

Infidelity in the United States Among Married Couples: A Fact Sheet

Background/Importance

Infidelity—the breaking of marriage vows of monogamy—violates the promise of emotional and sexual loyalty by a partner in a committed romantic relationship. American culture seems to be both mesmerized with, and condemning of, the concept of infidelity. While modern films, television shows, and literature are fraught with this behavior, most married adults in America say they expect monogamy and strongly disapprove of extramarital sex. When asked, surveys find that a majority of married couples report being faithful to each other.

Headlines/Trends

Studies vary on the frequency of infidelity in marriage. One study found that about four percent of married men and two percent of married women had admitted to infidelity within the previous year. Long-term survey data (1972–2006) collected by the National Science Foundation (NSF) places the rate somewhat higher, at about 12 to 13%. Other studies find that over the length of a marriage, about 25% of men and 10 to 15% of women report having had an affair. Still, studies may underestimate the true rate of infidelity because people are reluctant to admit this behavior to researchers. For example, a recent study of married American women tested whether respondents were more or less likely to report infidelity in face-to-face interviews than through computer-assisted surveys. The result: in face-to-face interviews, one percent of women reported infidelity while in computer surveys, six percent acknowledged having had an affair.



Definitions

Monogamy – Having only one mate at any one time. Monogamy often refers to having one sexual partner irrespective of marriage or childrearing.

Infidelity – Commonly refers to a breach of the expectation of monogamy. Infidelity can occur in relation to physical/sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy. Sexual infidelity by a marriage partner is also called adultery, extramarital sex, or an affair.

Extramarital sex – When a married person engages in sexual activity with someone other than his or her marriage partner.

Cohabitation – An arrangement in which an unmarried couple lives together on a long-term or permanent basis in an emotionally and/or sexually intimate relationship.

Data

Although the definition of infidelity includes both emotional and physical behavior, the data presented in this Fact Sheet are primarily focused on sexual infidelity.

Factors Associated With Infidelity

Research on infidelity reveals a wide range of factors that relate to a spouse's decision to have an affair. A major study in 2001 relying on National Science Foundation surveys of more than 4,000 respondents found that relationship satisfaction, a previous divorce, religious behavior, education level, age at marriage, work status, and income all affected the likelihood of whether spouses cheat on their partners. A number of other studies on infidelity have cited the same factors. For instance, a 2000 study of married and cohabitating couples found that sexual infidelity was more likely to occur among those with lower relationship satisfaction, a weaker shared social network (e.g., less time spent with a mate's family and friends), stronger sexual interests, more permissive sexual values, and more sexual opportunities. Several of these factors are examined more closely below.

Marital Dissatisfaction and Divorce

Respondents in the NSF study who reported that their relationships were “pretty happy” and “not too happy” were two and four times, respectively, more likely to report infidelity than those who reported that their relationships were “very happy.” Another study found that regardless of how unhappy people were with their marriages, it was only after they began thinking and talking about divorce that they (or their spouse) began searching for new sexual partners.

In a recent study of premarital predictors of marital infidelity, couples who experienced infidelity in the first year of marriage reported they were more likely

to have communicated negatively with their partner before they were married than married couples who remained faithful. In instances in which the husband cheated, husbands reported less satisfaction with the premarital relationship as well as premarital sex, and were less likely to communicate positively with their partners before they were married than couples who remained monogamous. Among couples in which the wife cheated, wives reported that before they married they were more satisfied with sex but were more likely to communicate negatively with their partner and feel invalidated than wives who remained faithful.

Religious Behavior

The NSF study revealed that those who never attended religious services were 2.5 times more likely to have committed adultery than those who attended once a week.

Education

Research is mixed on the relationship between education and infidelity. According to one study, respondents with higher education levels were more likely to have had extramarital sex, but this was true only for respondents who had been divorced. The 2000 study of married and cohabitating couples showed that people at both ends of the education spectrum—eighth grade or less and a Master's degree or higher—were more likely to be unfaithful than those with other levels of education.

Income and Employment

Spouses were less likely to have an affair when neither partner was employed, according to one study conducted in 2001. The NSF study reported that individuals earning \$75,000 or more per year were more than 1.5 times as likely to have had an affair as those earning less than \$30,000 per year.

Age at Marriage

Respondents who were first married as teens (age 16 or younger) were four times more likely to be unfaithful than those who married at age 23 or older, according to the NSF study. Respondents in the NSF study who had been divorced were nearly twice as likely to have engaged in extramarital sex as those who had never been divorced. Another study found that marrying at a later age as well as cohabiting before marriage are factors that lessen the probability of infidelity.

Infidelity as the Cause of Marital Break-Up

Research offers some insight into the extent to which infidelity causes divorce. One study found that infidelity early in a marriage was a strong predictor of later divorce. In this study, married couples were asked about their relationship problems at four different time periods during their marriage: upon getting married, at three years, at eight years and again at 12 years. The study found that an initial report of infidelity was one of the most consistent predictors of divorce during the subsequent three interviews, along with jealousy, spending money foolishly, and drinking or using drugs. In another study, about half of 205 divorcees surveyed said their marital problems were caused by their spouse's infidelity.

Relationship expert John Gottman, PhD, does not agree that infidelity is as strong a factor in the decision to divorce. He reports on his website that 20–25% of mediation groups he has counseled state that an affair is one of several causes of divorce; 80% of groups report that deterioration of intimacy is the most important contributing factor.

Recovering from Marital Infidelity

A 2002 study of spouses who had experienced infidelity and continued in the marriage suggested that after the disclosure of unfaithfulness, couples often go through three stages: roller coaster, moratorium, and building trust. In the roller coaster phase, the spouse reacts to the affair with intense emotions such as denial, fierce anger, or depression. The moratorium stage involves less intense emotions and efforts to understand why infidelity occurred. Spouses in this phase also often retreat physically and emotionally from their partners, and seek support from others to make sense of their situation. In the third phase, spouses try to build trust again by reengaging with their partner, recommitting to the relationship, increasing communication, and forgiving their partner.

Conclusion

Although most married adults in the United States have a strong expectation of monogamy, at some point during their marriage, between 2 to 25% of spouses report that they have committed adultery. Researchers find a higher likelihood of infidelity among men and women with stronger sexual interests, more permissive sexual values, lower reported satisfaction with their relationship, weaker shared social ties with their partner, and greater sexual opportunities.

Data Sources

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