women had engaged in sexual behaviors of infidelity, while a higher percentage of women reported engaging in emotional behaviors of infidelity (Sheppard et al., 1995).

In order to determine whether men and women commit different types of infidelity (sexual or emotional) Drennick (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that differentiated between sexual and emotional infidelity. Results revealed a significant

effect size ( $d = .68$ ) indicating that men were more likely than women to rate their infidelity as sexual versus emotional (Dreznick, 2004). Although these results are interesting they are problematic for two reasons. First, the effect size although moderate, is based on a sample size of three studies (Boekhout et al., 1999; Glass & Wright, 1985; & Spanier & Margolis, 1983) and 645 participants. Secondly, the results do not take into account the fact that infidelity may be both sexual and emotional. Of the three studies included in the meta-analysis, two of them (Boekhout, 1999; Glass and Wright, 1985) allowed participants to classify their infidelity as both sexual and emotional infidelity. Various percentages of both men and women in these two studies identified their involvement as both being a combination of sexual and emotional. Those classifying their infidelity as being both sexual and emotional were not included in the meta-analysis.

In order to have a better, more complete understanding of sex differences in the types of infidelity that men and women commit, it is important to look at all three infidelity conditions; sexual only, emotional only, and the combination of sexual and emotional. In doing so, we will be able to determine if men do in fact commit sexual infidelity more than women and women commit emotional infidelity more than men, and if a sex difference exists between men and women committing both sexual and emotional infidelity. Therefore, to better understand the types of infidelity men and women commit we posit the following and research question.

RQ3: Are there sex differences in the type of infidelity (sexual, emotional, sexual and emotional) that men and women commit?

In addition to studying whether men commit sexual infidelity more than women, some studies have examined whether men commit more extreme types of sexual



infidelity than women. This belief was partially confirmed by a sample of college students in a study conducted by Feldman and Cauffman (2000) examining five infidelity behaviors, three were acts of sexual infidelity (kissing, petting, and sexual intercourse) and two were acts of emotional infidelity (dating and emotional involvement). The only sex difference that emerged was that men more than women reported having engaged in extradyadic sexual intercourse. Men and women were similar in dating, emotional involvement, kissing, and petting. Despite the use of similar methods, Wiederman and Hurd (1999) found multiple significant differences between the extradyadic behavior of men and women, including, kissing and fondling ( $d = .31$ ), performing oral sex ( $d = .38$ ), receiving oral sex ( $d = .48$ ), and sexual intercourse ( $d = .38$ ) indicating that men committed these acts more than women.

There is also evidence that men commit multiple extradyadic sexual acts more than women (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Significant differences emerged for the sexual behaviors of romantic kissing ( $d = .41$ ), kissing and fondling ( $d = .44$ ), performing extradyadic oral sex ( $d = .40$ ), and extradyadic sexual intercourse ( $d = .58$ ) indicating that men more than women committed these acts of sexual infidelity more than once. Unfortunately, this data does not reveal whether these acts were committed with multiple extradyadic partners, or whether they committed these acts on multiple occasions with the same extradyadic partner.

Wiederman and Hurd (1999) suggest that because men and women are socialized differently about acceptable sexual activity (i.e., more acceptable for men than women) sex differences in infidelity may be a result of underreporting of infidelity behavior by women rather than real sex differences. However, this does not explain the fact that

Feldman and Cauffman (2000) found that men and women only differ on sexual intercourse and do not differ on any of the other sexual acts of infidelity studied. However, it is possible that women may only underreport certain behaviors of infidelity such as sexual infidelity while they may not underreport less severe sexual acts such as kissing or petting.

Because there are inconsistent results regarding sex differences in various acts of sexual infidelity and because no one has looked at whether there are sex difference in various acts of emotional infidelity we asked the following research questions.

RQ4: Are there sex differences in the particular acts of sexual infidelity (kissing, fondling, oral sex, sexual intercourse)?

RQ5: Are there sex differences in the particular acts of emotional infidelity (flirting, dating/spending time together, Intimate Conversations/sharing intimate secrets, falling in love)?

#### *Justifications for infidelity.*

Infidelity research has attempted to understand why individuals engage in extradyadic behaviors. Researchers have documented various reasons that individuals have given to justify their acts of infidelity. Although men and women agree on many reasons for committing infidelity, studies have shown that there are sex differences in some justifications for committing infidelity.

Roscoe et al. (1988) surveyed undergraduate students asking them to report the reasons that someone in a serious dating relationship would give for unfaithful behaviors. There were no sex differences for various reasons such as boredom, geographical distance, variety/experimentation, attraction to another, and revenge. However, women

relationship dissatisfaction reported more as contributing to infidelity than men; whereas men identified lack of communication/understanding, and sexual incompatibility as factors leading to unfaithful behavior more so than women.

Boekhout et al. (1999) asked undergraduates to rate various sexual and emotional reasons that may be given for a extrarelational involvement for men and women. Results revealed significant sex differences in their use of 15 of the 23 reasons for men and women being unfaithful in a committed relationship. In particular, they found that participants perceived that sexual reasons for infidelity (e.g. sexual incompatibility, sexual excitement, boredom, variety/experimentation) would be more likely to be used by men than women, whereas emotional reasons for infidelity (e.g. lack of attention, lack of commitment, falling in love, emotional satisfaction, companionship) would be more likely to be used by women than men. Boekhout et al. (1999) did not examine the reasons that individuals themselves gave for being unfaithful to a partner.

The findings of Boekhout et al. (1999) mirror those of a study by Glass and Wright (1992) whose results revealed that married men were more approving of sexual justifications for infidelity (hypothetical infidelity, not their own) than were married women. The results for the love justification were not significant, although authors reported a trend ( $p < .07$ ) with women more for approving of emotional justifications. Researchers concluded that there was clear support suggesting that in response to hypothetical infidelity men tend to be more approving of sexual justifications, but only partial support suggesting that women are more approving of emotional justifications.

Contrary to the results of the above studies dealing with hypothetical infidelity, Feldman and Cauffman (1999) did not find sex differences in participants' justifications

for actual sexual infidelity. Male and female undergraduates did not differ in the reasons they produced for their own sexual betrayal. Thus, the results of this study do not confirm the findings of other studies of reasons for hypothetical infidelity that men are more likely to give sexual justifications for infidelity, while women are more likely to give emotional justifications for infidelity.

It is possible that the contradictory results are due to the fact that Feldman and Cauffman (1999) studied participants' reasons for actually committing infidelity whereas Boekhout et al. (1999), Glass and Wright (1992), and Roscoe et al. (1988) were dealing with hypothetical infidelity. The sex differences that emerged in these studies of hypothetical infidelity may be due to stereotypical ideas about the reasons men and women commit infidelity in that men seek sex and women seek emotional attachment. The one study focusing on actual experience with infidelity would be less likely to support stereotypical views because participants know exactly why they committed infidelity, and results reveal that in response to their own infidelity, men and women did not differ in types of justifications.

Little research has been done on the reasons or justifications individuals report for committing infidelity, and the results are contradictory. These contradictions warrant further research on justifications for actual infidelity to determine whether men and women differ in the reasons they commit infidelity. Thus, the following research question was asked.

RQ5: Do men and women differ in the justifications (sexual dissatisfaction versus emotional dissatisfaction) they produce for committing infidelity?

*Approval of infidelity and reasons for infidelity:*

Research on approval and acceptance of infidelity has shown that infidelity is generally disapproved of. Despite general disapproval of infidelity many people still commit infidelity. Additionally, research suggests that sex differences may exist in approval of infidelity, with men approving of infidelity more than women, which may account for sex differences in infidelity. In a sample of college students Hansen (1987) found that although a large proportion of participants had actually engaged in extradyadic sexual relations. Survey results did not reveal any evidence of extensive acceptance of extradyadic relations and there were no sex differences in acceptance of extradyadic sexual relations. Men and women were equally likely to be opposed to it.

Contrary to the above study, Feldman and Cauffman (2000) found sex differences in overall acceptability of hypothetical sexual betrayal. Men were more approving of sexual betrayal than women in nearly all of the 19 circumstances tested (e.g. “Wasn’t sexually satisfied by boyfriend/girlfriend”, “Was certain that no one would ever find out” and “Fell in love with new person”) in the study despite participants’ low levels of approval of sexual betrayal. Feldman and Cauffman (2000) found that participants’ actions contradict their attitudes about the acceptability of betrayal. Results showed high incidences of sexual betrayal by participants, indicating that although individuals do not approve of betrayal within committed, monogamous relationships, many still commit betrayal behaviors.

Similarly, Sheppard et al. (1995) found a significant difference between men’s and women’s general approval rating of hypothetical infidelity. Men relative to women were more approving of infidelity occurring in both marriage and committed dating

relationship; however, neither sex was highly approving of infidelity in general. The interaction between sex of participant and type of infidelity (sexual versus emotional) was not significant and the results revealed that the most acceptable type of infidelity for both dating and marital conditions was an emotional only involvement, while the least acceptable condition for both dating and marital was a sexual only involvement. Despite widespread participant disapproval of infidelity 37.6% of the participants that had been in a serious committed relationship had engaged in an act of sexual or emotional infidelity. These results confirm those of previous studies that despite disapproval of infidelity in committed relationships, individuals continue to commit infidelity. Based on these results, we advanced the following research question.

RQ6: Are there sex differences in approval of sexual and emotional infidelity?

Sexual dissatisfaction and relational dissatisfaction are two main reasons researchers have studied for sexual and emotional infidelity. Dreznick (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of sex differences in approval of sexual and relational dissatisfaction as reasons for committing infidelity. The results of the meta-analysis indicate that men were more approving of sexual dissatisfaction as a reason for committing infidelity, whereas women were more approving of relational dissatisfaction as a reason for committing infidelity ( $d = .12$ ). Although this difference is significant, the effect size is small and is only based on four studies (Buunk, 1980; Buunk & Bakker, 1997; Prins et al., 1993; Roscoe et al., 1988) and (insert participant #) participants. Based on these results, the following hypothesis is advanced.

H1: Men are more likely to accept sexual dissatisfaction as a justification for infidelity, whereas women are more likely to accept relational dissatisfaction as a justification for infidelity.

## Method

### *Participants*

(Number) undergraduate students at an urban Midwestern university (xx men, xx women;  $M_{\text{age}} = \text{xx}$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = \text{xx}$  years) participated in this study. The sample included (number) heterosexual participants, (number) homosexual participants, and (number) bisexual participants. (Number) of the participants were married, (number) single, (number) divorced, and (number) widowed. The ethnicity of the sample included (number) Caucasian, (number) African-American, (number) Asian, (number) Hispanic, and (number) other.

### *Procedures*

Participants for the study were solicited in introductory communication courses. Students received extra credit for participating in the study. They were given the Relationship Infidelity Survey and a scantron during class and were told answer the survey outside class on the scantron using a Number 2 pencil and return it within two weeks. Upon completion, the participants returned the survey and consent form with their signature to the teacher, and the anonymous scantron sheets with were put into an envelope and returned to the experimenters.

## *Measures*

The survey measured the hypothetical reactions to infidelity, commission of infidelity, justifications for infidelity, approval of infidelity, and perceptions of the behaviors that constitute infidelity. A copy of the survey is included in the Appendix.

### *Definition of Infidelity*

Participants were presented with several sexual (kissing, fondling, oral sex, sexual intercourse) and emotional (flirting, dating/spending time together, intimate conversations/sharing intimate secrets behaviors, and falling in love) behaviors and asked to identify whether they believe that they are acts of infidelity

### *Partner's Infidelity*

Participants were asked whether they have ever had a partner commit infidelity and if so the type of infidelity (sexual, emotional, sexual and emotional) the partner engaged in, the specific sexual (kissing, fondling, oral sex, intercourse) and emotional (flirting, dating/spending time together, intimate conversations/sharing intimate secrets, and falling in love) behaviors that occurred, and how upset they were over the type of infidelity that occurred (1= *not at all upset*, 5= *extremely upset*). Additionally, following Harris (2002) participants that reported their partner's infidelity as being both sexual and emotional were asked a series of questions assessing the degree to which they focused on the sexual aspects of their partner's infidelity and the emotional aspects of their partner's infidelity measured on a 5-point scale (1= *not at all focused*, 5= *very focused*), along with the following question from Buss et al. (1992): Which were you more upset over?  
Thinking of your partner forming a deep emotional attachment with the other person.



Thinking of your partner enjoying passionate sexual intercourse with the other person.

We added the following option. I was equally distressed by both.

Participants were also asked questions regarding the circumstances of their partner's infidelity including questions about the type and length of the relationship with their partner the length of the affair, the amount of time that has passed since the infidelity, the classification of the relationship at the time of the affair, participants relationship with the person their partner cheated on them with, and whether the affair occurred in a current or past relationship. Those that were referring to a past relationship were asked additional questions regarding whether the relationship was terminated due to the infidelity and who terminated the relationship.

#### *Participant Infidelity*

Participants were asked whether they had even engaged in infidelity? And if so, to identify the type of infidelity they committed (sexual, emotional, both), and the specific sexual and emotional behaviors they committed. They were asked the reason they committed infidelity (sexual dissatisfaction, emotional dissatisfaction, both sexual and emotional dissatisfaction, or other). They also reported if and how their partner found out about their infidelity and whether they had admitted or denied their infidelity if confronted by their partner. The same questions asked about the circumstances of the partner's infidelity were also asked about the participant's infidelity with the exception of the relationship the participant had with the person they cheated on their partner with.

#### *Approval of Infidelity*

Using a 5-point scale (1= *not at all acceptable*, 5= *very acceptable*) participants were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding their approval of infidelity. The

following questions were asked twice, once referring to a man and once referring to a woman: How acceptable is it for a man (woman) to engage in sexual infidelity? How acceptable is it for a man (woman) to engage in emotional infidelity? Two additional questions were asked regarding the acceptability of sexual and emotional dissatisfaction as reasons for engaging in infidelity for men and women.

### *Hypothetical Reactions to Infidelity*

Participants' reactions to hypothetical infidelity were assessed using the measure established by Buss et al. (1992). Participants were asked to think of a serious romantic relationship they've had in the past, currently have, or would like to have and imagine that they discover that their partner has become interested in someone else. Then they were asked what would upset them more? (1) Imagining your partner forming a deep emotional attachment to that other person? (2) Imagining your partner enjoying passionate sexual intercourse with that other person.

Participants were also asked to answer a question from the revised version of this measure (Buss et al., 1992). They were instructed to imagine that they discover that their partner has become interested in someone else. Then they were asked what would upset them more? (1) Imagining your partner trying different sexual positions with that other person. (2) Imagining your partner falling in love with that other person.

The final measure of hypothetical infidelity included questions adapted by Harris (2004)

from the original version of Weiderman & Allgeier, (1993). The questions were:

You suspect that while your boyfriend/girlfriend was on vacation s/he had a one-night stand. You realize that even if s/he did have sex with this other person, they

will probably never see each other again. How upset do you think you would feel if this happened?

2. You suspect that while your boyfriend/girlfriend was on a trip s/he fell in love with someone else. You realize that even if s/he did develop these feelings, s/he will probably never see this other person again. How upset do you think you would feel if this happened? These questions were answered using a 5-point scale anchored with the words *not at all upset* (1) and *extremely upset* (5).

#### *Logical Inference Explanation*

Using a 5-point scale anchored with the words *not at all likely* (1) and *very likely* (5) participants were asked to answer the following questions: If your partner formed a deep emotional attachment to someone of your gender, how likely is it that your partner and this person are now, or soon will be, sleeping together? If your partner has slept with someone of your gender, how likely is it that your partner has formed, or soon will form, a deep emotional attachment to that person?

#### *Demographics*

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to identify their gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and marital status.

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