

Sex Differences in the Perception of Infidelity

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between gender and perceptions of infidelity among 77 college students. This study focused on two aspects of infidelity (physical versus emotional) and whether males and females defined unfaithful acts similarly. Additional issues explored included possible reasons why infidelity occurs in relationships and what to do when infidelity does occur. Previous research suggests that males and females have different views of infidelity. However, those findings were not supported in the present study. Possible reasons for this inconsistency were discussed.

Introduction

Research of infidelity suggests that a person's gender may determine his or her perceptions of infidelity (Cramer, Lipinski, Meteer, & Houska, 2008). However, researchers, Cramer, et al., believe that not just physical but emotional unfaithfulness is infidelity as well. Also, according to a person's gender, the reason given to cause infidelity can differ from loss of interest to poor sexual or emotional relationships (Allen, Rhoades, Markman, Williams, Melton, & Clements 2008).

Researching more about the differences in gender perceptions of infidelity is important to find what people's perceptions are and what causes infidelity to help people prevent infidelity in their relationships. Infidelity may occur in a relationship due to the fact that males and females do not define infidelity in the same way or agree on what constitutes an unfaithful act (Allen, et al. 2008). Also, based on male or female perceptions of infidelity, the reasons for infidelity given by the unfaithful person may differ simply because the unfaithful person is male or female. Males seem give the reason of poor sexual relationship while females give the reason of poor communication in the relationship (Zuhal & Dogan, 2006).

In one study that focused on subjective distress to unfaithfulness, sex differences in perceptions of infidelity were found (Cramer, et al., 2008). The study was conducted using a questionnaire to measure the participants' expectations of their partners' infidelity using both emotional and physical

unfaithfulness questions. The study found that males felt their female partners were more likely to be emotionally unfaithful than sexually unfaithful. Females felt that their male partners were more likely to be physically unfaithful. Another result was that females were more distressed about their male partner committing emotional infidelity and males were more distressed about their female partner committing physical infidelity. According to these findings, one can conclude that gender plays an important role in what kind of infidelity is more distressing to males or females.

A study focusing on why infidelity occurs was done using college students. (Cohen 2005). This study found that infidelity occurs in relationships due to a partner being unsatisfied sexually or emotionally. The study found that men are more likely to be sexually unfaithful and women more likely to be emotionally unfaithful due to their dissatisfaction (Cohen 2005). However, this study did not find a difference in the reasons infidelity occurred between men and women.

Supporting gender differences in perceptions of infidelity as well, in a study about premarital precursors of marital infidelity, the cause for the infidelity was researched according to gender (Allen, et al. 2008). The study used self-report and observation to obtain findings of both males and females separately. The results were different reasons for infidelity between males and females. The causes for men who committed infidelity were low sexual and relationship satisfaction as well as negative communication. The causes for females were higher sexual satisfaction at the beginning of the relationship than at the current

time of the relationship and negative communication. These findings support that males and females believe there are different reasons for why infidelity occurred.

Also supporting that there are different reasons for infidelity, a study was done focusing on male and female reasons for infidelity. This study asked males and females why they felt infidelity occurred (Zuhal & Dogan, 2006). The findings of Zuhal and Dogan were that males attribute infidelity in the relationship to poor sex between partners while women attribute infidelity to a weak emotional connection. These findings show that males and females differ in the reasons for infidelity, but fail to address what the participants view as an act of infidelity.

Gender differences in perceptions of infidelity are also shown in a study of sex differences in self-reported infidelity and its correlates which examined sex variances in how often infidelity occurred and the reasons and consequence of infidelity (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007). Researchers asked participants who had cheated in their relationships to tell of the circumstances from which the infidelity occurred. The results were that males did not commit infidelity more than females and no significant difference in incidence was revealed. However, there was a significant difference in the consequences of infidelity between males and females. Females were more likely to break up with their partner after their own infidelity. Males were more likely to find out about their partner's infidelity any way possible. Due to the fact that Brand et al. (2007) found that

males and females had different consequences after their infidelity, it also supports that gender does affect perceptions of infidelity.

Gender and perceptions of infidelity are related. Gender has an effect on the definition of infidelity, as well as different reasons for why infidelity occurs (Cramer, et al., 2008).

In the present study, males and females will have different perceptions of infidelity simply due to their sex. Gender and the effect it has on perceptions of infidelity will be more strongly shown through this study. With findings of previous research and directly asking people of their infidelity and why the infidelity occurred as well as why their partner's infidelity occurred will more clearly show the perception differences between males and females. Asking what the definition of infidelity is to them, if they have been the cause of infidelity in a relationship, what to do when infidelity occurs, as well as why infidelity occurs all in the same study will give more conclusive results than the previous studies have. Males focus on infidelity as sexual behaviors while females focus on infidelity as emotional as well as sexual behaviors. Females will feel more strongly about their male partner being in an emotional relationship with another partner than males will. Also, males and females will have different reasons why they feel infidelity happens. Therefore, the cause and definition of infidelity, as well as what actions to take when infidelity occurs will be different between males and females in this study.

Method

Participants

In this study, the participants consisted of 77 traditional aged college students enrolled in a general psychology class who volunteered either as a college requirement or as an elective. From the students in the class who volunteered to participate, 41 males and 36 females randomly participated in the study. The college students in this study were full time or part time traditional students at Robert Morris University, a small private university in Western Pennsylvania.

Design

A correlational design with one independent variable having two levels and one dependent variable was used in this study. Gender was the independent variable with male and female as the two levels. Perception of infidelity between males and females was the dependent variable measured using a survey.

Materials

An anonymous and confidential survey was constructed consisting of 13 questions (see appendix). The questions addressed what infidelity is, why it occurs, what to do after it occurs, and if the participant had been unfaithful in a previous relationship. The survey questions each consisted of the question followed by a two or three multiple choice answer response. The questions were

designed to determine the differences gender makes in a person's perceptions of infidelity.

Procedures

Each student who participated was given a copy of the survey. The students were asked to circle the answer that best fit their opinion. When the participants finished their survey, the survey was collected in no specific order. The students did not put their names on the surveys so the survey remained anonymous. The students were given 20 minutes to complete the survey.

Results

Correlational analyses were performed on the variables which were males and females perceptions of what infidelity is, why infidelity occurs, what to do when infidelity occurs, and if the participant had been the cause of infidelity in a previous relationship. As can be seen in Table 1, the analyses resulted in multiple significant relationships. People who were more likely to see sexual relationships as examples of infidelity were also more likely to see emotional relationships as examples of infidelity, $r(75) = .49, p < .01$. Males were more likely to view infidelity as due to sexual problems in the current relationship than did females, $r(75) = .33, p < .01$. People who felt an emotional relationship is considered infidelity were more likely to be upset when infidelity occurs than those who did not, $r(75) = .36, p < .01$. People who have been the cause of emotional infidelity in a previous relationship are most likely to have been the cause of sexual infidelity as well, $r(75) = .49, p < .01$. People who would be upset if

their significant other had an emotional or sexual relationship were not likely to pretend they didn't know in either situation, $r(75) = -.51, p < .01$ and $r(75) = -.33, p < .01$. People who consider emotional relationships with someone other than their partner infidelity are more likely to end the relationship immediately when emotional infidelity occurs, $r(75) = .34, p < .01$. Those who felt infidelity occurs due to poor sexual relations are most likely to end the relationship immediately when sexual infidelity occurs, $r(75) = .39, p < .01$.

Conclusion

In this study, sex differences in the perception of infidelity were shown. Males and females do define infidelity differently. A consistent finding with previous research was that males define infidelity as a sexual act, while females define it as both sexual and emotional acts. The rest of the findings of this study did not support the prior research. Females believe infidelity occurs due to poor sexual relationships, poor communication between partners, and loss of interest in significant other while males really aren't sure why infidelity occurs. Also, even though males do not include emotional relationships in their definition of infidelity, they are very upset when this occurs and consider it infidelity if it happens in their relationship. Another finding incompatible with previous research, females are more likely to end the relationship when infidelity occurs than are males. Overall, this study found differences between males and females in the perception of infidelity and added findings to the previous studies of other researchers.

Table 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1 Sex (1=m)	1.00																
2 Age		1.00															
3 SexRel			1.00														
4 EmotRel			0.49	1.00													
5 InfvSex	0.33				1.00												
6 InfvComm						1.00											
7 InfvInt						0.47	1.00										
8 UpsetSex								1.00									
9 UpsetEmot	-0.36			0.36				0.31	1.00								
10 Sex=End					0.39					1.00							
11 Sex=Work										-0.79	1.00						
12 Sex=DK												1.00					
13 Emot=End				0.34									1.00				
14 Emot=Work													-0.57	1.00			
15 Emot=DK									-0.51	-0.33			0.39		1.00		
16 CheatSex																1.00	
17 CheatEmot																0.49	1.00

References

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Appendix

**This survey is for research purposes only. All responses will be kept anonymous.
(DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THIS FORM.)**

1. Gender (circle one) Male Female
2. Age _____
3. A sexual relationship with a person who is NOT your significant other is an example of infidelity.
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Agree Not Sure Strongly Disagree
4. An emotional relationship with a person who is NOT your significant other is an example of infidelity.
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Agree Not Sure Strongly Disagree
5. Infidelity is most likely to occur in a relationship because of a poor sexual relationship between significant others.
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Agree Not Sure Strongly Disagree
6. Infidelity is most likely to occur in a relationship because of poor communication between significant others.
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Agree Not Sure Strongly Disagree
7. Infidelity is most likely to occur in a relationship because of a loss of interest in the relationship between partners.
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Agree Not Sure Strongly Disagree
8. How upset would you be if your significant other engaged in a sexual act with another person?
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Very Upset Not At All Upset
9. How upset would you be if your significant other started building a deep emotional relationship with another person?
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Very Upset Not At All Upset

