

Infidelity and Attachment Styles

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Abstract

Literature points to differing responses among women and men regarding sexual and emotional infidelity. In view of limited research regarding gender responses to infidelity within the context of attachment styles, the research study investigated whether there were significant difference in the way women and men responded to sexual and emotional infidelity. It also sought to determine whether attachment styles affected gender differences.. The sample population consisted of 300 staff employed at a university in South Africa, of which 81 were male and 219 were female. The voluntary online monkey survey required respondents to provide information focusing on demographics, attachment styles and sexual orientation. Following this, sexual and emotional cases were presented for participants to rate each case. Participants then made a binary choice, of which scenario upset them most. The findings showed that men found sexual infidelity most upsetting, while emotional infidelity was found most upsetting for women. Further, results indicated that men found sexual infidelity most upsetting within the fearful and secure attachment style, with scores much higher than women in the categories of fearful and secure attachment style. On the other hand, women found emotional infidelity most upsetting within the fearful and secure attachment style, with scores much higher than men in the categories of fearful and secure attachment style. However, both men and women found sexual infidelity to be most upsetting with the preoccupied and dismissive attachment style. The research findings showed that there were differences in the responses of the male and female gender to sexual and emotional infidelity. This supports the theory of evolutionary sex differences and provides an opportunity to augment further intense and rigorous debate on evolutionary approaches. In view of these findings, the study proposed greater empirical and theoretical studies in the area of sexual and emotional infidelity within cultural contexts.

Key words: sexual and emotional infidelity, attachment styles,

Introduction

Infidelity includes behaviors such as emotional intimacy physical intimacy and cybersex. Infidelity can break the intimacy and trust between two people who are in established relationships. Hertlein, Wetchler and Piercy (2005) have noted that emotional

infidelity involved investments in different resources, including time, attention, romance as well as material items, at the expense of the partners of the lovers. Sexual infidelity involved physical sexual activities between the lovers outside their legitimate relationship with their partners. The exposition of sexual infidelity often leads to jealousy and its attendant consequences. Thus, one of the immediate response of sexual infidelity is jealousy in view of the values of the investment in the legitimate relationship (Bendixen, Kennair & Buss, 2015).

A general consequence of infidelity is the destructive emotional effect on the individuals involved. This often arises from the feelings of anger and betrayal, with guilt, especially if the offended partners chose not to react violently. The betrayal of trust often degenerates to separation and loss of intimacy. This is likely, since unfaithfulness destroys the core essence of a relationship underpinned by emotions of loyalty and commitment. This also impact how the betrayed partners see themselves in terms of desirability.

Studies have shown that men and women exhibit different reactions infidelity, either emotional or sexual. Burchell and Ward (2011) found in their study that women were more sensitive to and affected by emotional infidelity while the male gender tended towards been affected by sexual infidelity. Similarly, Cann, Mangum and Wells (2001) discovered in their study that men often become distressed whenever they are aware of sexual infidelity of their spouses. On the other hand, women only get distressed when they discovered that their men were involved in another romantic emotional affairs.

Contrary to these findings, DeSteno, Bartlett, Braverman and Salovey (2002) discovered in their study that irrespective of the type of infidelity, both the male and the female gender are often upset and distress by the discovery of the involvement of their spouses. The study revealed further that men often experience more distressing situation when they found that their spouses were involved in sexual infidelity. The findings of these scholars conformed to the discovery of Zengel, Edlund and Sargarin (2013) in their study,

which showed significant difference in both gender, in their response to the feelings of jealousy occasioned by infidelity. Levy and Kelly(2010) in their study discovered that women found emotional infidelity more distressing than sexual infidelity. They also found that infidelity that was strongly related to attachment arouse more jealousy. The findings of Buss, Larsen, Westen and Semmelroth (1992) in their study supported this claim indicating differences in distress associated with emotional and sexual infidelity among the male and the female gender, though imagination of romantic sexual intimacy with the partner

Studies have sought to adopt evolutionary perspective to sexual intercourse among humans to analyse differing responses to jealousy arising from sexual infidelity. For one, Buss, Larsen and Westen (1996) used the parental investment model to offer explanations for the differences in response to jealousy. They argue that while men investments were more visible in impregnating the women, the female gender were more interested in upbringing of the children, The reason is that while women have absolute certainty of the presence of their genes in their children, men could not be so certain. According to Levy and Kelly (2010, p. 168), such uncertainty among males supports the male belief that “sexual infidelity increases the risk of investing resources in a genetically unrelated offspring” Other scholars such as Buss (1994), Kramer, Manning-Ryan, Johnson and Barbo (2000) and Wiederman and Allgeier (1992) have argued that emotional infidelity was more distressing than sexual infidelity for women. They have contended that women found emotional infidelity more distressing because it was a threat to their commitment, economic stability and continued access. The concentration of the investments of women were of more importance to the much needed material resources than sexual infidelity. To the men, sexual infidelity was distressing since sexual exclusivity was more important for paternal certainty (Buss,1994; Kramer, Manning-Ryan, Johnson and Barbo , 2000; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992).

Sex differences, in the context of the attachment theory, are consistent by adulthood. Thus, attachment style and sex were significant predictors of jealousy among men and

women . Women, according to Levy et al (1998), have less insecure dismissing, avoidant attachment style. They have claimed that dismissing individuals restricted emotional experience, placed high investments in autonomy, avoided the need for intimacy and were more inclined to sexual infidelity than those with other attachment styles. Therefore, a dismissive attachment style appeared as a protective barrier against vulnerability and negative outcomes associated with emotional experiences.

Levy and Kelly (2010) in their study indicated that men, who courageous, were more likely to report higher levels of sexual jealousy, while courageous women would report higher levels of emotional jealousy. In addition, Levy, Kelly and Jack (2006) showed that the men, who were in the forefront of attachment avoidance considered emotional jealousy as less distressing than sexual jealousy. It could, thus, be asserted that attachment avoidance, for women, is not a significant predictor of sexual jealousy. Women, generally placed more emphasis on higher levels of attachment and motivation.

This study aimed at discovering the difference in the responses of men and women to emotional and sexual infidelity. It also sought to examine if attachment styles diminished sex differences.. The research questions are:

Are women and men differ in their response to the type of infidelity that upset them?

Are there differences between men and women over the frequency of attachment styles?

Are there differences in their attachment styles categories in terms of the infidelity that upset them most?

Are their differences in the type of infidelity that men and women found upsetting?

This study hypothesized that men and women expressed different responses to sexual and emotional infidelity Burchell and Ward (2011) have found in their study that men and women were expected to differ in the frequency of attachment styles. Thus, this study also

hypothesized that attachment style impacted on the type of infidelity men and women found to be more upsetting.

Research methodology

The 2x4 experimental research design was suitable as there were two independent variables, one having two levels (male and female sexes) and the other having four levels (secure, preoccupied, dismissive, fearful attachment styles). Furthermore, the between group design focused on males and females; their attachment style categories and infidelity. The experimental design was an online survey monkey to determine how males and females perceived infidelity with a partner. Participants were presented with two cases of sexual and emotional infidelity and had to respond to questions regarding their feelings and thoughts.

Only two levels of sex variables were used because the participants that chose 'other' as sex category were less than 1%. Thus, it was difficult for the researcher to analyze such insignificant numbers.

The respondents were presented with distressing level of each type of infidelity as the dependent variable. The participants were presented with two choices of cases of sexual and emotional infidelity they found most distressing. The sex of the participants and the attachment category were the independent variables.

There were 300 samples drawn among the full time employees staff of a university. There were 81 male and the females were 219, with age range between 22 and 65 years. The mean age of 31.78 (SD = 7.41).

Procedure

The online survey was completed voluntarily. It was estimated to take 20 minutes for completion. The voluntary online survey required respondents to provide information focusing on demographics, attachment styles and sexual orientation. Following this, sexual

and emotional cases were presented for participants to rate each case. Participants then made a binary choice of which scenario upset them most.

Results

Table 1: The frequencies of Sex Variables

	Count	Percent
Male	81	27.0
Female	219	73.0
Total	300	100.0

N = 300

Table 2: The Sexual Orientation

	Frequency	Percent
Heterosexual	244	81.3
Homosexual	13	4.3
Bisexual	28	9.3
Other	15	5.0
Total	300	100.0

N = 300

Table 3: Relationship Status

	Frequency	Percent
Not in relationship	177	59.0
Currently in relationship	123	41.0
Total	300	100.0

N = 300

The minimum and maximum age of the 300 participants was 22 65 years, respectively.

M = 31.78; SD = 7.41. In Table 1, 81 out of the 300 participants were male while the remaining 219 were females. As shown in Table 2, out of these 300 participants, 244 were heterosexual, (81.3%); the homosexual and bisexual participants were 13 and 28, respectively. The relationship status, as shown in Table 3, indicated that 177 participants were not in any relationship, while those in relationship were 123 participants.

1. Differences in the type of infidelity that upset men and women most

Table 4: Cross Tabulation of Hypothesis 1

Sex	Sexual Infidelity	Emotional Infidelity	Total
Male	77.2%	22.8%	100.0%
Female	39.7%	60.3%	100.0%
Total	56.2%	43.8%	100.00%

Table 5: Chi Square of the outcome

Chi Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	19.74	1	0.000

N = 300

$\chi^2 (1, N = 300) = 19.74, p < .001$. As shown in Table 4, 77.2% and 39.7% of the male and female participants, respectively, indicated that the most upsetting infidelity was sexual. While 22.8% of the male participants indicated that emotional infidelity upset them most, 60.3% of the female participants indicate that they were most upset when their partners engaged in emotional infidelity. The Pearson Chi-Square value is 19.74, and its significant value is $< .001$.

2. Differences in the in the frequency of attachment styles between men and women

Table 6: Cross Tabulation of Hypothesis 2

Sex	Secure	Dismissive	Preoccupied	Fearful	Total
Male	27.2%	27.1%	12.4%	33.3%	100.00%
Female	22.9%	19.3%	22.7%	35.1%	100.00%
Total	24.3%	23.1%	22.1%	30.5%	100.00%

N = 300

Table 7: Chi Square Test

Chi Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	2.44	3	0.401

χ^2 (3, N = 300) = 2.44, p = 0.401. As shown in Table 6, there seems to be no significant differences in the attachment styles between the male and the female respondents. The two sex have similar attachment in each of the categories, with the exception of dismissive and preoccupied. While 27.1% of the male respondents were dismissive, 19.3% of the female respondents indicated that they were dismissive. Similarly, 12.4% and 22.7% of the male and female respondents, respectively, indicated that they were preoccupied. The non-significant chi-square test confirms that the proportion of males and females is the similar across the four attachment style groups.

3. Differences in attachment style categories in the type of infidelity men and women found most upsetting

Table 8: Chi Square Test

Chi Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	4.67	3	0.189

N = 300

Using the data in Table 4, there is no significant Chi Square test in the attachment style categories. This means that

t attachment style did not influence the type of infidelity that upset men and women most. It should be noted, however, that in the previous cross tabulation on attachment styles, those with fearful attachment style (30.5%) would impact on emotional infidelity while the dismissive (24.3%) would most likely impacted on sexual infidelity.

4. Differences in terms of the type of infidelity men and women found most upsetting

Table 9: Cross Tabulation of Hypothesis 4

Sex	Sexual Infidelity	Emotional Infidelity	Total
Male	70.1%	29.9%	100.0%
Female	33.1%	66.9%	100.0%
Total	50.3%	49.7%	100.00%

N = 81

Table 10: Chi Square Test

Chi Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	6.12	1	0.007

$\chi^2 (1, N = 81) = 6.12, p = 0.007$. As shown in Table 9, there is a significant difference in terms of the infidelity that upset men and women most. Men (70.1%) were more upset with sexual infidelity while 66.9% of women would be more upset when partner indulged in emotional infidelity.

Table 11 reflects the cross tabulation for dismissive style and table 12 showing the Chi-square test

Table 11

Sex	Sexual Infidelity	Emotional Infidelity	Total
Male	78.7	21.3	100.0
Female	55.2	44.8	100.0
Total	61.8	38.2	100.00

N = 68

Table 12

Chi Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	5.88	1	0.037

$\chi^2 (1, N = 68) = 5.88, p = 0.037$. The cross-tabulation table and the Chi-Square Test indicated a significant difference even though dismissive attachment style showed that both male (78.7%) and female (55.2%) leaned towards sexual infidelity as most upsetting. Nevertheless, men found sexual infidelity more upsetting than women.

Table 13 shows the cross tabulation for the preoccupied style and table 14 illustrates the chi square tests

Table 13

Sex	Sexual Infidelity	Emotional Infidelity	Total
Male	64.2	35.8	100.0
Female	56.3	43.7	100.0
Total	59.1	40.9	100.00

N = 72

Table 14

Chi Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	1.43	1	0.311

$\chi^2 (1, N = 72) = 1.16, p = 0.311$. With regards to the preoccupied attachment style, there is no significant difference, as shown in the Chi-Square Test, between men and women, even though both gender leaned towards sexual infidelity.

Table 15 shows the cross tabulation for the fearful style and table 16 illustrates the chi square tests

Table 15

Sex	Sexual Infidelity	Emotional Infidelity	Total
Male	81.1	18.9	100.0
Female	31.3	68.7	100.0
Total	52.1	47.9	100.00

N = 85

Table 16

Chi Square Test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	8.89	1	0.000

N = 85

$\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 10.10, p < .001$. From the crosstabulation shown in Table 15, the Chi-Square Test indicated a significant difference between feeling of men and women within the fearful attachment styles with respect to sexual infidelity. Both the male and the female gender in this cycle, with 81.1% and 68.7%, respectively, found sexual infidelity most upsetting.

Discussion

The research study investigated whether women and men showed significant differences in responding to sexual and emotional infidelity and whether gender differences were affected by attachment styles. The study hypothesized that men and women showed differences in their responses to sexual and emotional infidelity. Findings of the study indicated that there was a significant difference in the response of the male and female genders to sexual and emotional infidelity. To the men, sexual infidelity was more upsetting, while the women would be more upset when they found that their partners indulged in emotional infidelity. These findings tallied with the result of the study conducted by Zengel et al. (2013). They found that men were more depressed with sexual infidelity while emotional infidelity depressed the women more.

The study had hypothesized that there was a significant difference in the frequency of attachment styles among men and women. However, the findings of this study showed that there were no significant differences in the attachment styles in relation to the feelings of the men and women towards infidelity. The revelation here is that gender differences in

attachment styles were not significant. Brase, Adair & Monk (2014) have found in their study that no high disproportionate tendency to have a dismissive attachment style among men. They also found no significant differences on the ratings of the four attachment styles among men and women.

Another hypothesis of the study was that attachment style affect the type of infidelity found most upsetting among men and women. However, the findings could not establish any significant difference in this regards. In other words, attachment styles could not significantly influence the type of infidelity that upset either of the gender most. Brace et al. (2014) have found in their study that there were no significant differences in the responses of men and women to either sexual or emotional infidelity, even though they might have different attachment styles. However, results showed that emotional infidelity was most likely to be affected by the fearful attachment style, while sexual infidelity is most likely to be affected by the dismissive attachment style. Knobloch, Solomon and Cruz (2001) found in their study that even though higher levels of emotional jealousy were associated with fear, nevertheless, there was no significant difference by sex.

The study hypothesized that men and women differed on type of infidelity that upset them most within the context of attachment styles. The findings indicated that sexual infidelity upset men, within the secure and fearful attachment, most while women in this context found emotional infidelity most upsetting Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) in their study on secure attachment style, found men more in this category of attachment. This had made men to be inclined towards denying intimacy with a view to exercising control over their emotion in order to avoid being upset. However, women in the secure attachment styles did not see sexual infidelity as upsetting than emotional infidelity. These findings corroborated the assertion that an insecure attachment style which is higher amongst men than women, is closely associated with sexual infidelity having a significant impact on men compared to emotional infidelity (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991)

Within the dismissive attachment styles, the findings of this study showed that both men and women found sexual infidelity to be most upsetting. This was in line with the findings of the study by Levy et al. (2006). They found that sexual infidelity was more depressing to participants associated with the dismissive attachment style. In addition, Levy et al (2006) found that men were vulnerable to possessing the dismissive attachment than the women. Nevertheless, Burchell and Ward (2011) found the dismissive attachment as a significant predictor of reaction to sexual infidelity, especially among men. Levy and Kelly (2010) showed that there was no significant differences between men and women with preoccupied attachment in their response to infidelity.

Conclusion

This study showed that there was strong evidence indicating differences in the response of men and women to sexual and emotional infidelity. This evidence is supported by the theory of evolutionary sex differences. The findings provide an impetus for robust interrogation and debate pertaining to evolutionary approaches, impact on attachment styles and its influence on responses to sexual and emotional infidelity. However, the result of the study could not be used to generalize the findings because the participants were limited to staff employed at a university. Aside from this, the samples were biased towards the female gender with only 81 participants who were men. Steiger, Reips & Voracek (2007) had found that there was the likelihood that men would withdraw from studies that used forced-response online surveys. This might be responsible for the low participation of men in this study, compared to women. The findings of this study, would however, contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the study on attachment styles and infidelity. There should be more empirical study across different geographical, cultural and demographical contexts, with a view to generating theories.

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