

Affairs of the Heart: Gender, Personality, Religiosity and Parental Relationship History as Predictors of Infidelity

Suzanne Hughes
John Hyland
DBS School of Arts

1. ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to identify predictors of infidelity, and whether 'Religiosity' would inhibit such behaviour. A convenience sample of 110 part-time DBS students (57 male, 53 female) with a mean age of 30.86 years (SD = 5.99) completed a battery of questionnaires measuring infidelity and associated variables such as narcissism, conscientiousness, religiosity, and parental relationship history. Analysis revealed no gender differences in rates of infidelity and attitudes to sexual versus emotional infidelity. Infidelity was associated with narcissism but not conscientiousness or religiosity. An association between infidelity and knowledge of parental cheating and unhappy parental relationship was found in males, but not females. In conclusion, narcissism seems to predict infidelity, but religiosity was not identified as a buffer to infidelity. Interestingly, males may possibly be more vulnerable to the effects of parental relationships than females, with regard to infidelity.

2. INTRODUCTION

Much research has found that males engage in infidelity more than females (e.g., Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994; Allen & Baucom, 2004; Lewandowski Jr., & Ackerman, 2006; Boğda & Şendil, 2012). Using a forced choice technique, Buss et al. (1992) reported that a majority of males (60%) were more distressed by sexual infidelity whereas a majority of females (83%) were more distressed by emotional infidelity. However, Lishner et al., (2008) who expanded the forced choice allowing participants a third option, found that a majority of both males and females chose that both types of infidelity are equally distressing.

With regard to associated variables of infidelity, Atkins et al. (2005) report that infidelity is correlated with narcissism, while Schmitt (2004) indicates that low conscientiousness can result in sexual risk-taking and higher levels of relationship infidelity across all cultures for both sexes. Plack et al. (2010) assert that religiosity is negatively correlated with infidelity, and therefore may act as a restraint, but other studies (e.g., Atkins & Kessel, 2008) suggested attendance, but not faith, nearness to God, prayer, and other religious attributes, are related to infidelity.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, infidelity may be linked to a revenge fantasy that originated from the oedipal complex. Hunyady et al. (2008) tested this using a priming technique, which reactivated unconscious memories of the oedipal situation. In addition, parental infidelity is positively associated with the likelihood of the person being unfaithful themselves. Furthermore, adult children who had knowledge of their father's infidelity were more likely to engage in infidelity than adult children without such knowledge (Platt et al., 2008). As rates of infidelity are increasing in recent times, such studies underpin the need for more research to identify predictors and possible buffers of infidelity in contemporary Ireland.

It was hypothesised that, with an expansion on the forced-choice format and offering a third option, both males and females would report sexual and emotional infidelity as equally distressing. Moreover, participants who engage in infidelity will more likely be male than female, would score higher in narcissism, and lower on conscientiousness and religiosity. Finally, those who engage in infidelity would report knowledge of parental cheating and an unhappy parental relationship at a higher rate than those who do not.

3. METHODS

A convenience sample of 110 part-time undergraduate students, (57 males, 53 females) participated in the study. Of these participants, 29% were single, 45% were in a relationship and 25% were married. Seventy two per cent of participants identified themselves as "Christian" with 25% as "no religion". A quantitative survey design was used for this study. Variables were gender, personality traits narcissism and conscientiousness, religiosity, knowledge of parental cheating and unhappy parental relationship history, scores of the infidelity scale and emotional responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity.

Participants completed a battery of questionnaires regarding infidelity and attitudes to infidelity. Materials included the Infidelity Scale (Drigotas et al., (1999), Narcissism Personality Inventory-16 (Ames et al., 2006), Conscientiousness as a subset of BIG-5 (John et al., 2008) and the Francis Scale of Attitudes to Christianity (Francis & Stubbs, 1987). A questionnaire was also designed to collect information on parental relationship and demographic variables.

4. RESULTS

A chi-square test found a moderate positive significant association between gender and sexual versus emotional infidelity ($X^2(2) = 14.38, p = .001$), with the majority (68%) choosing both types of infidelity as equally distressing, (30% of males and 38% of females). However, of those that did not choose both types of infidelity as equally distressing, more males (17%) choose sexual infidelity than females (2%). And more females (8%) choose emotional infidelity than males (6%) (See Figure 1).

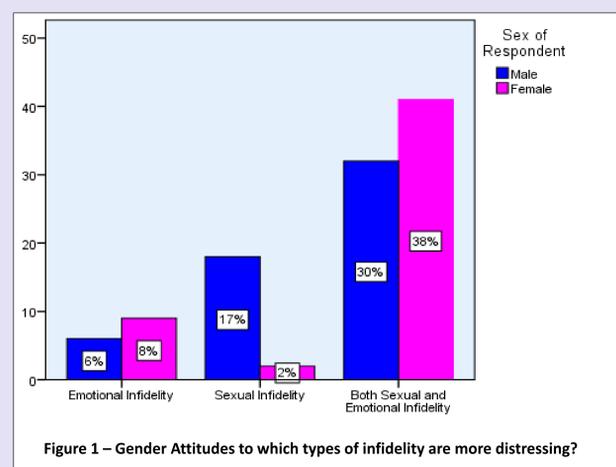


Figure 1 – Gender Attitudes to which types of infidelity are more distressing?

No significant difference was found between infidelity scores of males and females ($t(106) = -.08, p = .934$). Also, while not significant, females (mean = 4.14, sd = 2.30) were found to have slightly higher scores of infidelity than males (mean = 4.11, sd = 2.04).

A Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a weak positive significant relationship between infidelity and narcissism ($r(100) = .23, p = .029$), but no association between infidelity and conscientiousness ($r(106) = -.09, p = .375$). A Spearman's rho correlation found no association between infidelity and religiosity ($\rho(101) = .160, p = .109$).

Males with knowledge of parental cheating (mean = 5.16, sd = 1.92) were found to have higher scores of infidelity than females who had knowledge of parental cheating (mean = 4.30, sd = 2.47). This difference was confirmed ($t(52) = 1.82, p = .037$). Also, a higher proportion (80%) of males reported being unaware of parental cheating compared to (63%) females (See Figure 2).

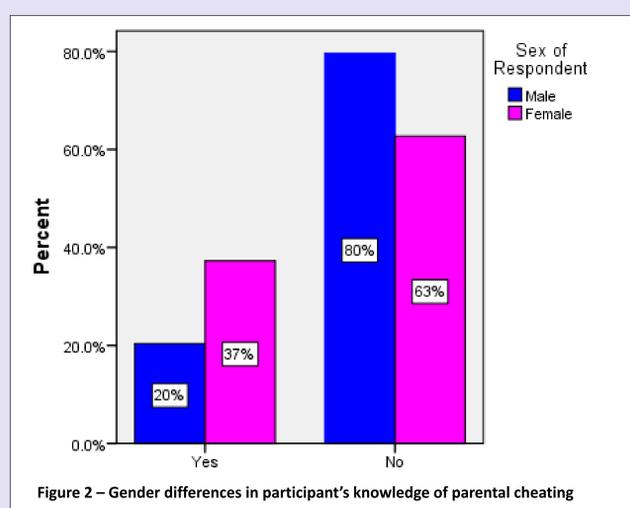


Figure 2 – Gender differences in participant's knowledge of parental cheating

Participants who reported knowledge of an unhappy parental relationship history (mean = 4.75, sd = 2.05) were found to have higher scores of infidelity than those who reported knowledge of happy parental relationship history (mean = 3.73, SD = 2.18) ($t(103) = -2.42, p = .017$). However, further analyses revealed that males with knowledge of unhappy parental relationships (mean = 5.06, sd = 1.82) were found to have higher scores of infidelity than females with similar knowledge (mean = 4.49, sd = 2.22). There was a significant difference between infidelity and knowledge of unhappy parental relationship in males ($t(52) = -2.54, p = .014$, 2-tailed), but not in females ($t(49) = -1.02, p = .314$, 2-tailed). Similarly, males reported being less aware of an unhappy parental relationship (37%) compared to females (46%).

5. DISCUSSION

The majority of both males and females found sexual and emotional infidelity equally distressing, supporting the findings of Lishner et al., (2008). There were notable sex differences between males and females who did not choose that both types of infidelity are equally distressing. More males (17%) choose sexual infidelity than females (2%). And more females (8%) choose emotional infidelity than males (6%). This is in line with the original research of Buss et al., (1992) study which suggested evolutionary reasons for why males and females find different types of infidelity distressing them.

There were no significant difference between males and females engaging in infidelity, contrary to much previous research. However, Wiederman (1997) does suggest a narrowing gap in infidelity rates between the sexes in samples under 40 years of age. Therefore, the mean age of just under 31 years for the sample in the current study may explain the result.

A significant relationship was found between infidelity and narcissism, in line with previous research (Atkins et al., 2005). However, there was no significant relationship found between infidelity and conscientiousness, contrary to Schmitt (2004). No relationship was revealed between infidelity and religiosity. Research by Atkins and Kessel (2008) found that individuals with high religious importance but low attendance were more likely to have had an affair. However, a post-hoc hypothesis found no significant association between infidelity and church attendance.

Knowledge of parental cheating increasing the likelihood of engaging in infidelity was not supported. However, when gender differences were looked at there was a significant relationship between infidelity and knowledge of parental cheating in males, but not females. Interestingly, despite the findings, males reported significantly less knowledge of parental cheating (20%) than females (37%). Again, a relationship between infidelity and unhappy parental relationship history was supported for males, but not females. These findings may suggest that although males report less awareness of parental cheating or unhappy parental relationships, the effects of such parental behaviour may influence their son's behaviour in their own intimate relationships in later life.

6. CONCLUSION

The implications that there is a relationship between infidelity and knowledge of parental cheating and unhappy parental relationship in males but not females suggests males may be unconsciously more vulnerable to the effects of parental relationships. This finding could be considered when addressing such issues in individual or couple's therapy. The study succeeded in supporting some previous research on infidelity in contemporary Ireland. Future research can continue to investigate potential buffers to infidelity. Additional empirical research should also consider psychoanalytic theory as useful when developing accounts of infidelity.

References available upon request.