

## Unfaithfulness – Cause and/or Effect in Couple Dysfunctionality?

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**ABSTRACT:** Over time, when in crises, the partners in a marital couple have tried to solve their problems in an extramarital frame, the unfaithful relationships being the constant cause of couples' dissolution, no matter the age or durability of the marriage. Unfaithfulness has been the way married people chose to express themselves against narrow, traditional patterns, and a dull private life. Therefore, the adulterous relationships have meant, to some extent, the attempt to compensate for the dissatisfactions of the married life, thus sweetening the banality of the conventional and the bitterness of having an unwanted partner.

**KEY WORDS:** marital couple, faithfulness, unfaithfulness, sexuality, variables of unfaithfulness

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### Introduction

This article represents a revised and extended subchapter from the Dissertation titled *Married couples' perception of infidelity*, unpublished, presented in front of the Evaluation Committee of the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, in June 2011, in Bucharest.

Hereafter, we intend to approach the marital relationship from the perspective of major issues that can occur inside the couple, accentuating unfaithfulness. Following the presentation of some introductory notions, some statistics related to the prevalence of unfaithfulness, as well as the way extramarital relationships have been perceived from a historical and cultural point of view, we intend the reader to focus on some ways of manifesting

unfaithfulness, ways that have been identified and explored throughout our research. Furthermore, we shall analyze some variables of unfaithfulness, such as they are studied in published literature, simultaneously capturing a possible cause of unfaithfulness, from the perspective of changing modern and postmodern perception of sexuality.

## **1. The marital relationship**

The notion of **marital couple** designates “a generating core of the family micro group, expressing structurally and functionally the way in which two opposite sex persons model each other creatively, after they get married, growing, motivating, and determining each other through adjusting and assimilating each other, simultaneously on a biological, psychological, and social plan” (Mitrofan and Mitrofan 1991, 97). Even if from a marital viewpoint, the society proposes alternative options to the notion of “couple,” in this article we shall refer only to the heterosexual marital couple.

The marital relationship is important in the lives of most people, even in the postmodern society, people looking to have safety in their lives, by entering a couple relationship (Træen and Stigum 1998, 42). Marriage has a privileged status amongst grown-ups’ relationships, being a “crucial nomic instrument” (Berger and Kellner 1964, 5). Published literature sees marriage as “a dramatic act in which two strangers unite and define” (Berger, Kellner 1964, 5), the meaning of “stranger” here being that of two persons that come from different contexts. Socially recognized, marriage has some dominant themes (romanticism, sexual fulfilment, self-achievement and self-discovery through love and sexuality), which can be found in all layers of society. In this context, sexual faithfulness is a label of trust, and sexual exclusivity is “the speciality” of marital relationships (Reibstein and Richards 1992).

## **2. Issues inside the marital couple**

The dynamic of marital interactions seldom orients the marital couple either towards cohesion, stability, and progress or towards dissension, instability and, sometimes even, dissolution. Every stage of the marital life cycle is assaulted with problems or conflicts, their causes may vary from an individual to another and from a couple to another (Stoica-Constantin 2004, 48). These

issues may be determined by different incompatibilities, common purposes, personality traits, degree of communication, perception of self, personal values, breaking rules, inappropriate attitudes, interpersonal relationships and needs. Inevitably, the problems and conflicts contribute to the evolution of the relationship towards a positive or a negative conclusion.

The conditions of a precarious economic situation may trigger, in a married person, defense behaviors or a mechanism of compensation for all the frustrations, tiredness, discouragement and anxiety. **Alcohol, cigarettes, illegal drugs, or medicine** taken “by ear” are the most frequent refuge for the persons psychologically “worn out” by an unhappy marriage or burdened by everyday problems (Mitrofan and Mitrofan 1996, 220-221). In a couple we may notice appearing conflicts caused by the distribution of roles, the execution of chores and even by money. Moreover, there are persons that can become emotionally addicted to their partner, especially in a passionate relationship (Valleur and Matysiak, 20). From addictions to domestic violence, it is just one small step, taking refuge in alcohol or drugs being a real nightmare for both the consumer and his family.

**Domestic violence** is a consequence of the power ratio between men and women. The phenomenon has always existed, and taking over power by one of the partners, generally men, was socially reinforced over time. The mind-set behind domestic violence is the traditionalist family model, in which the man is the head of the family and the woman must obey even to his violent acts. The women, who are victims, are educated to keep silent, considering that they are guilty of their partner’s aggressive behavior and thus they must endure and accept the acts of violence in order to keep the family together (Giddens 2001, 178-179).

Aside from the above, in the couple we can see **communication blockages**, which can be caused by the incapacity of both partners to understand the sexes’ differentiated needs and by not knowing the mind-set or gender differences (Mitrofan and Ciupercă 2002, 170-171). When it comes to communication, both men and women forget about the gender differences, namely that they listen to in a different manner, they perceive/offer different solutions to problems, they respond to stress in a different manner, they decode differently their partner’s words, and they express their love in a different way. Also, the effects of this double message are of the most

damaging, the spouses being unable to clearly interpret the received messages and, consequently, they are induced with confused, doubtful, and ambivalent actions. An ineffective communication may, in time, generate conflicts which could have been avoided should the problems be discussed on time. After all, any problem can be solved through dialogue, talking about it, not avoiding it.

Another factor which contributes to intensifying the family issues is **the impossibility to reach intimacy**, this being that “special quality of two persons to be emotionally close to each other” (Mitrofan 2002, 102). Linked to this private aspect of the marital relationship are the **sexual problems**. In the sexual act, the partners continuously engage to one another, and therefore the contemporaneous couple gives a greater importance to sexual performances, aspect which even became obsessive (Ciupercă 2000, 237). Men complain, in general, that marital sexual relations have become rarer and, even if there are women who would want to have more sex, few talk about this. Furthermore, from a qualitative viewpoint, a great deal of sexual relations do not automatically imply great pleasure, sometimes men even rape their wives.

When the marital relationship is not based on trust, honesty, and reciprocal respect, there inevitably appears **jealousy**, which describes a set of feelings that appear when a person perceives her erotic relation with her loved one as being threatened (Mitrofan, Mitrofan 1996, 124). In general, jealousy appears under pathological aspects, dominating the life of the jealous one, and it frequently appears in sensitive, anxious, susceptible persons and who think they are being betrayed and manifest themselves through acts of violence, aggressivity, suicide or even passionate murder (Chelcea and Ivan 2006, 224-225). Trust betrayal depends totally on what the couple established or thought of having established (Spring 2009, 18).

Faithfulness is seen, by many, as an absolutely necessary thing in the evolution of a love relationship. Although the motivations for **unfaithfulness** are diverse, there is never just one cause or just one responsible for it. Even if it appears mostly as a result of a dysfunctional marriage, unfaithfulness may as well be the cause of the problems a couple faces.

Neglecting marital problems instead of solving them may lead to a major marital crisis which can end up in a **divorce**, that is presented as “a complex psychosocial phenomenon which represents the final form of the

marital life dissolution” (Voinea 1996, 65). Engaging tensions, conflicts, frustrations, and dissatisfactions, divorce is, in general, caused by a new perspective of marriage (it is no longer seen as a failure, but as a positive response to a critical situation), by the economical emancipation of woman, as well as by the democratization and liberalization of social life. In particular, divorce is caused by multiple factors: big age difference between partners, psychological and behavioral incompatibilities, dissatisfaction, alcohol, unfaithfulness, jealousy, abuse, and even in-laws and relatives’ involvement.

### 3. Unfaithfulness

#### 3.1. *Introductory notions*

Viewed, in published literature, as a breaking of moral laws of marital faithfulness, by one or both spouses, unfaithfulness is characterized by a fracture on the emotional-moral plan, by tensions, fighting, and even violence (Voinea 1996, 96). Although, from the “betrayed” spouse perspective, it can be seen as a cause of couple disputes. Still, from the unfaithful spouse viewpoint, it is, most of the time, a defense response to an unsatisfactory and dysfunctional marital relationship. Therefore, adultery may be “a type of communication, the message being: *For me, this relationship does not work!*” (Nuță 2001, 134). From an interactional viewpoint, one or both spouses’ adultery is a clear symptom of a deficit of marital interaction. Although, historically speaking, unfaithfulness represented “the vicious pleasure of senses”, “a monstrous image of a savage sexuality,... between two beings in an animal-like state” (Adler 2003, 129), today it is more of a challenge, a test of competence (not just sexual). Being viewed by some specialists as “an evolution determined by a beginning and an end, with a random character” (Simmel 1998, 16), unfaithfulness does happen to someone, but it is something that occurs between two people, the wholeness of the love affair being accomplished when the risk of losing everything combines with pleasure (Duval 2000, 35).

From the viewpoint of the impact over close relationships, unfaithfulness is the most frequent motif for divorce (Betzig 1989, 669), with damaging impact on marriage (Pittman, Wagers, Gurman and Jacobson 2002) and on feelings of love and safety. The betrayed spouses often experience humiliation,

anger, jealousy and even breakdown (Buunk and van Driel 1989), female unfaithfulness (real or presumed) represents the main cause for domestic violence and spouse homicide. (Daly, Wilson, and Weghorst 1982, 12.,15).

Although the hidden nature of extramarital relationships, as well as the development of contraceptive techniques, have crippled the scientific attempts to quantify the extramarital sexuality, there still are numerous studies on this subject. The experts suggest that the probability of a partner to have an affair, while married, varies from 20% to 25% (Widerman 1997, 168), other studies indicate the fact that one third of men and one fifth of women had extramarital relationships (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin 1948, 282). According to some other research, the parameters for extramarital relationships seem to be 50% for married men, the number for married women being extremely close (Thompson 1983, 18). Furthermore, people whose lives are characterized by routine (home, job, children) may have fewer possibilities to enter unfaithful relationships, compared to those who travel more. Moreover, because sexuality is more socially monitored in rural areas than in urban ones, one can presume that a bigger percentage of people in urban areas have extramarital sexual relationships (Træen, Stigum 1998, 43). However, it is possible that men and women do not necessarily have more sexual relationships but seem to have in an extramarital context (Weeks 2012, 321-325). Although many people experience non-monogamy in secret and shamefully, they allegedly continue to accept the morality of monogamy (Reibstein and Richards 1992).

From a historical and cultural point of view, unlike premarital sexual relations, extramarital relations were more severely regulated. There were more restrictive for women than for men, sexuality varying between the different social layers. Men from the upper class have cultivated sex and eroticism more often. At the same time, the working class was too exhausted by work to give sexuality the same importance, sex being more related to the idea of reproduction. By contrast, the middle class gave sexuality the role of mutual exchange of security, intimacy, and pleasure (Træen and Stigum 1998, 43).

In the Romanian space, faithfulness was a virtue, marriage being a sacred institution. In rural areas, feminine unfaithfulness was harshly sanctioned, the person being forced to leave the village. Men unfaithfulness was tolerated, and the consensual relationship with a widow did not generate too many talks. In urban areas, there was more freedom between spouses,

unfaithfulness being very much present amongst artists, writers and even politicians. It was a “virtue” to be the mistress of a “minister” as it was seen as a way to claw your way to the middle, to get privileges or to open doors in different areas. There were also “selfless” or “out of boredom” infidelities experienced by some officers' wives. In modest environments, spouses' faithfulness was greater, man treating his wife as personal goods (Academia Română 2003, 155-158).

### 3.2. *Ways of manifesting unfaithfulness in a couple*

Research has made it possible that today we benefit from numerous psychosocial studies regarding marital faithfulness, certain theories being elaborated. Starting with a glimpse, a certain manner of speaking or listening, embracing, kisses and ending with intercourse, all these can be ways in which unfaithfulness can manifest. The easiest to define is the carnal infidelity, because, in most cases, it involves intercourse, but it becomes less evident when it is just tenderness (touching, kissing, embracing). Even more difficult to establish is the mental unfaithfulness, which implies sharing secrets, and matters of the heart to a third person, especially when you have not discussed them with your spouse.

Between the partners of a marital couple there is an unspoken agreement for total faithfulness, in this context, the infidelities being thus accidental, clandestine and of all types. When talking about *non-consensual infidelities*, we discuss the **mild infidelities** which mean looking at and desiring someone, teasing to flatter, flirtation being limited to embracing and caressing only. In addition, the **blow** infidelity (for an hour, a night) suits an occasion, coming on a background of personal dissatisfaction. Not in the least, the **relationship** (for a month, or years) is a type of unfaithfulness which lasts, and in many cases, the spouse finds out eventually (Leleu 2003, 56).

There is as well, the category of **contractual infidelities**, in this category, enter **couples** that **openly** admit the possibility that one or the other spouse may be involved in a love affair with a third person, the monogamy laws being very permissive in this case. By contract, the partners agree to live as a couple (with their main partner), but in a complete sexual freedom. Some couples share everything, introduce their partners to each other (Bird,

Melville 1994, 163), and even discuss the terms under which the affairs shall unfold: not too much emotional connection, never in our bed/house/town/ or in front of our neighbors (Reibstein and Richards 1992, 101-102). Other couples, on the contrary, adopt such a marital lifestyle and both partners keep silent regarding their extramarital relationships. The particularities of such agreements are the following: the affairs are allowed as long as they are hidden, lying is allowed to camouflage an unfaithful relationship, and, last but not least, the extramarital relationship must not interfere with the main relationship (Gartrell 1999, 26).

Concurrently, there are persons who live in a **community** and share everything: goods, needs, and even their loves. They make the assumption that, since no one can satisfy the totality of one person's needs, this satisfaction can only come from multiple changes of partners. In general, the person living in a community is someone "searching" and is the believer of non-accumulation theory, non-possession and declares himself against marriage (Leleu 2003, 69). There also are families that adhere to these community groups, all these based on the idea that either by being faithful, or by fear of public opinion, or because of educational, moral, and religious laws, the monogamous marriage induces, from the very beginning, "a psychological and sexual neutering of the spouses" (Mitrofan and Ciupercă 1998, 89-90). The life span of such a community is short (two, three years) and every individual has the right to have sex with any partner of choice, in the community prevails equality, irrespective of the social class.

Some couples cannot find erotic pleasure but by **changing partners**. The term "swing" designates a volunteer and temporary exchange between couples with sexual purpose, the sexual combinations taking place with the full acceptance of all parts involved (Mitrofan and Ciupercă 1998, 92). This differs from the community group as the couples are married. Although, in this case, sex is desecrated, the purpose in which the couples accept the exchange of partners is to shake things up, to revitalize their fantasies and, maybe, to compensate for their dissatisfaction. To all these we may also add less clear motivations, such as: the need to feel the fear of losing to reinvigorate their feelings, the satisfaction of a certain masochism seeing their spouse in someone else's arms. It is estimated that in "swing" relationships there are involved young couples and middle-aged couples, members of middle class,



with relatively high incomes, that, except for these sexual practices, have an extremely conventional behavior. (Rădulescu 1999, 315).

### 3.3. *Variables of unfaithfulness*

Based on the negative impact unfaithfulness has on marriage and family relationships, researchers have identified more variables, which can predict infidelity. In the studies, there were noticed characteristics of persons who are susceptible to extramarital relations, identifying both the circumstances and the factors associated with unfaithfulness (Vangelisti, Gerstengerger 2004, 60).

According to research, the individual feature most associated with unfaithfulness is gender, women being less prone to infidelity than men. They have more love affairs than their spouses, while women mostly choose married men, when entering extramarital relationships (Lawson and Samson 1988, 429). On the other hand, men who have a sexual perception of extramarital relationships seem to approve of these more easily than women, women perceive these relationships rather emotionally (Glass, and Wright 1985, 1103). Men's increased tendency towards unfaithfulness might be due to their access to more resources, such as the exposure to more potential partners. Moreover, unfaithful individuals tend to have more permissive values and much libertine sexual attitudes compared to those who remain faithful (Prins, Buunk and VanYperen 1993, 40). At the same time, individuals who have unlimited socio-sexual orientations and increased sexual appetite are more prone to unfaithful relationships (Seal, Agostinelli and Hannett 1994, 1).

Other studies indicate that not just gender difference is the most important variable in infidelity, but "the opportunity variables", such as income and working status, also make a difference (Atkins, Baucom and Jacobson 2001, 735. 743).

Not in the least, studies show that individual tendencies to take advantage of extramarital sexual opportunities are greatly connected to the quality of the marital relationship. Negative marital contentment is associated with unfaithfulness, infidel partners complaining about the low frequency and poor quality of sexual relations (Edwards and Booth 1976, 76-78). Hence, we can conclude that partners with a low marital satisfaction will look for high quality extramarital sexual alternatives.

### 3.4. *Changing the perception of sexuality – possible cause for unfaithfulness*

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century has brought a change in the perception of sexuality, this entire period representing a transition with regard to sexual values and behavior, a transition that transformed the intimate and erotic possibilities of millions.

As a result of the research, four major directions have been identified in the development of the social and sexual life (Haavio-Mannila, Kontula and Rotkirch 2002, 194), directions that reflect the general trend of transition from traditionalism to liberalism.

The first direction is linked to what happened in the 20th century, when **sex was “secularized”** (Weeks 1986, 90), this meaning that sexuality started to be seen more as a personal choice, detached from religious and ideologic values, imposed until then. So, being less ruled by governmental or divine laws, sexuality has become more dependent on the individual's choice of a lifestyle, and the latter has gradually grown detached from the institution of marriage. Once freed from the sexual authoritarianism, the new “sexual freedom” gave people multiple and new possibilities of sexual exploring, the changes acting as a solvent for the old values. The new sexual opportunities have paved the way for the rise of a new ethics, that most people have taken advantage of (Weeks 1986, 91). Being allowed to live together before marriage, more and more young adults have started to become unable to morally distinguish between consensual relationship and marriage (Jamieson 2004, 35).

The second major trend identified was the **liberalization** of attitudes and the emphasis of rights for people with different sexual orientations. Abortion, birth control, divorce, extramarital and premarital sexual relations, consensual relationships, and homosexual relationships are just a few of the directions where more permissiveness occurred. This led to a new recognition of feminine sexual legitimacy. Today, sexuality openly addresses everybody, “offering a cacophony of values and alternative possibilities” (Weeks 1986, 92).

The third major change is represented by **the growing diversity of domestic lifestyle types**. Actually, the traditional connection between marriage, family and sexuality has been interrupted. Since even the relationships pattern have changed, family has reached a crisis, whose cause

and expressions led to “an anxiety of marriage” (Weeks 1986, 93-94). On the other hand, diversity led to the occurrence of some nontraditional patterns for family, patterns such as: single persons (never been married), cohabitation, “stepfamily” (resulted from remarriage and putting together children from different parents), monoparenthood (families resulted from divorce or death, as well as those created through artificial insemination), the so-called “open marriages”, multi adult households, homosexual and lesbian couples, and, probably, many other types (Macklin 1980, 916-915).

In the fourth place, the diminishing of the reproductive role **has oriented sexuality towards pleasure and leisure**, both sexes are, today, expressing their love through sexuality. Since they look for high quality relationships, more individual rewards and even sexual happiness, the spouses have started to put pressure on each other. This trend is in harmony with „the theory of exchange”, that says people seek and enter relationships to obtain rewards, staying in a relationship as long as it is favourable, according to the cost ratio (Hurlbert 1992, 105). Schmidt even claimed that “drive” or “instinct” are no longer primordial motivations for sexual relations, people now seeking powerful sensations, the purpose now being not the ease or equilibrium gained through sex, but that endless source of arousal and emotion (Schmidt 2001, 645-646).

## Conclusions

The consequences of an unfaithful relationship are diverse, from severe and permanent dissolutions of the family, to psychosomatic diseases, suicide, and even passionate murder. Some faithful partners accept their spouses, accepting and forgiving them when they return to their families. Others do not want to risk resuming the relationship, thus exposing themselves to more pain and disappointment. Nevertheless, giving up a dysfunctional, damaged relationship may be the easiest solution, but it is also a way to avoid facing some harsh truths about self, life, love and taking responsibility, which may make the relationship functional. Although from the “betrayed” spouse perspective, unfaithfulness may appear as a cause for the couples’ problems, however, from the unfaithful point of view, it is a defense response against an

unsatisfactory and dysfunctional marital relationship. Although extremely hurt by an extramarital relationship, many are brave enough to admit they can remain together, they can each take the blame for their own mistakes, and that, together, they can rebuild trust and marital intimacy.

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