Cheaters! Men, women jealous for different reasons when mate strays

Men care more about sexual aspects, while women fret over emotional connection, study finds

When a partner cheats, men have the most questions about the sexual details of the affair while women focus most on the emotional relationship, a new study finds.

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Romantic jealousy seems to have a gender divide when it comes to cheating: Men typically ask more questions about the sexual aspects of an affair while women inquire more about emotional infidelity, a new study finds.

The study, published in the journal Personality and Individual Differences, used a modern-day phenomenon -- the reality TV show "Cheaters" -- to explore an age-old issue -- jealousy-fueled interrogations of infidelity.

Student coders viewed 102 cases of "love triangle" confrontations between the cheater, the victim, and the person they were fooling around with. They analyzed whether a victim's comments to the two-timer represented sexual jealousy (Was she/he better in bed than me? How many times did you have sex with her/him?) or emotional jealousy (Do you love him/her? Who do you love more?).

The research found that when men were the victims of infidelity, 57 percent of the questions to the cheating partner focused on the sexual aspects of the affair. Women, by contrast, only asked about the intimate details 29 percent of the time. And when the ladies were the victims, 71 percent of their questions centered on the emotional side of their mate's fling, versus 43 percent of men's inquiries.
"Relative to women, men are more distressed by sexual infidelity, and women are more upset over emotional infidelity, relative to men," says study author Barry X. Kuhle, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Scranton in Scranton, Penn.

According to Kuhle, an evolutionary psychologist, "modern men have inherited an evolved wisdom from a long line of ancestral men who could never be 100 percent certain that a child was actually theirs." So men became concerned with sexual infidelity because of the potential for cuckoldry -- being duped into raising a child who wasn't theirs.

Ancestral women did not run the risk of cuckoldry, he says, but they worried about a partner's emotional involvement of time, attention, protection and commitment to another woman. Asking about the emotional nature of an affair helped a woman to gauge the harm done to a relationship and whether to hang in there.

Even so, studying infidelity can be an imperfect science: It's unethical to randomly ask one group of participants to cheat on their mates and another group not to (as a control) then observe the jealous behavior in a true experiment. As a result, researchers often gather jealousy data by asking volunteers to imagine how they would react to an unfaithful partner or recall a conversation if they've been cheated on.

But do reality TV episodes accurately represent the grilling of an unfaithful mate?

Kuhle admits the cameras and producers can influence some of the victims' jealous interrogations. And Dr. Gail Saltz, a New York City-based psychiatrist and TODAY show contributor, describes the research as "an edited TV show perhaps reflective of the mindset of the producer but not a true study."

In her counseling experience involving infidelity, she has noticed that men are more concerned about their spouse having sex with someone else while women seem more concerned about their spouses loving someone else.

"Measuring which matters more -- the emotional or sexual aspect -- is less relevant than knowing that a betrayal is pretty devastating for the other person," says Saltz. The emphasis ought to be placed on what kinds of tools -- ways of communication, ways of staying close, ways of being practical about putting yourself in high-risk situations -- exist in a relationship to make sure cheating doesn't happen.

"Hyper-examining an affair in hopes of finding some aspect of it that will make a victim feel less terrible, usually doesn't work," she says.

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