

Understanding the Cheating Heart: What Determines Infidelity Intentions?

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Abstract Infidelity is experienced in many relationships. This paper seeks to determine the correlates of infidelity intentions among a sample of 512 individuals. Results imply that favourable attitudes, social approval and the perceived ease of attracting a partner are positively related to infidelity intentions. More than this, attitudes were the most significant correlate of infidelity intentions. Attitudes, in turn, were influenced by gender, religiosity and infidelity experiences.

Keywords Infidelity · Unfaithful · Non-monogamy · Extradyadic · Theory of planned behaviour · Attitudes towards cheating

Introduction

The traditional norm in intimate relationships is monogamy (Treas and Giesen 2000). Many societies disapprove of infidelity and consider unfaithful behaviour morally wrong and unjustifiable (Glass and Wright 1992). Yet, even though many societies consider infidelity to be a “deviant” behaviour, many individuals often engage in infidelity. In fact, a recent meta-analysis by Tafoya and Spitzberg (2007) suggests that 34 % of men and 24 % of women have engaged in extramarital sexual relations. More than this, work by Hall and Fincham (2009) hints that the prevalence of infidelity may be even higher in dating relationships. This is somewhat worrying, given the negative effects of unfaithfulness. Particularly, the related literature has linked infidelity to declines in psychological health (Cano and O’Leary 2000; Gordon et al. 2004; Hall and Fincham 2009) and also identified infidelity as a key transmission route for sexually transmitted diseases (Finer et al. 1999). More than this, the realisation of a partner’s infidelity can prompt negative responses, including

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physical abuse, suicides or even murder (Daly and Wilson 1988; Kaighobadi et al. 2009; Wilson and Daly 1996).

While there is a large body of work citing the negative concomitants of infidelity, there are a few works that suggest infidelity may have some positive effects. For instance, early work by Buunk and Van Driel (1989) reports that individuals who were involved in extradyadic relations believe that such transgressions led to personal growth and increased self-esteem. Meanwhile, Jones and Burdette (1994) report that individuals who engage in affairs often think that their primary relationship improved due to their unfaithfulness. Finally, as suggested by Dainton and Gross (2008), for some individuals, engaging in infidelity may be perceived as a way to maintain a relationship by providing rewards not found in the primary relationship.

Given the various effects of infidelity, it is not surprising that several researchers have sought to determine the factors influencing extradyadic behaviours. In this paper, I opt to focus on the determinants of infidelity intentions. Intentions are a central factor in any behavioural model. Intentions are indicators of the degree to which an individual is willing to try and how much effort he/she is willing to make in order to perform a particular behaviour and are thus viewed as the best antecedent of actual behaviour (Ajzen 1991, 2012; Ajzen and Fishbein 1969). This study provides a unique conceptual two-stage model of infidelity intention, combining notions from planned behaviour and attitudinal models. Specifically, in the first stage, the factors influencing 'infidelity intentions' are exclusively based on the theory of planned behaviour, which assumes that intentions are a function of attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioural control. The literature to date suggests that attitudes are one of the most significant predictors of infidelity intentions (see for instance, Drake and McCabe 2000; Buunk and Bakker 1995). Drawing on the related literature, the second stage of the model relates attitudes as a function of socio-demographics, religion and past experiences with infidelity. To the best of my knowledge, most of the empirical work on infidelity either focuses on intentions or attitudes, not both. This paper attempts to fill this gap via a two stage model.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides a description of the conceptual model and key research hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the data and methods, a discussion of the results and finally, some concluding remarks.

Conceptual Model and Key Hypotheses

This study draws extensively on behavioural and attitudinal theory to determine intentions to be unfaithful. The proposed model consists of two stages (Fig. 1). The first stage is based on the theory of planned behaviour, which assumes that rational considerations govern the choices and behaviours of individuals. It was developed from the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1969), which maintains that actual behaviour is directly linked to one's intention to perform an action. These intentions, in turn, are shaped by an individual's attitude towards the behaviour (that

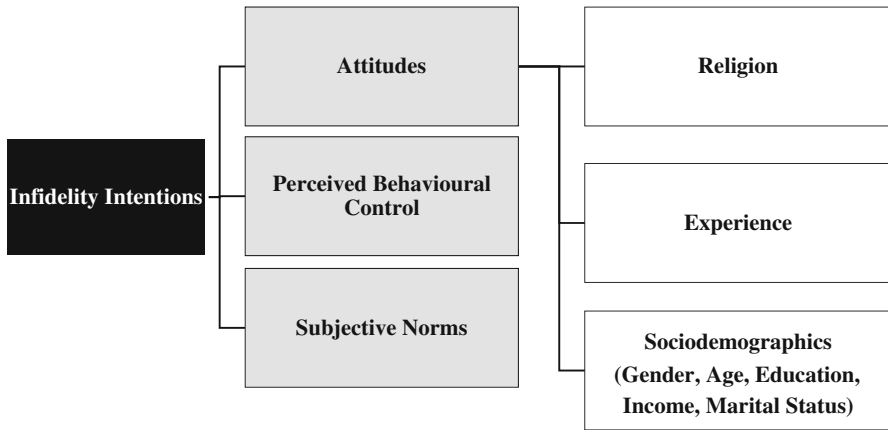


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

is, an individual's feelings of joy, elation, pleasure, distaste or discontentment with respect to a particular behaviour) and subjective norms (the degree to which significant individuals, such as relatives, friends or colleagues, condone or engage in this act). The theory of planned behaviour is often represented as a refinement of the theory of reasoned action. Basically, the theory of planned behaviour extends the theory of reasoned action by including a measure called perceived behavioural control, which is the extent to which individuals feel they can engage in these behaviours (Ajzen 1991). Against this backdrop, the first three hypotheses are as follows:

H₁: Individuals with favourable attitudes towards infidelity will have a greater intent to be unfaithful.

H₂: Individuals with a social network that supports or condones infidelity will have greater infidelity intentions.

H₃: Individuals who think that it is easy for them to cheat will have higher infidelity intentions.

Of the aforementioned predictors, it would seem plausible to assume that one's attitude towards infidelity behaviours would be the most valuable psychological construct in predicting intent to be unfaithful. In fact, Ajzen (1991, 2012) notes that attitudes are key antecedents of intentions for individuals based on theory of planned behaviour, and empirical research has provided support for this assumption. For instance, Trafimow and Finlay (1996) found that attitude was the best predictor of intention in 29 out of 30 studies. Given the importance of attitudes in explaining intentions, the second stage of the model focuses on what drives attitudes towards infidelity. Specifically, attitudes towards infidelity are modelled as a function of gender, age, marital status, education, income, religiousness and experience with infidelity.

Gender is arguably one of the most commonly studied predictors of infidelity. Expected gender differences in infidelity are often rooted in evolutionary theory (Buss 1994, 1996). According to this theory, women, due to internal fertilization and gestation, are more likely to benefit from long-term partner commitment and affluent partners who can provide resources that are necessary for survival; males, on the other hand, can impregnate multiple females and the desire to achieve genetic success leads men, more so than women to engage in infidelity. While some researchers disagree with the notions provided by evolutionary theory (Munsch 2012), the literature to date suggests that men have a stronger desire to engage in infidelity (Andrus et al. 1977; Prins et al. 1993) and are more likely to be unfaithful (Allen and Baucom 2004; Atkins et al. 2001; Wiederman 1997). The literature also points to gender differences in attitudes towards infidelity (Tagler and Jeffers 2012; Whitty 2003). There is also evidence to date that men tend to view commitment and monogamy as less attractive options than women do (Sheppard et al. 1995) and have more permissive attitudes towards sex outside of the primary relationship (Lieberman 1988; Thompson 1984). Hence:

H₄: Males hold more positive attitudes towards infidelity than females.

Beyond gender, other socio-demographic factors are also hypothesised to be strong predictors of attitudes towards infidelity—particularly, the literature often controls for the impact of education, income, marital status and age (Treas and Giesen 2000; Atkins et al. 2001; Træen et al. 2007; Mark et al. 2011; Munsch 2012). In this vein, the study hypothesises:

H₅: There are significant differences in attitudes across age groups, marital status, education levels and income status.

In addition to socio-demographic variables, the literature also identifies religion as a key predictor of infidelity (Atkins and Kessel 2008). In their prescriptions for holy living, most monotheistic religions emphasise the importance of fidelity and strictly prohibits extramarital affairs (Larson and Goltz 1989). Past research has shown that religiously affiliated individuals are less likely to be unfaithful (Burdette et al. 2007; Mattingly et al. 2010), and that the impact of religion seems greatest for those whom religion is more salient or those who are more involved in their religious community (Dollahite and Lambert 2007; Whisman et al. 2007). As such, this paper posits that:

H₆: Individuals who do not claim a religious identity hold more favourable attitudes towards infidelity than the religiously affiliated.

H₇: Greater levels of religiousness are negatively correlated with attitudes towards infidelity.

A less researched area concerns how infidelity experience influences reactions towards infidelity (Sharpe et al. 2013). Under a theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959), individuals who engage in particular behaviours are likely to change their attitudes toward said behaviour. It would seem plausible to assume that those who have been unfaithful in the past would tend to express more

positive attitudes towards infidelity. In fact, work by Drake and McCabe (2000) and Thompson (1984) lend some credence to this hypothesis. On the other hand, being a victim of infidelity is assumed to have the opposite effects. As mentioned prior, there are intense negative psychological consequences of infidelity. In this vein, it would not be surprising that those who have been on the receiving end of infidelity would view it much more negatively than those who never experienced it. Work by Sharpe et al. (2013) and Sagarin et al. (2003) found that responses to infidelity can be more distressing for victims of infidelity. The final two hypotheses are as follows:

H₈: Persons who have been unfaithful in the past hold more favourable attitudes towards cheating.

H₉: Persons who have been victims of infidelity hold more negative attitudes towards infidelity.

Participants and Design

The data was collected via a 43-item online survey. The survey was circulated on social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook. A total of 512 persons voluntarily completed the survey. Ages ranged between 18 and 59, with 62.0 % of the individuals between 21 and 29. A plurality of respondents were female (67.7 %) and the sample was highly educated with 65.1 % having at least a bachelor's degree.

Measures/Scales

In the first stage, the paper used the notions from planned behaviour to model infidelity intentions. Composite scores were computed for each measure. The main measures were taken from previous research that have demonstrated strong evidence of their high reliability and validity.

Infidelity Intentions

To measure infidelity intentions, the study adopted the Jones et al. (2010) intentions towards infidelity scale. This measure consists of seven items, which assess the likelihood of engaging in infidelity behaviours (e.g., intentions to hide the relationship from an attractive other or be unfaithful in the future). Items were scored on a seven point scale ranging from not at all likely (−3) to extremely likely (+3). Here, the higher the score, the higher one's intentions to be unfaithful. As shown in Table 1, on average, respondents tend to have relatively low infidelity intentions (Mean = −9.04), though there is a great deal of variation in the sample (SD = 8.11). Table 1 also evaluates the reliability of the summative rating (Cronbach's alpha, α). The alpha is 0.77, which is above the rule of thumb minimum value of 0.7.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of variables

Scales	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's alpha
Infidelity intentions	-9.04 (8.11)	0.77
Attitudes	-22.57 (11.33)	0.80
Perceived behavioural control	1.87 (3.20)	0.73
Subjective norms	-3.50 (2.90)	0.79
Religiosity	14.88 (7.52)	0.88
Other variables		%
<i>Age</i>		
18–29 (contrast)		61.9
30–49		32.1
50 and over		6.0
<i>Gender</i>		
Male		32.3
Female		67.7
<i>University educated</i>		
Married		19.4
<i>Income class</i>		
Low income (contrast)		28.0
Middle income		47.9
High income		24.2
<i>Religiously unaffiliated</i>		
Religiously unaffiliated		9.1
<i>Infidelity experiences</i>		
Has been cheated on		68.8
Has cheated		57.0

Attitudes Towards Infidelity

To gain insight of what people think or feel about issues associated with infidelity, the study adopts the 11-item Attitudes toward Infidelity Scale by Whatley (2006). This comprehensive scale covers feelings towards infidelity (for instance, infidelity is morally wrong in all circumstances regardless of the situation) and attitudes towards a range of infidelity items including online infidelity and infidelity in reaction to partner infidelity. Items were scored using a seven-point Likert scale ($-3 =$ strongly disagree; $3 =$ strongly agree). For this sample, the scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = 0.8$).

Perceived Behavioural Control

Drawing loosely on the work of Lammers et al. (2011), this study employs the following three items to measure respondent's perceived ability to attract a romantic partner: "It would be very easy for me to seduce someone," "I feel confident about

my charm” and “I feel confident about my looks”. Responses were made on a seven-point scales ($-3 =$ strongly disagree; $3 =$ strongly agree) and summed to form a composite measure ($\alpha = 0.73$, $M = 1.87$ and $SD = 3.2$).

Subjective Norms

The assessment of how one ought to behave was based on two items: “Most people who are important to me would support me if I was unfaithful to my partner” and “Most people whose opinion I value would think it is ok if I was unfaithful to my partner”. These two items were scored via a seven-point scales ($-3 =$ strongly disagree; $3 =$ strongly agree) and were highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.73$).

In the second stage, the study focuses on what determines attitudes. The paper includes measures of age, marital status, gender, income class, education, religion and infidelity experiences. Age is recorded categorically using three distinct age groups: 18–29, 30–49 and 50 and over. The 18–29 age category is used as the reference category in this study. Income is divided into low income, middle income and high income (based on Barbados’ income tax brackets) with the low income category serving as the contrast. The gender, marital status, education and infidelity experience variables were all dichotomised. Binary indicators were generated to capture the impact of gender (Male = 1; 0 otherwise), education (Tertiary education = 1; 0 otherwise), and marital status (Being married = 1; 0 otherwise). To assess the impact of infidelity experience, two binary indicators are created, such that “Has Been Cheated On (= 1)” if respondent has been a victim of infidelity (0 otherwise) and “Has Cheated (= 1)” if respondent has been unfaithful in a past relationship (0 otherwise). Finally, the impact of religion is captured as follows. First the study includes a binary indicators capturing those who are religiously unaffiliated, that is religiously unaffiliated = 1 if respondent doesn’t identify with a religion, 0 otherwise. Then, to capture religious importance, the study creates a religiosity measure based on eight items, assessing (a) how often respondent attends religious services, (b) how often respondent attends informal religious or prayer groups, (c) how often respondent talks/shares religious views with others, (d) how often respondent prays or mediates, (e) how often respondent reads holy scriptures, (f) how often respondent reads religious literature, (g) how often respondent watches/listens to religious broadcasts and finally, (h) how many of respondents friends belongs to his/her congregation. These items were highly correlated as evidenced by Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha = 0.88$). Table 1 also provides descriptive statistics for these variables.

Results and Discussion

In this paper, ordinary least squares (OLS) multivariate regressions are used to test the hypothesized relations among the variables. To provide some insights on the size of the effects, the standardised coefficients are presented along with the standard output of the OLS regression.

Table 2 Determinants of infidelity intentions

	OLS coefficient	Standardised beta
Attitudes	0.294 (0.051)***	0.417***
Subjective norms	0.505 (0.205)**	0.179**
Perceived behavioural control	0.290 (0.105)***	0.148***
R^2	0.338	
F test (p value)	0.000	

Robust for standard errors are in parentheses

***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10 % levels of significance, respectively

Table 2 presents the first stage of the model. Generally, previous work has found links between infidelity, attitudes, social norms and behavioural control. For instance, Buunk and Bakker (1995) and Drake and McCabe (2000) show that attitudes is a predictor of infidelity intentions, while other authors have confirmed that confidence in attracting a partner increases infidelity (Lammers et al. 2011). With respect to social norms, work by Thompson (1984), Buunk and Bakker (1995), Drake and McCabe (2000) and Banfield and McCabe (2001) suggest that individuals were more willing to engage in infidelity if they perceived that they would have the approval of others or believed that given the opportunity, members of their network would also engage in infidelity. Thus, it is not surprising that my results provide support for the theory of planned behaviour in predicting infidelity intentions. The coefficients on the attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioural control proxies are all positive and statistically significant. Simply put, the current study suggests that individuals with favourable views on infidelity have higher infidelity intentions, infidelity intentions tend to be greater if individuals believe that their social networks would support them in their infidelity, and finally persons that believe that it is easy for them to attract a partner also have higher infidelity intentions.

A point hitherto unexplored in this paper concerns the size of the effects. The standardised coefficient was largest on the attitudes variable, suggesting that this variable is the most important determinant of infidelity intentions. Given the finding that attitudes is the strongest predictor of intentions for this sample, a key question emanating would be “what determines attitudes”. Table 3 presents the results of estimating attitudes as a function of socio-demographics, religion and infidelity experiences.

As mentioned prior, a general consensus in the literature seems to be that men tend to display more positive attitudes than women towards infidelity (Feldman and Cauffman 1999; Glass and Wright 1992; Sheppard et al. 1995; Whitty 2003). Consistent with a priori expectations, this study reports that males in this sample were found to be more accepting of infidelity. More than this, the standardised coefficients suggests that gender is the most significant factor in predicting attitudes towards infidelity. This serves as some evidence that men and women approach the idea of being monogamous very differently with men being more likely to view monogamy negatively.

Table 3 Determinants of attitudes towards infidelity

	OLS coefficient	Standardised beta
<i>Age</i>		
18–29 (contrast)	–	–
30–49	1.364 (1.775)	0.055
50 and over	–2.712 (2.686)	–0.056
<i>Gender (male)</i>	6.375 (1.687)***	0.258***
<i>Marital status (married)</i>	–2.171 (1.921)	–0.074
<i>Income class</i>		
Low income (contrast)	–	–
Middle income	–0.254 (1.750)	–0.011
High income	0.711 (2.120)	0.026
<i>Tertiary education</i>	–0.643 (1.737)	–0.026
<i>Religion</i>		
Religiously unaffiliated	8.862 (3.227)***	0.222***
Religiosity	–0.326 (0.111)***	–0.214***
<i>Infidelity experiences</i>		
Has been cheated on	–2.976 (1.680)*	–0.120*
Has cheated	4.610 (1.560)***	0.197***
R^2	0.343	
F test (p value)	0.000	

Robust standard errors in parentheses

***, ** and * indicate statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10 % levels of significance, respectively

Beyond gender, a number of studies have emphasised the role of age, education, income and marital status in predicting infidelity. However, the empirical evidence to date can best be described as mixed (Munsch 2012). Some studies have shown that married persons have more invested in their unions and face higher exit costs (Treas and Giesen 2000) and so, are more likely to be faithful. Some researchers associate richer, younger and more educated individuals with more liberal attitudes and so, are more likely to engage in extradyadic behaviours (Mark et al. 2011). In contrast, other authors have shown that infidelity tends to be more prevalent across the less educated (Smith 1998; Whisman and Snyder 2007) and older persons (Atkins et al. 2001; Treas and Giesen 2000); while others find no evidence of a significant for age (Burdette et al. 2007; Maddox Shaw et al. 2013) education (Træen et al. 2007) or income impact (Buunk and Van Driel 1989; Janus and Janus 1993). Like the literature, the results of this study shed little light on the impact of these variables: the OLS estimates suggest that neither age, marital status, education nor income are significantly related to attitudes towards unfaithfulness—there is no evidence to support hypothesis 5. It should be noted the sample is dominated by tertiary educated, single and young (under 30) individuals. It is possible that this bias could have impacted the results.

Turning now to the case of religiousness, religion has often been associated with fidelity. As noted by Dollahite and Lambert (2007) most religious teachings and

holy writings reinforce moral values such as fidelity and often discourage behaviour that leads to unfaithfulness. Indeed, the empirical literature to date shows strong support for the hypothesis that the sacred tend to be more faithful than the secular (Atkins and Kessel 2008; Dollahite and Lambert 2007; Whisman et al. 2007). The findings of this paper are very much in line with previous work. First, persons that are religiously unaffiliated seem to have more liberal attitudes towards infidelity. More than this, persons for whom religion is more salient (that is, individuals with higher scores on the religiosity index) are also more likely to view infidelity in a negative light. Indeed, highly religious persons would see it fit to live in line with religious plausibility structures as well as belief systems. As noted by Burdette et al. (2007), these persons would most likely internalize religious values and thus would be most likely to disapprove of deviant behaviours, such as infidelity.

Finally, the results lend support to hypotheses 8 and 9: persons who have been unfaithful in the past hold more favourable attitudes towards cheating while persons who have been victims of infidelity hold more negative attitudes towards infidelity. In this vein, my work corroborates that of Sharpe et al. (2013) who found that persons who have been unfaithful to their partners have more liberal attitudes towards infidelity than those who have always been faithful and also reported that infidelity tends to be more distressing for persons who had been cheated on.

Summing up, this paper suggests that greater infidelity intentions can be found among individuals who:

- Have favorable attitudes towards infidelity
- Display high levels of self-efficacy
- Have a social network who would support their infidelity
- Report lower levels of religiosity
- Had been unfaithful in the past
- To their knowledge, have never been cheated on, and;
- Are male

Concluding Remarks

The current study was designed to develop a model of infidelity intentions. Specifically, I conceptualise a two stage model of infidelity intentions. The first stage draws on the TRB, which supposes that intentions are a function of attitudes towards the behaviour, social norms and perceived behavioural control. In the second stage, I focus on attitudes, which the literature suggests tends to have the strongest impact on intentions. Attitudes are modelled as a function of various socio-demographics, religion and infidelity experiences.

In line with the TRB, more favourable attitudes, social approval and higher levels of perceived behavioural control is associated with higher levels of intentions, and by extension, a greater chance that infidelity will occur. More than this, attitudes appeared to have the largest impact on infidelity, indicating that this is the key

channel through which intentions are developed. Turning to the determinants of attitudes, I find evidence that religion, gender and infidelity experiences have a significant impact on attitudes towards infidelity; socio-demographics such as age, education, marital status and income had an insignificant impact on attitudes. Specifically, the regressions suggest that persons who are religiously unaffiliated hold more favourable attitudes towards infidelity, while those for whom religion was more salient displayed more negative attitudes. Meanwhile, individuals who have been unfaithful in the past hold more favourable attitudes, while those who have been on the receiving end of infidelity are more likely to view infidelity as unacceptable behaviour. Finally, males displayed more positive attitudes towards infidelity than their female equivalents. Thus, one can conclude that in this sample, infidelity intentions are indirectly affected by gender, religion and infidelity experiences.

It should be noted that the study is not without its limitations. The first concerns the use of an online survey. One of the main benefits of using an online survey is that it reduces the incidence of social desirability bias. Infidelity is often viewed as “deviant behaviour” and so, there would be general concerns that social acceptability may deter persons from sharing their true feelings about infidelity. Hence, an online survey may offer better data than a face-to-face interview. However, there are some downfalls to using online survey data, particularly the inability to attain a representative sample, so that the results presented here have limited generalizability. Another related caveat concerns the fact that the sample was dominated by tertiary educated individuals, singles and persons under the age of 30 which could be due to the fact that it was administered in an online environment. In this vein, future research can aim at finding out whether or not findings described here can be replicated using larger nationally representative samples.

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