The Different Gender Perceptions of Sexual and Emotional Infidelity

Final Research Paper

Kacy Shackelford

Cathleen Aguila

San Jose State University

Psychology 120

Professor Trafalis
Abstract

There are several types of infidelity but the two that will be analyzed in this study are physical and emotional infidelity. The perception of these types of infidelity could possibly vary according to variables such as age, gender, current relationship status and past relationship history. 80 college students from San Jose State University who are at least 18 years old were randomly selected to participate in a study measuring their perception of immorality regarding physical or emotional unfaithful behaviors. ANOVA was utilized during this studying to help analyze the relationship between the different gender perception of infidelity and the level of immorality. Each participant received a packet including an informed consent form, a questionnaire, and one of four scenarios. In addition, each survey took about 5 – 10 minutes to complete. Our results concluded that there is a non-significant effect on gender and their perception of physical infidelity. However, there is a significant effect on gender and perception on emotional infidelity. Females were found to be more distressed about emotional infidelity in comparison to men. While as stated earlier, gender was not a variable that influenced the participant’s perception of infidelity. Overall, the findings of this study did not conclude that there’s a significant effect on the type of infidelity and immorality.
Terms and Concepts

We read about it in magazines, watch it on television, and hear about it through everyday songs played on the radio—the list could go on and on. What do we hear about so much? Infidelity. Naturally, many think of infidelity as being something as simple as cheating on a romantic partner in a committed relationship through a sexual act with another person. While this is the clearest case of infidelity to identify, infidelity actually exists on a broad spectrum of behaviors making it a more complex set of behaviors that could be defined in multiple ways.

For example, being unfaithful is also another way to describe infidelity. Dishonesty within a relationship can lead to unfaithful behavior. What people might not realize, however, is that these unfaithful behaviors just might be of a physical nature. In fact being unfaithful through developing emotional bonds outside the romantic relationship is another aspect of infidelity. Since not everyone perceives cheating as either emotional or physical or both, our research project is focusing on the perception of the physical and emotional aspects of infidelity.

Physical and emotional infidelity is very different, but they can both be extremely dangerous and hurtful to a relationship. Naturally, being betrayed in either of these ways can lead to jealous behavior as well as hurt feelings. Physical infidelity involves sexual behaviors.

On the other hand, emotional infidelity is focused more on the intimacy without being physical. These behaviors can include things like seeing or talking to each other and connecting on a level that is more than a typical friendship would consist of. Sometimes, emotional infidelity is the direct result of physical infidelity but may not be always the case.

Multiple studies have shown that there are gender differences such that men and women perceive infidelity in different ways. One article found evidence that men and women differ in
their conceptualizations of infidelity. For instance, females saw keeping secrets from a partner as more indicative of cheating than did males, while males saw engaging in sexual interactions as being more indicative of cheating than did females (Wilson, Mattingly, Clark, Weidler & Bequette, 2011). Women consider emotional infidelity more severe than physical infidelity, and men consider physical infidelity more severe than emotional infidelity. This could lead to many different assumptions. This could indicate that women might not want to have sexual relationships without an emotional attachment, and men might now want to have an emotional attachment while having a sexual relationship. Each scenario will have different opinions on it, depending on the person who the scenario is being presented to.

Relationship history may have an impact on one’s perception on infidelity. This might contribute to the idea that there’s a reason of why there is not one set definition of infidelity. Everyone has his or her own opinion about what is right and what is wrong, regarding to faithfulness in a relationship, which is another main concept of this research project.

There will be several variables that we are focusing on this study. For example, the participant’s age can affect the outcome of our reach. The target group for this is going to be college level students. We our focusing on this age group because this is something that we can relate to as college students, and this will most likely catch the interest of those who are taking part in the survey. Another variable that we are focusing on is gender. This will help us, as researchers discover if there is any type of gender bias regarding infidelity. The scenarios that we present will give us a better understanding of the role of gender in a relationship. Our experiment will focus on examining group differences in response to four scenarios.

**Background and History**
There are several aspects and perceptions of infidelity. For example, in one study conducted, a hypothesis has been made that men would be more suspicious about cheating in comparison to women. In addition, there was also a statement that suggests that the likelihood of men discovering their significant other cheating is higher than women. (Brand, Markey, Mills & Hodges, 2007) Overall, the study concludes that women were reported to have a higher prevalence of infidelity and more likely to report it.

A factor that could contribute to this result is the fact that women are no longer in an era where virginity is prized, as it once was (Brand Markey, Mills & Hodges, 2007). One cause for this result can be that women ultimately find themselves having the freedom to partake in however many sexual relationships throughout their life even in multiple relationships at once, regardless of what their relationship status is at the moment. (Brand et al, 2007). However, there can be other factors that contributed to this result. For example, just because the findings of the study state that women are more likely to cheat, it doesn’t justify honesty and reliability in both men and women. More women reported to cheating but men may not have reported it even if they have committed the disloyal act. The fact that the definition of infidelity can be subjective makes it difficult for one to really understand what cheating behavior entails. There are different opinions on what constitutes acts of infidelity and that’s why reporting it could be a complex procedure.

Furthermore, another factor could be that evolutionary theories have suggested unstable childhood circumstances may influence the participant’s behavior. For example, experiences of poverty in childhood or their parents divorced, these early experiences can predispose an individual to engage in more promiscuous mating strategies that are short term (Brand, Markey, Mills & Hodges, 2007). There are definitely limitations to the study but in general, results
provided that women self reported cheating behavior more than men. Also, the study concluded that men were more suspicious about cheating and more likely to discover the behavior than women. Whereas women were more likely to terminate their relationship with their partners, to begin new relationships after cheating, and to report reasons for cheating that may imply a desire to switch to long-term mates, such as being unhappy in a relationship.

In addition, there are more aspects to infidelity that triggers different perceptions amongst today’s society. Gaining insight about infidelity can construct a variety of responses that cater towards a bias opinion. Men and women’s perception, for example, have noticeable differences with different types of infidelity. In several studies about the distinctions in men and women’s perception of infidelity in varying conditions, men and women have evident differences in terms of their opinions about sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity.

One research study involved undergraduate students answering a questionnaire with 12 items pertaining to their reactions towards dissimilar scenarios of infidelity (Brogdon, Fitzwater & Johnson, 2006). In specific, the participants of this research were asked to imagine that they were in a specific type of relationship and respond to questions relevant to the scenario. These scenarios were either involving sexual cheating or emotional cheating. The findings of this research show that both sexes are more distressed by sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity (Brogdon et al, 2006).

Past studies indicated that after going through a physiological test, the physiological measures indicate that men are more physiologically aroused by imagining scenarios of sexual infidelity; whereas, women get more aroused by imagining emotional infidelity (Brodgdon, Fitzwater & Johnson, 2006). Thus, those tests are not consistent with what was studied amongst the college undergraduate students.
Although the perception of sexual infidelity may be the same in that study, there is other research that can provide evidence that show gender differences towards cheating behavior. The emotional reactions, for example can vary with men and women. There is a wide array of emotional responses that men and women might experience on the discovery of a partner’s sexual or emotional infidelity. For example, one can feel hurt, anger, jealousy, feelings of insecurity, depression, helplessness and anxious when their respected partner is unfaithful to them. An article about identifying emotional reactions to sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity indicates that women would report greater anger and hurt than men in sexual infidelity while they would also be more angry, hurt and jealous with emotional infidelity (Shackelford, Leblanc, & Drass, 2000). This makes sense because generally women are perceived to be more emotional by nature in comparison to men. Men have other ways of coping with cheating behavior but women are known to express their emotions more in this subject matter. In addition, the study showed which type of emotions would follow a certain type of infidelity. For example, participants endorsed nauseated and repulsed as more likely to be a result of sexual infidelity while feelings of undesirability and insecurity would follow emotional infidelity (Shackelford et al, 2000).

In conclusion, there are many perceptions, emotions, and aspects conveyed towards infidelity. Gender opinions, discerning what exactly represents cheating behavior, and the emotions that follow it contribute to understanding the intricate meaning of what exactly signifies a faithful individual and what justifies an individual who may perceivably be cheating. It’s studies and research experiments like the one’s mentioned earlier that help us comprehend the differences and opinions of this concept.
To give a better understanding to the conductors of this research project, certain scenarios will be presented to college level students, along with a questionnaire of how these behaviors were perceived.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in our research project will consist of college level students who are currently attending San Jose State University. We are not limiting our study to students who are only enrolled in certain classes, however there are certain courses that we are especially interested in. Sociology and Psychology are both subjects that we are interested in because we are focusing our research in the perception of men and women and infidelity, and both of these majors study behaviors. We are hoping to survey about 80 - 100 students.

**Materials**

Participants will be presented with a packet that includes a series of questionnaires and scenarios, which they will read and form opinions about. One of the materials is a survey. Each participant will receive a survey as well as a questionnaire. The questionnaire will focus on the background and relationship history of the participant followed by statements that will help us figure out to what extent they feel emotional and physical infidelity is immoral. The stimulus material will consist of scenarios in which infidelity takes place.

**Procedure**

The procedure for this research study involves visiting a classroom and asking permission to distribute a survey to students who wish to participate. After getting this approval from the professor of each class, we will introduce ourselves to the class. Next, we will explain what our survey is and why we are distributing it to San Jose State students. We will then pass
out an informed consent form to each student explaining the study, the risks and benefits of their participation, and letting them know their participation is voluntary. Participants must also be 18 years or older to participate in our study. Participants will retain a copy of the informed consent.

Once informed consent has been completed, the packet of questionnaires will be distributed to students. The packet will consist of our questionnaire and our stimulus materials. We are interested in their background, how content they are in their current relationship (if applicable), what they consider cheating is, and if they have experienced infidelity in the past or in their current relationship. After they are finished with the questionnaire, we will pass out the survey.

The stimulus materials will consist of four different scenarios. Two of the scenarios will correspond to physical infidelity and the other two scenarios will relate to emotional infidelity. After each survey, they will be asked to respond to different statements that are pertaining to the different types of infidelity we are studying. Ultimately, this will help us determine the level of immorality each student applies to the scenarios.

**Hypotheses**

Hypothesis #1:

Men will be more distressed about physical infidelity than women

Our independent variable is the type of infidelity and our dependent variable is the perception of the immoral behavior. We will measure this by using a Semantic Differential scale.

Hypothesis #2:

Women will be more distressed about emotional infidelity than men

Our independent variable is the type of infidelity and our dependent variable is the perception of immoral behavior. We will measure this by using a Semantic Differential scale.
Hypothesis #3:

Physical infidelity will be perceived as more immoral than emotional infidelity.

Our independent variable is the type of infidelity and our dependent variable is the perception of immorality behavior. We will measure this by using a Semantic Differential scale.

Results

The topic being observed in this research project is the perception of physical and emotional infidelity between women and men. Our independent variable is the type of infidelity and the dependent variable is the level of morality regarding the different types of infidelity using a Semantic Differential scale. The primary method of research we used in this project was ANOVA, which is an analysis of variance.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that men will be more distressed about physical infidelity than women. Subjects were given a questionnaire asking their gender and the extent to how they perceive physical infidelity as immoral. The subjects responded by utilizing a scale ranging from 1-10. The number 1 in the scale means physical infidelity is not immoral and 10 signifies that it’s extremely immoral. The results were not statistically significant $F= (1, 77) = 0.083, p > .05$. Therefore, the hypothesis was not confirmed. For the males in our study, the mean for level of immorality is 8.74 and there’s a SD of 1.71. For the females in our study, the mean for the level of immorality is 8.84 and there’s a SD of 1.64.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that women will be more distressed about emotional infidelity than men. Subjects were given a questionnaire asking their gender and the extent to how they perceive emotional infidelity as immoral. The subjects responded by utilizing a scale ranging from 1-10. The number 1 in the scale means emotional infidelity is not immoral and 10 signifies that it’s extremely immoral. The analysis reveals a significant effect on gender and perception of
emotional infidelity. The results were statistically significant $F = (1, 78) = 5.83$, $p < .05$

Therefore, the hypothesis was confirmed. For the males in our study, the mean for level of immorality is 6.91 and there’s a SD of 1.69. For the females in our study, the mean for the level of immorality is 8.07 and there’s a SD of 2.37.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that physical infidelity will be perceived as more immoral than emotional infidelity. Subjects were to read a scenario that either illustrated physical infidelity or emotional infidelity. Following the scenario are statements that will be answered by using a Semantic Differential scale. The main statement asked to rate the character’s immoral behavior using a scale ranging from 1-10. The results indicated that there is no significant effect on type of infidelity and the character’s morality level. The results were not statistically significant $F = (1, 78) = 3.82$, $p > .05$. Therefore, the hypothesis was not confirmed. For sexual infidelity, the mean for level of immorality is 8.35 and there’s a SD of 1.48. For emotional infidelity, the mean for the level of immorality is 7.63 and there’s a SD of 1.82.

**Discussion**

In conclusion, this research that was conducted showed results that were both significant and insignificant to our hypotheses that we predicted. Overall the purpose of our study was to collect data from males and females to see if there’s a significant difference on their perception of the different types of infidelity. The results of our study showed that there is no significant difference between men and women for physical infidelity. However, there is a significant difference between men and women for emotional infidelity. In addition, hypothesis 3 was not confirmed meaning there is no significant difference between physical and emotional infidelity.
Hypothesis 1 showed results that were not significant. Hypothesis 1 predicted that men will be more distressed about physical infidelity than women. This was rejected because there’s no significant difference among males and females. The hypothesis predicted that men will be more distressed about physical infidelity than women. Women actually perceived physical infidelity to be more distressful than men. Recent studies have shown that males are more engaged in sexual interactions as being more indicative of cheating than did females (Wilson, Mattingly, Clark, Weidler, & Bequette, 2011). This was not supported by the data collected in this study, in fact we found the opposite result from our surveys that were distributed. We found this data by asking each subject how immoral they consider physical and emotional infidelity, on a scale from 1 to 10. These are the results that we discovered after observing and analyzing each survey.

Hypothesis 2 showed results that were significant. This hypothesis predicted that women will be more distressed about emotional infidelity than men. Referring to the article previously mentioned, this does seem to be supported by the existing literature review. We predicted men will be more concerned about physical infidelity, whereas women would be more concerned with emotional infidelity. Our results showed that women actually consider both of these to be immoral in comparison to men. These are the results that we discovered after observing each survey.

Lastly, hypothesis 3 showed results that were not statistically significant. This hypothesis focused on the types of infidelity and how it effects their perception of the fictional character’s behavior. We found that there was no significant difference of whether or not physical infidelity or emotional infidelity were perceived as immoral based on the character’s behavior from the scenario that either represented physical infidelity or emotional infidelity. The subject was given
a question about immoral behavior after they read a scenario about infidelity which led us to gather these results.

There were a few limitations that we came upon while conducting our research. One limitation involves the way we designed our measure instrument. As previously mentioned, we distributed four different scenarios depicting either physical or emotional infidelity. However, since the scenarios could be perceived differently, this may have altered the way our participants rated the type of infidelity. In addition, after collecting our surveys, we realized the gender ratio was not balanced. Our surveys were distributed to more women than men and ultimately we obtained an equal amount of males and females, our research would not have a bias towards a certain gender.

In addition, after collecting our surveys, we realized the gender ratio was not balanced. Our surveys were distributed to more women than men and ultimately if we obtained an equal amount of males and females, our research would not have a bias towards a certain gender.

Our results can help direct future researchers. This results of our study clearly shows that women perceive infidelity as more immoral than men. This could help a future researcher conduct a hypothesis, while considering the results that we gathered. This could help in the field of couples counseling because it could help the therapist analyze gender perceptions. For example, if a client is undergoing an unfaithful relationship, the therapist can apply their knowledge of the generalized perception of infidelity to assist in how to help the client cope with their difficult situation. This is also helpful information for any researcher that is interested in learning more about behaviors regarding infidelity amongst this age group. As previously mentioned, we did have certain limitations within our study, but this is a step in the right direction to discover how college level students perceive emotional and physical infidelity.
References


