



A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT AND NATURE OF INFIDELITY IN MARRIAGE AS A SOCIO-ETHICAL ISSUE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is a product of both tradition and culture. In the African tradition, marriage is considered a sacred union due to its contributions and role in the society. For this reason, marital vows which include faithfulness or fidelity to one's spouse are inviolable because infidelity undermines the very foundation of marriage and family in many ways. Unfortunately, the very bond (fidelity/faithfulness) that unites and strengthens marriage and family has been undermined. Today, almost every family in our contemporary society suffers from the consequences of the breach of marital vows otherwise known as infidelity. Against this background therefore, this paper attempts a critical examination of infidelity in marriage as a socio-ethical issue in our contemporary society. By engaging the analytic and historical methods of analysis, the paper discovers that infidelity is present in nearly all marriages in our contemporary society and that the concept is not limited to just men, as women both young and old are closing in on their male counterparts in its frequency. The paper then argues that infidelity is indeed a moral as well as a social problem that has devastating long-term consequences on both the spouse and the society at large. Hence, the paper advocates for proactive measures or mechanisms that should be instituted by the government to check-mate the incidents of infidelity in marriage.



Introduction

Marriage is a sacred institution and a life-long commitment as well as the beginning of every human family. Hence, marriage is more than a physical union; it is also a spiritual and emotional union. To understand the problem posed by infidelity, the meaning and purpose of marriage must first be explored. Marriage occupies an important position in the affairs of Africans, especially in the past. Without marriage, there is no family, and without a family, one could not bear children (Ogoma, 2014). Indeed, the connection between marriage and family can hardly be separated among the traditional Africans such that marriage other than serve procreative purposes is also seen as the focus of existence (Mbiti, 1969). Hence, the family is not just a component of the man, the wife and their children, but includes also the departed souls, relatives and the unborn generations. That is why marriage is not the union, or the joining of a man and a woman for the purpose of becoming husband and wife, but rather and basically a family or even a community affair (Ogoma, 2014). Hence within the African traditional societies, marriage is, so to say, a drama in which everyone or every member of the family becomes not just a spectator but an actor or an actress. Unfortunately, the influence of modernization and Christianity have all affected African culture so much that most of the African values have been eroded or replaced with foreign values. Hence the African system of marriage and the concept of family have all changed significantly and considerably. This change in the concept of marriage and family might have some contributing factors in the overall issues of infidelity as is witnessed in our contemporary society.

For some reasons, infidelity in marriage has been a ‘no go’ area in the field of research. This may be due to the fact that nearly, everybody is involved in it despite the fact that both individuals and the society frown at it. In spite of the efforts of different religious organizations in our midst that teach moral to sustain marriages and encourage mutual understanding in families, infidelity or extramarital affair not only still exist but is on the increase by day and with different dimensions. Consequently, this very act of infidelity most often than not leads to the procreation of children outside marriage or wedlock who are later perceived as miscreants in the society because of insufficient parental care and rejection by the society.

Infidelity is believed to be a global phenomenon and is one of the most cited causes for divorce in our contemporary society due in part to the fact that women are more physically and financially self-supporting than ever, and this can lead to harming a marriage more easily than in the past. Currently, most marriages are experiencing serious marital problems as a result of dishonesty from husbands and wives. . The question to ponder is: why does infidelity persists despite societal and religious teachings and prohibitions? Why is infidelity a moral problem? Can infidelity be justified? What are the causes, effects and reasons for infidelity? Can infidelity be stopped? In trying to proffer answers to the above questions this paper examines infidelity as a moral problem as well as a social problem that demands proactive, radical and pragmatic measures.

Concepts of Infidelity

There are varied but connected definitions of the term infidelity. Merriam Webster defines infidelity as 1a : the act or fact of having a romantic or sexual relationship with someone other than one's husband, wife, or partner. b: unfaithfulness to a moral obligation : disloyalty. Infidelity is also understood as a violation of a couple's emotional and/or sexual exclusivity that commonly results in feelings of anger, sexual jealousy, and rivalry (Wikipedia). It includes among other things vices such as cheating, straying, adultery, being unfaithful, two-timing, or having an affair within marriage. Infidelity equally means unfaithfulness to the marriage vow or contract; violation of the marriage covenant by adultery, breach of trust; unfaithfulness to a charge, or to moral obligation; treachery; deceit; as, the infidelity of a servant. Simply, infidelity, or cheating or adultery, is the act of being unfaithful to a spouse or other partner. It typically means engaging in sexual or romantic relations with a person other than one's significant other, breaking a commitment or promise in the act.

Infidelity is a violation of the prior agreement between partners regarding their sexual and/or emotional exclusivity. It is the subjective feeling that one's partner has violated a set of rules or relationship norms and this violation results in feelings of sexual jealousy and rivalry. The violation can be sexual in nature, for example involving kissing, sexual fondling, vaginal intercourse, or anal intercourse with another individual outside of the relationship.

Categories of Infidelity

There are two major categories of infidelity, namely - physical infidelity and emotional infidelity. Physical infidelity is what most people think of when they imagine cheating, while emotional infidelity happens when you establish a close, intimate connection with someone who isn't your partner (Meyer (2017)). In other words, *physical infidelity* involves people meeting directly and then engaging in physical intimacy. It involves having sexual connection outside of marriage or relationship. There may or may not be an emotional component between partners. Emotional infidelity on the other hand is an intimacy between two people who are in a committed relationship to other persons and does not immediately include a physical relationship. It typically starts innocently, as a friendship that involves shared likes and dislikes and pleasant conversation and evolves into an emotional closeness with communication about deeper issues that would usually be reserved for a partner or spouse with whom there has been an expressed commitment. Instead of reserving this communication for the committed partner it is offered to this other person who is considered more understanding and a better person with whom to entrust this information. Emotional infidelity can be easily set apart from simple friendship because the interactions often involve some sexual tension or romantic attraction. Emotional infidelity can be dangerous, due to the fact that it is often hidden from the non-cheating spouse. Generally, this type of cheating is non-sexual, at least at first. It can easily lead to physical infidelity, as sexual desires take over.

Causes of Infidelity

Many factors have been identified to contribute to infidelity in our contemporary society, including:

- Personal dissatisfaction and low self-esteem
- Low Confidence and Self-Esteem
- Loss of Trust in the Cheating Spouse Lack of affection
- Loss of fondness and caring for each other
- Imbalance of give and take in the relationship
- Breakdown of communication related to emotional and relationship needs
- Physical health issues, such as chronic pain or disability
- Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder
- Addiction, including addiction to sex, love, romance, gambling, drugs or alcohol
- Unaddressed marital problems, such as fear of intimacy or avoiding conflict
- Anxiety and depression
- Life cycle changes, such as the transition to parenthood or empty nesting
- Low compatibility (people who married for the wrong reasons): Low compatibility can lead to loss of a sense of remorse
- Stressful periods, such as when partners are separated for long periods of time (Sheri, 2021).

Risk Factors

In addition to the causes of infidelity above, there are certain risk factors that can facilitate or increase the chances of infidelity in marriage. These risk factors include: drug or substance addiction, childhood trauma, exposure to infidelity in childhood, previous cheating, mental illness, psychological issues and sex addiction.

A spouse with substance abuse issues, such as addiction to alcohol, drugs, or gambling, is likely to fall into the trap of infidelity because substance abuse or addiction can reduce inhibitions so that a person, who wouldn't consider having an affair when sober, may cross the line under its influence. Having a history of untreated or unresolved childhood trauma, such as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect can increase the chance that a person will cheat. It is believed that some mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder are a risk factor for cheating in marriage. Hence a spouse with such mental illness is likely to cheat in marriage.

Also, previous experience with cheating can also increase the risk of infidelity. Hence children who are exposed to a parent having an affair are twice more likely to have an affair themselves than those who were not exposed. Psychological issues such as narcissistic traits or personality disorders have been found to be triggers

for infidelity. With narcissism, an affair may be driven by ego and a sense of entitlement. In addition to being self-centered, people with these disorders often lack empathy, so they don't appreciate the impact of their actions on their spouse. Finally, sex addiction in one partner increases the chance that they will be unsatisfied with the physical aspect of their marriage and look elsewhere.

Problems already in the marital relationship can also be a risk factor for cheating. Some of these problems include: domestic violence and emotional abuse, emotional and/or physical disconnect, financial pressures, lack of communication, lack of respect etc (Sheri, 2021).

Reasons for Infidelity

There are many reasons why people cheat and spouses who cheat usually have reasons to back up or defend their culpability. However, there are three primary types of reasons why people cheat in marriage. They range from individual reasons, relationship reasons, to situational reasons. Individual reasons are given or happen when one of the partners violated the implied rules of relationship by engaging with a different affair for no other reason but personal satisfaction. Relationship reasons normally happen when marriage or relationship is not in good shape and one or both partners resulted to finding their own comfort zone and forget about their vows. While situational reasons are the most common reasons or alibis used by the unfaithful party. Here, the blame is on the situation that was beyond one's control.

In addition to the primary reasons for cheating noted above, there are secondary reasons that may lead to an affair and eventual cheating. Some of these include: the internet, long absence, and pornography. The internet has made it easier through social media for people to meet and relate. Having an affair, especially an emotional affair, is much easier than in the past, and social media sites have been implicated in many affairs and divorces. Periods of absence, whether traveling for work or serving in the military provide greater opportunities for affairs or cheating to occur. Absence allows a spouse to have an affair with little risk of being discovered. Pornography is dangerous to marriage and has clearly been demonstrated to be a "gateway" for some people who intend to cheat (Gornbein, 2021).

Unhappiness and or dissatisfaction with the marriage either emotionally or sexually are other important causes for infidelity in marriage. Marriage is said to be a big task or work, and without mutual nurturing couples may grow apart which may lead to sexlessness on both spouses, which with time may exhibit or manifest itself in the form of desire for adventure and finally cheating or infidelity. Equally, **feeling unappreciated**, undervalued or neglected can lead to boredom and infidelity. Spouses looking for the thrill of the chase and the excitement of newfound love may be more likely to cheat. **Revenge can also be a possible cause for infidelity.** If one partner has had an affair in the past or has damaged the partner in some way, the offended partner may feel a need for revenge resulting in an affair or cheating.

In our contemporary society where the concept of marriage and family has been adversely affected by modernization, people tend to shy away from their duties and responsibilities in the form of running away from perceived problems. Making excuses rather than facing the music with one's spouse opens the door to infidelity, especially emotional affairs. Hence, Running away from problems is a major contributor to infidelity. In the same vein, growing apart from one's spouse can also be a serious factor. When spouses are not longer compatible or do not have the same goals anymore, feeling of isolation can come in with the antecedent urge and desire for a change which may result into extramarital affairs. In other words, when spouses did not marry for the right reason, they will often look for compatibility and commonality in the arms of someone else. Just as lack of respect at home can lead to infidelity, so does too much insecurity can be one of the causes of infidelity in a marriage. The need for constant reaffirmation can lead to an affair, especially if one spouse becomes "too needy" or "too clingy" (Gornbein, 2021).

Possible Effects of Infidelity

Extramarital affair or infidelity has come to be identified as the highest form of dishonesty that is capable of having disastrous effects on spouses as well as other relations and friends. One of the possible effects of infidelity is on reproductive health of the people involved in it. Meyers (2006) affirmed that extramarital affair have deleterious effects on reproductive health and consequently, marriages. Mayer is right because parents that cheat on their spouses also influence male and female children negatively. Children with a parent who has had

an affair may have trust issues with future romantic partners which may lead to the formation of negative perceptions of fidelity. Besides, more often than not, infidelity as opined by Mothersil (2005) breaks up the marriage and rubs children of financial resources. Rastogi (2013) is right too to have asserted that extramarital affair is a leading cause of divorce which undermines relationship foundation with devastating effects. When this happens, children feel betrayed, especially if the affair results in a divorce, interrupting or distorting the family life they have adapted to.

The events of infidelity can induce intense feelings of shame, anger and humiliation after an affair and sometimes all throughout the remaining part of their lives. In fact, infidelity causes unbearable emotional pain and trauma, a blow to self-esteem and breaking of trust. It affects people's social life, changes victim's perception of reality and about everything. Hence Shyju (2012) concluded that infidelity arouses a feeling of abandonment, attacks on senses of belonging, betrayal of trust, enraged feelings and or surge of justification to divorce the spouse develops. Infidelity also affects family finances because the money meant for the whole family is squandered on the woman or the man outside as the case may be. More so, infidelity can damage personal confidence or sexual confidence significantly. It is for this reason that Ogungbadejo (2013) opined that extramarital affair causes significant damage to the spouse's image, personal confidence and socio-economic condition at the home front having a deep impact on the attitudes of the family members.

Besides harming the people involved in it, infidelity equally put the other members of the family at risk. The quality of couple relationship is diminished creating difficulties in community sexuality and violence that may further exacerbate extramarital sex and risks of infection. Hence Huisenga (2005) and Barr (2013) are right when they averred that extramarital affair affects both the immediate families, extended families, friends, colleagues and employers. Generally, infidelity can damage personal self esteem as well as loss of trust in the cheating spouse and a sense of emotional instability.

Infidelity as a Socio-Ethical Issue

Social problem can be understood as any condition or behavior that has negative consequences for large number of people and that is generally recognized as a condition or behavior that needs to be addressed. A social problem is an issue within the society that makes it difficult for people to achieve their full potentials. Based on the definition above, infidelity is considered a social problem or issue because its effects or consequences extends to large number of people such as not only the spouses involved but also families, friends, associates and the society at large. This is because family is the primary unit of socialization, and without marriage, there will be no family, and whatever happens to marriage affects not only the family but also the entire society. Therefore, infidelity is indeed a social problem or issue and it represents a serious issue both for society and for the individuals because society has a strong interest in binding people together into long-term relationship in order to build a stronger, dependable, moral and spiritual family. As a social issue or problem, infidelity poses a great danger for peace and cohesion in society.

Infidelity is also an ethical issue or problem because it bothers on the violation of accepted code of behavior and values. Ethics teaches values and fidelity is a cherished and prescribed ethical value and virtue in the society, while infidelity is a vice proscribed by the society in order to maintain trust and relationships. Hence, infidelity is an ethical issue because it violates the principles of value and utility. As an ethical issue, infidelity represents the endemic moral virus that is gradually eroding the very foundation of the human society.

The danger with the issue of infidelity is that it goes viral whenever it happens. In other words, infidelity does not happen and stop with the spouses involved alone; it has a way of networking the feelings of families, friends and society in such a way that the guilt and pains are almost equally shared by all. This is why infidelity is not only an ethical issue but also a viral ethical issue with a wider scope. Our contemporary society is morally bankrupt because ethical issues like infidelity have been over looked and treated as if they have no consequences on the well-being of the individuals and society. This is why the issue of infidelity, though unacceptable even by the perpetrators themselves, yet, is treated as if it is a normal and accepted common practice in the society. Consequently, this attitude has led many people to think that infidelity can be justified under certain circumstances.

Justification of Infidelity

Often times, people who cheat convince themselves that their behavior is justified because of the circumstances surrounding the act. But then, the question is can evil or immorality be justified? The answer is no. infidelity has been identified in this paper as an immoral or unethical behavior and so by simple logic, infidelity cannot be justified. However, there have been counter arguments supporting the view that infidelity can be justified in certain circumstances. Here people argue from the perspective of natural inclination in which man is identified as a polygamous animal. Hence, man is seen as a being that has the inclination and the natural seed to relate with multiple spouses at the same time without guilt or sanction. Similarly, people tend to justify infidelity from the perspective of utility. Meaning that it is believed that sometimes, infidelity can help strengthen or build up relationships. Although it is possible for some spouse to be unfaithful in marriage and still maintain good relationship with each other, yet, it has been discovered that infidelity is like a time bomb waiting to detonate at any given time. Hence, there is no reason or circumstance that can be used to justify infidelity.

Recommendations

- **Keep communication open, avoid secrets**
Good communication is the key to a successful marriage or relationship. There should be no secret between partners. Secrecy is usually a sign or an indicator that something not wanted is happening. In fact, when spouses begin to keep secrets from their partner, it indicates lack of trust and a sign of potential cheat.
- **Avoid social comparison**
In order to avoid infidelity in marriage, both spouses must learn how to avoid social comparison. In other words, don't discuss your spouse's strengths and or weaknesses with others. You must learn to be contented with your partner. Instead of comparison, learn to encourage one another and build one another spiritually, socially and mentally.
- **Spend quality time with your spouse**
When spouses spend quality time together, they tend to grow fond of each other. When spouses are fond of each other, there is a high probability that they would not be easily swayed into the temptation of infidelity.
- **Set boundaries for each other**
It is important to set boundaries that guide partners in their relationships. These boundaries may include but not limited to what kind of relationship the partners should be allowed to keep outside their marriage, as well as what to expect from each other.
- **Don't deliberately touch someone of opposite sex**
Fantasies, gazing and touching the opposite sex that is not your spouse deliberately and sexually should be avoided. In other words, intimacy with someone of the opposite sex should be avoided as this would gradually and surely lead to sexual intimacy.

Above all, this paper recommends contentment with one's partner as well as self-control. After all, there are many clergy, religious men and women who have never had sexual relationship yet, they are living happily and functioning productively in the society. Therefore,

Conclusion

Infidelity is a choice and will always be a choice. No matter what types of reasons we have, it will always boil down to the decision we make. These decisions would affect not only the people involved, but most especially the people around them. If one is always faithful to his relationship and marital vows, he always finds ways to solve whatever problem he has, by making the right choice and not making a choice that would make the situation more complicated. This paper therefore calls on the government and all stakeholders to come up with a bill or policy that would prohibit infidelity in marriage since what happens to the family also happens or affects the larger society.

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