

## Special Section

### GENDER, JEALOUSY, AND REASON

Christine R. Harris and Nicholas Christenfeld

*University of California, San Diego*

**Abstract**—*Research has suggested that men are especially bothered by evidence of their partner's sexual infidelity, whereas women are troubled more by evidence of emotional infidelity. One evolutionary account (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992) argues that this is an innate difference, arising from men's need for paternity certainty and women's need for male investment in their offspring. We suggest that the difference may instead be based on reasonable differences between the sexes in how they interpret evidence of infidelity. A man, thinking that women have sex only when in love, has reason to believe that if his mate has sex with another man, she is in love with that other. A woman, thinking that men can have sex without love, should still be bothered by sexual infidelity, but less so because it does not imply that her mate has fallen in love as well. A survey of 137 subjects confirmed that men and women do differ in the predicted direction in how much they think each form of infidelity implies the other; proposing innate emotional differences may, therefore, be gratuitous.*

Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) have suggested that men and women are intrinsically different in the magnitude of their responses to sexual and emotional infidelity, as a result of differing reproductive costs over human evolutionary history. Women, seeking to ensure males' long-term involvement, have evolved to care about their mates falling in love with others and not to be so concerned about their mates having sex with others. Men, keen not to expend resources on other men's children, should be concerned about their women having sex with others, and not care so much about their falling in love with others. Buss et al. supported their argument with data indicating that when asked to choose whether sexual or emotional infidelity would be more bothersome, more women than men selected emotional infidelity, and more men than women selected sexual infidelity. We argue here that these results can be explained without suggesting that men and women are innately different in how much they are disturbed by emotional and sexual infidelity.

Although Buss et al. and other investigators before them (Daly & Wilson, 1983; Symons, 1979) proposed an evolutionary account for men caring about sexual infidelity and women about emotional infidelity, Buss et al. argued that "emotional infidelity may signal sexual infidelity and vice versa, and hence both sexes should become distressed at both forms" (p. 255). We suggest instead that men and women may be equally upset by each type of infidelity and that the crucial difference may lie in how much they think that each form of infidelity signals the other.

Imagine a man returning from work one day to discover

Address correspondence to Christine R. Harris, Department of Psychology 0109, University of California, San Diego, 9500 Gilman Dr., La Jolla, CA 92093; e-mail: [charris@ucsd.edu](mailto:charris@ucsd.edu).

incontrovertible proof of his wife's sexual infidelity. He might well think that because women have sex only when in love, it is quite certain that she has fallen in love with this other man as well. A woman, however, finding the same evidence about her husband, might think that because men often have sex without being in love, there is no reason to assume he is in love with the other woman. The man, then, is upset by what he takes to be sexual and emotional infidelity, whereas the woman is concerned only about sexual infidelity. The man will be more bothered by the sexual infidelity than is the woman because he draws a more troubling conclusion from that evidence. The man should have a stronger response to sexual infidelity even if the man and woman care equally about their spouses' actual sexual exploits.

The situation should be reversed with evidence of emotional infidelity. The man, on coming across evidence of this sort, should reason that women can be in love without having sex, and so he need not assume that there is sexual infidelity as well. The woman, however, thinking that men in love are certainly having sex, will assume that both sorts of treachery have occurred, and be doubly bothered.

Thus, emotional infidelity should especially trouble women, and sexual infidelity should especially trouble men. This prediction follows not from any postulated innate difference in responses to the specific infidelities, but rationally from the hypothesis that men think women have sex only when in love and women think men have sex without love. We tested this hypothesis in a survey, and also sought to replicate the original finding of Buss et al.

#### METHOD

Subjects were 137 undergraduate students (55 males and 82 females) who individually and anonymously completed a survey of attitudes about relationships as part of a requirement for experimental participation. Among other questions about sexuality and dating were three questions about sexual and emotional infidelity. The first was taken from Buss et al. and was included to replicate their finding; the other two were designed to measure how much men and women think each form of infidelity implies the other:

1) Please think of a serious romantic 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. What would upset you more?

a) Imagining your partner trying different sexual positions with that other person.

b) Imagining your partner falling in love with that other person.

2) Please think of a serious romantic relationship you have had in the past, currently have, or would like to have. Imagine that you discover that your mate is engaging in sexual intercourse with someone else. How likely do you think it is that your mate is in love with this person?

3) Please think of a serious romantic relationship you have had in the past, currently have, or would like to have. Imagine that you discover that your mate is in love with someone else. How likely do you think it is that your mate is also engaging in sex with this other person?

The latter two questions were answered on 5-point Likert scales ranging from "not at all likely" to "very likely."

## RESULTS

Results for the first question replicated the results of Buss et al. In choosing between the two forms of infidelity, more males than females selected sexual infidelity as more upsetting, whereas more women than men selected emotional infidelity,  $X^2(1, N = 136) = 9.39, p < .005$ . (One female failed to answer this question.) The data are shown in Table 1. Overall, subjects were bothered more by emotional than sexual infidelity, a bias that Buss et al. found also. In fact, in both our data and those reported by Buss et al., the men were close to equally split about which would bother them more, and it is the women's strong aversion to emotional infidelity that produced the effect.

To analyze whether the sexes differ in the extent to which they think one form of infidelity implies the other, we subjected the second and third questions to a mixed factorial analysis of variance, with gender as the between-subjects factor and the two questions as the within-subjects factor. There was no main effect of gender,  $F(1, 132) = 1.03, n.s.$ , and overall subjects thought that emotional infidelity implies sexual infidelity more than sexual infidelity implies emotional infidelity,  $F(1, 132) = 12.17, p < .001$ . (One female and 2 males failed to answer one of these questions.) The specific prediction, that men think that sex implies love for their partners more than do women, whereas women think that love implies sex more than do men, was tested with the interaction, which was significant,  $F(1, 132) = 11.32, p < .001$ . An inspection of the means, which are presented in Table 2, indicates that the dominant effect was that women think men can have sex without being in love.

## DISCUSSION

The findings provide strong support for the predicted interaction in the extent to which men and women think each form of infidelity implies the other. The pattern suggests that it is reasonable for men to be more concerned than women by evidence of a partner's sexual infidelity and for women to be es-

pecially concerned by evidence of a partner's emotional infidelity. Women may report less concern over scenarios of sexual infidelity because they believe that their partners have sex without being in love; men care more about sexual infidelity because they think it is unlikely to occur without emotional infidelity as well. It need not be the case that men care more about the sex, but may just be that sexual infidelity accompanied by emotional infidelity is worse than sexual infidelity alone.

Both the approach taken by Buss et al. and our own interpretation can explain why women are more bothered by emotional than sexual infidelity. Buss et al. suggested that this is an innate response based on women's desire that their offspring have involved fathers. We suggest it may be due to women's belief that men may have sex without being in love, but are less likely to be in love without having sex. Emotional infidelity is thus logically a more troubling indicator. The account offered by Buss et al., however, has difficulty explaining men's indifference between sexual and emotional infidelity, a pattern that Buss et al. found in their survey (even after discarding men who have never had a committed sexual relationship), and one replicated here. The evolutionary account predicts that men, not wanting their partners bearing others' children, but not caring so much about their partners loving others, should care far more about sexual than emotional infidelity. Our account, that men care about both kinds of infidelity, and our finding that they think the two signal each other about equally, is perfectly compatible with men reporting they would be equally concerned to discover evidence of either type of infidelity.

The different inferences about the relationship of love and sex that are documented here could well reflect actual differences in the behavior of men and women in the world. That is, our subjects may be correct in suspecting that women tend to have sex only when in love, and this tendency may reflect an innate dispositional difference (Symons, 1979). However, even if it does, our account would not require one to postulate an innate gender difference in the intensity with which men and women experience sexual or romantic jealousy. Whether or not the difference in sexual behavior is real, and whether or not it is based in innate biological differences, does not matter. As long as women think that men have sex without love but not love without sex, it is rational for them to be bothered more by reports of emotional infidelity than by reports of sexual infidelity.

Ultimately, all differences between men and women have a genetic origin, because the difference between man and woman is one of genes; however, the path from genes to attitudes and behavior may be circuitous and based on reasoning (Harris & Pashler, 1995). It is not, for example, an innate preference that causes men to micturate standing and women sitting, but a reasonable response to an innate difference. Gender differences in affective responses to jealousy also need not be innate.

One can think of many examples of gender differences in emotions that are based on reasoned interpretations of evidence. Men and women will have very different emotional reactions to lipstick stains on a partner's collar—not because of a difference in their innate responses to lipstick, but rather as a result of their rationally interpreting the evidence differently. What suggests an affair to one sex implies mere sloppiness to the other. Responses to infidelity may likewise not be innate

**Table 1.** Comparison of men's and women's distress in response to imagining emotional and sexual infidelity in a partner (in percentages)

Gender	More bothered by	
	Sex	Love
Females ( $n = 81$ )	12	88
Males ( $n = 55$ )	47	53

**Table 2.** Subjects' rating of how much sexual infidelity implies emotional infidelity and how much emotional infidelity implies sexual infidelity

Gender	Sex implies love	Love implies sex
Females ( <i>n</i> = 81)	2.70	3.75
Males ( <i>n</i> = 53)	3.43	3.32

*Note.* Cells indicate means on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*).

reactions, but instead a result of differences in the way the evidence is interpreted. Men and women need not differ in how much they care about each sort of infidelity, but only in what they think each implies.

**Acknowledgments**—The authors thank Margaret McDevitt, Shirley McGuire, Eric Ruthruff, Mara Sanders, John Wixted, Shama Mesiwala, and Cathy Yi for assistance at various stages.

## REFERENCES

- Buss, D.M., Larsen, R.J., Westen, D., & Semmelroth, J. (1992). Sex differences in jealousy: Evolution, physiology, and psychology. *Psychological Science*, *3*, 251-255.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1983). *Sex, evolution, and behavior* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Harris, C.R., & Pashler, H.E. (1995). Evolution and human emotions. *Psychological Inquiry*, *6*, 44-46.
- Symons, D. (1979). *The evolution of human sexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

(RECEIVED 2/14/95; REVISION ACCEPTED 6/9/95)