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Extramarital Sex: Good for the Goose? Good for the Gander?

Christina J. Taylor

Sacred Heart University, taylorc@sacredheart.edu

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Extramarital Sex: Good for the Goose? Good for the Gander?

Christina J. Taylor

Two experiments were carried out to elucidate beliefs about marital fidelity and extramarital sex by examining how the social evaluation of extramarital relationships is affected by three situational factors—sex of the extramarital actor, the actor's physical attractiveness, and the frequency of the actor's involvement in extramarital affairs (i.e., extramarital experience). Overall, there has been little research on this subject in social psychology, and what findings do exist (Hartnett, Mahoney, & Bernstein, 1977; Vallacher, 1982) have limited generalizability because of the youth of the subjects, contrary definitions of extramarital relationships, and contradictory evidence regarding the double standard.

EXPERIMENT 1

Subjects and procedure. A total of 526 (265 females, 261 males) subjects ($M = 34.7$ years of age) drawn from colleges and universities in Connecticut and New York responded to a scenario about a married couple (David and Susan) which had one of three endings: (a) a husband/wife chose not to become involved in his/her extramarital affair, (b) a husband/wife became involved for the first time in an extramarital affair, (c) a husband/wife with a history of several extramarital affairs became involved in another extramarital affair. Photographs prepared for attractiveness portrayed the married couple and the

Christina J. Taylor is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Sacred Heart University, 5229 Park Avenue, Bridgeport, CT 06606.

other man/other woman as either attractive or very attractive. Two sets of photos were used for each attractiveness level.

Dependent measures included the following ratings on 7-point scales: (a) perceptions of the actors on 14 traits, (b) perceived justifiability of the spouse engaging in an extramarital affair, and (c) perceived responsibility of each of the actors and circumstances for the spouse engaging/not engaging in an extramarital affair. Subjects were also asked to state the single most important cause for the extramarital affair.

Results

In preliminary analyses, alpha coefficients for the trait ratings indicated adequate reliability (.70 - .93) for the ratings to be combined into a single social evaluation score. Significant main effects for Physical Attractiveness produced by ANOVAS on the mean physical attractiveness ratings assigned to the husbands, $p < .0001$, the wives, $p < .0001$, the other men, $p < .0001$, and the other women, $p < .02$, indicated that subjects perceived the very attractive group of stimulus persons to be more attractive than the attractive group. Results of separate analyses of the data from the two picture sets were virtually identical so that the data from the two sets were combined.

The main findings of interest from a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3$ (Sex of Subject by Extramarital Spouse by Physical Attractiveness by Character) repeated measures MANOVA performed on the mean social evaluation scores for each actor (see Table 1) demonstrated that spouses were perceived very favorably when they resisted the temptation to become involved in an extramarital affair (husband, $M = 5.68$; wife, $M = 5.69$) and when they stood by a faithful/faithless spouse (husband, 5.45, 5.27, 5.38; wife, 5.61, 5.33, 5.25), $F(4, 1002) = 99.48$, $p < .0001$. They were perceived less favorably when they were involved in their first affair (husband, 4.11; wife, 4.16) and the least favorably when they had been involved in many affairs (husband, 3.76; wife, 3.65), Duncan, $p < .05$. Most strikingly, no evidence for a double standard was obtained from this analysis.

The perceived justifiability of a spouse engaging in an affair tended to be low across all conditions (husband, $M = 1.87$; wife, $M = 1.77$). And the only significant effect which

Table 1

Mean Social Evaluation Scores for Each Actor by Condition

Actor	Wife as extramarital spouse			Husband as extramarital spouse		
	No affair	First affair	Many affairs	No affair	First affair	Many affairs
Attractive						
Susan	5.59	4.07	3.62	5.59	5.35	5.24
David	5.27	5.31	5.45	5.66	4.03	3.71
Other ^a	5.09	3.80	3.73	5.11	3.58	3.76
<i>n</i>	41	40	47	45	47	44
Very attractive						
Susan	5.78	4.24	3.68	5.63	5.43	5.26
David	5.62	5.25	5.31	5.69	4.21	3.81
Other ^b	5.29	3.78	3.77	5.48	3.92	3.95
<i>n</i>	44	42	41	43	43	48
Total						
Susan	5.69 _a	4.16 _c	3.65 _d	5.61 _a	5.33 _b	5.25 _b
David	5.45 _b	5.27 _b	5.38 _b	5.68 _a	4.11 _c	3.76 _d
Other ^c	5.19 _a	3.79 _b	3.73 _b	5.29 _a	3.75 _b	3.86 _b
<i>n</i>	85	82	88	88	91	92

Note. Means in a given row with dissimilar subscripts are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level according to the Duncan Multiple Range Test.

abcOther refers to the "Other Man" in the Wife as Extramarital Spouse condition, and to the "Other Woman" in the Husband as Extramarital Spouse condition.

emerged from a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3$ ANCOVA performed on these means, using religiosity as a covariate, identified a tendency, $F(1, 505) = 5.37, p < .02$, for males to perceive a husband's extramarital involvement ($M = 1.97$) as more justifiable than a wife's ($M = 1.61$), Duncan, $p < .05$. The analysis of the causal attribution data helped to explain the truncated nature of the justifiability ratings.

The causes offered for spouses engaging and not engaging in an affair were classified into three categories by two independent judges (92% and 94% agreement respectively)—Marital Dissatisfaction (Marital Satisfaction in the no affair condition), Extramarital Spouse, and Extramarital Partner/Relationship. Marital Satisfaction was the principal attribution made for a wife (63.85%), $X(2, N = 83) = 38.34, p < .001$, and husband (70.45%), $X(2, N = 88) = 53.46, p < .001$, choosing not to engage in an extramarital affair. In the first affair condition, only 18.68% of the subjects cited Marital Dissatisfaction as the cause of a husband's affair, $X(2, N = 91) = 9.38, p < .01$; about a third of the subjects (34.15%) attributed a wife's affair to Marital Dissatisfaction, $X(2, N = 82) = 3.61, ns$. In the many affairs condition, most subjects were found to attribute both a wife's affair (51.72%), $X(2, N = 87) = 16.62, p < .001$, and a husband's affair (55.43%), $X(2, N = 92) = 20.24, p < .001$, to the Extramarital Spouse herself or himself, rather than to Marital Dissatisfaction (wife, 32.18%; husband, 21.73%). These findings thus suggest that subjects did not find an extramarital affair to be very justifiable for either spouse because they perceived them to have a satisfactory marriage.

Analysis of the responsibility ratings through a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4$ (Sex of subject by Extramarital spouse by Physical attractiveness by Extramarital experience by Locus of responsibility) repeated measures MANOVA demonstrated that while husbands (5.55, 5.05, 5.21) and wives (5.39, 5.07, 5.27) were rated highly responsible for both engaging/not engaging in an affair, $F(6, 1462) = 3.64, p < .001$, bystander or faithful spouses were rated significantly more responsible for their spouses not engaging in an affair (husband, 4.16 vs. 2.73 and 2.98; wife, 3.81 vs. 2.90 and 2.88) than they were for their spouses engaging in one, Duncan, $p < .05$. *Of further note, the very attractive wife in the many affairs condition was rated significantly more responsible (5.71), $F(6, 1462) = 2.69, p < .02$, for engaging in*

an extramarital affair than her attractive counterpart (4.89) in the many affairs condition, Duncan, $p < .05$.

EXPERIMENT 2

Subjects and procedure. A total of 94 (56 females, 38 males) subjects ($M = 38.3$ years of age) viewed one of two videotapes of a Hollywood film about an extramarital affair between a married woman and married man. In one, information that the female character had a previous extramarital affair was included, in the other, this information was deleted by editing the film. Dependent measures were similar to those in Experiment 1.

Results

The results of a 2 (Sex of Subject) $\times 2$ (Extramarital Experience) $\times 2$ (Character) repeated measures ANOVA, with repeated measures on the last factor, showed that the woman's ($M = 4.33$) extramarital involvement was perceived as more justifiable than the man's ($M = 2.83$), $F(1, 92) = 88.58, p < .0001$, and that their extramarital affair was perceived as more justifiable when it was believed to be the woman's first extramarital involvement ($M = 3.83$ vs. $M = 3.34$), $F(1, 92) = 9.22, p < .003$.

The causal attributions for each actor's extramarital involvement were coded with 94% agreement by two judges into four categories—Marital Dissatisfaction, Ego Enhancement, Need Frustration, and Physical/Emotional Attraction. Subjects were overwhelmingly more likely to attribute the woman's affair to Marital Dissatisfaction (71.41%) than to other causes, $X(3, N = 94) = 29.92, p < .001$. In contrast, no one cause was cited more often than any other in accounting for the man's affair, $X(3, N = 93) = 2.31, ns$. Thus, in a comparison between an unhappily married woman's affair and a happily married man's, subjects' judgments about the justifiability of their extramarital involvement were less affected by the double standard than they were by the quality of the actors' marriages.

CONCLUSIONS

The pattern of findings from both studies showed that marital dissatisfaction is generally regarded as the only justifiable reason for engaging in an extramarital affair. Most remarkably, perhaps, the results provided little support for a differential evaluation of husbands' and wives' extramarital activities. The observers of this study thus appeared to hold a contractual view of marital fidelity whereby extramarital sex is proscribed for *both* husbands and wives for as long as and until the marriage itself remains reasonably satisfactory. It is a distinctly modern belief, but one which is very much in keeping with serial monogamy and the impermanence of the marriage vows. It also represents a transformation of traditional normative beliefs about marital fidelity and signifies a radical departure from the traditional code of sexual ethics which condemned the participation of married women in extramarital affairs while condoning the same behavior for married men.

The equality women have achieved in the domain of marital fidelity must be interpreted with caution because the overall results of this investigation revealed a fairly traditional and conservative portrait of extramarital affairs. Given the circumstances of what appeared to be a happy marriage, social observers were not inclined to find an extramarital affair very acceptable for either marital partner. Tolerance of extramarital affairs thus occurs within very circumscribed boundaries. What is new is the fact that those boundaries appear to constrain men and women equally. The favorable evaluations of spouses who remained faithful to their mates despite a strong extramarital attraction and the opportunity to engage in an affair cogently illustrates this point. Herein, a husband who demonstrated this type of staunch fidelity was actually evaluated more favorably than in any other condition (see Table 1). This is an interesting twist on the double standard according to which a husband's social standing is enhanced by his participation in extramarital affairs. Thus, contrary to what may be an outdated stereotype of the "macho" male, these findings demonstrated that a husband's image was enhanced by *avoidance of*, rather than an *involvement in* an extramarital affair.

In sum, these results showed that the ethic of marital fidelity is alive and well in the minds of ordinary social observers. At the same time, however, the findings indicated that there has truly occurred a rejection of sexist and rigidly absolutist marital mores. To reiterate the central finding in this regard, the new "ethic" of marital fidelity appears to be a conditional one wherein it is expected of a spouse for as long as the marriage remains fulfilling. There are two principal implications of this new ethic. First, when they are caught in a bad marriage, it is now legitimate for women and men to pursue emotional and sexual fulfillment outside the marriage. To do so more than once is, however, not as acceptable or justifiable. Second, the social pressure on wives to accept, rationalize, and/or ignore their husbands' involvement in extramarital sexual activities should be diminished. In other words, women should no longer be expected to play the role of the long-suffering wife who must tolerate a husband's affairs. Correlatively, men should receive less social support for engaging in extramarital affairs that are not motivated by marital dissatisfaction.

This investigation explored and analyzed the network of factors which determine how social observers process and assimilate knowledge of extramarital involvements. The findings clearly bespeak the currents of social change which are moving us toward new definitions of acceptable conduct in this area of socio-sexual behavior. Whether and how our thinking about extramarital sexuality will evolve must continue to be a subject of social and research concern.

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