

# My Parents Cheated. Does That Mean I Will Cheat?

Research examines intergenerational patterns of infidelity.

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[Infidelity](#) is one of the greatest fears many of us have about intimate relationships, and can be a [traumatic](#) experience characterized by betrayal and injury, or a relief allowing one to finally leave an unfulfilling relationship. **Infidelity may also be a good solution for couples who want to remain together while experiencing greater satisfaction in sexual and [romantic relationships](#) than can be met by exclusivity with their partners. Infidelity with betrayal is more damaging (Smith and Freyd, 2014), but infidelity which is mutually beneficial does not involve betrayal, and may not only not be traumatic but may be preferable. In the United States especially, infidelity is strongly frowned upon, while other cultures may find infidelity more acceptable and essentially normal.**

Nevertheless, infidelity is the most common reason for relationships to end, and may cause a great deal of pain and suffering for both the victims and the transgressors, as well as other parties (the person cheated with, children and other stakeholders). Both [predictive](#) factors (including the finding that people who [have cheated](#) are more likely to do so) and [protective](#) factors are fairly well understood. **Factors contributing to infidelity include low relationship and sexual satisfaction, having attractive alternative partners, and personal inclinations toward infidelity.**

**My [parents'](#) relationship broke up because of cheating. Am I likely to have the same issues in my relationships?**

While there is a common perception that family history may predict infidelity, **research on the role of parental infidelity and offspring attitudes, behaviors and relationship outcomes is lacking.** To address this knowledge gap, Weiser and Weigel (2017) conducted a series of studies examining the intergenerational effect of infidelity on offspring relationships using a survey model.

They report that **22-25 percent of married men and 11-15 percent of married women report having engaged in sexual infidelity, numbers which are much higher in college-aged people where men and women report infidelity rates of 75 percent and 68 percent, respectively.** The definition of infidelity varies in the literature and among people generally. **Infidelity can range from any kind of covert behavior (romantic, sexual and emotional) which goes outside of the boundaries of a committed relationship, to specific behaviors from [flirtation](#) to sexual**

**intercourse. Beliefs about monogamy and infidelity have been shown to [predict whether people will break up](#) after a transgression, so it is important to understand what the background attitudes about infidelity are in coping with cheating.**

In order to look at the role of parental infidelity, Weiser and Weigel (2017) formulated the following hypotheses based on existing research on infidelity and [social learning theory](#), the concept that relationship beliefs and behaviors are picked up both explicitly and implicitly during development through different channels. While attitudes about relationships and infidelity outside the family are very influential, the research reviewed here is focused on intergenerational infidelity. In the interest of space, I'm condensing the study methodology and findings with a summary rather than spelling out all the details of each study. They conducted three studies, using a much broader pool of participants than the first two studies with undergraduates:

#### Study 1

1. The experience of parental infidelity will be associated with offspring's greater likelihood of having engaged in infidelity behavior.
2. Trust and [self-efficacy](#) will mediate the association between parental and offspring infidelity.
3. Participants: 267 undergraduates, 61 percent in an exclusive relationship, 19 percent married, 205 women, 75 percent white, average relationship length 45 months.
4. Infidelity findings: Twenty-five percent of participants reported they had engaged in infidelity at some time (not necessarily in the current relationship). Sixty-one percent of participants parents were currently married, and 35 percent reported there had been infidelity in their parent's relationship. Twenty-seven percent reported paternal infidelity and 16 percent maternal, including 8 percent who reported both.

#### Study 2

1. The experience of parental infidelity will be associated with offspring's greater likelihood of having engaged in infidelity behavior.
2. Trust and self-efficacy will mediate the association between parental and offspring infidelity.

3. Participants: 269 undergraduates, 188 women, 61 percent in a relationship, 20 percent married. Average relationship length was 48.5 months, and 75 percent were white.
4. Infidelity findings: Twenty-four percent reported infidelity in their own relationships. Sixty-one percent of participants parents were currently married, and 35 percent reported there had been infidelity in their parent's relationship. Twenty-seven percent reported paternal infidelity and and 13 percent maternal, including 6 percent who reported both.

### Study 3

1. The experience of parental infidelity will be positively associated with offspring infidelity behavior.
2. Parental infidelity will be associated with a greater likelihood of having received negative messages about fidelity and faithfulness, and positive messages about infidelity from their family of origin.
3. Parental infidelity will be associated with more accepting infidelity beliefs.
4. Offspring who received more negative messages about fidelity and more positive messages about infidelity will report more accepting infidelity beliefs.
5. More accepting infidelity beliefs will be associated with a higher likelihood of offspring having engaged in infidelity.
6. Participants: 718 total, 319 from a broad population sample and the rest undergraduates. There were 440 women and 76 percent of the sample was white. Forty-four percent were in an exclusive relationship, and 29 percent were married. The average age was 26.9 years, and the average relationship length was 59.4 months.
7. Infidelity findings: Personal infidelity was reported by 31.5 percent. Fourteen percent reported maternal infidelity and 26 percent paternal, with 5.7 percent reporting both.

In addition to collecting demographic information, including data about infidelity in parental and their own relationships, they used the following measures over the 3 studies:

1. Self-Efficacy in Romantic Relationships Scale (Study 1)
2. Self-Disclosure Scale (Study 1)

3. Generalized Communication Suspicions Scale (Study 1)
4. Suspicion of Infidelity questionnaire (Study 1)
5. Infidelity Beliefs Questionnaire (Studies 2 and 3), with sub-scales looking at a) Negative Outcomes, b) Positive Outcomes, c) Acceptability
6. Extradyadic Behavioral Intentions Scale (Study 2), estimating how likely they are to to engage in different behaviors outside of their exclusive relationship.
7. Infidelity messages in family of origin (Study 3): Researchers developed five common messages about infidelity and asked how similar they were to attitudes in their family of origin. They looked at messages in favor of exclusivity as well as permissive of infidelity. The reason they did this is because they found that infidelity behavior was not related to beliefs about infidelity, and they surmised that messages about infidelity might be relevant. One factor related to infidelity messaging accounted for all the variance in these items.
8. Infidelity communication in family of origin (Study 3): Participants rated how often they heard their parents talk or argue about infidelity, monogamy, and commitment, and how much direct instruction participants were given by their parents about these issues. Three factors emerged from this item: Family Communication about Being Faithful, Perceived Parental Conflict about Infidelity, and Family Communication about Acceptability of Infidelity.

## Findings

**Parental infidelity predicts infidelity among offspring in their adult relationships**, supporting the general impression many people have observed. The odds of infidelity were 2.5 times higher in participants with parental infidelity. **Even with that sub-group, the odds of infidelity are still low, with about 75 percent exposed not cheating.**

**Beliefs about infidelity, surprisingly, were not found to be related to unfaithful behavior.** However, the actual messages people report hearing growing up did have an impact, and correlated with a higher likelihood of infidelity. This is an interesting finding because it points to a radical split between self-reported beliefs from behavior and communication in family of origin, and requires further investigation. It is not unusual for people to hold different beliefs than their behaviors would suggest, a common finding in social psychology.

Because people tend to shape their beliefs later on in accordance with their earlier behaviors (to reduce internal conflict or [cognitive dissonance](#)), it would be important to look at the relationship between infidelity behavior and change in beliefs about infidelity over time. Along these lines, the current study did find that people reporting infidelity

were more likely to believe that infidelity has positive outcomes and is acceptable, and less likely to see infidelity as having negative outcomes. In addition to reducing conflict by shaping one's beliefs in line with behavior after the fact, participants may have seen positive outcomes from parental [divorce](#) if their parents ended up being happier after splitting up, and likewise those without infidelity may have more positive experiences with parental monogamy.

Researchers derived the following model of how the different factors they examine are correlated with one another:

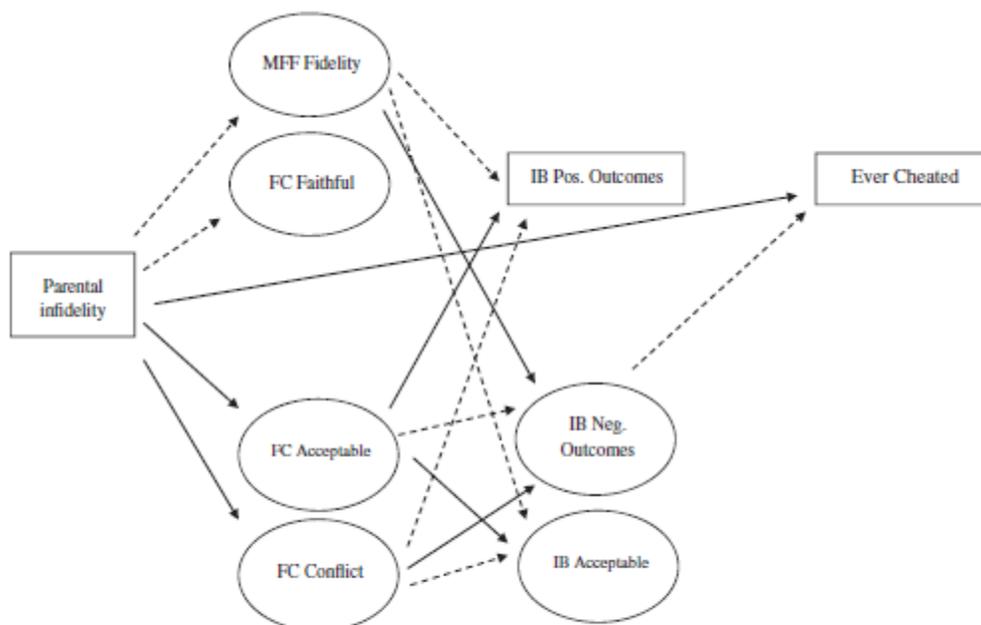


Figure 2. Structural equation model for all Study 3 participants.

Note. Only significant relationships ( $p < .05$ ) shown. Solid line = positive relationship; dashed line = negative relationship. Age and gender are covariates.

Source: Weiser & Weigel, 2017

## Relationship Sanity

**Whether or not infidelity is intrinsically bad is becoming a moot question. It depends on how acceptable infidelity is in one's own family and culture, and a variety of other factors which are interrelated and complex.** The results of the current study are surprising because beliefs about infidelity were not correlated with actual infidelity, and unfaithful parental behavior more than doubled adult children's chances of engaging in infidelity their own relations. This effect appears to be mediated therefore not necessarily through beliefs that we hold about infidelity, but through non-verbal behaviors we absorb non-verbally and implicitly via core developmental relational experiences (attachments), and via parental messaging. However, prior research

suggests that [moral beliefs](#) do protect against infidelity, a factor which was not clearly addressed in the current study but which may be hidden and lost in statistical noise in the Infidelity Beliefs-Acceptability sub-scale.

**If we are in exclusive relationship, and infidelity is a consideration, it may behoove us to take a look at these factors more closely. Unpacking our [memories](#) of parental relationships, what we saw, what we heard, what we learned on conscious and [unconscious](#) levels, can help orient us to where we are in our current relationships.** Aside from seeking general satisfaction in romantic relationships, constructively reflecting with oneself and our partners about challenging and rewarding issues can help us avoid damaging experiences regardless of where we end up together. Having fewer negative experiences and more reparative experiences in intimate relationships, furthermore, may help to secure more adaptive ways of dealing with [anxiety](#) in future intimate relationships because we can recognize and unlearn maladaptive patterns and replace them with [more sane approaches to relationships](#).

#### References

Weiser DA & Weigel JD. (2017). Exploring intergenerational patterns of infidelity. *Personal Relationships*, 24 (2017), 933–952.

Smith PS & Freyd JJ. (2014). Institutional betrayal. *American Psychologist*, September, Vol. 69, No. 6, 575-587.