

When Better Becomes Worse: Black Wives Describe Their Experiences with Infidelity

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Abstract

In addition to media representations that depict black sex as easy and free, mainstream research often normalizes infidelity as a black-community pathology. This essay counters the stereotypes by presenting black women's first-person narrative experiences with infidelity, discussing the impact of a unique imbalanced sex ratio in the African American community, and considering the pertinent public-health implications of infidelity. Interviews conducted with twenty women yielded twenty-five hours of data and the following emergent themes: definitions of infidelity, infidelity discoveries, violations, responses, and making plans.

Introduction

Infidelity has become an affair with capitalism within the black community. In addition to visual images that depict black sex as easy and free, extramarital sex has become quite profitable in the literary realm. Consider these representative book titles: Cydney Rax's *My Husband's Girlfriend* (2006), Miasha's *Diary of a Mistress* (2006), Karrine Steffans's *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (2005), Joy Marie's *The Straight-Up Truth about the Down-Low* (2008), HoneyB's *Single Husbands* (2009), and Grace Octavia's *Take Her Man* (2009). *Essence* sells magazines with prurient articles titled "Sex, Lies, and Infidelity" (April 2009), "What Makes a Black Man Cheat?" (October 2008), and "Confessions of the Other Woman" (April 2007). The profitability of selling black sex makes the sexual affairs of current cultural icons like Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, and Bill Cosby more public than the clandestine affairs of past icons like Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King Jr. (Robeson 1930, Powers 1995).

Unsurprisingly, the infidelity narratives that sell well are shortsighted. They frequently normalize black infidelity by focusing on why men cheat,

public apologies from men who have strayed, and salacious details from mistresses. Wives who have experienced infidelity, however, are integral components of infidelity narratives, yet they receive the least attention. This study centralizes their experiences in their own words because black wives' perspectives are essential to complicating not only the popular narratives but also the research on infidelity within the black community. Specifically, this study presents definitions of infidelity, infidelity discoveries, violations, responses, and making plans as the emergent themes from the narratives of twenty wives who experienced infidelity.

Review of Literature

According to research, African Americans have a greater proclivity to infidelity than white Americans (Choi, Catania, and Dolcini 1994; Forste and Tanfer 1996; Treas and Giesen 2000; Wiederman 1997). The black-marriage dissolution rate is higher than that of white Americans, as it hovers around 50 percent (Clarkwest 2007; Forste and Tanfer 1996; Phillips and Sweeney 2005). Pinderhughes (2002, 276) posits, "The rates of infidelity of African American men constitutes [*sic*] a prime factor in marital instability and rising divorce. They exhibit infidelity at a rate higher than other groups, and are nearly twice as likely to be unfaithful as white men." Infidelity is generally identified as a prime contributor to divorce, second only to physical abuse (Molina 1999; Olson et al. 2002; Shackelford, Buss, and Bennett 2002; Wiederman 1997).

Statistics are frequently used to explain black men's penchant for infidelity as a result of an imbalanced sex ratio that makes eighty-five black men available for every one hundred black women. The sex-ratio imbalance is exacerbated by higher mortality and incarceration rates for black men; however, it is not a new phenomenon. The imbalance began in 1850 when lynching was the primary form of violence enacted against black men (Aborampah 1989). Relationship experts suggest that black men are less likely to be faithful because they have so many other viable alternatives available to them (Choi, Catania, and Dolcini 1994; Hutchinson 1999; Penn, Hernández, and Bermúdez 1997; Pinderhughes 2002; Wiederman 1997). The imbalanced sex ratio can have devastating effects on black women and black families not only by jeopardizing relationships but also by jeopardizing a partner's health.

In addition to compromising healthy black relationships and stable families, black infidelity demands research and attention because it is a public-health issue. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that "African Americans accounted for 51% of all HIV/AIDS cases diagnosed in 2007" (2009, 7). The National Urban League's *State of Black America* (2008) reports,

61% of those under age 25 with the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS are African American, and African-American women are diagnosed with AIDS at a rate nearly 24 times higher than white women. Black women are more likely to be infected by heterosexual means—sexual contact with men who are HIV positive—compared to other racial and ethnic groups.

The majority of women who are new HIV/AIDS cases engage in high-risk behavior (that is, behavior that includes having sex with men who are having sex with multiple partners). Not only are black men more likely to have multiple sex partners (Choi, Catania, and Dolcini 1994; Treas and Giesen 2000), but black women are less likely to control condom use in their relationships (Bowleg, Lucas, and Tschann 2004). Choi, Catania, and Dolcini (1994) considered the public-health implications of extramarital sex in light of HIV transmission. They oversampled African American and Hispanic populations within an urban sample and concluded,

Of the 77 respondents in the urban sample who reported extramarital sex, 65% and 60% never used condoms with their main and secondary partners, respectively; about 1 in 5 irregularly used condoms with their main (18%) and secondary partners (21%); and less than one fifth always used condoms with their main (17%) and secondary partners (19%). (2005)

Despite infidelity's contribution to increasing sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates in the black community, dissolution rates for black marriages, and devastating effects on black relationships and families, most infidelity research simply calls for more culturally specific research on the black population (Blow and Hartnett 2005a; Forste and Tanfer 1996; Treas and Giesen 2000).

Admittedly, some generalizations about infidelity risk factors, such as marrying at a young age, being in the early years of marriage, low marital satisfaction, and opportunity, can be made across cultures (Allen and Atkins 2005; Blow and Hartnett 2005b; Forste and Tanfer 1996; Liu 2000, Phillips and Sweeney 2005; Treas and Giesen 2000). Unfortunately, Olsen et al. (2002, 423–24) note that a majority of the infidelity research focuses on “the prediction of infidelity and identification of specific risk factors” without considering “the aftermath of the affairs.” Blow and Harnett (2005a) identify pain and shame as the primary hindrances to participants' honest divulgence in regard to their experiences with infidelity, but they also argue that convenience samples where individuals (often undergraduates) are asked to imagine hypothetical infidelity situations are ineffective because accuracy

is impossible to measure (Abraham et al. 2003; Nannini and Meyers 2000; Shackelford, Buss, and Bennett 2002).

Adhering to Olsen et al.'s (2002) call for research on the aftermath of affairs and Blow and Harnett's (2005a) petition for more diverse cultural representation in infidelity research, this study asks black wives to describe their experiences with infidelity. The purpose of this exploratory study is not to contribute to the bawdy tabloidization of black sex but to create a more complex and accurate depiction of black infidelity by focusing on what black wives have said about their experiences. It is the first qualitative study to ask how African American wives experience infidelity.

Method

Participants in this study ($n = 20$) were ever-married women who experienced infidelity during their marriages, self-identified as African American, and over twenty-one years old. All participants were self-selected from Southern California, meaning they initiated contact with me when they heard about the study via word of mouth either interpersonally or via electronic mail. The mean age of the interviewees was 49.8 years old. Fifty-five percent ($n = 11$) had some college experience or earned a college degree. Thirty-five percent ($n = 7$) earned a graduate or professional degree. Eighty percent ($n = 16$) of the women identified as Christian. In terms of their marital status, 55 percent ($n = 11$) were divorced and single, 20 percent ($n = 4$) were still married, 15 percent were separated ($n = 3$), and 10 percent ($n = 2$) were divorced and in committed relationships. No one had divorced and subsequently remarried.

All of the face-to-face interviews were conducted in Southern California in settings chosen by the participants. Some interviews took place in restaurants, others in their work offices, in their homes or mine. No other family members or friends of the interviewees were present during the interviews. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question at any time and could terminate the interview at any time. Participants gave their informed consent before the interviews began. To ensure their privacy, they chose aliases for themselves and their (former) partners. Interviewees were initially asked to define the term *infidelity* and then prompted to "tell me about your experiences with infidelity with this definition in mind." The semistructured interview protocol proceeded organically. The following target questions and probes were asked in a way that maintained the natural flow of the conversation: "Define *love*," "If you could go back and change anything, what would you change," "What advice would you give to a woman

who finds herself in an infidelity situation similar to yours,” and “Why did you choose to talk to me.” I did not ask the wives how their race impacted their experiences with infidelity. Although this is a project about black wives, I did not want to skew their data by asking them for a racial component.

While discussing their experiences with infidelity, participants addressed a range of issues including but not limited to the following: the other woman and how they found out about the infidelity, their relationships before and after the infidelity, the impact of infidelity on their children, and their decision-making process about whether to stay or leave. Interviews ranged in length from 40 to 154 minutes ($m = 88$). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The verbatim transcripts were used as sources for the content analysis. No compensation was offered to the participants.

Because it is very difficult to recruit individuals to talk honestly and openly about the often painful and embarrassing experiences associated with infidelity, I was able to recruit only one woman who had experienced it within the past twelve months. The average length of time elapsed since the first incident of infidelity was thirteen years. Additionally, many of the women experienced infidelity in more than one marriage, and a majority of the women had partners who had multiple extramarital sex partners. A limitation of this study is the impossibility of ensuring the accuracy of their memories under these circumstances. Although a sample size of twenty appears small, it is the same number interviewed by Olson et al. in their 2002 study “Emotional Processes Following Disclosure of an Extramarital Affair” and slightly larger than the fourteen-person sample size in Bowleg, Lucas, and Tschann’s (2004) study on black women’s sexual scripts. Furthermore, the twenty interviews provided over twenty-five hours of data; and theoretical saturation was reached as consistent themes, regardless of time elapsed and a smaller sample size, emerged from coding the transcripts.

In order to preserve the accuracy of the participants’ lived experiences, I applied grounded theory methods, specifically open coding, to the transcripts (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Charmaz (2005, 517) describes grounded theorists as researchers who “focus on defining action, explicating implicit assumptions, and seeing processes. By engaging in line-by-line coding, the researcher makes a close study of the data and lays the foundation for synthesizing it.” Thus, I identified emergent and consistent themes through line-by-line reading and rereading of the full-text verbatim transcripts. I refrained from interpreting these themes as I coded. Sixteen distinct themes emerged. Due to space limitations, this exploratory study focuses on the

underresearched aspect of black women's direct experiences with infidelity that includes these five subthemes: definition of infidelity, discovery, violations, responses, and making plans.

Results

Definition of Infidelity

Because definitions of *infidelity* vary, it was important to establish how the wives understood the term *infidelity* at the beginning of the interviews. Consequently, those definitions are also important to establish at the beginning of the results section. Half of the wives ($n = 10$) included a physical or emotional relationship with someone other than one's spouse within their definition of *infidelity*. Blow and Hartnett (2005a, 186) note that *infidelity* is difficult for researchers to define because "acts clearly defined as infidelity in one relationship may not be even close to infidelity in another relationship." Because I recruited women who had "experienced infidelity," I expected the participants' perspectives to vary. Sabrina summed the other more ambiguous responses ($n = 4$) when she stated, "infidelity is being untrue to an agreed upon commitment made with a person in an intimate relationship." The agreed-upon commitment may be the typical definition of heterosexual, extramarital intercourse defined by four of the wives as simply "cheating." Other wives defined *infidelity* more broadly as the "creation of distrust" and "traumatic betrayal."

Discovery

Although most of the wives could articulate clear definitions of *infidelity*, it was much more challenging for them to prove their husbands were cheating. Research shows that cheating partners are often disinclined to confess (Allen and Atkins 2005; Marie 2008). This section on discovery details the interesting ways that wives received confirmation primarily through word of mouth, technology, and paying more attention to their husbands' habits.

Word of mouth is a dominant form of discovery. Sisters-in-law are surprisingly forthcoming with information, as is a husband of a cheating wife. Random people aid in discovery, too. Willa, for example, described her experience:

There was always somebody that managed to tell on him, whether that was the intent or not. A co-worker would approach me. "Willa, I saw your car

last night, was trying to wave to you.” And I said, “You saw it where?” “Umm, Arcadia.” “Ah, it was my husband more than likely.” Okay, it’s not the intent. They don’t even know him, but, you know, it comes up. My mother used to have an old cliché: what goes on in the dark always comes out in the light.

Mistresses often come right out and confess to the wives. For respondents Brenda, Conchita, and Kathy, confirmation occurred when their husband’s mistresses showed up on the front porch. Brenda refused to believe her third husband when he denied that he was having an affair with the woman yelling and screaming at him on the lawn. When Conchita’s husband refused to talk to his mistress on the porch, she went outside and was shocked to hear the mistress beg, “Please give him to me.” Kathy let the intoxicated woman at her front door rant for three hours until she tired herself. Kathy refused to give the mistress the satisfaction of knowing that she was hurt, but she admitted to “spiraling on the phone” as she talked to a girlfriend immediately after the episode.

Technology further aids in discovery. Participants Ebony, Kelly, and Marie boldly confronted the respective mistress on the phone after they had culled phone records and discovered their husbands’ frequent calls to numbers they did not recognize. Checking phone records online aided Lola’s and Maria’s discoveries as well. Maria had been tracking her husband’s phone records and his email, so she knew he was talking to at least three or four other women regularly. She called her own house from an untraceable phone card, so there would be evidence of a call on the caller ID. Then she described the pitch and tone of a woman she had completely made up. Her husband was initially unnerved and brushed off the phone call. Maria kept reporting that she “got that call again” until Louis actually confessed that he had been building relationships with other women.

Simply paying attention to their husband’s new and often secretive habits was an important clue for most of the wives. Marie noted that the number of condoms in the nightstand drawer diminished. Sabrina found ten years of video recordings of her husband having unprotected sex with strippers and prostitutes. Ce Ce described her discovery: “As we were having intimate relationships, he made a move I hadn’t seen before, and I said to myself, “What was that? And that’s when I knew. They always think you have to see them.” Before her husband confessed that his mistress was pregnant, Jane’s intuition told her through a series of dreams that her husband was being unfaithful. Tina found out when her husband told her that his mistress was pregnant.

The wives who experienced infidelity in their marriages were not completely surprised. Lola said it best: “But in retrospect, there were so many signs that I just didn’t wanna see.” Tina talked about her relationship in hindsight:

I thought that when you trust somebody, you trust somebody. I don’t have time to be jealous. If you don’t wanna be with me, leave . . . bye . . . you know, and I truly respected him enough to know that, okay, oh, he’s not gonna do that; but I should have realized when all my girlfriends and people that knew him said he’s good-looking, he’s getting that attention. . . . I should have known that if my friends are telling me this, just imagine if I’m not with him and he’s out by himself. I know he’s getting hollered at, so the key is whether or not he’s responding to that. And yeah and I should have known. I think the signs were all there before I even said yes to him in marriage.

Dee explained why she ignored the little signs:

I’m not going to say I didn’t have any idea. I wasn’t looking for it to an extent, and to an extent I didn’t care. As long as he was doing what he needed to do within the household . . . he was a good father to our kids and he was a provider and he pulled his weight around the house and I considered him to be a pretty decent father, a pretty decent husband. I wasn’t really looking at the little signs that would come up that would maybe spark another woman to say, “Hmm, maybe my husband’s doing something.” I wasn’t looking for those things, so for me I probably let a lot of little things slide that looking back now, saying, oh my God, okay, now that makes sense, but I didn’t probe into it because if you would have asked me a day before everything came out, I would have thought that I had a good marriage.

Dee’s description of a good marriage as one where the husband provides for his family is a traditional masculine role that men who are unfaithful do not necessarily abdicate. Only one of the husbands of the women in my study asked for a divorce. In fact, at the time of this study, Dee’s husband, William, still refuses to sign divorce papers, even though he has two children with his mistress and emotionally, financially, and physically left his family with Dee five years ago.

Even though a majority of the husbands did not want to leave their wives, the wives acknowledged that their husband’s behavior had become more secretive. Many of the husbands started creating space between themselves and their wives. They were home less often. They communicated less. They had sex less. Or they became more abusive.

Violations

Infidelity was considered a violation by many of the study's participants, but the violations theme explores companion forms of abuse. Half of the wives described their husbands as physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive. For Ce Ce and Grace, it was a violent confrontation and not the infidelity that spurred them to leave the relationship. Ce Ce describes the incident that prompted her to leave:

Christmas Eve 1994, I said something to him. It wasn't anything really serious. He decided to hit me in my head three times, okay, real hard, and so that was it 'cause he seemed to be out of control, escalating environments, no interest in the children, would not take care of the children, and he used to do things in front of the children like put me in like a chokehold and drag me backwards across the room, and my children would be screaming at the top of their lungs, trying to jump on him. You know they're little babies, right? Trying to get him off, and he's laughing hysterically, you know, so they're going to think he's crazy, okay. So, anyway, I started getting ready to go after he hit me in the head three times, and, uh, I moved out.

Grace's story is similar. "One day my oldest daughter who was five at the time seen him jump on me and then the next morning she asked me about it, and I was like, it's time to go."

The physical violations a husband can commit against a wife are not limited to beatings. Many of the women in the study either contracted an STI from their husbands or had been exposed to one through him. Alma realized her husband was cheating when she found medicine in his open briefcase that a friend told her was for a venereal disease. Anita also found out her husband had been unfaithful when a nurse from the Department of Health informed her that her husband had a STD. Willa recounted, "Honey, I've had more STD's than Carter's got pills and I have been with no one other than him." Two of the wives contracted trichomoniasis. Kelly said,

And that was another thing that hurt me so bad too because, if you're gonna fool around, you wouldn't use protection? I mean trichomoniasis is something very small, but it could have easily been AIDS, or HIV, or anything, you know?

Sherry knows. When they would argue, her husband told her that "he made it where no other man would ever want her again." For years, she wondered what that meant until she wound up in the hospital and the doctors determined that she was HIV positive.

Infidelity is a physical, sexual, and emotional betrayal, yet only two wives admitted to complete abstinence when they had proof of adultery. Lola was in denial:

I just remembering saying to him once, if you ever, ever bring anything into my body, you will have a serious price to pay. Um, but, um, again I, I was just in denial. And so I just didn't insist on protection for a while. . . . Thank God, I never did get anything.

Kathy decided it wasn't worth the fight:

Basically he refused to just not bother me, and I just gave in because it was, I mean, either I'm gonna fight you and I'm gonna end up calling the police on you and putting you in jail for rape, or I'm just gonna lay there and just let you do your thing.

Ce Ce's cheating husband would not allow her to protect her sexual health. When he wanted sex and she didn't, he forced her. She recalls thinking, "If I don't leave him, I'm going to get AIDS." Maria didn't have to protect her sexual health because she said, "He ain't gonna touch it cause it's too much fat there and he don't wanna touch the fat." Maria's self-esteem took quite a battering during their marriage because of her husband's constant disparaging about her weight.

Several husbands belittled their wives' physical appearances. Lola's and Dee's husbands also harangued them about their weight. Lola's husband consistently denied his affair until he finally exploded: "Go look at you. What do you expect? Why wouldn't you expect me to try to find someone else? You know, you gained all this weight; you're not losing weight." Dee was on active duty in the Marine Corps and, after three children, was a size five or seven, yet she described her husband's negative comments about her weight: "Whenever he would get angry with me or get mad at me or, you know now that I think about it, even when he wanted to start a fight so that he can get out of the house—fat ass. I was always fat he would always called me fat."

In addition to the emotional abuse and stress inherent in dealing with infidelity, 25 percent ($n = 5$) of the wives also had to deal with children their husbands had fathered outside their marriage. Kathy's and Dee's husbands each had two. Willa's, Tina's, and Jane's husbands each had one. Kathy even allowed the two children her husband fathered during their marriage to live with them.

Furthermore, according to the wives, most of their husbands had multiple affairs. Dee wrote down every affair that her husband confessed to her. She

counted over forty. Ce Ce believes her ex-husband was a sex addict because he had so many extramarital relationships.

Grace describes the pain of infidelity:

You have given this person a very deep part of you and given him a place in you that no one has ever been before and it's a place that only one person should be and that person is your husband, that person that you're in love with, and when that's disrespected and taken from you, he's actually taken a part of you. And it's not just, oh, you've taken my heart. No, to me it's deeper than that, it's like, it's almost like you've carried this person in your womb. You've allowed him in all these years and then for him to take something that was most precious to you and disrespect it and misuse it is like . . . I don't know, it's just . . . it's just to me, it was just very very deep. I felt like you just . . . you just vomited me up and moved on.

Because of and also in spite of the pain, the majority of the wives decided to just move on. No one who eventually left did so immediately. Even Sabrina, who found her husband's recordings of sex with prostitutes, wanted to rebuild the relationship. Several of the women interviewed remained married at the time of this study and are trying to work it out.

Responses

Despite a majority of the wives' decision to leave their relationships, their initial responses to infidelity reflected their most pressing concerns, which included parenting, taking personal responsibility, and becoming the other woman. For example, ten of the women who left their husbands had children with them. None of them wanted to be single parents or "baby mamas." Kelly said she got married when she found out she was pregnant because "I wanted my daughter to have a family, not just a baby daddy." Conchita admitted, "No one gave me a book on being married, being in relationships, the do's and the don'ts. But in my mind, I figured if I had my children in a two-parent home, I would have successful kids." When describing the effect her separation had on her children, Dee said,

If I would have ever known that my son would be raised without a father in the home, I would have never had a son. I know the history of that, and I know how hard it is for our black men just to grow up in this world, period; and to grow up without a father in the home is way worse.

But when things got rough, many of them chose to be single parents because they knew that would be best for their children. Lola did not want to be a

single parent again, but she conceded that she hurt her children by taking so long to separate from their unloving father. Alma said she wished she had left her unfaithful husband when her children were younger because she thought he would have paid his daughters more attention as a weekend dad than he did when they were all living together and he thought his mere presence was parenting.

In her study on working women and divorce, Molina (1999) concluded that her participants were better off post-divorce. She noted,

For most women the feelings during the post-divorce phase showed a great improvement. Typical responses were feelings of happiness, freedom, and increased self-esteem. A few women expressed realistic sadness about their children growing up without their father at home. However, everyone had accepted the divorce by this phase as the necessary thing to do. (7)

In contrast to Molina's study, my participants were still regaining their self-esteem.

Three of the wives blamed themselves for the dissolution of their marriages. Conchita never left her abusive and cheating husband because she did not "want to be a blemish." "If I would have got a divorce or left my husband, that would have been a failure," she explained. Ebony described herself as a "two-time loser." She admitted to being unhappy with her second husband, the father of her children. She said she could not stand him. He was not a go-getter and he was not a good role model for her sons, but she regretted divorcing him and breaking up her family in a society that says individuals should be married and children should have both parents. Grace conceded, "I had to forgive myself in saying that it's my fault." Lola admitted to asking herself, "What could I have done differently?" Brenda did not reach out for support when she found out about her second husband's infidelity because she disclosed, "I had always taken responsibility for it. I got myself into this mess." Tina willingly accepted responsibility:

I also take accountability upon myself in terms of the ways in which I may have contributed in some way to the failing of our relationship, and it's not just talking about infidelity but it's talking about the years of being together and the other significant things that may have happened or played out within our relationship. So it wasn't just about infidelity. I mean, that was the thing, the straw that broke the camel's back, but you gotta be able to question leading up to that how have we participated and played in the sort of, you know, breakdown of a marriage.

While none of the women responded to their husband's infidelity with a "revenge affair," Kathy and Ebony were eventually the "other women" of married men. Kathy's lover was someone she knew before she had married her husband. They were in each others' weddings and were the best of friends, but Kathy eventually called it off because, in addition to her, he had too many other women. Ebony's take on infidelity was also shaped by her past. She explained:

So, coming out of [my first] marriage I think it was like, my dad did it, my dad cheated, now here's this man who kind of took the place of my father because, you know, he was buying me and taking care of me where my dad use to, you know. Then he did it. So, it was like, well, it's supposed to be done. So then my mentality after that was like, well, I'm a do them before they do me 'cause somebody gone get done, and it ain't gone be me no more.

Infidelity's consequences are much more far-reaching than the dissolution of a marriage. The betrayed spouse must buffer, in this case, her self-esteem and determine how she will deal with her betrayal in other relationships. In addition, families are separated and the social stigma of divorce and "broken homes" impacts all family members (Penn, Hernández, and Bermúdez 1997). Sometimes financial constraints necessitated or prevented a wife from leaving the relationship. With these consequences in mind, leaving a relationship that has been wracked by infidelity is not an easy thing to do. The wives made sophisticated plans.

Making Plans

In revealing how they made plans to leave their marriage, wives discussed their finances, support systems, and the process of moving out. Finances were a very important factor in the wives' decision making. Kelly and her husband are working through his infidelity partially for financial reasons:

That's another reason why I decided to stay with him also, because we have bills and things together too so it's better for us to stay together for that reason. That's one of the main reasons because we still do love each other, but finances does play a role.

Kathy took back her husband, accepted the children he fathered during their marriage, and stayed in the marriage much longer than she desired because they had major debt and she needed help with the bills. She described herself making an "emotional economic decision": "Because had we not owed all that money, he would have never come back in the house." Brenda found

herself in a different situation. She left her second husband because he wanted her to support him. She described him as never working “an adult job”: “I think with him it was more the ‘you will support me’ than the infidelity.”

Willa was advised not to leave her husband because it would financially devastate her:

I was going to file for divorce I would say maybe . . . eight or nine years ago, and I went to the lawyer and I was ready to move on, you know, and I was told at that time because I was the reliable person in our partnership that nine times out of ten I would suffer greatly if I divorced him because he could always go back and say that he didn’t know and I would wind up paying spousal support even if he did make more money than I did because he was a freaking idiot with money and we had been together all of this time and I being the responsible party to make sure everything was maintained, then it would become my responsibly by the rules of the state of California to support his smart ass.

Willa decided to sell the house that he viewed as a “cash cow” and devised a set of terms for reconciliation that would completely eradicate his freedom should he want to reconcile their separation. When he refused the terms as she predicted, she felt personally absolved of responsibility, albeit not legally.

Kathy, Willa, Sabrina, and Lola eventually acquired new places to live in their names only so that their husbands could not follow them when they were ready to leave. Lola’s job and the fact that she made more money than her husband were points of contention during the marriage, but they provided her with the option to leave:

I could say, you know what, if he doesn’t give me a dime, I can take care of myself and the kids. If he decides he’s not giving us any support, I know we will make it. You know, we’ll be okay. . . . And I also think that’s a big reason he was very resentful. Because this gave me a sense of independence.

Maria admitted to being a big spender, but she paid off her bills because, she said, “I didn’t know what was going on or what was going to happen or if I would need more money for a divorce.” Ebony saved her money, too. She told her husband, “I ain’t paying no mo bills. You the man, you the head, you run this house. So I started putting my money away. Cause I had a plan.” Ebony had the money she needed when she was ready to leave.

Ce Ce planned her escape over seven years. She waited until she was healthy and financially solvent. When it was time to pack, though, she did not hide her plans. She recounted her story:

So he's so preoccupied with his life that he would be out late at night and I would be packing and I would put the boxes in a line outside in the garage and then he would come in and walk by the boxes and then I would take those same boxes and put them in my car the next morning and move over to the apartment, and the next day there would be different boxes lined up across the garage and he never noticed.

The day she was completely moved in, she picked up her children from school and took them to their new apartment which was completely furnished and unpacked.

Many of the other women put plans in motion so that, when the opportunity presented itself, they simply moved. Grace waited until her unfaithful and abusive husband went to work. Then she left and never came back. When Kim had confirmation that her husband was cheating and knew she could not save her marriage, she waited until her husband went away on a trip; then, she says, she "planned her escape." A childhood friend helped her pack and move her and her daughter back to her mother's house. Sherry bought a one-way ticket to California. She asked her best friend to hold it for her; when her husband hit her again, she kept her promise to herself and left. Once these women knew that their husband's behavior was other than it should be, they started making power moves. Admirably, the majority of them also picked up the pieces of their lives on their own.

When asked who they talked to and who they turned to for support when they discovered the unfaithful husband, several reported that they had no one to which to turn. Brenda noted that she talked to

One friend and I didn't really tell her details. . . . I really didn't talk, I just handled it. I really never talked to anyone about problems in my marriage because the first divorce my parents were totally shocked, like, "You're getting divorced?" "Oh yeah, it'll be final in two weeks." It's like, "You didn't mention it." "Oh, I guess I didn't."

Ce Ce, a microbiologist, kept her personal issues to herself not only because she was a private person but also because of class issues:

My husband and I are successful, so when you try to talk to people and most of them are not successful, there's a little bit of, you know, . . . haters. So I began to tell people what was going on, and I guess some of them wondered why I didn't leave or didn't want to hear it. I don't know what, but I kinda think that, even though I had problems in my marriage I took so good care of my children and I accomplished so much that they couldn't take it.

In a society where fewer African American women are getting married, it makes sense that the unmarried would have little patience for those in marriages. The predominant sentiment would be “at least you have a husband.”

Jane waited a year to tell her mother and two years to tell her father about her husband’s infidelity. She said her family was too critical and negative. She did not need to hear “all men were bad.” When asked whom she confided in, Kim lamented, “You know what? I didn’t have any supports, so I didn’t know who to talk to or even how to talk to somebody; I didn’t know what questions to ask.” Marie commiserated with one good friend. She characterized their interactions:

I would only tell her so much because she, you know, she would often tell me like, girl, you’re stupid for staying. . . . She was very pragmatic about that stuff, so I only told some stuff so she wouldn’t think I was a total idiot, but I would talk to her.

Kelly talked to her mother, but Grace said her mother was the last person she could call:

I remember when I was getting married, I remember my mom saying, “You will never have him by yourself” and I remember my response was, then, if I can’t have him by myself then there’s no sense in me getting married. And when I was going through what I was going through . . . I knew I wasn’t going to call my mom because that’s the first thing that came up in my mind is what she said. I would just be crying and pretty much consoling within myself. And it just, I don’t know. I really didn’t have anybody to talk to.

Lola also talked to family. Her husband’s mother turned out to be a “big support.” Sabrina found a confidant in a woman at work who was there when the people she normally reached out to were not answering their phones. Two other women were spiritually grounded. Conchita talked to God, and Maria confided in an intercessory prayer partner.

Most of the wives’ plans for themselves and their children were made on their own or with the help of one or two friends who knew piecemeal details. Lola reiterates the typical superwoman perspective of black women:

It’s not easy to admit that, you know, you were fooled, so to speak, that you allowed someone to be in your life for so long and accept it, you know. You feel like you’re gonna be seen differently by them. You wanna be seen as, you got it all together. You’re the strong person. And, you know, they could even give some support to you, but I think sometimes it’s a fear of being

embarrassed. And I think that's even why a lot of women who are abused, you know, don't come forward and get help.

Even though they might not have had extensive support networks when they were healing from their experiences with infidelity, most of the wives were more than willing to speak with me in the hope that the project would help other women. Others admitted that the interview was personally cathartic for them. Dee explained why she shared:

If someone can read my story or hear about my story and it could motivate them maybe early on to see the signs that I didn't see. Maybe to get out of a relationship before it gets to the point that it got with mine. . . . Do I want to announce it on top of the building? No, but do I want to let people know that these things do happen and that maybe by hearing mine, maybe I can deter, maybe I can help somebody.

Kathy asserted, "I hope that whatever comes of it someone is enlightened, empowered, enlified by it." Kelly admitted, "I actually thought it was kind of like a duty to talk about it. I have to admit though, if you weren't black, I probably wouldn't of did it." Ce Ce's sharing had personal benefits, "I learned, uh, in my 30's, cause I'm 52 right now, that if I talk about what has happened and I tell everybody what's going on, I feel happier; so I don't care." Jane articulated the sentiments of most of the interviewees when she said that she needed to forgive so that she could be happy.

Discussion

Although half of the participants included sexual and emotional aspects in their infidelity definition, sexual infidelity was the primary focus of their narratives. No one offered a story solely about emotional infidelity. Abraham et al. (2003, 211) posit, "In theory emotional infidelity is more distressing to women than to men because it signals a potential threat to a romantic partner's commitment to the relationship and to continued access to critically needed resources." Women are supposed to be more upset about emotional connections than sexual ones because women marry for emotional and economic security (Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Hill 2005; Hutchinson 1999; Mandara et al. 2008; Shackleford, Buss, and Bennett 2002).

While I am not disputing the stressors of emotional infidelity, the wives in my study also reveal that sexual infidelity poses a direct threat to one's emotional and economic security, especially when children are involved and

STIs are transmitted. Tina's emotional security was shattered when she found out her husband impregnated his mistresses:

So just imagine going on years and years and him taking that f-ing risk of not putting on a rubber, of not protecting himself, and you hear many stories, in particular black women were HIV positive or have AIDS; so I am thankful in the ways in which the life has played out and not so many women have been lucky.

The distrust and disrespect engendered through unprotected sex have emotional and economic consequences when children are born. Dee was devastated when her husband left to be with his new family the day after they buried their daughter. Kathy recounted, "I added it all up and told him these [two] kids . . . have cost us \$80,000 out of our household, and that did not include the four kids that he had when I married him." Based on these experiences, further research must account for sexual infidelity's impact on women's emotional, physical, and financial health.

Initial discovery of sexual infidelity was devastating. Most of the men who committed infidelity confessed when they fathered children, although the timing of those confessions ranged from conception to the child being two years old. Word of mouth and technology were the other primary means of discovery. I selected narratives about first discoveries, but confirmation would recur for many of the wives through technological innovations. A majority of them combed cell phone records online. Several tracked the husband's email. Once, Maria responded to her husband's mistress through his email. Kelly was taking pictures with her husband's digital camera and saw date-stamped pictures of him and his mistress on vacation together.

The wives consistently described husbands' private spaces—they had their own offices, computers, email accounts, voice mail, and cell phones. Wood (2009, 145) describes the relationship between proxemics and power: "Proxemics offers keen insight into the relative power and status accorded to various groups in society. Space is the primary means by which a culture designates who is important." Access to private spaces designates power in a household. The husbands' autonomy and disengagement from their marriages (primary risk factors for infidelity) were made possible by the power imbalance created by proxemics (Allen and Atkins 2005). Blow and Hartnett (2005b, 227) argue that couples with separate lives are more likely to be nonmonogamous. This study argues that couples who live together in separate spaces that represent an imbalance of power are also likely to be nonmonogamous.

The wives admitted to rarely entering their husbands' spaces until they had reason to do so. Upon entering the husband's spaces, the wives found proof of his infidelity practically out in the open—easily accessible messages on the voicemail, cards in briefcases, saved emails to other women. When initially confronted, most husbands lied. There seemed to be less of a need to hide the evidence and more of need to lie about it. The entitlement to space translated into an entitlement to power. hooks (2000, 40) believes “men use lying, and that includes withholding information, as a way to control and subordinate.” She continues:

Even the wealthiest professional woman can be “brought down” by being in a relationship where she longs to be loved and is consistently lied to. To the degree that she trusts her male companion, lying and other forms of betrayal will most likely shatter her self-confidence and self-esteem. (40–41)

Marie described herself as a “super detective” doing “crazy stuff” to expose her husband's lies. “That was that thing that made me crazy. I just could never really get the kind of admission and then, you know, being genuinely remorseful about it.” She admitted at the conclusion of the interview that the “madness” “was a tremendous waste of energy” that she wished she had put toward getting herself together.

Undermining self-confidence and a lessening of self-esteem are only two of several violations experienced by the wives. Because there were so many other forms of abuse in the relationships, many women were already emotionally estranged from their husbands, so the emotional tie was not initially severed with the discovery of infidelity. However, the exposure to STIs is another specific violation that deserves further attention because of its far-reaching impact.

The husbands of two women who contracted trichomoniasis denied their infidelities and actually accused their wives of cheating. Both wives are certain they contracted it from their husbands. Choi, Catania, and Dolcini (1994) noted that the mid-1990s marked public-health researchers' serious consideration of the associations among extramarital sex and sexually transmitted diseases. More research must be done, especially among a black population, with increasing STI rates via heterosexual-sex transmission. Men who have unprotected sex with men or women who then have unprotected sex with their wives are putting the wives at risk.

The study's significant policy implication is the necessary outreach to married women about the risks of STIs. There needs to be a public campaign for husbands and wives to get tested frequently for STIs. The majority of the

campaigns now are aimed at single individuals, but married individuals cannot be left out of the equation. For the past several years, *Essence* magazine has published at least one article a year about the importance of married women getting tested for HIV and using condoms unless they are trying to get pregnant. This message must become more widespread. Because infidelity is a public-health issue, there should be comprehensive social services specifically designed for women dealing with infidelity. Services should include childcare, marital and family therapy, individual counseling, financial planning, STI testing, and legal aid for filing for divorce, custody, and child support.

The majority of women in this study faced these challenges alone. Olson et al. (2002) argue that their interviewees who survived an affair did so through strong support networks. Black women are gendered to be self-sufficient superwomen primarily because they do not have access to these support systems, not because they do not desire them (Wallace 1990). Black women are also depicted as emasculating matriarchs, lazy welfare mothers, and rancorous jezebels, especially in popular movies about black relationships like some of the characters in Tyler Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, *Why Did I Get Married?*, *Daddy's Little Girls*, and *The Family That Preys*. Pinderhughes (2002, 276) further argues that “[s]tereotypes of African American women as unattractive, bossy, castrating, evil, and mean, threatens [*sic*] their sense of themselves and may cause them to experience infidelity as the ultimate in powerlessness,” but the women in this study embody neither the negative stereotypes nor powerlessness. They are professional women, conscientious mothers, and productive citizens who, despite the drama, loved their husbands and wanted the best for their families.

It is important to note, however, that these participants are unique in the sense that they were self-selected volunteers motivated to participate in a study about infidelity. In the absence of diaries and spousal corroboration, their narratives are strictly based on memories that may be biased not only by time but also by feelings of betrayal. Because the mean time elapsed since the discovery of infidelity is thirteen years and the mean age of respondents is roughly fifty-years-old, the women have had ample time to get their stories straight. Furthermore, Catania et al. (1990, 347) caution that “highly motivated respondents may try harder to understand and answer questions.” This may be especially true for women who, in the process of the interview, were making sense of their infidelity experiences and consequent relationships. The authors also note that, because face-to-face interviews (FTFIs) about sexual behavior and practices “involve both visual and auditory social

contexts, one might expect that self-presentation bias would be highest. . . . However, respondents may perceive FTFIs as having greater credibility and may trust the interviewer more than in phone interviews and SAQs” (Catania et al. 1990, 351). Although motivation, time, emotional memory bias, and the data-collection format clearly have limitations, this exploratory study yields important new insights.

Conclusion

Much of this study’s data are applicable to women of any race. Interestingly, the participants did not talk specifically about racial implications with the exception of AA who expressly noted that one of her husband’s mistresses was white. On the whole, the general omission of race is an interesting finding because it suggests that black women’s experiences with infidelity are women’s experiences with infidelity. One important distinction, however, is the disproportionate impact of the sex-ratio imbalance for African Americans.

Crowder and Tolnay (2000, 794) point out that the increasing gap between the numbers of available black men for available black women is a result of “demographic unavailability as well as economic undesirability.” As long as there are more single black women than there are “socioeconomically attractive” black men, “the overabundance of desirable women makes it easier for [black] men to avoid a committed relationship” (Pinderhughes 2002, 276). As a consequence, black women may be more willing to normalize infidelity and compromise their health, self-confidence, and esteem in abusive relationships to keep the men they have (Bowleg, Lucas, and Tschann 2004; Hutchinson 1999).

Crowder and Tolnay (2000) also describe declining marriage rates among African Americans as a “retreat” from marriage, but the wives in this study beat the odds. They were not part of the roughly 50 percent of black women who never marry, but over half of them were part of the approximately 50 percent of black marriages that end in divorce. Black women may not be retreating from marriage as much as they may be having difficulty finding suitable long-term partners. The average age of my participants was approximately fifty-years-old because younger black women are marrying less frequently. If they are not married, they cannot experience infidelity in their marriages. Tellingly, none of the single women post-infidelity had remarried.

The study’s data highlight commonality across races as well as the aforementioned culturally specific impact of the sex-ratio imbalance within the black community. The racist implications of politics of containment (that is,

the prison industrial complex) and the abandonment of urban communities (lack of viable employment, access to social services, and preventative health care) contribute to the sex-ratio imbalance, which, in turn, contributes to higher rates of extramarital sex, higher divorce rates, and high-risk sexual behavior that leads to higher STI rates.

This essay's focus has been on infidelity's consequences, not its causes. Future research must more fully explore the impact of the black sex-ratio imbalance and infidelity. Future research should definitely consider the impact of extramarital sex and black public health. Researchers should interview black men about their experiences and consider black husbands' and wives' relationships post-infidelity. In addition to studies that focus on imminent threats to healthy black relationships, more research should also be conducted on how healthy black relationships and families are cultivated and sustained.

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