Male and female college students (N=437) read imagined scenarios of infidelity manipulated for discovery method and infidelity act. Participants rated how upsetting each scenario was and the likelihood they would forgive their partner. Sexual infidelity was the most upsetting and least forgivable infidelity act. Implications for relationships are discussed.

Introduction

Infidelity often leads to relationship dissolution (Shackelford, 1998). Understanding reactions to different types of infidelity and different manners of discovery may be helpful to romantic couples dealing with this relationship challenge.

In an investigation of past infidelity recollection and relationship outcomes, Affifi, Falato, and Weiner (2001) 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 the threat to the partner’s identity. As real life outcomes, 46% 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’.

According to Buss, Larsen, Weston, and Semmelroth (1991), women are more upset by a partner’s emotional infidelity, whereas men show the opposite. However, research could be the prospect of sexual infidelity to cause more distress. Shackelford, Buss, and Bennet (2002) have also found that men find sexual infidelity more difficult to forgive and would be more likely to end a romantic relationship if sexual infidelity was committed.

We wanted to extend the categories of discovery method 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) and the emotional orientation, sexual orientation, and relationship status.

Current Study Hypotheses

We anticipated similar results to Affifi et al. (2001), 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 (i.e., Buss et al., 1992; Shackelford et al., 2002).

Method

Participants

Four-hundred and thirty seven college students (197 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=2.01). The majority of participants were Caucasian (70.60), while 32% 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, 4.8% seniors, and 1.5% “other.” The majority of participants were heterosexual (98.33%). 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.”

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 that stand with their own assessment of how upsetting each scenario would be for them personally and how likely they would forgive their partners if this were to happen to a point Likert scale. These scenarios were created specifically for this study, based on previous research. See Forgiveness Survey as an example of one of the measures used.

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

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 (F(5,431)=243.36, p<.001, ηp2=.67), a significant main effect for infidelity act (F(5,431)=296.36, p<.001, ηp2=.62), a significant discovery method x infidelity act interaction (p<.001), and a marginally significant infidelity act x participant sex interaction (p=.06). There was a non-significant discovery method x participant sex interaction (p=.14), and a non-significant discovery method x infidelity act x participant sex interaction (p=.67).

Upset responses showed the same pattern as forgiveness responses and are not reported due to space constraints.

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 caught the partner in the act. Regarding infidelity acts, participants were least likely to forgive and most upset by sex and most likely to forgive and least upset by a present, going out to dinner, and falling in love. See Figure.

Males were less upset than females about infidelity (p<.001) overall, and males were slightly more likely to forgive infidelity than females (p=.11).

Discussion

Consistent with Affifi et al. (2001) and our hypotheses, participants were most upset and least likely to forgive when they imagined catching their partner in the act of cheating, infidelity, as opposed to being informed from Affifi et al. (2001) with respect to reactions to a stranger communicating infidelity about a partner. While Affifi et al. (2001) 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.

Males and females reported similarly high rates of feeling upset (over 9 on a 10-point scale) and being less likely to forgive sexual cheating, but this could be due to a ceiling effect. Dibbets, Barends, and Groothof (2000) found that in both males and females explicit infidelity, such as falling in love with another individual and having sex, induced the most jealousy. 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.

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

Selected References


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Abstract

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

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The Ohio State University-Marion

Figure. Mean Forgiveness Ratings by Discovery Method and Infidelity Act.

Supplementary Table 1: Imagined Infidelity Scenarios on Forgiveness and Distress

Means for selected single infidelity act x discovery method interactions are presented in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infidelity Act</th>
<th>Discovery Method</th>
<th>Mean Forgiveness</th>
<th>Mean Upset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Close Friend</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caught</td>
<td>1.83</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confesses</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure. Mean Upset Ratings by Discovery Method and Infidelity Act.

Supplementary Table 2: Imagined Infidelity Scenarios on Forgiveness and Distress

Means for selected single infidelity act x discovery method interactions are presented in the table below:

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Figure. Mean Forgiveness Ratings by Discovery Method and Infidelity Act.

Supplementary Table 3: Imagined Infidelity Scenarios on Forgiveness and Distress

Means for selected single infidelity act x discovery method interactions are presented in the table below:

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</tr>
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