An Indirect Approach for Identifying Unfaithful Spouses

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Abstract

Research on infidelity has suffered from inconsistency in how infidelity has been operationalized across studies, as well as various sources of bias that affect self-reported behaviors. Thus, a novel approach was employed that (a) allowed each respondent to subjectively define infidelity for themselves, and (b) provided an indirect assessment of engagement in self-defined infidelity while minimizing bias in those reports. Results based on a community sample of 465 married or divorced individuals recruited via MTurk indicate that this approach was successful and should be employed in future studies designed to assess self-reported infidelity.

Background

Although research on infidelity has provided valuable insights for researchers and clinicians, the extant literature has suffered from methodological limitations, such as (a) inconsistency in the definition of infidelity across studies (e.g., Moller & Vossler, 2015; Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016), (b) social desirability bias (Blow & Hartnett, 2005), and (c) excessive use of college samples in infidelity research. The present study was designed to overcome these shortcomings by using a subjective definition of infidelity, employing an indirect questioning method to reduce social desirability bias, and using a sample of married couples.

Sample

A community sample of 465 married (91.4%) and divorced (8.8%) respondents were recruited via MTurk to complete an online survey. Although both women (52.0%) and men (48.0%) were well represented, respondents were primarily non-Hispanic White (73.1%) and had earned a college degree (93.3%).

Measures

Indirect assessment of infidelity. The 32-item Definitions of Infidelity Questionnaire (DIQ; Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016) is composed of the four subscales: sexual behavior, computer-mediated behavior, emotional behavior, and solitary behavior . The DIQ was administered twice, with the wording of instructions, items, and response options adapted as needed to (1) assess beliefs concerning the degree to which each behavior constitutes unfaithful behavior in a generic married couple (response options ranged from *not at all unfaithful* [scored as 1] to *very unfaithful* [7]), and (2) to indicate the number of times the respondent engaged in each behavior him- or herself while married (*0 times, 1 time,* or *2+ times*). Distractor items such as respondent characteristics were asked between the two DIQ versions. Those who indicated that a particular behavior was unfaithful in the generic version and later reported engaging in the same behavior during marriage were classified as unfaithful spouses (or, more bluntly, cheaters).

Direct assessment of infidelity. Following some additional distractor items, respondents were directly asked near the end of the survey, "Did you ever cheat on your spouse during your marriage?"

Using a self-defined ***subjective definition*** of infidelity can resolve operational inconsistencies with regard to what constitutes infidelity.

Indirect measurement of self-defined and self-reported infidelity substantially reduces social desirability bias and cognitive dissonance when self-reporting infidelity.

Table 1

*Intercorrelations for Study Variables (*N *= 465)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Direct question	–						
2. Indirect question	.39**	–					
3. Sexual	.48**	.67**	–				
4. Computer-mediated	.37**	.72**	.68**	–			
5. Emotional	.22**	.76**	.59**	.59**	–		
6. Solitary	.16**	.60**	.59**	.57**	.64**	–	
7. Gender	.11*	.10*	.16**	.10*	.03	.06	–

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Chi-square Tests for Observed Frequencies and Percentage Differences Between Male and Female

			Total		Male		Female				
	M	*SD*	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	χ^2	*p*	φ
Direct[a]	.13	.33	59	12.7	37	16.6	22	9.1	5.89	.02	.11
Indirect[a]	.43	.50	199	42.9	107	48.2	92	38.0	4.90	.03	.10
Sexual	6.08	1.37	117	25.2	72	32.4	45	18.6	11.76	.00	.16
Computer-mediated	4.89	1.46	129	27.8	72	32.4	57	23.6	4.55	.03	.10
Emotional	2.66	1.50	139	30.0	70	31.5	69	28.5	0.50	.48	.03
Solitary	2.33	1.56	99	21.3	53	23.9	46	19.0	1.63	.20	.06

Note. DIQ = Definitions of Infidelity Questionnaire.

[a]0 = faithful spouses, 1= unfaithful spouses.

Key Result

Self-reports of marital infidelity were substantially more frequent with indirect questioning (48.2% of men and 38.0% of women) than with direct questioning (16.6% of men and 9.1% of women; see Table 2), indicating that social desirability bias and cognitive dissonance were reduced by the indirect approach.

References

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