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ESSAY

Rethinking the Other Woman: Exploring Power in Intimate Heterosexual Triangular Relationships

Ebony A. Utley

Department of Communication Studies, California State University Long Beach, Long Beach, California, USA

ABSTRACT

This article challenges disempowering stereotypes about Other Women by investigating how they negotiate power in imbalanced romantic relationships. This study defines an Other Woman as a woman who engages in a sexual relationship with a man who is in a committed sexual relationship with an Initial Woman. In these instances, a man's infidelity can be characterized as a form of interpersonal power whereby he controls the rewards and costs the women involved with him experience. Employing an interpretive description methodology, this qualitative essay analyzes 35 narratives to consider how Other Women respond to men's infidelity as interpersonal power by realizing their personal power. An exploration of Other Woman interaction with the symbolic "me," "him," "her," and "us" components of an affair reveals underrepresented personal empowerment strategies Other Women use, including (a) increased self-concept, (b) prioritized pleasure, and (c) acknowledged personal growth.

KEYWORDS

Cheating; infidelity; interpersonal power; mistress; Other Woman; personal power; symbolic interaction

Intimate heterosexual relationships are an important site of investigation for feminist scholars because they offer an opportunity to observe gendered relational power dynamics (Farrell, Simpson, & Rothman, 2015).¹ Two predominant power dynamics in relationships are interpersonal and personal power. Interpersonal power describes one partner's "ability to control the rewards and costs the [other] partner experiences" (Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004, p. 147). Solomon et al. (2004) identify dependence and punitive power as types of interpersonal power, distinguishing between the two: "Whereas dependence power emphasizes the valuation of rewards gained from a relationship, punitive power arises when an individual can increase the costs or negative outcomes another party experiences" (p. 148). For example, a partner with dependence power may control the finances, and a partner with punitive power may be abusive. The powerful partner usually wields greater resources including but not limited to income, education, and social status (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). The more powerful partner is also frequently less vested in the relationship—a phenomenon known as the *principle of least interest*, which states that the partner with greater relational alternatives "can exploit the more involved partner in various ways" (Sprecher, Schmeekle, & Femlee, 2006, pp. 1255–1256).

Whereas interpersonal power "increases control over others," personal power "decreases dependence" on someone else (Van Dijke & Poppe, 2006, p. 537). Van Dijke and Poppe

CONTACT Ebony A. Utley  ebony.utley@csulb.edu  Department of Communication Studies, California State University Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd. AS 309, Long Beach, CA 90840, USA.

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(2006) further note that “studies show that people are often strongly motivated to restore their independence when they feel it is restricted” (p. 539). Negotiating personal power is a dynamic process of both reducing dependence and gaining “self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy” (Wagers, 2015, p. 236). Personal power “is accomplished through mastery of one’s own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors rather than the control of others” (Wagers, 2015, p. 237).

On a macro level, scholars have argued that compulsory heterosexual coupledness is an origin of a relational power differential between men and women (Richardson, 1985; Rosewarne, 2009). On a micro level, a man’s interpersonal power over a woman within a relationship may be made possible by the social, economic, and cultural power granted via male privilege outside of the relationship.² This does not mean, however, that women in heterosexual relationships are powerless.

I argue that women’s negotiations of personal power are possible even in their most power-imbalanced relationships with men. I explore this assertion by focusing on the infidelity triad of a singular man with multiple women as a unique heterosexual romantic entanglement wherein the man’s interpersonal power inherently defines the relationship (Abbott, 2010; Rosewarne, 2009). Unlike open relationships, polyamory, or other relational alternatives where consent from all partners is paramount, the crux of the inherent infidelity power imbalance is the initial deception cloaking the involvement of (at least) one partner.

This study defines an Other Woman as a woman who engages in a sexual relationship with a man who is in a committed sexual relationship with an Initial Woman such as a wife, fiancée, cohabiting partner, or long-term girlfriend. I adopt Richardson’s (1985) use of the capitalized Other Women “to wrest [the label] from its stigmatized context, and to remind the reader continuously that these women are not just ‘others’ ... They are a distinct social group worthy of analysis” (p. xii). I also capitalize Initial Women because they too are a highly stigmatized distinct social group, often shamed for their complicity in a man’s affair, but ultimately finding themselves in a situation not of their own making.

I claim that, within these intimate heterosexual triangular relationships, Other Women respond to men’s use of interpersonal power with their own personal power. Asserting that Other Women access personal power within infidelity is controversial, because Other Women are typically stereotyped as expendable and extraneous to the core relationship (Richardson, 1985). Negative interpretations of Other Women and their experiences abound (Abbott, 2010; Herman, 2005; Sands, 1978). Progressive scholarship must not replicate and must, in fact, challenge the tendency to demonize or pity Other Women.

My claim, however, is not intended to uncritically celebrate Other Women as wholly empowered. An empowerment–disempowerment dichotomy problematically creates two extremes that fail to accurately represent the wide range of Other Woman experiences. This study focuses on the underrepresented position that Other Woman negotiations of personal power exist on a continuum between empowerment and disempowerment, and while personal power is not without pain, it is evidentially present in the form of increased self-concept, prioritized pleasure, and acknowledged personal growth. After a discussion of men’s infidelity as a form of interpersonal power, I describe my data collection, and present the women’s narratives as exemplary negotiations of personal power.

Men's infidelity as interpersonal power

In triangular relationships, the man's interpersonal power or ability to control both women's rewards and costs is maximized by his "attractive relational alternatives" (Solomon et al., 2004, p. 147). These alternatives may weaken his emotional commitment, manifest as the principle of least interest, and reduce relationship satisfaction for both women. Furthermore, a power imbalance permeates these relationships when a man keeps his involvement with two or more women a secret. Bell hooks (2000) identifies lying as an effective and common way for men to gain and wield power in their intimate relationships. Sometimes a man's astute deception will result in neither the Other Woman (or Women) nor the Initial Woman being aware of one another. Multiple women may initially think that they are in a monogamous relationship with the same man.

In addition to deception as a form of interpersonal power, a man engaged in relationships with multiple women is empowered by male privilege (Richardson, 1985). He is celebrated for his masculine virility, while Other Women are demonized as narcissist or sadomasochist and deviant others (Richardson, 1985; Rosewarne, 2009), and wives are pitied, blamed, or shamed (Rosewarne, 2009). He may rationalize his sexual urges as biological (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and/or target younger and economically dependent Other Women over whom he is in a position of authority (e.g., as their employer, professor, landlord, and so on). In addition, the presence of Other Women increases his relational alternatives.

Power imbalances further characterize relationships involving one man and two or more women when the women compete for the man's interpersonal, sexual, and financial attention. When the women involved become aware of each other and choose to maintain their relationships with the same man, the relational power imbalance shifts from being sustained by deception to being sustained by competition for a man who retains the power to decide the women's relational fate (Rosewarne, 2009). Burns (1999) argues: "But when women criticize and blame 'other women' rather than unfaithful men, heterosexual male privilege is both instantiated by and disguised as power struggles between women" (p. 412).

Of course, not all Other Women want to become the only woman. Not all Other Women are single. Some are women also in committed relationships. Other Women with no intention of leaving their initial partners could potentially maintain more relational power because of their own "attractive relational alternatives." In her study of single Other Women at the end of an affair, Richardson (1979) conceptualizes a power continuum where she characterizes the hypersubmissive (powerless) and hyperdominant (powerful) management styles of Other Women. Dominant-style Other Women had more relational power albeit less emotional intimacy. While it is possible for a woman to sustain power in these imbalanced relationships, if she is single, submissive, and/or desires the relationship with a man who has an initial partner, the "equalitarian management style" advocated by Richardson will likely remain elusive.

This study utilizes Richardson's qualitative in-depth interview method and analyzes 35 Other Women's experiences to answer the following research question: How do Other Women negotiate their personal power in triangular relationships where men maintain more interpersonal power? There is no preordained personal empowerment ideal that Other Women must meet before acknowledging that negotiations of personal power are taking place. How an Other Woman perceives her self-concept, self-esteem, and

self-efficacy at various stages in a triangular relationship will ebb and flow. The preferred outcome adheres to the goals of Abrams's (1995) psychological or internal agency, which "depict[s] women as possessing a constrained but nonetheless salient capacity for self-direction, while addressing the underlying conditions of women's oppression" (p. 355). Abrams's (1995) internal agency comprises a broader tripartite conceptualization of partial agency, which is significant for the following reason:

Acknowledging partial agency means looking for responses outside the range of the autonomous liberal subject or the wholly dominated victim, responses consistent with the broad notion that women strive to affect their environments and direct their lives, even when their chances of doing so are limited by structures or relationships of oppression. (p. 366)

Because agency and choice are the primary tools feminists use in the struggle to end sexist oppression, feminist scholars can benefit from understanding how Other Women negotiate personal power within a potentially oppressive relational structure.

Specifically investigating how Other Women negotiate power in power-imbalanced romantic relationships expands the gray area within empowerment–disempowerment binaries. This underrepresented perspective asserts that Other Women's personal power in the form of internal resources, while limited by the constraints of their intimate relationships, is hard-won and charts an important trajectory toward understanding larger and more varied contexts in which women negotiate power when faced with different forms of sexist oppression. Moreover, the themes and patterns that signify the Other Woman's negotiation of personal power provide insight into feminist concerns about women's personal power, women's relationship to male privilege, and competition among women. I proceed by describing how my data were collected and then justify interpretive description as my method before analyzing the Other Woman narratives.

Data analysis

The 35 in-depth interviews with Other Women emerged from a larger sample of 110 women from across the United States who had cheated, been cheated on, or been the Other Woman. I recruited this self-selected snowball sample via word of mouth, social media posts, and my appearance on two Los Angeles talk-radio programs. All 110 interviews were conducted by me, audio recorded with permission, averaged approximately one hour, and took place in a location of the participants' choosing or on the phone. After collecting demographic information, I asked interviewees to define *love* and *infidelity*, share their experience(s) with infidelity, offer advice to other women based on their experiences, and explain their motivation for participating in the study.

The data for this study are composed of 35 of the 110 interviews that included accounts of being in a sexual relationship with a man who was concurrently in a committed relationship with an Initial Woman. Because of the semistructured interview format, several women narrated more than one instance of being an Other Woman, but only the most well-developed stories are represented here. I used pseudonyms chosen by the women, except for a few instances where pseudonyms were changed to avoid duplicates. I edited quotes for readability and omitted all geographical information.

The 35 Other Women were a diverse sample. Ages ranged from 21 to 65 with an average age of 39. Of the 35 women, 34 had some or more college education. The women identified

their own race, religion, and sexual orientation: 19 self-identified as Black, 11 self-identified as White, three self-identified as Latina, and two self-identified as biracial (Black and White; White and Latina). Regarding religion, 21 women self-identified as Christian, seven self-identified as not religious, and another seven self-identified as “other.” In addition, 29 women self-identified as heterosexual, four as bisexual, one woman self-identified as lesbian (although her Other Woman experience was a heterosexual relationship), and one woman self-identified as heteroflexible—an identifier for predominant heterosexuality inclusive of some homosexual activity. Sexual orientation diversity is not reflected within these data because all but one of the Other Woman experiences occurred within heterosexual relationships.

At the time of the interview, four of the women were still in their triangular relationships, although the frequency of their interactions had tapered off. Only one woman remained in a relationship with a man who had left his initial committed relationship for her. In addition to being self-selected and predisposed to participate in a research study about their experiences, the majority of these women shared a postrelationship perspective that would have been impossible to obtain while in the midst of a potentially tumultuous affair. Whereas recall is certainly a limitation, especially once a relationship has ended, the data’s value is not measured in terms of veracity but in terms of *how* the women choose to describe their affairs. This analysis is not based on chronological events or the broad characteristics of these relationships. Instead, this analysis is premised on the women’s references to the symbolic components of an affair: the self as Other Woman (“me”), the man (“him”), his Initial Woman (“her”), and the triangular relationship between the Other Woman and the man (“us”).

Symbolic interactionism is a useful perspective for contextualizing triangular relationships, because the Other Woman’s interactions with the four symbols of an affair—me, him, her, and us—highlight distinct power differentials for the women involved. Symbolic interactionists believe that meaning and identity are coconstructed through human interaction. Umberson and Terling (1997) write, “An individual’s self-concept is formed, in part, as a reflection of the way that others view the individual; thus relationships with others are fundamental to the formation of self-concept” (p. 724). Charmaz (2014) explains that symbolic interaction helps us see that “how [people] name things affects what they know, how they know it, and the actions they take” (p. 272). Constructing an identity and justifying action based on that identity are essential steps taken toward accruing personal power.

As I conducted the interviews, I realized that the aforementioned components of an affair recurred in each narrative without prompting. Furthermore, it was the coexistence of “me, him, her, and us” that created and sustained the power-imbalanced relationship. My methodological approach follows Oliver’s (2012) guidelines for interpretive description by beginning with a theoretical frame of symbolic interactionism, applying “an iterative process of data collection and analysis” by identifying themes that emerged within each reference to the symbolic components of an affair, constantly comparing the relationships among symbols and themes, and ensuring self-reflexivity throughout (p. 410).

My goal in using interpretive description was to make use of this methodology as “a coherent conceptual description that taps thematic patterns and commonalities believed to characterize the phenomenon that is being studied and also accounts for the inevitable individual variations within them” (Thorne, Reimer, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004, p. 4).

Although the emergent overarching theme of personal power in relationship to the symbolic components of an affair is the subjective result of my analysis (Thorne et al., 2004; Tracy, 2012), the categories of people and the situations described within the data are the subjective understandings of each participant. Thus, the following section is organized according to how the data were presented to me and the implications regarding personal power are discussed in the conclusion. Because I asked interviewees to simply share their stories, no pointed questions about power were asked. No attempts have been made to construct a unified experience, and 35 women is by no means representative of all women involved in affairs.

Other Woman (“me”)

The self-identity of an Other Woman is important because her personal power first emanates from how she chooses to see herself. In the interviews, Other Women distinguished the symbol “me” from their perception of mistress stereotypes. I intentionally use the label mistress here to highlight the stigma that accompanies the term. Mistresses are stereotypically disdained as (1) temptresses who use sex to home wreck (Richardson, 1985; Sands, 1978); (b) kept women who are financially supported by their men (Herman, 2005); and/or (c) agential minxes who are looking for “involvements that would not interfere with their major current life goals” (Richardson, 1979, p. 402). Despite the diversity of these major stereotypes, none of them reflects the complexity involved in the self-identification process of a woman in a triangular relationship. Not only must she contend with social stereotypes about herself, but she must also construct an identity in relationship to the unique aspects of her interactions with her man and his wife or girlfriend.

Other Women distance themselves from mistress stereotypes via relational circumstances and self-awareness. One recurring relational circumstance is strategically differentiating between participating in an affair and being responsible for it. Several women employed no-fault declarations that were premised on the fact that the Other Woman did not break a vow. Sasha declared, “I did not make a vow to anybody. I did not have a husband. I did not make a vow. I did not have children... I do acknowledge that I was an equal participant though.” Denise, who had a two-year affair with her landlord, said, “I wasn’t married to her; he’s the one that’s married to her, so he has to own his being faithful to her and not me, but I was okay with the situation.” When Rena was feeling uneasy about their affair, her man defended her by reminding her that she was not the one who made and subsequently broke a commitment. When Melanie discovered that her boyfriend had an Initial Woman, she described it this way: “I was a part of that infidelity, but I’m not so much responsible for it.” Differentiating participation from responsibility is perhaps used to distinguish oneself from the symbol of the mistress as the most deviant and devious instigator of an affair.

Another recurring relational circumstance was ignorance: 10 of the women in concurrent relationships were utterly unaware that their partners were married or in committed relationships. An additional three women admitted to suspecting that he was partnered but pursuing the relationship until receiving clear confirmation about his Initial Woman. Patrice was involved with a man whom she suspected was still in a relationship with his live-in girlfriend despite his assertions that she was in the process of moving out. Patrice said, “And as long as he never told me or I never found out that he was in this other

relationship, then I wasn't doing anything wrong, because as far as I knew he was single." After several months, however, the initial couple was still living together, and Patrice was finished being the Other Woman. She explained why she broke it off with him, saying, "You don't want to be cheated on, and you don't want to be the Other Woman, and I'm a firm believer in karma."

Patrice's self-description as an Other Woman and not a mistress is consistent throughout the data. During the interviews, I directly asked women who did not self-define as mistresses a follow-up question about whether they considered themselves mistresses; all but four women said no. The justifications that follow are further evidence of how the women use their relational circumstances to distance themselves from mistress stereotypes. For example, some women rejected the mistress label because their experiences did not fit the "kept woman" stereotype. A month after having her boyfriend's baby, Melanie discovered that she was his Other Woman; he had been in a relationship that predated her by seven years. After enduring his physical and emotional abuse as well as his disinterest in parenting, Melanie did not feel like his mistress because, she asserted, "mistresses get treated better." Sadie's married boyfriend of four years paid for jewelry, dates, and trips when they were physically together, but when they were not she was expected to be financially independent. She clarified, "If you go by the definition of mistress and you see that most mistresses are taken care of, I was not." Both women imply that mistresses should be treated well and taken care of—standards that their men did not uphold.

Julie, on the other hand, rejected the descriptor, not because of her relational circumstances as a wife, but because of her lover's relational circumstances with a wife in whom he was no longer interested:

I'm sure this is what every married guy who's screwing around says, but their marriage is on the rocks, and they aren't really in a romantic relationship anymore. They're just cohabitating for the sake of the kids, and so I didn't feel like I was a mistress, because I felt like he wasn't in an actual romantic relationship.

Julie distanced herself from the temptress stereotype. She did not wreck his relationship. According to her, it was already broken.

Finally, the defining circumstance for Xeenasummer's justification for avoiding the mistress label was that she quickly ended the sexual aspect of the relationship with her married best friend. She clarified, "I think that, had we kept having sex, and there was no other kind of emotional investment, I think that I would have been seen as a mistress." For Xeenasummer, a mistress was part temptress and part agential minx—a woman who continuously had sex without emotions. Xeenasummer, on the other hand, had been harboring feelings for her best friend long before he even proposed to his wife.

Other women shirked the mistress label because it misaligned with their self-concept. Despite her attempts to resist him, Elle unintentionally fell in love with her boss who had an on-again, off-again relationship with the mother of his children—a relationship that Elle eventually began to believe was a marriage even though it was never publicly announced. Elle explained:

It's just unfair to just always put people in a category that's so negative, like mistress or home-wrecker. Because I know I'm definitely not that. You couldn't get me to believe that at all, and I mean, call me crazy or whatever because everybody has their own opinion, but I know who I am and I know what I'm made of and it's not that.

Sasha also fell for a man in a position of authority—her former high school instructor. She was 18; he was 32 and married. Sasha rejected the mistress moniker because she thought more highly of herself than its negative connotations would allow. She explained, “I think of a mistress as being kind of demeaning. It’s very, like, degrading. She’s the mistress. She doesn’t even have a name. She’s the mistress, and maybe I think higher of myself than that.”

Adriana was a wife having an affair with a married coworker. Her rationale for not being a mistress explicitly countered a majority of the mistress stereotypes while acknowledging that one choice does not form one’s entire identity:

I know the shame that can come with being the Other Woman, because we are quick to say ... women who sleep with married men are loose women. They have no morals and a whole litany of other things: they’re uneducated, they have low self-esteem, da da da da da, and that’s not always the case. Once again, I’m real clear. I made a choice, but sometimes you find yourself in a situation, you find yourself in a period of life, you find yourself when you make a bad choice. It doesn’t make you moral-less. It doesn’t make you have low self-esteem. It doesn’t make you any of the adjectives, or doesn’t mean you are any of the adjectives that some would label you with because you slept with a married man, and that’s the other side of it for me. I am an educated woman. I do have a good self-esteem. I have a good job. I have a good quality of lifestyle. It was just a period, a moment in time, where I chose to do something.

Barbara fell in love with her married employer. She left him after his wife had their third child. Eventually she decided to publicly share her story to release the shame that accompanies being a mistress:

So by writing that story and sharing it with those who could potentially judge me as this Other Woman, as this adulteress, as this sexual person who potentially lured a man into my trap, I don’t know, there’s something about it that just kind of released that for me ... I wouldn’t take it back if I could, because I think that experience taught me a lot about myself and my own value as a woman and as person and as a sexual being too. That wasn’t something to be ashamed of. The things that I desired in that relationship with this married man were a good thing, just the circumstances were not ideal. It was a long process, but I learned that I could want and I could love and I could be loved and that wasn’t something to be ashamed of.

When Other Women encounter the symbol of a mistress, they distance themselves from its negativity by adding the layers of their relational circumstances and/or their self-representations. As Charmaz (2014), observes, “Renaming oneself as a particular type of person can mark profound changes in self-concept, beliefs, and actions” (p. 272).

These women exhibit personal power via self-concept when they describe themselves as being better than negative, demeaning, degrading, and shameful stereotypes. They do not argue that the mistress stereotypes are untrue; they simply suggest that those characteristics belong to someone else. The empowering self-definitions for “me” are at the expense of imaginary women who really must be temptresses, kept women, and agential minxes. The women acknowledge that mistresses are generally disdained, but sharing their personal narratives allows for empowering self-definition wherein “me” becomes a multidimensional person that chose “him” for an equally complex set of reasons.

Man (“him”)

When discussing “him,” Other Women found personal power in his ability to help her recognize and meet her unmet emotional and sexual needs. The Other Women describe

voids that, once filled by “him,” empowered them to see themselves as lovable and sexual even after the relationship’s demise. His intangible contributions of providing attention and satisfying sexual desire were ultimately sustaining.

Providing attention was an essential part of what attracted the women to their committed men. Ava admitted to being a spoiled teenager who liked attention. She said, “I knew that he had a wife at home . . . Just as long as the attention that I wanted was given to me at the time that he was able to, I was cool.” Other women described being courted and treated better than ever before. Antoinette was 21 and feeling unappreciated by her husband when she met her lover. She remembered, “So when I met him, it was like a whole ‘nother world. He just introduced me to a whole ‘nother world of how a man is supposed to treat a woman.” Anne was a wife who had a “same time next year” rendezvous revenge affair with the same man for several years.³ She recounted, “This guy would ask me probing questions about who I was, what my hopes were, what my dreams were, what my fears were, wanted to analyze my handwriting, so it was very seductive.” Raven had her heart broken in a previously controlling relationship and was prepared to give up when the attention of her married man gave her hope:

I was like, I am just an unlovable schlub and I just to need to be comfortable with that fact in my life, that I will be unfuckable and unlovable. And then this guy comes along . . . and he just wants me. I felt powerful. I felt like, this is awesome. To have somebody want you with the strength of that desire. I said, this is great.

Elle admitted, “That probably was one of the best guys I’ve had in my life that’s treated me the best. I’ve never had chemistry like that with anyone else. It was amazing. It was worth it.” Not only were the affairs worth it for these Other Woman, but the attentiveness of the men fulfilled an emotional need for affirmation that empowered the Other Women to see themselves as worthy too.

Whereas each of the aforementioned women describe the benefits of his attention, his ability to satisfy a sexual addiction was equally valued. For four years, Ferris dated a man she did not know was married and who introduced her to the pleasures of great sex. She admitted, “I used to refer to him as a drug because I had to have him. It was all about him.” Nicole and her lover were both married graduate students. She confessed to being a “sexual girl,” because sex filled her “high need to connect.” She said, “I was almost having withdrawals from having sex with this guy.” Adriana only had sex with her lover “no conversations, no phone calls, no visits, no lunches, no get-togethers, no nothing.” She summed up the sexual passion that many women conveyed:

I think I was addicted to him. It was definitely like a drug. Because I physically craved this man, and to a certain extent even now, if I allow myself to dwell and rehash and think about the memories, there’s still that—that throbbing, that aching, that deep need. So yeah. Addiction.

The language of addiction conjures images of a potentially problematic lack of control, but for Ferris, Nicole, and Adriana, the point of their liaisons was to relinquish control and succumb to their desires.

It is also possible that addiction is a recurring term not because of its accuracy but because of the absence of a more customary descriptor. An all-consuming desire for sexual pleasure is so foreign to many women that there are few familiar words other than addiction to describe their craving for sexual satisfaction. Richardson (1985) explains the

benefits of a woman allowing herself to access pleasure with a committed man. She writes, “But, in a relationship with a married man, because it is outside the bonds of convention she can *experiment* and *practice* new definitions of her sexual self. Such a relationship gives her both time and freedom to redefine herself” (p. 43).

Personal power can arise from pursuing such pleasure. Oftentimes that pleasure is accompanied by heartbreak, but prioritizing desire irrespective of the potential outcome exemplifies a form of self-determination. Emphasizing attention and sexual desire creates a fuller picture of how an Other Woman may find or redefine herself through the experience of an affair. The symbol of “him” represents a powerful opportunity for the Other Woman to discover and meet her emotional and sexual needs.

His Initial Woman (“her”)

The Other Woman’s relationship to her man’s Initial Woman represents personal power when the Other Woman acts in her own self-interest. It is difficult to unconditionally celebrate the Other Woman’s guilt-free decision to compartmentalize “her” or create a hierarchy that diminishes “her.” However, this self-prioritization is understandable for the aforementioned Other Women who, for the first time, finally experienced emotional connections and sexual pleasures that positively redefined them. Alternately, Other Women’s guilt-filled decisions to end the relationship are empowering because when the relationship benefits diminished, they acted in their best interests and ended the affair.

The Other Woman’s guilt-free thoughts and thus compartmentalization of “her” are buffered by the Initial Woman’s absence. Antoinette said, “I never thought about her. You know what—he wanted me to meet his wife. I met her one or two times in coming into work, but I never actually—I just never thought about her.” Sadie admitted, “And again it just never really crossed my mind that she was in the picture until two years later when she had hired a private investigator to follow him around.” Sasha, Ebony, and Ishtar all confessed that the wife “wasn’t really around”; “she never ever came up in a conversation”; and she “wasn’t real,” until Sasha had to acknowledge that her lover and his wife were still having sex since they had another baby. Ebony realized her lover’s wife was her prayer partner at church. Ishtar friended her lover on Facebook and saw pictures of him interacting with his family.

An Other Woman’s compartmentalization of the Initial Woman is common. Rosewarne (2009) notes, “While a single woman’s disregard for the betrayed partner may be selfish, the affair is rarely pursued as a direct assault. By pursuing one’s self-interests through infidelity, arguably some feminist goals can be achieved, albeit with a cost” (pp. 74–75). Both Abbott (2010) and Richardson (1985) agree that not even feminist principles forestall affairs. Richardson (1985) explains:

One would expect that the new feminist consciousness, though, might create a different sense of guilt in women, that they would feel it unsisterly and divisive to sleep with another woman’s husband. But for the most part, feminist consciousness has neither prevented women from getting involved with married men nor created new forms of guilt. (p. 104)

A sense of sisterhood is still not strong enough to dissuade a woman from choosing a relationship with a man with an Initial Woman if that relationship is something she intensely desires.

If compartmentalization provided some personal power through the pursuit of self-interest, women who thought negatively about the Initial Woman absolved themselves of guilt via the empowerment provided by constructing a hierarchy with themselves above the wives. Wives were disregarded because they never initiated a confrontation, seemed not to care, or were too stupid to notice their man's attention was divided. Sometimes wives were dismissed because they were trashy, untrustworthy, failed to make their husbands happy, or were suspected of having their own affairs.

Tru remained guilt-free because she felt her experience benefited both herself and the wife. Evidence of Tru's affair led to the demise of her partner's marriage. She confessed, "I am thankful for it, and though I don't feel guilty about it, I feel happy that his wife will move on and will seek and probably find happiness in a new way that she never thought she would." Tru was guilt-free because the affair was an invaluable learning experience for her and an opportunity for his wife to find happiness.

Alternatively, the symbol of the wife or initial girlfriend was guilt-filled for many women. Ishtar described how reflecting on her lover's wife diminished the benefits she received from the relationship: "I could just imagine how hurt she would be if she knew, and that makes me sad and not—I guess not—not as happy with the relationship as I had been, and I guess not proud of myself." Ishtar was honest with her husband but began to feel badly about being part of the lie that her lover told his wife. Adriana admitted to the contradiction of greatly benefiting from an exciting, crazy, sexually charged relationship and yet wanting her lover and his wife to mend their marriage:

Even now I pray daily for his marriage, and I hope that they are able to work through any damage that I caused. I do hope they stay together. It was never my intent to become a factor in his marriage and do regret that his wife found out. It was not something I ever wanted her to know.

Nicole also wished her lover and his wife the best. She searched for him online and reported, "It looked like their marriage survived, so that made me feel really happy. Because I kind of felt like, even though mine fell apart, I hope something positive happens for him." Seeing "her" happy is a symbol of redemption for a woman who is no longer participating in an affair.

But the unfinished business of never being able to apologize to "her" directly due to a lack of clarity about what she knows creates its own guilt. Rena said, "I don't like how I feel about what I'm doing to her" and considered apologizing. "She has what she wants, so—and when all this happened I never intended to take it from her, but I did. I do feel like sometimes I want to apologize, but I don't think I would arrange for that to happen." Lita also explored the delicacy of apologizing when she was unsure what the wife knew about the extent of Lita's two-year relationship with her husband: "I wasn't exactly going to go to her and say, like, 'I'm sorry I stole your husband.'" Xeenasummer offered a spiritual perspective on why she decided to keep her actions to herself:

I think that when you keep whatever you do, your sin, or whatever, you should keep it in the sphere in which it's in. So I'm not the one who—"Let me just come clean and tell all of the people involved." I don't think that that would help anyone. But if I stop because I know what I'm doing or what I've done, then in my private time with my faith and my walk I know that there's going to be—grace that's going to be provided for me, and I think that's what's most important to me than anything.

The guilt that may emerge from the symbol of the wife or initial girlfriend need not be debilitating. Similar to XeenaSummer, Patrice noted: “I felt bad, you know? I felt bad for her. I felt bad for being a part of it. But it wasn’t anything that necessarily, you know, crushed me.”

In these guilt-filled instances, personal power is negotiated by choosing to leave the triangular relationship and wishing the best for “her.” The Other Women chose to enter asymmetrical relationships because of the benefits they provided, but when those benefits were no longer propitious they chose to leave. Whether the women were guilt-free or guilt-filled, their choices were *their* choices. Negotiating personal power does not imply the absence of regret or other potentially negative feelings. It does mean that a woman pursuing personal power will fully embrace her own decisions. However, the fate of a triangular relationship that has returned to its initial dyad remains outside of the Other Woman’s realm of influence. The rest is up to “him” and “her.”

Relationship (“us”)

Because the symbol of the relationship, or “us,” raises issues of responsibility and regret for Other Women, it also presents a prime opportunity for personal growth. A retrospective appraisal of the relationship provided many Other Women with a panoramic view of the “us” of “him” and “her” *and* the “us” of “me” and “him” as well as the life lessons accompanying the affairs.

As noted in the previous section, some women expressed regret about what they did to “her.” When discussing “us,” women expressed regret about what they did to themselves. Sadie said, “He’s getting the last laugh, and I’m getting nothing. And so I’m the one that was stupid because I’m still single.” Barbara felt that loving, seeing, and sleeping with her married man left her “completely empty inside.” Whereas Sadie and Barbara discussed the personal challenges of participating in a triangular relationship, Symone and Rena noted the public embarrassment that can accompany an affair even after it has ended. Symone said, “For so long, I wanted to protect myself from the public knowing that I made a damn fool out of myself. That’s how I feel. That’s what I did, made a damn fool out of myself.” Rena’s sentiment was similar: “I didn’t want people to look at me like okay, this dumb broad. When you make things like that public, you open yourself up to criticism, and it wasn’t a criticism that I needed because I was beating myself up enough.” Lita confessed, “I definitely felt ruined for a long time. Part of me was like, wow, how could I have been so stupid? You know that the man never leaves his wife.” Lita’s “us” was a scenario she had seen replicated in “a thousand books and TV shows and movies,” but only through personal experience did she learn that her situation would not be different. Tru cautioned against this attitude at the end of her interview. When asked to offer advice to Other Women who find themselves in her situation, she advised, “There are so many important and intense elements that go into play when somebody breaks their marriage vows or their partnership vows, and you are not one of those elements.”

The Other Woman’s process of negotiating personal power is not without pain. Feeling stupid, empty, foolish, dumb, and ruined are some of the emotions of women who are active participants in a relationship with a man who is in another partnership. However, these women’s regrets and negative feelings spurred them to action. Sadie, Barbara, Symone, Rena, and Lita—the women with the most intense feelings of regret—all ended

their relationships of their own volition. They did not wait for the man to choose them. They recognized their regret and made a different choice. Learning from one's mistakes is a clear pathway to personal empowerment. Personal power does not always mean avoiding pain, but it does require acknowledging the origins of one's pain and taking action to ameliorate it.

Conclusions

Other Women negotiate personal power in inherently power imbalanced relationships by (a) increasing self-concept by situating themselves atop a hierarchy of women, (b) allowing themselves the pleasure of being with someone who satiates their emotional and sexual needs, and (c) accepting that the decision to participate in a triangular relationship resulted in personal growth. Even though the relational power imbalance was created through the symbolic interaction of "me," "him," "her," and "us," it is the "me" in this analysis that is paramount. Part of the Other Woman's empowering self-concept is premised on establishing a hierarchy among women that places herself above other women. Sometimes these lesser women are mistresses that embody the demeaning stereotypes. Other times these lesser women are the "bad" Initial Women who mistreated and underappreciated their men. When Other Women distinguish between participation and responsibility, they shirk full responsibility by seeing the relationship as part of a complex situation wherein both "him" and "her" must be held accountable. This strategy of differentiating participation from responsibility further suggests that empowerment for Other Women often occurs at the expense of women they view with contempt.

Personal power is oft obtained by wielding interpersonal power over someone else, as some of the Other Women have done (Van Dijke & Poppe, 2006). Increasing personal power by competing with other women is certainly exacerbated by the sense of competition that accompanies relationships with one man and multiple women. This is indeed a limitation of personal power for feminist purposes, but negotiating personal power in power-imbalanced relationships is complex. There is no egalitarian outcome, but there are strategies—some less injurious than others—whereby the less powerful may find empowerment.

The second Other Woman empowerment strategy is celebrating pleasure. These Other Women acknowledge how the relationship benefited them and embrace the significance of emotional and sexual bonds even though those bonds may have been formed at inopportune times. Being with "him" fulfilled essential relationship needs for intimacy, companionship, emotional involvement, and self-worth that were previously lacking (Jeanfreau, Jurich, & Mong, 2014). Sex is also a relationship need, and it is easier to understand its fulfillment as an addiction for Other Women who lacked opportunities to explore their sexuality. In these instances, addiction is not a loss of control but a discovery of a sexual need deficit and a decision to want more (and more) sexual need fulfillment.

The third Other Woman empowerment strategy is personal growth. If interpersonal power is premised on greater resources, it appears that ultimately the male privilege of increased relational alternatives and/or tangible resources is matched by the resource of personal growth for these women. Jeanfreau et al.'s (2014) study of why women initiate affairs in part reflects what women may learn from being Other Women. Infidelity becomes empowering when it results in personal growth, self-expansion, and self-discovery. This is not to suggest that women intentionally become Other Women to

experience personal growth. However, personal growth can be an unexpected result of enduring a less than ideal relationship. The Other Woman experiences recounted within this sample are never entirely negative. They discovered how they are different from mistresses, how they desire to be loved, how they want to have sex, and how to determine when a relationship is no longer fulfilling their needs, among many other personalized lessons.

Across the varied experiences of these Other Women, they are unified in their increased self-awareness. Every symbolic interaction is primarily about “me.” Even the negative consequences of “us” highlight the regret the women felt about what they did to themselves. Symbolic interactionism is the process by which individuals come to understand themselves in relationship to other symbols—in this case, the four components of an affair. Through self-narrating these interactions, Other Women exemplified personal growth by describing who they were before the affair, defining who they were during the affair, and determining who they intended to be postaffair. Identity construction through self-narration is empowering. Barbara put it best when she said, “I’m the one who owns this story, and I’m the one who is going to tell it.”

However, one limitation of these narratives and their focus on “me” is that the triangular relationship is explored only from the perspective of the Other Woman. Ideally, future research would include data from Other Women, their men, and the men’s Initial Women to explore their relationships with one another in a single study. Historically, however, infidelity research is difficult to conduct because of animosity between partners, fears of confidentiality breaches, and issues of trauma and shame that may lead to inaccurate self-reporting (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

Diversity is also important for future infidelity research. This sample is majority Black, Christian, and educated, but these identifiers were secondary to the women’s relational experiences. Similar to Utley’s (2011) research on Black wives and infidelity, “the participants did not talk specifically about racial implications” (p. 86). While an imbalanced sex ratio created and sustained by high mortality and incarceration rates for Black men may primarily account for greater numbers of infidelity within the Black community, no Black women made explicit comments about how their race affected their experiences as Other Women. The few women who incorporated their faith into the interview did so in terms of the forgiveness and grace they felt when the relationship ended and not in terms of condemnation or shame. Perhaps the women’s higher educational levels made them more apt to participate in a research study. Only one participant confessed to being an avid reader of mistress history. Demographically, this study expands knowledge on how non-White women perceive infidelity, but subsequent studies should ask participants to address how race and class impacted their experiences, include same-sex relationships, and account for the circumstances of women of lower educational access and, by extension, lower socioeconomic status.

Although I celebrate these Other Women for accessing their personal power in imbalanced power relationships, these discoveries do not make a relationship with one man and multiple women any less asymmetrical. An Other Woman’s personal power does not eradicate the external pressures of compulsory heterosexual coupling, male privilege, and competition among women that buffer these relationships. Yet, despite the power imbalances, women will still become Other Women and women will still enter into other power-imbalanced relationships with men. In her essay on “the benefits and limitations of ‘choice’

discourse within feminist theory,” Snyder-Hall (2008) pointedly observes that “[j]udge-mentalness does not make desire go away” (pp. 563, 582).

So what exactly can feminist scholars learn from the Other Woman? Analyzing the Other Woman experience for its female empowerment strategies is important because it offers a fuller picture of infidelity that moves away from popular condemnations of the mistress as the misnomer that Raven describes: “You think of a mistress as a brutal woman who’s coming in and kicking everybody’s puppy and little children and taking this marriage and throwing it away and being heartless and cold and being the bitch.” It also moves away from narratives about the destroyed woman at the hand of the male domestic terrorist (Abbott, 2010; Sands, 1978; Zackheim, 2007). The interviews demonstrating Other Women’s negotiations of personal power may display imperfections and limitations, but the fact that these strategies were possible underscores the need for a narrative that embraces manifestations of personal power that occur in the gray areas between the two extremes of full empowerment and complete disempowerment. Other Woman research is important because it contextualizes the layered complexity and diversity of how women respond to potentially oppressive situations. Personalizing the Other Woman’s experience by focusing on her negotiation of personal power provides strategies that may be applicable to other relational power differentials between women and men, particularly relationships where there is exploitation or emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, social, and/or financial abuse. These Other Women demonstrate that, even in power-imbalanced relationships, women can still empower themselves.

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Notes

1. Because this study’s data include only heterosexual pairings, same-sex relationship power dynamics are not examined.
2. Male privilege is not experienced equally by all men, creating important exceptions to this rule, particularly concerning African-American couples, where Black women may obtain more resources through the accrual of education and employment while Black men’s resources are reduced through “racial profiling..., higher rates of hyper incarceration, death by homicide and certain diseases, suicide rates, and high unemployment as compared to black women” (Mutua, 2013, p. 346).
3. An affair that is initiated in retaliation for a partner’s infidelity is considered a revenge affair. Anne’s revenge affair recurred in part because her husband was a serial cheater.

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