

# Imagined Infidelity Scenario Forgiveness and Distress: The Role of Method of Discovery and Specific Cheating Behavior

## Abstract

Male and female college students ( $N=437$ ) read imagined scenarios of infidelity manipulated for discovery method and infidelity act. Participants rated how upsetting each scenario was and the likelihood they would forgive their partner. Sexual infidelity was the most upsetting and least forgivable infidelity act. Implications for relationships are discussed.

## Introduction

Infidelity often leads to relationship dissolution (Shackelford, 1998). Understanding reactions to different types of infidelity and different manners of discovery may be helpful to romantic couples dealing with this relationship challenge.

In an investigation of past infidelity recollection and relationship outcomes, Afifi, Falato, and Weiner (2001) found that harm to the quality of the relationship and forgiveness degree were dependent on the method of discovery. In order, unsolicited partner discovery was the most likely to be forgiven and the least harmful to relationship quality, followed by solicited information, catching a partner 'red handed', and unsolicited third party discovery. The researchers explain these results in relation to the potential for face redress to explain, apologize, and minimize public threats to the partner's identity. As real life outcomes, 56% of the participants indicated they remained in the relationship following unsolicited partner discovery whereas only 17% stayed together when the partner was caught 'red handed.'

According to Buss, Larsen, Weston, and Semmelroth (1992), women are more upset by a partner's emotional infidelity, whereas males find the prospect of sexual infidelity to cause more distress. Shackelford, Buss, and Bennet (2002) have also found that men find sexual infidelity more difficult to forgive and would be more likely to end a romantic relationship if sexual infidelity was committed.

We wanted to extend the categories of discovery method to include who told the partner (partner's best friend, own close friend, or stranger) as well as the type of infidelity (sexual and emotional types: sex, falling in love, massage, kissing, going out to dinner, or buying a present).

## Current Study Hypotheses

We anticipated similar results to Afifi et al. (2001), where being caught 'red handed' would be the most upsetting and partner infidelity disclosure would be the least upsetting and most likely to be forgiven. Furthermore, we hypothesized participants would report the strongest negative response to sexual infidelity and we expected men to be more upset with sexual infidelity and women to be more upset with emotional infidelity (i.e., Buss et al., 1992; Shackelford et al., 2002).

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## Method

### Participants

Four-hundred and thirty seven college students (127 men and 310 women) participated in this research in exchange for course research credit for their introductory Psychology courses. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 56 ( $M=19.34$ ,  $SD=3.01$ ). The majority of participants were Caucasian (91.6%), while 3.2% were African American, 2.7% were Hispanic, 1.5% were Asian, and 1.1% indicated "other." The class rank of the participants consisted of 56.2% freshmen, 27.2% sophomores, 10.2% juniors, 4.9% seniors, and 1.5% "other." The majority of participants were heterosexual (98.3%). With respect to relationship status, 52.5% were single-dating one partner, 39.3% were not dating, 2.5% were single-dating several partners, 3.2% were engaged, 1.5% were married, .6% were divorced, and .4% reported "other."

### Materials & Procedure

Participants completed an anonymous online survey about reactions to infidelity in a controlled lab setting. Participants were asked to consider 36 cheating scenario sentences and respond with their own assessment of how upsetting each scenario would be for them personally and how likely they would forgive their partner if this were to happen on a 10-point Likert scale. These surveys were created specifically for this study, based on previous research. See **Forgiveness Survey** as an example of one of the measures used.

Participants also completed demographic information, including age, sex, class rank, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and relationship status.

## Forgiveness Survey

Please think of a serious relationship you have had in the past, currently have, or would like to have. Imagine that you discover that your romantic partner has become interested in someone else. Knowing this information, how likely to forgive your partner would you be in the following situations, using a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being not very forgiving and 10 being extremely forgiving?



### PLEASE READ EACH QUESTION CAREFULLY

- 1) If a close friend tells you that your partner has been having sexual intercourse with that other person.
- 2) If your partner's best friend tells you that your partner was giving a massage to that other person.
- 3) If a stranger tells you that your partner has been having sexual intercourse with that other person.
- 4) If after questioning your partner, she admits to you that she is falling in love with that other person.
- 5) If you caught your partner falling in love with that other person.
- 6) If a close friend tells you that your partner bought a present for that other person.
- 7) If your partner's best friend tells you that your partner went to dinner with that other person.
- 8) If you caught your partner out to dinner with that other person.
- 9) If a stranger tells you that your partner is falling in love with that other person.
- 10) If your partner tells you that she went to dinner with that other person.
- 11) If a close friend tells you that your partner is falling in love with that other person.
- 12) If you caught your partner buying a present for that other person.
- 13) If a stranger tells you that your partner was kissing that other person.
- 14) If after questioning your partner, she admits to you that she bought a present for that other person.
- 15) If you caught your partner having sexual intercourse with that other person.
- 16) If a close friend tells you that your partner was kissing that other person.
- 17) If your partner's best friend tells you that your partner has been having sexual intercourse with that other person.
- 18) If after questioning your partner, she admits to you that she went to dinner with that other person.
- 19) If a stranger tells you that your partner went to dinner with that other person.
- 20) If your partner tells you that she was giving a massage to that other person.
- 21) If after questioning your partner, she admits to you that she was kissing that other person.
- 22) If your partner tells you that she is falling in love with that other person.
- 23) If a close friend tells you that your partner went to dinner with that other person.
- 24) If your partner's best friend tells you that your partner bought a present for that other person.
- 25) If a close friend tells you that your partner was giving a massage to that other person.
- 26) If your partner tells you that she has been having sexual intercourse with that other person.
- 27) If your partner tells you that she bought a present for that other person.
- 28) If your partner tells you that she was kissing that other person.
- 29) If after questioning your partner, she admits to you that she has been having sexual intercourse with that other person.
- 30) If you caught your partner kissing that other person.
- 31) If after questioning your partner, she admits to you that she was giving a massage to that other person.
- 32) If a stranger tells you that your partner bought a present for that other person.
- 33) If you caught your partner giving a massage to that other person.
- 34) If your partner's best friend tells you that your partner is falling in love with that other person.
- 35) If a stranger tells you that your partner was giving a massage to that other person.
- 36) If your partner's best friend tells you that your partner was kissing that other person.

## Results

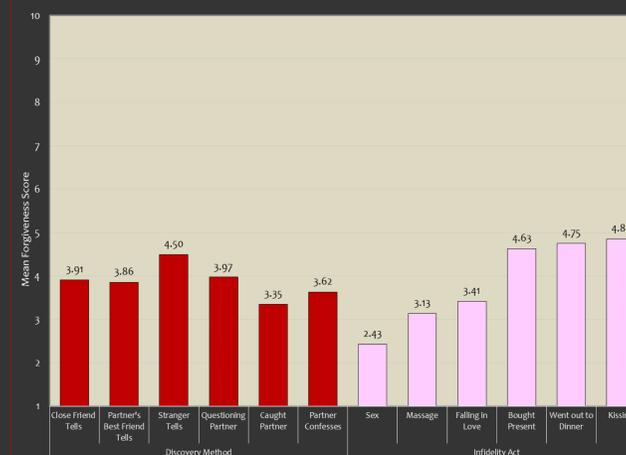
To analyze forgiveness and upset responses to the hypothetical infidelity scenarios, 6 (discovery method: close friend tells, partner's best friend tells, stranger tells, questioning partner, caught partner, and partner confesses)  $\times$  6 (infidelity act: sex, massage, falling in love, bought present, went out to dinner, and kissing)  $\times$  2 (participant sex: male/ or female) repeated measures MANOVAs were conducted. For forgiveness, results revealed a significant multivariate main effect for discovery method [ $\lambda=.65$ ,  $F(5, 431)=47.30$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.35$ ], a significant main effect for infidelity act [ $\lambda=.48$ ,  $F(5, 431)=92.36$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.52$ ], a significant discovery method  $\times$  infidelity act interaction ( $p<.001$ ), and a marginally significant infidelity act  $\times$  participant sex interaction ( $p=.06$ ). There was a non-significant discovery method  $\times$  participant sex interaction ( $p=.14$ ), and a non-significant discovery method  $\times$  infidelity act  $\times$  participant sex interaction ( $p=.67$ ).

Upset responses showed the same pattern as forgiveness responses and are not reported due to space constraints.

Participants were most likely to forgive and least upset about the infidelity if a stranger reported the act to them and least likely to forgive and most upset about the infidelity if they caught the partner in the act. Regarding infidelity acts, participants were least likely to forgive and most upset by sex and most likely to forgive and least upset by buying a present, going out to dinner, and falling in love. See **Figure**.

Males were less upset than females about infidelity ( $p<.001$ ) overall, and males were slightly more likely to forgive infidelity than females ( $p=.11$ ).

Figure. Mean Forgiveness Ratings by Discovery Method and Infidelity Act.



Note. Higher forgiveness values indicate a greater likelihood of forgiving partner.

## Discussion

Consistent with Afifi et al. (2001) and our hypotheses, participants were most upset and least likely to forgive when they imagined catching their partner in the act of cheating. Interestingly, our results deviated from Afifi et al. (2001) with respect to reactions to a stranger communicating infidelity about a partner. While Afifi et al. (2001) found unsolicited third party discovery of infidelity was even less likely to yield forgiveness than catching a partner in the act, our participants imagined learning of the infidelity from a stranger was the least upsetting and the discovery method most likely to be forgiven. These differences could be the result of actual experiences with infidelity compared with imagined scenarios about what people think they would feel or how they would react.

Males and females reported similarly high rates of feeling upset (over 9 on a 10-point scale) and being less likely to forgive sexual cheating, but this could be due to a ceiling effect. Dijkstr, Barelds, and Groothof (2010) found that in both males and females explicit infidelity, such as falling in love with another individual and having sex, induced the most jealousy. However, we did find females were more upset and less likely to forgive emotional infidelity (falling in love, going to dinner, buying a present, kissing, and massage) compared to males.

These results further highlight the importance of open communication in relationships and the strong emotional reactions to cheating.

## Selected References

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