Imagined Infidelity Scenario Forgiveness and Distress: The Role of Method of Discovery and Specific Cheating Behavior

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Abstract   Male and female college students (*N*=437) from the U.S. read imagined scenarios of infidelity manipulated for discovery method (close friend tells, partner's best friend tells, stranger tells, questioning partner, caught partner, and partner confesses) and infidelity act (sex, massage, falling in love, bought present, went out to dinner, and kissing). Participants rated how upsetting each scenario was and the likelihood they would forgive their partner if this were to happen. Sexual infidelity was rated the most upsetting and least forgivable imagined infidelity act by both men and women, especially when imagining the infidelity act being discovered in person. Discovering infidelity by means of a stranger was the least upsetting and most likely to be forgiven. Contrary to previous findings, men were less upset by all types of imagined infidelity than women and men were also more likely to forgive the indiscretions. Implications for relationships are discussed.

Keywords: infidelity, forgiveness, relationships, gender differences

1. Introduction

Infidelity often leads to relationship dissolution [1]. Understanding reactions to different types of infidelity and different manners of discovery may be helpful to romantic couples dealing with this relationship challenge [1].

In an investigation of past infidelity recollection and relationship outcomes, researchers [2] found that harm to the quality of the relationship and forgiveness degree were dependent on the method of discovery. In order, unsolicited partner discovery was the most likely to be forgiven and the least harmful to relationship quality, followed by solicited information, catching a partner 'red handed', and unsolicited third party discovery. The researchers explain these results in relation to the potential for face redress to explain, apologize, and minimize public threats to the partner's identity. As real life outcomes, 56% of the participants indicated they remained in the relationship following unsolicited partner discovery whereas only 17% stayed together when the partner was caught 'red handed.'

Researchers have found that women are more upset by a partner's emotional infidelity, whereas males find the prospect of sexual infidelity to cause more distress [3]. Others have also found that men find sexual infidelity more difficult to forgive and would be more likely to end a romantic relationship than women if sexual infidelity was committed [4]. However, other researchers [5,6] have questioned the methodology of using forced choice scenarios in determining these patterns and suggest both sexual and emotional cheating are extremely upsetting to both men and women.

In the current investigation, we wanted to extend the categories of discovery method [2] to include who told the partner (partner's best friend, own close friend, or stranger) as well as the type of infidelity (sexual and emotional types: sex, falling in love, massage, kissing, going out to dinner, or buying a present). We anticipated similar results to past research [2], where being caught 'red handed' would be the most upsetting and partner infidelity disclosure would be the least upsetting and most likely to be forgiven.

Furthermore, we hypothesized participants would report the strongest negative response to sexual infidelity and we expected men to be more upset with sexual infidelity and women to be more upset with emotional infidelity [3,4,7].

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Four-hundred and thirty seven U.S. college students (127 men and 310 women) participated in this research in exchange for course research credit for their introductory Psychology courses. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 56 (*M*=19.34, *SD*=3.01). The majority of participants were Caucasian (91.6%), while 3.2% were African American, 2.7% were Hispanic, 1.5% were Asian, and 1.1% indicated "other." The class rank of the participants consisted of 56.2% freshmen, 27.2% sophomores, 10.2% juniors, 4.9% seniors, and 1.5% "other." The majority of participants were heterosexual (98.3%). With respect to

relationship status, 52.5% were single-dating one partner, 39.3% were not dating, 2.5% were single-dating several partners, 3.2% were engaged, 1.5% were married, .6% were divorced, and .4% reported "other."

2.2. Materials & Procedure

Participants completed an anonymous online survey about reactions to infidelity in a controlled lab setting. Participants were asked to consider 36 cheating scenario sentences and respond with their own assessment of how upsetting each scenario would be for them personally and how likely they would forgive their partner if this were to happen on a 10-point Likert scale. These surveys were created specifically for this study, based on previous research.

Participants also completed demographic information, including age, sex, class rank, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and relationship status.

3. Results

To analyze forgiveness and upset responses to the hypothetical infidelity scenarios, 6 (discovery method: close friend tells, partner's best friend tells, stranger tells, questioning partner, caught partner, and partner confesses) x 6 (infidelity act: sex, massage, falling in love, bought present, went out to dinner, and kissing) x 2 (participant sex: male or female) repeated measures MANOVAs were conducted.

For forgiveness, results revealed a significant multivariate main effect for discovery method [λ=.65, F(5,

431)=47.30, p<.001, η_p^2=.35], a significant main effect for infidelity act [λ=.48, F(5, 431)=92.36, p<.001, η_p^2=.52], a significant discovery method x infidelity act interaction [λ=.55, F(5, 431)=13.36, p<.001, η_p^2=.45], and a marginally significant infidelity act x participant sex interaction [λ=.98, F(5, 431)=2.16, p=.06, η_p^2=.02]. The discovery method x participant sex interaction (p=.14), and the discovery method x infidelity act x participant sex interaction (p=.67) were not significant. See Figure 1.

For upset responses, results revealed a significant multivariate main effect for discovery method [λ=.49, F(5, 421)=89.03, p<.001, η_p^2=.51], a significant main effect for infidelity act [λ=.24, F(5, 421)=263.76, p<.001, η_p^2=.76], a significant discovery method x infidelity act interaction [λ=.41, F(5, 421)=23.24, p<.001, η_p^2=.59], a significant infidelity act x participant sex interaction [λ=.86, F(5, 421)=13.55, p<.001, η_p^2=.14], and a significant discovery method x infidelity act x participant sex interaction [λ=.91, F(5, 421)=1.54, p=.05, η_p^2=.09]. There was a non-significant discovery method x participant sex interaction (p=.75). Upset responses followed a pattern similar to the forgiveness responses. See Figure 2

Participants were most likely to forgive and least upset about the infidelity if a stranger reported the act to them and least likely to forgive and most upset about the infidelity if they imagined catching their partner in the act of being unfaithful. Regarding infidelity acts, participants were least likely to forgive and most upset by sex and most likely to forgive and least upset by buying a present and going out to dinner.
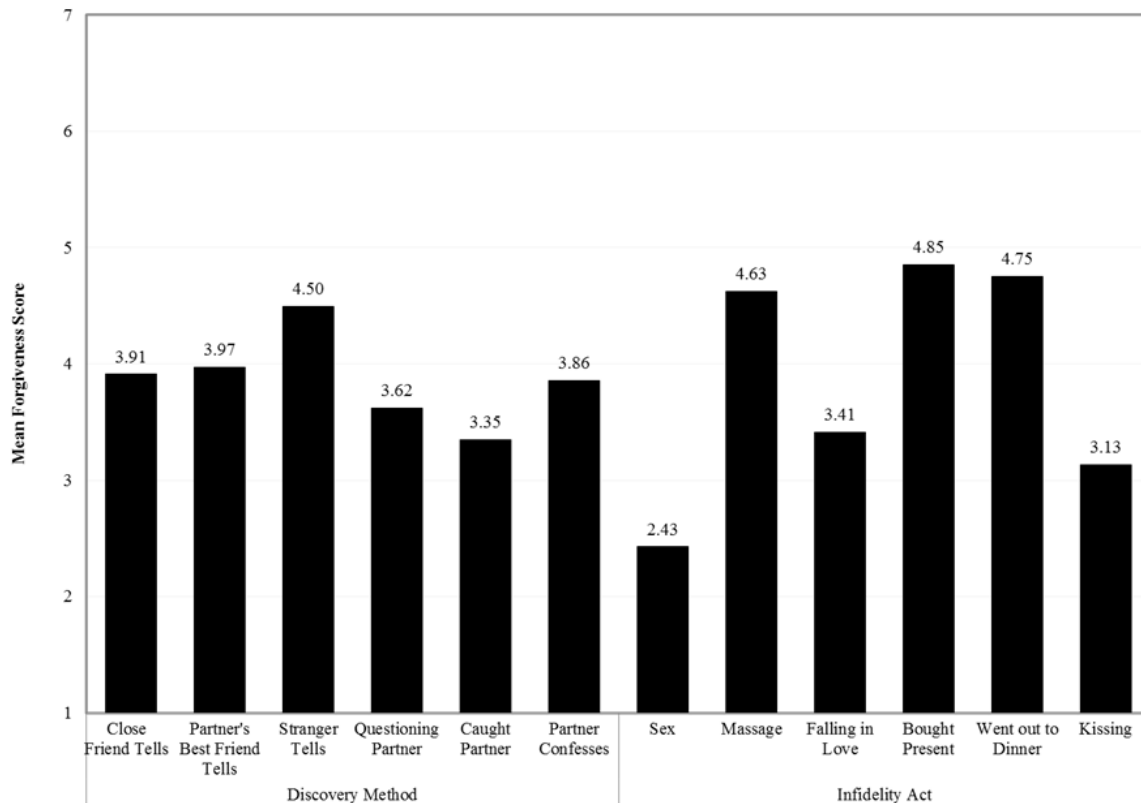
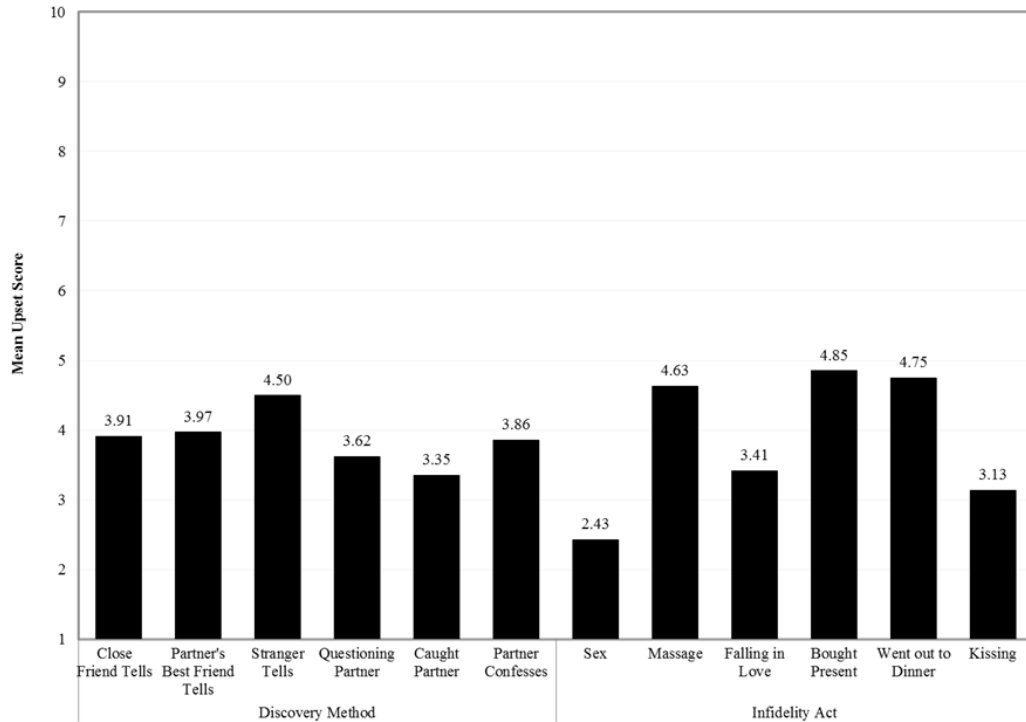**Figure 1.** Mean forgiveness ratings overall for infidelity discovery method and act

Figure 2. Mean upset ratings overall for infidelity discovery method and act

Males were slightly more likely to forgive all types of infidelity than females overall (*p*=.11). Males were more likely to forgive than females in response to every type of discovery method (all *p*s<.05) except learning of infidelity from a close friend (*p*=.11) and being told of infidelity by a stranger (*p*=.72). Males were more likely to forgive than females if their partner was falling in love with another (*p*=.04) or bought a present for another (*p*=.03). Males were slightly more likely than females to forgive going out to dinner with another partner (*p*=.10), but males and females reported similar forgiveness for sex, massage, and kissing types of infidelity (*p*s>.25). A breakdown of sex differences for forgiveness is presented in Figure 3.
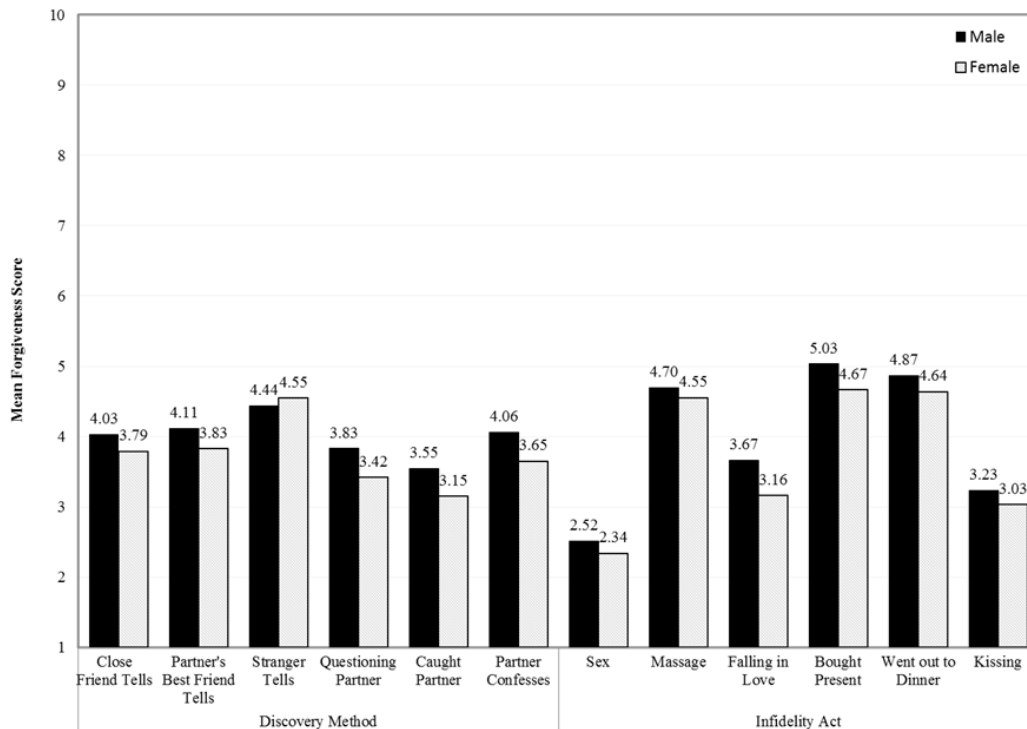

Figure 3. Mean forgiveness ratings by sex for infidelity discovery method and act

Males were less upset than females about all types of infidelity overall ($p<.001$). Females were more upset than males in responses to every type of discovery method (all $ps<.02$) and every type of infidelity act (all $ps<.02$), except sex ($p=.33$). Males and females were equally upset by sex with another partner. A breakdown of sex differences for upset responses is presented in Figure 4.
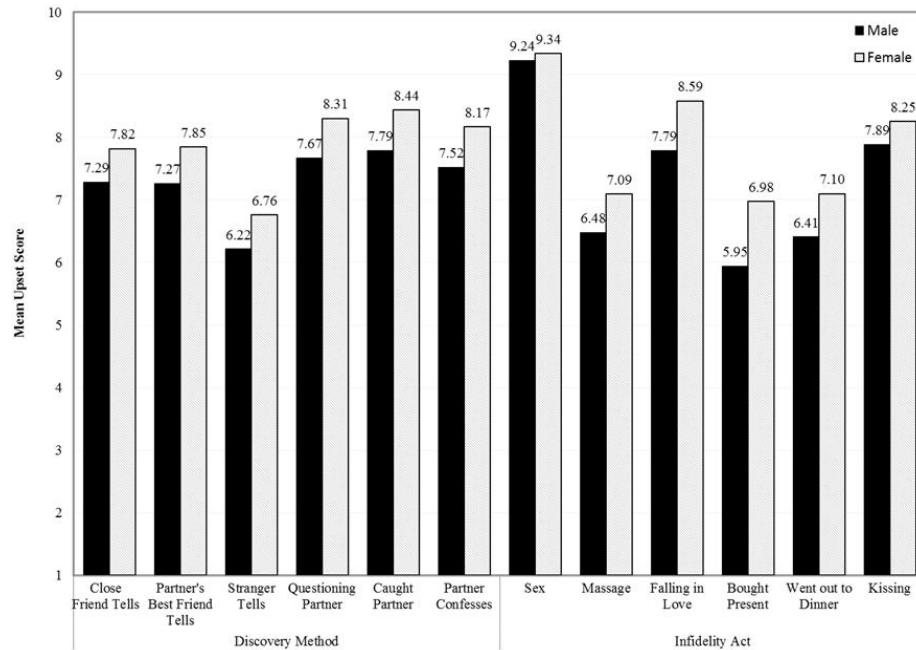

Figure 4. Mean upset ratings by sex for infidelity discovery method and act

4. Discussion

Consistent with past research on infidelity discovery method [2] and our hypotheses, participants were most upset and least likely to forgive when they imagined catching their partner in the act of cheating. Interestingly, our results deviated from past research [2] with respect to reactions to a stranger communicating infidelity about a partner. While past research [2] found unsolicited third party discovery of infidelity was even less likely to yield forgiveness than catching a partner in the act, our participants imagined learning of the infidelity from a stranger was the least upsetting and the discovery method most likely to be forgiven. These differences could be the result of actual experiences with infidelity compared with imagined scenarios about what people think they would feel or how they would react [6]. It may also be the case that strangers communicating infidelity provide less social consequences to the relationship. The unfaithfulness may remain secret between the partners if only a partner knows, but if a close friend or family member knows about the indiscretion many others will also be aware of the cheating and make judgments about the relationship and possibly share those judgments with the partners.

Men and women reported similarly high rates of feeling upset (over 9 on a 10-point scale) and being less likely to forgive sexual cheating. Although this may be due to a ceiling effect, these results are consistent with recent findings from a meta-analysis of sex differences in responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity [8]. Both males and females explicit infidelity, such as falling in love with another individual and having sex, induce the most jealousy [9]. However, we did find females were more upset and less likely to forgive emotional infidelity

(falling in love, going to dinner, buying a present, kissing, and massage) compared to males. Additional work exploring the subtleties between college samples and more generalized samples and between those who have and have not had firsthand experiences with infidelity may explain some of these inconsistencies [6,7].

We recognize the limitations of the current investigation. Our investigation focused on U.S. college students and involved only imagined responses to infidelity [2,6]. These responses may or may not be how partners respond in complex, real, interpersonal scenarios. Furthermore, individuals of varying ages, individuals from different cultures, or individuals with homosexual orientations may exhibit different responses than the current sample of exclusively young, heterosexual, American college students. There are additional factors to consider, including commitment to relationship, length of relationship, dependence on partner, alternative relationship partner availability, frequency of unfaithfulness, and sincerity of apology of partner for infidelity among other factors. We included a sample of possible discovery methods and infidelity acts, but we believe this design helps replicate previous findings [2] and helps differentiate some possible scenario reactions which may be useful to individuals experiencing infidelity and professionals counseling those in relationships who have experienced infidelity [1].

Future research may consider participant responses to additional methods of discovery and additional sexual acts of infidelity, including oral sex, anal sex, heavy petting, and other more explicit sexual behaviors. In previous research, researchers found that sexual intercourse was the most upsetting type of sexual infidelity in response to different sexual interactions (oral sex, etc.) [10]. Various forms of new technologies may also be incorporated into

investigations to see how people respond to learning of infidelity through social network sites, email, or text messages. Women have been found to be especially upset by a partner's infidelity involvement through technological devices (e.g., cell phone) [9].

The current results further highlight the importance of open communication in relationships and the strong emotional reactions to cheating.

Acknowledgement

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