

Please cite this paper as follows

Meskó, N. & Láng, A. (2013). Women evaluate their partners' betrayal: Emotional reactions, forgiveness, perceived threats of infidelity. In E. Farkas (ed) *Acta Szekszardiensium/Scientific Publications, Tom XV*. (pp. 47-59.) Szekszárd: Illyés Gyula Faculty, University of Pécs.

Women evaluate their partners' betrayal: Emotional reactions, forgiveness, perceived threats of infidelity

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The first author is supported by a grant of
the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA) – PD83794

ABSTRACT

In a recent poll women morally convicted husbands' relations with prostitutes. From an evolutionary point of view women's reproductive success has been influenced more by their partner's emotional infidelity than by his sexual infidelity. Women have been less sensitive to sexual than to emotional infidelity, because latter could have resulted in losing their partner's resources. In our study women reported an unanimous opinion. As compared to a former girlfriend, women reported less intensive negative emotional reactions, and more forgiveness, if their partner betrayed them with a prostitute. Women evaluated betrayal with a prostitute as less threatening for their ongoing relationship. We conclude that it is still the evolutionary interest of women to form a more negative attitude toward betrayal with a former girlfriend than toward betrayal with prostitutes.

KEYWORDS: infidelity, emotional reaction, perceived threat, abandonment, forgiveness, attitude.

1. Introduction

According to a recent poll by Gallup (Jones, 2008), women living in the United States consider paying to have sex with prostitutes is worse for a husband to do (38 per cent), than to carry on with an extramarital romantic affair (30 per cent). The phrasing of the question (... which do you think is worse ... ?) raises moral issues. At the same time, the conclusion of the poll, that “women tend to believe sex with prostitutes is a greater betrayal [than an extramarital romantic affair]” (Jones, 2008, p.1), is not tenable from an evolutionary perspective. Prostitutes represent a lesser threat to the emotional bond of the marriage, and should be preferred by women over an extramarital romantic affair (Salmon, 2008).

Issues of infidelity have been of great concern to our ancestors ever since the beginnings of human evolution (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). Historical, literary, anthropological, and other accounts suggest that among humans extramarital sexual relationship is, and always has been, a widespread phenomenon. The context of infidelity is highly variable from sex with prostitutes, and one night stands to extramarital romantic affairs. The persona of the husband's extramarital sexual partner can highly influence a wife's reaction to sex outside marriage. Sex with a former girlfriend carries the possibility that the partner would reestablish the relationship, and he would become emotionally committed to the former partner. Therefore this possibility is threatening for women, since emotional commitment can lead to abandonment or cessation of the current relationship (Buss, 2000; Shettel-Neuber, Bryson, & Young, 1978). If the husband (or romantic partner) has sex with prostitutes, the risk for emotional commitment is low, since this extramarital sexual relation is financially based, and with payment both parties consider the business finished (e.g. Salmon, 2008; Burley & Symanski, 1981). Next, women's emotional reactions, perceptions and motivations connected to sexual and emotional infidelity are reviewed.

1.1. Emotional reactions to infidelity

Jealousy is a common and universal response to the partner's real or putative infidelity (Buss, 2000). According to evolutionary psychologists, sex differences in the pattern of infidelity result from the different adaptive issues that has been challenging to men and to

women during evolutionary history (Trivers, 1972). The embryo develops in the female organism, which makes maternity certain and paternity uncertain. Therefore, men have been sensitive to signals of sexual infidelity. Males, who lack this kind of sensitivity, have been at risk of raising genetically unrelated offspring and hazarding resources. On the other hand, female reproductive success hasn't been directly influenced by the partner's sexual infidelity. Accordingly, women haven't become sensitive to signals of sexual infidelity, but to the failure to monopolize resources provided by the males. If the male shared these resources with a female rival, it could have resulted in the loss of the male's spousal and/or parental investment. Thus, female jealousy has been directed toward signals of emotional infidelity, because men, who have been emotionally committed to an extramarital partner, have been more likely to share resources (Buss & Haselton, 2005).

Buss, Larsen, Westen & Semmelroth (1992) reported situational differences in women's emotional reactions to infidelity. Women were found to be more sensitive to their partner's imagined emotional infidelity (83% chose this option as more distressing) than to his imagined sexual infidelity. Although women are also sensitive to their partner's sexual infidelity, they are more upset by his emotional infidelity. Infidelity of emotional nature is interpreted by women as a possible signal of losing their partner's emotional commitment and investment (Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, & Buss, 1996).

1.2. Forgiveness and partnership maintenance

When a betrayal comes to light, it usually has negative effects on a romantic relationship (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). Adultery is the main reason for divorce worldwide (Buss, 1994). Burn (1984) found that 31 per cent of women reported their husband's extramarital romantic relationship as the reason for divorce.

Sex differences has been revealed also in relation to forgiveness. In general, women whose partner cheated on them are more willing to forgive than men who were betrayed (Lawson, 1988). According to Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro and Hannon (2002) those who are more committed to their partner are more willing to forgive than those who are less attached. Fitness (2001) suggested that it is easier to forgive the partner's sexual infidelity that lacks

emotional involvement. According to Shackelford, Buss and Bennett (2002) the aftermath of betrayal (forgiving or break up) is highly dependent on the sex of the respondents and the nature of infidelity. Men are less willing to forgive and more likely to break up, if their partner engages in a sexual relation (compared to an emotionally committed relationship). On the contrary, women are more likely to break up and show less forgiveness, if their male partner engages in emotional infidelity, and it is easier for women to step over the fact of betrayal, if it happens with someone who is partner just for sex.

1.3. Evaluating the threat of sexual and emotional infidelity

The partner's infidelity includes the threat of being abandoned. Therefore, humans have been selected to evaluate how threats of a partner's infidelity impact the ongoing long-term relationship (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). Women (compared to men) have been more tolerant to their partner's sexual infidelity, because emotional infidelity holds a higher risk for being abandoned. In an evolutionary environment abandonment could have resulted in decreased chance for survival of offspring, because abandoned women lost the resources of the male.

Cann and Baucom (2004) studied the effects of a betrayal either with a former romantic partner or with a new rival. Their results showed that both men and women evaluated betrayal with a former partner as a greater threat, if it happened to be sexual infidelity. In the case of emotional infidelity only women (and not men) perceived greater threat in the case of a former romantic partner (compared to a new rival). Experienced distress and probability of forgiving showed a similar pattern.

2. Aims of the Study

Hypotheses The aim of this study was to examine women's attitude to their long-term partner's extradyadic sexual relation with a prostitute compared to an ex-girlfriend (or former wife). We presumed that the female respondents would report lower emotional distress to the sexual betrayal, higher willingness to maintain current relationship, and that they would evaluate the situation as less dangerous, if their partner cheated on them with a prostitute (as

opposed to a former girlfriend or wife). We also hypothesized this attitude to be independent of romantic relational status, because women show a sex-specific sensitivity of emotional infidelity.

3. Materials and Methods

Our method was based on the study of Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992), who studied sex differences in the emotional reactions to sexual cheating via thought experiment. In designing our study we relayed on the three components of attitudes (McGuire, 1969) – cognitive, emotional and behavioral.

3.1. Participants

Data from 1,562 female respondents were analyzed (mean age = 29.88 ± 8.24 years, min= 18 years, max= 65 years). Out of our sample, 1,243 respondents reported an actual romantic relationship. The mean duration of these relationships was 63.78 ± 74.07 months (min=0, max= 600 months).

3.2. Measures

Besides gathering demographic data (sex, age, actual romantic status), a self-edited questionnaire was prepared to examine women's attitudes toward betrayal from three different aspects: (1) negative emotional reactions to the betrayal (emotional component), (2) willingness to forgive the betrayal (behavioral component), and (3) evaluation of the betrayal as a threat to the current relationship (cognitive component). After a short introduction, the following questions had to be answered by choosing one of two options.

„Please think of a serious committed romantic relationship that you have had in the past, that you currently have, or that you would like to have. Imagine that your partner, with whom you've been seriously involved, cheated on you with another woman.”

1. Which one of the following situations would be more likely to upset and break you down?
(Please choose only one.)
 - A) Imaging your partner cheating on you with his former girlfriend or wife.
 - B) Imaging your partner cheating on you with a prostitute.

2. Which one of the following situations could you more easily overstep if you wanted to maintain your current relationship? (Please choose only one.)
 - A) Imaging your partner cheating on you with his former girlfriend or wife.
 - B) Imaging your partner cheating on you with a prostitute.

3. Which one of the following situations would be a greater danger to your current relationship? (Please choose only one.)
 - A) Imaging your partner cheating on you with his former girlfriend or wife.
 - B) Imaging your partner cheating on you with a prostitute.”

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire (using www.surveymonkey.com for preparation) was spread online on Hungarian community websites, popular lifestyle blogs, and via email. No information was gathered on the sexual orientation of the participants. Data collection lasted for one week.

4. Results

Data from the forced choice task was analyzed with Pearson's Chi-square test. The analyses resulted in the following. Experiencing higher emotional distress: former girlfriend/wife = 1166, prostitute = 396, Chi-square(1)= 379.58, $p < .001$. More willing to overstep: former girlfriend/wife = 344, prostitute = 1218, Chi-square(1)= 489.04, $p < 0.001$. Evaluated

as more dangerous: former girlfriend/wife = 1310, prostitute = 252, Chi-square(1)= 717.62, $p < 0.001$. Results are graphically presented in Figure 1.

Actual romantic relationships had no effect on the responses. Emotional distress: Chi-square(1)= 0.016, $p > 0.05$. Willingness to overstep: Chi-square(1)= 0.036, $p > 0.05$. Evaluation of danger: Chi-square(1)= 0.006, $p > 0.05$.

5. Discussion

In our study, women – independent of their romantic relational status – proved to be sensitive to the imagined betrayal by their partner on three different levels. In the case of a betrayal with a former girlfriend or wife women reported higher emotional distress than in the case of a betrayal with a prostitute. In a hypothetical situation where respondents had to imagine that they wanted to maintain the current relationship, women were more willing to forgive the betrayal, if a prostitute was involved (as opposed to the situation where the betrayal happens with a former girlfriend or wife). At the same time, women considered the betrayal with a former girlfriend or wife as a greater threat to their ongoing relationship (as opposed to the betrayal with a prostitute).

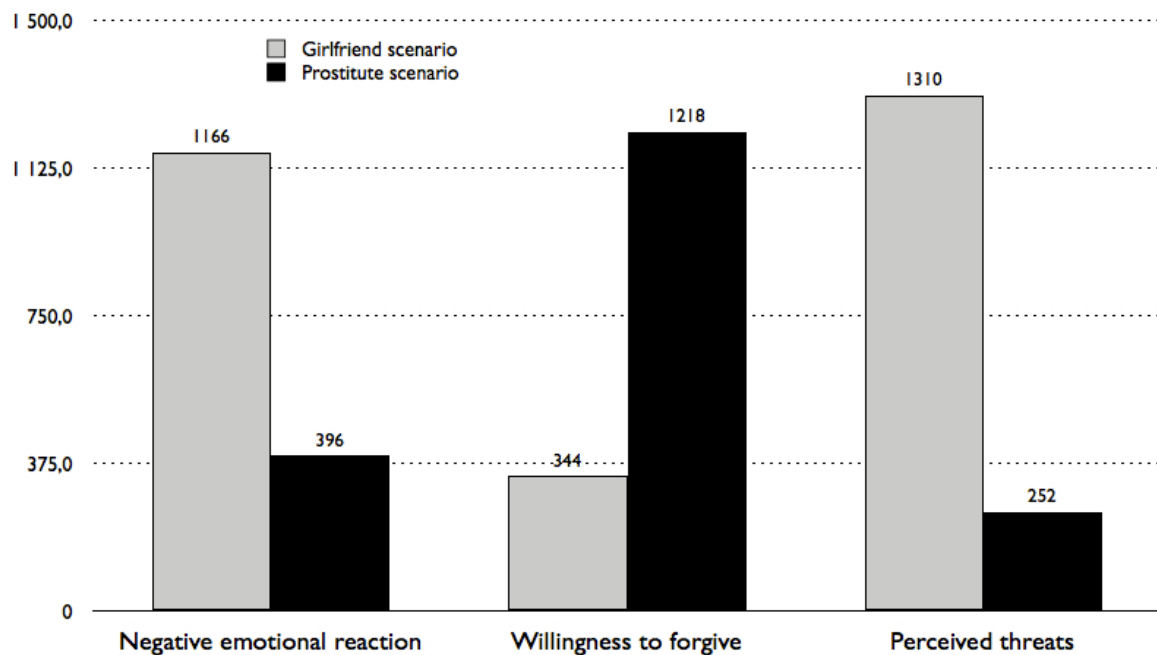


Figure 1. Distribution of responses on the two scenarios across the three components of attitude

According to our results, respondents – independent of their current relational status – clearly seemed to opt for their partner's relationship with a prostitute over a relationship where emotional commitment with the former partner and consequently break up with the actual partner is more likely to occur. The romantic relational status had no effect on respondents' attitude, since women – independent of their romantic relational status – show a sex-specific sensitivity to detecting their partner's betrayal. Therefore, women seem to form their attitude toward sexual vs. emotional infidelity independent of their current relational status.

Threat evaluation. Women presumably perceive and evaluate betrayal with a prostitute a lesser threat, because this form of relationship is solely about sex, while betrayal with a former girlfriend (former wife) holds the possibility and threat of (re)establishing an emotional bond. At the same time, other factors can also affect threat evaluation. E.g. the partner's indiscriminate direct or indirect sexual relations (e.g. the relation with a prostitute) put women at high risk of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Moore & Cates, 1990). Avoidance of these diseases could have exerted selective pressure on humans to form monogamous relationships. Probably, evaluating the probability of contracting such diseases still plays an important role in women's evaluation of threats stemming from their partner's infidelity (Mackey & Immerman, 2000). We believe that in Western societies with improved health systems and lower pathogen saturation the consequences of emotional infidelity (e.g., abandonment, decreased amount of resources – former girlfriend scenario) are more threatening for women than the consequences of a solely sexual relation (e.g., contraction of STDs – prostitute scenario).

Emotional reactions. As opposed to a betrayal that is emotionless by definition (such as sex with a prostitute), in a situation where emotional commitment is more likely to evolve (such as sex with former girlfriend or wife) elevated levels of arousal are automatically elicited even in an imaginary situation (Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth, 1992). We are certainly aware of the limitation that the mere fact of being cheated on can elicit several distinct negative emotional states (disappointment, anger, depression, etc.) that are ignored in this study.

Women's emotional reactions investigated in our study included anger (being upset) and depression (feeling broken down). The lived emotion of anger points to the fact, that betrayal is perceived as an interpersonal transgression. Anger is an evolutionary adaptive emotional reaction to show cut-off and to signal the need to be conciliated by the relational partner (Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009). On the other hand, depression or feeling down, are reactions to the possibility of loss – i.e., being abandoned by the partner and losing resources at the same time. Women's emotional reactions reported in our study are the function of the nonconscious evaluative process described above. Accordingly, women reported more intense negative emotions in the case of betrayal with a former girlfriend or former wife. These results point to a greater need of reconciliation and a greater fear of losing the partner (Cano & O'Leary 2000). On the one hand, need for reconciliation activates higher spousal expectations, and the partner has to work hard to reestablish trust in the ongoing relationship. On the other hand, depression stemming from the feared loss of the partner may activate mate retention strategies that prevent abandonment (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

Forgiveness. Women perceive betrayal with a prostitute as a financially based sexual relation. Neither their partner, nor the prostitute is interested in forming an emotional bond. This implies lesser threat to the marital bond, and elicits less intense emotional reactions. Accordingly, it is easier to forgive a betrayal with a prostitute than a betrayal with a former girlfriend (former wife) (Cann & Baucom 2004). According to several studies women are less sensitive to sexual infidelity than to emotional infidelity (Shackelford, Buss & Bennett, 2002; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000; Buss, 1998; Glass & Wright, 1985; Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth, 1992).

In the Gallup poll (Jones, 2008, p.2) responding women faced the possibility of male infidelity in an abstract moral context ('generally speaking, which do you think is worth for a husband to do?'). We argue that it was this moral context that made them reject the husband's relation with a prostitute (relative to an extramarital romantic affair). In our study, women had to make hypothetical decisions concerning their own partner. Therefore, they rather considered their evolutionary relational interests than social norms. In our study, when women presumably considered the vital issues of mate retention and the maintenance of a lasting emotional bond with their partner, women expressed a more negative attitude toward

betrayal with a former girlfriend or former wife than toward betrayal with a prostitute with whom the partner engages in a solely financially based sexual relation, and where the possibility is lower for an emotional bond to be formed.

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