

College Students' Definitions of Infidelity

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Abstract

The increasing frequency of the internet and other technology use to engage in social activities has spurred the question of how individuals currently view infidelity, related to the many virtual and non-virtual aspects of modern life today (Henline, Lamke, & Howard, 2007). This nonrandom pilot study investigated definitions of infidelity by surveying 64 male and female college students at a Midwestern college. It was hypothesized that male and females would differ in their definitions of infidelity, based on the literature and the Symbolic Interaction theory. Survey data was statistically analyzed using cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, independent t-tests, and reliability analysis. Results indicated no significant gender differences. Males and females included both technological and non-technological interactions in their definitions of infidelity. It would be recommended that implications for practitioners be suspended until future research would involve a larger sample and also to compare groups not only based on gender, but if currently in a partnered relationship.

Introduction

The increasing frequency of the internet and other technology use to engage in social activities has spurred the question of how individuals currently view infidelity, related to the many virtual and non virtual aspects of modern life

today (Henline, Lamke, & Howard, 2007). The current body of literature focused on traditional infidelity, defined as physical sexual intercourse outside of a primary relationship, but greatly lacked focus on online or technology related infidelity (Henline et al., 2007). Infidelity as defined by McAnulty and Brineman (2007) is “any form of emotional or sexual intimacy with a person other than one’s primary dating partner” (p. 94). The studied definition of infidelity that college students have constructed is very broad (McAnulty & Brineman, 2007). Narrowing this definition could increase the validity of future studies. After the researchers reviewed current literature on infidelity, male and female college students ages 18 and above were surveyed at a small Midwestern university regarding behaviors that they define as infidelity.

Literature Review

The researchers reviewed the current literature on the topic of gendered definitions of infidelity through the search engine Ebscohost. Identifying studies with a focus on definitions of infidelity proved to be a difficult task. Much of the literature was focused on feelings of jealousy or the effect of infidelity on an individual’s emotional state. However, a few studies focused mainly on participants’ definitions of infidelity, both online and off line, something that is important to consider in a technological society. Two studies were conducted outside of the United States of America, but are being used for this study because of the lack of relevant research specific to our interest. All four studies included information on men’s and women’s perceptions and definitions of infidelity or unfaithfulness. The studies focused on individual perceptions of what constitutes infidelity and within acts of sexual contact (Henline et al., 2007; Yeniceri & Kokdemir, 2006; Randall & Byers, 2003; Whitty, 2003).

Henline et al. (2007) examined the similarities,

differences, and potential linkages between perceptions of online infidelity and traditional infidelity. This was done by using a sample of 123 college students in committed relationships. The primary goals of the study were to describe the nature of online infidelity, identify similarities and differences in beliefs about online and traditional infidelity, and to examine beliefs about the possibility that online infidelity would lead to traditional infidelity. The four most frequently nominated behaviors that participants considered “unfaithful” were online sex, emotional involvement with an online contact, online dating, and other online sexual interactions. The results of the study indicated that college students in committed relationships recognize online infidelity to be comprehensive including both a sexual component (online sex, flirting) and an emotional component (talking about deeply personal things or saying “I love you”). This study also found that chatting with random people, keeping secrets from your partner, showing yourself by sending suggestive pictures or by using a webcam to an online contact should be considered unfaithful behaviors. On the other hand eight percent of participants in the study found that online interactions are not real, and nothing online could be considered unfaithful. Although a small number of participants believed that online infidelity was not real, most believed that online infidelity is a multifaceted occurrence including both a physical and an emotional component.

Yeniceri & Kokdemir (2006) examined perceptions of and explanations for emotional and sexual infidelity through a questionnaire and was administered to 404 university students from various universities in Turkey. The participants ranged from a small number who were married, students in committed relationships, and single. They were asked to indicate whether they had ever been emotionally or sexually unfaithful to their partners; 19.6% or almost one out of five of the University Students admitted that they had been

unfaithful at least once. Conversely, 17.3% claimed that their partners were unfaithful to them, while they had not been. The study included six different components of dating infidelity including legitimacy, seduction, normalization, sexuality, social background and sensation seeking. Participants were asked to indicate which type of cheating was a real act of betrayal or unfaithfulness. Results showed that 14.7% of the participants believed that emotional infidelity was unfaithful, 4.5% used the infidelity label if the behavior was solely sexual, and the majority of participants, 70.1%, believed that either type of betrayal should be taken as an example of unfaithfulness. Overall, this study found that most of the participants believed that both emotional and physical betrayals were infidelity.

Randall & Byers (2003) examined university students' definitions of having sex, a sexual partner, and behaviors of unfaithfulness. For the study, 167 students participated in a survey questionnaire. The primary goal of this study was to clearly define the terms: having sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful behavior in order to help individuals understand and utilize sexual health programs that generally use these terms. The results indicated that there was not a great gender difference in the students' definition of infidelity. It was found that infidelity did not have to include being involved with nor having sex with another person other than a partner to be engaging in unfaithful behavior to that partner. In summary, this study stated that students' definitions of unfaithful behavior included more than the traditional idea of infidelity, such as having sex or being involved with another individual other than a partner.

Whitty (2003) conducted a cross-sectional study based on men's and women's attitudes towards both online and offline infidelity. This study surveyed 1,117 people from the ages of 17 to 70. The primary goal was to discover what individuals perceive as infidelity or unfaithful behavior.

The results showed that individuals consider certain online behavior to be infidelity as well as behaviors traditionally perceived as infidelity. While many different behaviors were studied, those behaviors that carried the most threat to the relationship: dating, sharing intimate information, and sexual encounters (online or offline), were perceived most commonly as infidelity. This was due to these behaviors being perceived as the most likely to threaten to end the relationship, given that those behaviors happening online had a significant potential to move offline. This study showed that online behaviors can have a very real effect on a relationship, opposed to some beliefs that online actions do not matter. Overall, this study supported the idea that intimate relations both online and offline are considered to be infidelity.

Research has found that definitions of infidelity can consist of many different behaviors, both explicitly sexual and less so (Yeniceri & Kokdemir, 2006; Randall & Byers, 2003). Research also indicated that individuals' believe unfaithful behavior could occur both offline and online (Henline et al., 2007; Whitty, 2003). There was much research on the topic of infidelity and the consequential feelings, such as jealousy and guilt. However, the research was lacking an all encompassing definition of infidelity, both offline and online based. This study will contribute to the research by offering a more comprehensive definition of what participants, both male and female, believe constitutes infidelity as a whole, offline as well as focusing on online or technology related infidelity.

Theoretical Framework

The theory applied to this study was the Symbolic Interaction theory (LaRossa & Rietzes, 1993). Symbolic interaction theory is focused on the relationship between meanings that people share and the communications that arise around those shared meanings. The Symbolic

Interaction theory assumes that people act based on the individual meanings each person has towards their own life experiences. It also assumes that individual's meanings are influenced by the greater cultural context.

Applied to our study, the Symbolic Interaction theory would predict that each individual would have both unique and shared meanings for infidelity based on both their own experiences and society's influence. The Symbolic Interaction theory predicts that each individual will have a different meaning of infidelity, but also predicts that, with the selected group of people living in the same society, some meanings would be shared. Thus, the theory also predicts that each gender group would differ as well as share meanings of infidelity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was threefold: first, was to examine gendered perspective of definitions of infidelity with a sample of college students ages 18 and above, second, was to develop a reliable survey instrument to measure those perspectives of infidelity and, third, was that the results from this study would increase the awareness of family scholars, therapists, and counselors to help with clientele and future research, as well as with the general public to help individuals with personal relationships by supplying an idea of what infidelity might mean for one's significant other. A similar study by Whitty (2003) which examined perceptions of online infidelity identified the need to consider an array of online interactions when gathering perspectives of online infidelity.

The central research question in this study was "Is there a gendered perspective on definitions of infidelity?" The researchers predicted that there would be a significant difference of perspective between the genders on their definitions of infidelity. The hypothesis was informed by

literature that was reviewed which reported that gender plays a role in individual definitions of infidelity. This hypothesis was also supported by the Symbolic Interaction theory that assumes that individuals are shaped by their unique life experiences as well as by society. Therefore, if society shapes male and female perceptions, it would shape male and female definitions of infidelity.

Method

Participants

This study was held at a Midwestern university. The participants were 64 undergraduate students in general education classes. Of these, 25 were male and 39 were female. There were three participants between the ages of 18 -19, 27 between the ages of 20-21, 21 between the ages of 22-23, six between the ages of 24-25, and the remaining seven were 26 years and older.

Research Design

The purpose of this survey research was to draw conclusions and be able to generalize to a similar, larger population so that some inferences could be made about the attitudes of male and female college students regarding their definitions of infidelity (Babbie, 1990). The survey design type used in this study is best described as a cross-sectional design in that it was used to capture knowledge, or attitudes, from male and female college students at one point in time. Self-administered questionnaires were used for data collection. This method was used based on the rationale that it was the most efficient method to gather the data directly on campus due to the fast pace of our research course, low cost, convenience, and the quick return of data. The population the participants were taken from was the university student population, and the sample was male and female students in general education classes. The study used

a non-random purposive design, due to the researchers needs to gather information on attitudes of an equitable number of male and female college students in general education classes. Randomization was not used in order to be inclusive to all students in the classroom. Completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training provided the ethical protection of human subjects; this study has been approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

A survey was designed in order to identify the attitudes of male and female college students regarding their definitions of infidelity. The survey included a brief description of the study with an implied consent, definition of any terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality statement, voluntary participation, and contact information of the research team and the supervisor as well as instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of two demographic questions relating to gender and age; gender is the variable being used to compare groups. Participants were then given ten closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were informed by literature, theory, and a scholarly expert regarding definitions of infidelity and infidelity in our presently technological world.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to the instrument questions having a logical connection to the concept and research question. Because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey are inspired by literature, theory, and an expert on the subject, it was determined that they clearly related to college students' definitions of infidelity. Content

validity refers to the instrument statements' coverage of the full range of concepts under the larger topic. The questions addressed a variety of issues regarding the definition of infidelity. The survey was piloted to three college students to increase validity. Feedback showed that the survey was clear and ready for distribution.

Procedure

The survey process began with emails to the professors of general education courses stating the purpose for the study and asking permission to conduct a short survey with their students. Data was collected for this study when the researchers received permission to enter two studio art classes and one biology class in order to survey students in November, 2009. The researchers used a purposive sampling design, which lead them into general education classes that had equitable numbers of female and male students. In the first general education class that was surveyed students were informed by the researchers that they were there to ask for participation with completing a survey. One of the researchers introduced both and then informed the students why they were there and asked the college students if they would be willing to fill out a survey. Both researchers proceeded to hand out the surveys. Randomization was not used in order to be inclusive in the classroom. The implied consent was read aloud to the college students as they followed along. The college students were then informed that they could tear off and keep the first two pages of the survey. They were told that they could start the surveys as soon as the researchers and the professor left the room. When the researchers were finished, they placed an envelope on a table that would be sealed. When all the college students were finished completing the survey, one student came out of the classroom to inform the researchers they were finished. The researchers then sealed the envelope to maintain confidentiality. The second and third general

education classes that were surveyed followed the procedure described above. The researchers over-sampled to ensure the target sample number was reached in case of missing data. When all the surveys were completed, the researchers took the sealed envelope and placed it in their professor's locked office.

Data Analysis

The data was first cleaned and checked for any missing data. The results of that cleaning are indicated in the Results section. The cleaned surveys were then coded using acronyms for each variable. The first two questions on the survey were demographic variables: age and gender. The independent variable was gender. The dependent variables were then broken down into measurable survey statements aimed to measure college students: I define infidelity as keeping secrets from my partner (*KPS*); I define infidelity as spending time with someone other than my partner, with romantic or emotional interests in mind (*SPT*); I define infidelity as romantically kissing someone other than my partner (*RKS*); I define infidelity as sharing intimate information with someone other than my partner (*SIN*); I define infidelity as talking in a sexual manner to someone other than my partner (*TSX*); I define infidelity as my partner attending a strip club without me (*SPC*); I define infidelity as accessing internet pornography (*PRN*); I define infidelity as cybersex (on-line sexual conversations) with someone other than my partner (*CYS*); I define infidelity as showing yourself to someone online (pictures or webcam), other than my partner (*SHY*); I define infidelity as texting someone other than my partner with romantic or emotional interests in mind (*TXT*).

To analyze the data, the data-analyzing computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*, was used. The individual was used as the level of analysis.

Given that groups were being compared based on gender, data analysis included: frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and independent t-tests. A Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was also conducted.

Results

The computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* was used to analyze the data collected. The analyses variables were subjected to include: frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, independent t-tests, and a reliability analysis.

The first analysis run was a frequency distribution analysis. This analysis indicated that there was no data missing from the surveys.

Cross-tabulations were run with the independent variable, *GEN*. For all dependent variables comparing males and females, there appeared to be no large differences between genders (refer to Table 1 for Cross-Tabulations and Table 2 for Mean Comparisons).

Table 1
Cross-Tabulations

KPS						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	8.0%	28.0%	28.0%	28.0%	8.0%	100.0%
Female	12.8%	20.5%	23.1%	38.5%	5.1%	100.0%
SPT						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	4.0%	4.0%	12.0%	36.0%	44.0%	100.0%
Female	2.6%	10.3%	7.7%	38.5%	41.2%	100.0%
RKS						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	8.0%	4.0%	4.0%	16.0%	68.0%	100.0%
Female	0.0%	0.0%	15.4%	46.2%	38.4%	100.0%

SIN

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	16.0%	20.0%	24.0%	28.0%	12.0%	100.0%
Female	5.1%	25.6%	38.5%	25.6%	5.1%	100.0%

TSX

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	8.0%	16.0%	16.0%	28.0%	32.0%	100.0%
Female	2.6%	12.8%	12.8%	25.6%	46.2%	100.0%

SPC

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	24.0%	28.0%	20.0%	16.0%	12.0%	100.0%
Female	17.9%	30.8%	33.3%	5.1%	12.8%	100.0%

PRN

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	28.0%	12.0%	24.0%	20.0%	16.0%	100.0%
Female	25.6%	25.6%	17.9%	15.4%	15.4%	100.0%

CYS

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	8.0%	4.0%	16.0%	32.0%	40.0%	100.0%
Female	7.7%	2.6%	0.0%	28.2%	61.5%	100.0%

SHY

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	8.0%	12.0%	4.0%	36.0%	40.0%	100.0%
Female	10.3%	0.0%	2.6%	20.5%	66.7%	100.0%

TXT

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	4.0%	4.0%	16.0%	44.0%	32.0%	100.0%
Female	7.7%	5.1%	10.3%	33.3%	43.6%	100.0%

Note. (KPS)=Keeping secrets from partner; (SPT) = Spending time with someone other than partner with romantic interests in mind; (RKS) =Romantically kissing someone other than partner; (SIN) =Sharing intimate information with someone other than partner; (TSX) = Talking in a sexual manner to someone other than partner; (SPC) =Partner attending a strip club without me; (PRN) =Accessing internet pornography; (CYS) =Cybersex with someone other than partner; (SHY) =Showing yourself to someone online other than partner; (TXT) =Texting someone other than partner with romantic or emotional interests in mind.

Table 2
Compare Means

GEN	KPS	SPT	RKS	SIN	TSX
Male:					
Mean:	3.00	4.12	4.32	3.00	3.60
SD:	1.11	1.05	1.25	1.29	1.32
Range:	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Female:					
Mean:	3.03	4.05	4.38	3.00	4.00
SD:	1.16	1.07	1.25	0.97	1.17
Range:	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
GEN	SPC	PRN	CYS	SHY	TXT
Male:					
Mean:	2.64	2.84	3.92	3.88	3.96
SD:	1.35	1.46	1.22	1.30	1.02
Range:	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Female:					
Mean:	2.64	2.69	4.33	4.33	4.00
SD:	1.22	1.42	1.15	1.24	1.21
Range:	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

Note. (GEN)=Gender; (KPS)=Keeping secrets from partner; (SPT) = Spending time with someone other than partner with romantic interests in mind; (RKS) =Romantically kissing someone other than partner; (SIN) =Sharing intimate information with someone other than partner; (TSX) = Talking in a sexual manner to someone other than partner; (SPC) =Partner attending a strip club without me; (PRN) =Accessing internet pornography; (CYS) =Cybersex with someone other than partner; (SHY) =Showing yourself to someone online other than partner; (TXT) =Texting someone other than partner with romantic or emotional interests in mind.

An independent samples t-test was run to compare mean difference scores for males and females. There were no significant differences between the genders (refer to Table 3).

Table 3
Independent T-Tests

	Gender		t	df	Sig.
	Males	Females			
KPS	3.00 (1.12)	3.02 (1.16)	-0.09	62	0.930
SPT	4.12 (1.05)	4.05 (1.07)	0.25	62	0.802
RKS	4.32 (1.25)	4.38 (1.25)	-0.20	62	0.841
SIN	3.00 (1.29)	3.00 (0.97)	0.00	62	1.000
TSX	3.60 (1.32)	4.00 (1.17)	-1.27	62	0.210
SPC	2.64 (1.35)	2.64 (1.22)	-0.00	62	0.998
PRN	2.84 (1.46)	2.69 (1.42)	0.40	62	0.689
CYS	3.92 (1.22)	4.33 (1.15)	-1.36	62	0.177
SHY	3.88 (1.30)	4.33 (1.24)	-1.40	62	0.167
TXT	3.96 (1.02)	4.00 (1.21)	-0.14	62	0.892

Note. (KPS)=Keeping secrets from partner; (SPT) = Spending time with someone other than partner with romantic interests in mind; (RKS) =Romantically kissing someone other than partner; (SIN) =Sharing intimate information with someone other than partner; (TSX) = Talking in a sexual manner to someone other than partner; (SPC) =Partner attending a strip club without me; (PRN) =Accessing internet pornography; (CYS) =Cybersex with someone other than partner; (SHY) =Showing yourself to someone online other than partner; (TXT) =Texting someone other than partner with romantic or emotional interests in mind. *significant @ $p \leq .05$, two tailed. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the variables were a reliable index to measure the major concept: College students' definitions of infidelity. Cronbach's Alpha is a measure of reliability and was 0.888. This value indicated that survey items were a reliable measure of the major concept.

The cleaning of our data resulted in the elimination

of three surveys based on inconclusive answers. Qualitative comments were received at the end of a number of surveys. These comments will be analyzed and themes determined in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Surprisingly, results did not support the hypothesis that male and female college students would differ in their views on infidelity. This could be from a lack of diversity and small sample size; in addition, the limited variability in the scale might have been a factor. Each dependent variable will be discussed in relation to how the results positioned themselves to the literature and/or the theoretical framework. Thereafter, limitations to the study, implications for practitioners, implications for future research, and concluding remarks will be discussed.

In the first survey statement there was variability of responses for both genders across the scale when asked if keeping secrets from one's partner is considered infidelity. These mixed responses could be related to the statements' lack of clarity. This supports the Symbolic Interaction theory in that individual responses will be based on unique life experiences of the respondents; each respondent will have their own view of the intended definition of "keeping secrets" (LaRossa & Rietzes, 1993). In the next survey statement, a majority of participants agreed of both genders that spending time with someone other than one's partner, with romantic or emotional interests in mind, is considered infidelity. These results were supported in the literature; Henline et al. (2007) found that infidelity includes an emotional aspect which encompasses spending time with another individual other than one's partner. When asked if romantically kissing someone other than one's partner is considered infidelity the majority of participants agreed as supported by the literature. Randall & Byers (2003) discovered that a majority

of participants believed that romantically kissing someone is infidelity. In the next survey statement a majority of responses fell in the category of undecided or agreed, when defining if sharing intimate information with someone other than one's partner could be considered infidelity. Because the survey statement did not specify the nature of the relationship with which the individual was sharing intimate information, the researchers believe this could suggest a lack of clarity in what was intended. The Symbolic Interaction theory would suggest this is in part due to the individual respondent's personal experiences with sharing intimate information with others, and how that has worked to define beliefs on sharing intimate information with someone other than a partner (LaRossa & Rietzes, 1993). In the statement asking if talking in a sexual manner to someone other than one's partner is infidelity a majority of participants agreed as supported by the literature. Sexual interactions like talking in a sexual manner with another individual were considered infidelity (Henline et al., 2007). When asked if one's partner attending a strip club without the other was considered infidelity, most participants disagreed. The next survey statement asked if accessing internet pornography constitutes infidelity; a majority of respondents disagreed. Both statement results were supported by Whitty (2003), who suggested that pornography, including attending strip clubs, did not pose a large threat to a partnered relationship. Participants agreed that having cybersex with someone other than one's partner constitutes infidelity. This is supported in the literature as Whitty (2003) suggested that online sexual interactions are considered infidelity. In the survey statement: showing yourself to someone online other than one's partner, respondents agreed that this constitutes infidelity. Henline et al. (2007) discovered that various online interactions, including online sex, emotional involvement with an online contact, online dating, and other online sexual interactions,

were considered unfaithful or infidelity.

With the last survey statement, participants agreed that texting someone other than one's partner with romantic or emotional interests in mind is considered infidelity. The researchers consulted Dr. Susan Wolfgram (interview, September, 2009) for this specific statement. Dr. Wolfgram cited her experience as a couple's therapist that this contemporary phenomenon is becoming a source of infidelity for couples and needs research. Whitty (2003) suggested that many new technological interactions that are commonplace in today's society are leading to new ideas of infidelity.

While not many qualitative comments were made, most respondents who left qualitative comments were emphasizing traditional ideas of infidelity. Statements involving traditionally perceived infidelity were not included in this study in order to focus on infidelity as it relates to technology.

Limitations

This study used a nonrandom sample and therefore unable to generalize to a larger population. The study also used a sample with limited diversity and a small number of respondents. The limited variability of the Likert scale also could be considered a limitation.

Implications for Practitioners

Because of the surprising results regarding gender differences, it is recommended that implications for practitioners be suspended until future research can further identify if any gender differences are present with a larger sample and more variability in the scale. However, all practitioners need to be mindful of how technology has impacted infidelity in this contemporary society.

Implications for Future Research

It is recommended that the next step of research be to use a larger, random, and more diverse sample to be able to generalize to college students across the country. If this study were to be replicated, it is recommended that research include statements that compare groups not only based on gender, but also include if the respondents are in a partnered relationship. Also, it is recommended to expand the Likert scale to perhaps 1-7.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, it is hoped that this will spur future research to focus more on online or technology related infidelity as opposed to traditional infidelity because of the increasing frequency that technology is being used in both virtual and non-virtual aspects of life. It is also hoped that our study will create an open dialogue between individuals in partnered relationships, practitioners, and researchers as to what infidelity constitutes. Helping induce communication will hopefully help strengthen relationships and the overall understanding of the act of infidelity in its many forms.

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