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## Cheating in relationships – literature review

### Abstract

Defining the concept of infidelity in relationships has posed significant challenges for many researchers. By synthesizing their views, one can assume that infidelity encompasses any actions hidden from a partner, involving a third party, which violate the emotional, sexual, or romantic exclusivity of the relationship. Nowadays, it seems appropriate to categorize infidelity into sexual, emotional, mixed, and online types. Determining the frequency of infidelity is problematic due to discrepancies in various studies' results, primarily stemming from cultural differences among the studied populations. Nonetheless, it is expected that this phenomenon affects 20-50% of relationships, occurring more frequently in non-marital relationships, although this difference appears to be gradually diminishing. The causes of infidelity are diverse, primarily arising from the unmet emotional or sexual needs of an individual by their partner. However, infidelity can also occur due to factors beyond the partner's control, such as favorable circumstances. Factors that increase the likelihood of infidelity include being male and having higher education and income, as these factors lead to encountering more situations that facilitate infidelity. The impact of technological development on the occurrence of infidelity in relationships cannot be overlooked – practically every third internet user utilizes it for sexual purposes. Infidelity has consequences for relationships, often being the most common cause of their dissolution, as well as for the individuals involved. Those who are betrayed often experience anger and symptoms typical of a depressive episode and suicidal thoughts may also occur.

**Keywords:** betrayal, causes, affairs.

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### INTRODUCTION

The attempt to define infidelity in relationships has been undertaken by many researchers; however, providing a clear definition of this phenomenon poses significant challenges, which stem from cultural differences and the unique nature of each relationship [1-5]. It is worth citing some of the definitions proposed by scholars:

- infidelity is defined as a situation in which one partner feels that their partner, together with a third person, has violated the rules established in the relationship [2];
- infidelity refers to sexual and/or emotional actions involving one person in a relationship and a third party, which breach the trust or norms established within the relationship, specifically concerning romantic, emotional, or sexual exclusivity [3];
- infidelity is described as behavior, such as flirting (or kissing, sexual intercourse, etc.), between one person in a relationship and a third party, which is not tolerated by the other partner [4].

Pittman and Wagers [5] argued that a key component of infidelity is the concealment of actions outlined in the above definitions from the partner [2,3,4]. This view seems valid, as openness about such actions would imply a level of acceptance from the partner, which contradicts the essence of these definitions of infidelity [2-4].

Combining the definitions mentioned above, infidelity can be broadly defined as any action concealed from a partner that involves a third party and violates the emotional, romantic, or sexual exclusivity of the relationship [1].

According to many researchers, it is appropriate to categorize infidelity into the following types:

1. Sexual – hidden sexual contact (e.g., kissing, sexual intercourse, etc.) with a third party that violates the rules established within the relationship.
2. Emotional – concealed emotional involvement with a third party that breaches the emotional boundaries set in the relationship.
3. Mixed – a combination of the two above.
4. Online – this category includes actions hidden from a partner, such as emotional involvement with a third party met

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online (where the relationship occurs primarily or exclusively in the online space) and cybersex (exchanging sexually explicit messages, erotic photos, engaging in video conferences with erotic activities, etc.). Online infidelity must initially be confined to the online realm, though it may later lead to offline forms of infidelity [1-9].

Among the types of infidelity listed above, emotional infidelity seems to be the most difficult to define. In one study [10], participants were asked to define emotional and sexual infidelity. Many individuals indicated that emotional infidelity aligns with the earlier definition of the term, but they also included behaviors typical of sexual infidelity (e.g., sexual intercourse) or the intention to engage in sexual activity with a third party [10]. It is also worth noting that women primarily viewed emotional infidelity as a step toward sexual infidelity [10].

Numerous studies indicate that men fear sexual infidelity the most, while simultaneously showing greater tolerance for extramarital sex. In contrast, women are more concerned about emotional infidelity [6-13]. Nonetheless, both women and men believe that emotional infidelity is more likely to lead to the dissolution of a relationship than sexual infidelity [14,15]. Some researchers suggest evolutionary explanations for the differing perceptions of emotional and sexual infidelity between genders. They argue that women fear emotional infidelity more because they expect loyalty and commitment from their partner in nurturing the family, as they bear the children. Meanwhile, men, who cannot be sure if a woman is carrying their child, are more concerned with sexual infidelity, as they do not wish to raise another man's offspring [16,17]. It is also worth highlighting the findings of a study conducted by Cramer et al. [13], in which women justified their greater fear of emotional infidelity by expressing the belief that men are incapable of maintaining sexual fidelity. However, in the absence of an emotional connection with a third party, men generally remain loyal to their partners.

Both men and women agree that sexual intercourse, kissing, or excessive emotional closeness with a third party constitutes infidelity [3]. Despite this, some studies suggest that the perception of infidelity differs between the genders. Women tend to categorize a broader range of behaviors as infidelity and judge them more harshly than men [18,19].

This article will discuss the issue of infidelity in both informal and marital relationships, with the exclusion of consensual non-monogamous relationships. In such cases, due to the different dynamics and mutually accepted rules, it is difficult to speak of infidelity in the traditional sense.

### **The prevalence of infidelity worldwide and in Poland**

Infidelity in relationships appears to be a widespread phenomenon. According to some researchers, it occurs in 20% of marriages and 70% of non-marital relationships [3]. More recent studies indicate a similar rate of infidelity in marriages (20-25%), but a lower rate in non-marital relationships (33-50%). Nonetheless, infidelity remains more prevalent in informal relationships [20,21]. This difference may be attributed, for example, to the generally stronger emotional bond between partners in a marriage, which leads to greater fidelity [1].

In a longitudinal study conducted by Knopp et al. [22], the percentage of individuals who admitted to cheating on their partners was approximately 44%, while nearly one-third of participants reported having been cheated on at least once by

their partner. A study by Mark et al. [23] allows for a comparison of infidelity rates between genders, revealing that about one-quarter of men and one-fifth of women cheat on their partners. It is important to note that more recent research [1] suggests that the noticeable difference between the genders is gradually diminishing.

Referring to the prevalence of infidelity in the Polish population is problematic due to the limited number of studies on this topic. A survey conducted by CBOS in 2011 showed that approximately 20% of respondents had flirted with someone they knew was in a committed relationship, and 14% had physical contact with such a person [24]. However, the authors note that these percentages are likely underestimated [24]. A more recent source of information on infidelity in Poland comes from a study by Izdebski, in which 25.6% of men and 15.4% of women admitted to infidelity. These results are similar to those found in the aforementioned American study [23,25].

### **The Impact of Infidelity on Relationships and the Betrayed Individual**

#### *The Impact of Infidelity on Relationships*

Infidelity is the most common cause of relationship breakdowns worldwide [26]. According to research conducted by American therapists [27], infidelity leads to the dissolution of a relationship in 43% of cases. In the Polish population, this percentage is around 60% [24], likely due to the significant societal disapproval of infidelity (86% of respondents) [28]. Taking this into account, it is estimated that infidelity results in the breakup of a relationship in approximately half of all cases.

#### *Emotional Reactions to Infidelity*

The emotional response to infidelity varies significantly among individuals and has been the subject of numerous scientific studies [1]. Johnson et al. [29] compare the emotional pain of a partner's infidelity to the feelings experienced by an infant separated from its mother. Other researchers [3,30] emphasize the considerable emotional, psychological, and cognitive dysregulation in betrayed individuals, leading to lowered self-esteem, reduced trust in others, and fear of abandonment in future relationships [1]. Infidelity can negatively affect the mental state of both the unfaithful partner and the betrayed individual. Typical emotions experienced in these situations include anger, uncertainty, rage, shame, guilt, jealousy, and sadness [17,31-34]. According to research conducted by Warach et al. [30], the discovery of infidelity is most often associated with heightened feelings of jealousy, which, according to Leeker et al. [6], can even lead to the murder of a partner, particularly in the American population.

Factors Influencing the Emotional Response of the Betrayed Individual

#### 1. Gender and Sexual Orientation

- Women and heterosexual individuals exhibit greater anxiety toward emotional infidelity, while men and homosexual individuals are more concerned with sexual infidelity [6].
- Women, regardless of sexual orientation, display stronger emotional reactions to all types of infidelity, with sexual infidelity causing more pronounced reactions [6].
- Homosexual individuals have a less intense emotional reaction to infidelity compared to heterosexual individuals, possibly due to the absence of evolutionary threats posed by infidelity in their case [6,35].

### Emotional Bond with the Partner

Individuals who report a stronger emotional bond with their partner tend to experience anxiety and anger following infidelity, while those with a weaker bond feel anxiety and fear [6]. This likely stems from a reduced sense of security in the relationship when there is weaker attachment to the partner [6].

### Type of Infidelity

- Sexual infidelity typically provokes feelings of anger, anxiety, and jealousy [6].
- Sexual infidelity causes a significantly stronger sense of humiliation in women than in men [6].
- The predominant emotion in cases of sexual infidelity is anger, while emotional infidelity triggers feelings of anxiety and jealousy [6].
- Emotional responses are more intense in cases of sexual infidelity than in emotional infidelity [6]. This aligns with the view of some researchers that people have more control over their sexual behaviors than emotional ones, which leads to the perception of sexual infidelity as more deliberate [36].

### Consequences of Infidelity for Mental and Physical Health

Betrayed individuals often experience symptoms typical of a depressive episode [30,31,37], with this phenomenon being more pronounced in women [38]. A study by Hollenbeck et al. [39] on the experiences of betrayed individuals found that 87% blamed themselves for the infidelity, 84% reported that the anger they felt after discovering the infidelity was the greatest in their lives, and 43% expressed a desire to harm themselves after learning about the betrayal.

The occurrence of suicidal thoughts and suicide following infidelity has been studied by numerous researchers [1]. The range of negative emotions experienced by the betrayed individual, as detailed earlier in the article, can undoubtedly contribute to suicidal thoughts [40]. For those who committed infidelity, suicidal thoughts are often the result of their partner's intense anger and the prospect of divorce or separation [40]. A study by Stephens et al. [41] found that the tendency toward suicidal behavior after infidelity varied depending on the age of the betrayed person – younger individuals reacted immediately after the betrayal, while older individuals did so due to prolonged conflict with their partner. A study by Martin et al. [42] found that 9% of people who committed suicide among U.S. Air Force personnel had learned of their partner's infidelity within 24 hours before their death, while 5% had committed infidelity in that period.

The physical health consequences of infidelity have not been extensively researched [1]. However, a few studies [37,43,44] have shown that betrayed individuals may experience symptoms such as insomnia, weight loss, nausea, difficulty concentrating, decreased libido, difficulty breathing, and increased heart rate.

### Causes of Infidelity and Predisposing Factors

#### *Causes of Infidelity*

According to Thompson [4], infidelity occurs in relationships characterized by low levels of relationship satisfaction, poor communication, and frequent conflicts between partners. A more recent study on the causes of infidelity, conducted by Selterman et al. [45], identified eight primary reasons for infidelity in relationships:

1. Anger caused by the partner's behavior.
2. Unmet sexual needs by the partner.
3. Feeling a lack of love and intimacy from the partner.
4. Low emotional commitment to the relationship.
5. The need for greater autonomy.
6. Difficulty understanding the situation (situational causes), such as due to stress.
7. Neglect or feeling mistreated by the partner.
8. The desire to have multiple sexual partners simultaneously.

Nearly all participants in the aforementioned study [45] admitted to physical contact with a third party, but only about half of them reported having sexual intercourse with that person, with this being more common among men. Those who engaged in infidelity due to unmet sexual needs, low perceived love from their partner, or a lack of intimacy, as well as those desiring multiple sexual partners, reported greater sexual satisfaction from the affair compared to those who engaged in infidelity due to situational factors. Affairs driven by situational causes were also shorter in duration [45-47]. It is also worth noting that strong emotional commitment to the primary relationship was more likely to result in cutting off contact with the third party and increased personal growth and relational development after the infidelity [45]. Conversely, individuals less emotionally invested in the relationship and those whose infidelity was motivated by unmet sexual needs, a lack of love, or intimacy more frequently ended their primary relationship after the affair and began a new one with the person they had the affair with [45]. Selterman et al. [45] suggested that individuals engaging in affairs use them to compensate for deficiencies in their primary relationship. For example, individuals who cited a lack of love and intimacy in their primary relationship as the reason for their infidelity tended to engage in longer affairs, which were often associated with a stronger romantic bond with the third party.

#### *Predisposing Factors for Infidelity*

##### 1. Demographic Factors

- Traditionally, men were thought to cheat more frequently than women; however, newer studies suggest that the gender gap in infidelity is diminishing [1,48,49].
- Less religious individuals are more likely to cheat, possibly due to a more liberal attitude toward sexuality [50].
- Higher education and income levels are predisposing factors for infidelity [1], likely due to the professional and personal lifestyle, which provides more opportunities for cheating.

##### 2. Individual Traits

- Numerous studies indicate that certain traits predispose individuals to infidelity: neuroticism, a large number of sexual partners, a history of infidelity, a liberal attitude toward sex, difficulty forming attachments, and the presence of infidelity among close family members [51-54].
- Some studies also suggest that extraversion, high neuroticism and psychoticism, and low conscientiousness are associated with a higher likelihood of infidelity [52].
- A strong interest in sex and a low ability to inhibit sexual impulses are also predisposing factors for infidelity [1].

##### 3. Quality of the Primary Relationship

- Low relationship satisfaction is strongly associated with a higher risk of infidelity [1]. This issue is discussed in more detail in the section on the causes of infidelity.

#### 4. Characteristics of the Primary Relationship

- One spouse working outside the home while the other works at home (or does not work) predisposes to infidelity [56].

#### 5. The Internet

- The internet facilitates infidelity [1], with approximately one-third of internet users utilizing it for sexual purposes, and most of them engaging in sexual activities with individuals they met online [57].

## CONCLUSION

Infidelity in relationships is a relatively common phenomenon, and its prevalence appears to be increasing. It has a destructive impact on relationships and mental health of society, particularly on those who have been betrayed. Infidelity contributes to the development of depression, suicides, and even homicides of partners. The causes of infidelity seem to be varied, but in most cases, they stem from the partner's neglect in the sexual and/or emotional realm. Some individuals, however, cheat impulsively or out of a desire to have multiple sexual partners. The reason for infidelity also influences the nature of the relationship with the third party, its longevity, and the future prognosis of the primary relationship. Research conducted by numerous scholars has identified many factors that predispose individuals to infidelity, such as male gender (though this factor seems to be losing significance over time), higher education and income (which create more opportunities for infidelity), and the technological advancement of society (the internet provides an environment where it is easy to find a partner for an affair and facilitates online relationships).

Many issues related to infidelity in relationships have not yet been thoroughly researched. It seems justified to conduct more studies to assess the frequency of this phenomenon across different societies (especially in Poland, as no such study has been conducted for years) and to examine the factors predisposing individuals to infidelity, as these factors appear to change over time according to multiple studies. It also seems necessary to pay special attention to the appropriate training of psychotherapists working with individuals affected by infidelity, as their personal beliefs and biases can significantly influence the therapeutic process [58].

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