The State of Affairs: Rethinking our Clinical Attitudes Toward Infidelity

Presentation Overview

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“The bonds of wedlock are so heavy that it takes two to carry them, sometimes three.” ~ Alexandre Dumas

The meeting with the “other” (the lover) is a moment “that rearranges all our priorities, throws the superfluous overboard, projects a glaring light onto what is superficial and instantly discards it.”

- Francesco Alberoni, Falling In Love

This Presentation Draws from the Works Of:


The Fear and Fascination With Affairs

- Historically condemned yet universally practiced.
- Adultery is the repository of social ruptures and contradictions and highlights the tenuousness of relationships.
- What about cheating is so compelling?

Marriage, Sex, Intimacy, and Monogamy: A Brief Historical Overview

- Marriage – from economic unit to romantic enterprise.
- The romantic ideal.
- The enshrinement of intimacy.
- The sexualization of love: beyond sex for reproduction and woman's marital duty (in the west).
- The shift from sexual duty to sexual rights and sexual desire and pleasure.
- Sustaining desire is about reconciling two opposing sets of human needs: security and adventure.
- Reconciling the domestic and the erotic in one relationship is the new norm
- Sexual satisfaction becomes part of marital happiness, and happiness is the new mandate.
- The emotional and erotic challenges of the egalitarian couple.

Infidelity and Monogamy: Yesterday and Today
Monogamy - from patriarchy and lineage to a conviction of love.

- Modern infidelity highlights the tensions between commitment and freedom.
- Proclaimed monogamy and clandestine adultery.
- Monogamy equals commitment, adult, mature; it is the norm, realistic.
- Non-monogamous equals lack of control, egoistic.
- The ideal of monogamy vs. the reality of infidelity.
- From sin to betrayal, from fornication to sex. (cont'd next page)
Infidelity and Monogamy: Yesterday and Today (cont'd)

• The male double standard and gender differences around infidelity.
• Gender-shifts: The double standard and the rise of female infidelity. • Cultural preference of divorce over infidelity.
• Today monogamy must be negotiated and not assumed.

The Therapeutic Culture of Infidelity | Affairs

• A symptom of problems in the couple.
• Harmful, a violation, studied through the lens of trauma. (Michele Scheinkman)
• Language of moral condemnation, vilification, or pathologizing, “Perpetrator/ Victim”.
• Longstanding pathologies or childhood wounds: narcissistic personality disorder, attachment trauma, sex addict.
• The focus in on prevention and recovery.
• Focus is on impact of the affair, leaving out the complexities of love and desire. Betrayal, duplicity, and abandonment are at the epicenter.
• Belief in the redemptive power of confession and full disclosure of infidelity.
• Rebuilding trust and intimacy can be restored when the couple experience trauma together.
• Affairs described as the story of a couple rather than the story of a triangle. (The lover is not included).
• Lack of differentiation between the concepts of loyalty, fidelity and sexual exclusivity.
• Focus on compassion for the betrayed partner, and detailed advice for the perpetrator remorse, repent and repair.

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A Dual Perspective to Infidelity
When we seek the gaze of another, it isn't always our partner we are turning away from but the person we have ourselves become. We are not seeking another partner, but another self.

• Affairs do not always point at flaws in the relationship.
• Adulterers are not necessarily unhappy in their relationship.
• Some affairs have nothing to do with the partner.
• Affairs sought as marriage stabilizers.
• Rethinking loyalty and faithfulness.
• Bringing to infidelity a dual perspective of hurt and betrayal on one side and growth and expansion on the other.
• Secrets: A matter of autonomy as well as power over?
• The new monogamy is defined not in sexual terms but as a relational commitment, a loyal bond to a primary partner.

Rethinking Fidelity

• Mapping the differentiation between concepts of fidelity and exclusiveness.
• Defining fidelity as a relational constancy, a pact of emotional commitment, respect and loyalty, which can or not include sexual exclusivity.
• Monogamy as a continuum, involving thoughts, Fantasies, Desires, Arousal, Flirtation, Emotions, Actions, Connection, Sex, and Love. (Tammy Nelson)
• It requires establishing new norms of trust, loyalty, commitment and sexual flexibility.

Ethical and Existential Questions

• Why does sexual betrayal hurt so much? How is it different from emotional betrayal?
• Is faithfulness synonymous with sexual exclusivity?
• Is faithfulness a virtue, a need for security, for propriety, a quest for comfort?
• Is infidelity weakness and cowardice, or boldness and courage? (cont'd next page)
Ethical and Existential Questions (cont'd)

• Can lying be a form of protection?
• In the presence of multiple emotional betrayals – neglect, indifference, contempt, humiliation, abusiveness – is fidelity a virtue or weakness?
• What is the relation between: Truth and Protection, Growth and Betrayal, Transparency, Privacy, and Secrecy, Loyalty and Faithfulness?
• Is there a difference when the external relationship is emotional versus sexual?
• Is jealousy a feeling we can/should transcend?
• Is love in its essence monogamous?
• Is the notion of property the enemy of love?
• Is possessiveness an archaic remainder of patriarchy or is it fundamental to love?
• Does the unfaithful have a right to remain silent?
• What is the moral question about virtual infidelities? What is the morality of imagination? • Is our imagination subject to the same moral criticism as that directed at our actual behavior?
• Is chatting cheating?
• If people with dull lives use the internet to get the excitement of new relationships, and don’t intend to go any further, exactly what harm have they done? If the answer is "they kept a secret," is the betrayed spouse suggesting that the betraying spouse can do this internet activity out in the open? If not, "keeping a secret" can't be considered a major marital sin--it's simply following instructions.

Clinical Questions

• Should we push for revelation? Is it essential to restoration?
• What to do when we are told a secret the other partner doesn't know? • Should we meet with the partners individually?
• Can we help a relationship while there's a hidden affair?
• How to discuss the topic of monogamy in the context of therapy?
• Secrets: A matter of autonomy or power over? (cont'd next page)
Clinical Questions (cont'd)

• Secrets: A matter of autonomy or power over?
• Who decides whether internet activity is "infidelity"--the actor? The outraged spouse? The therapist?
• If the goal is to rebuild trust, what is the theoretical reason to allow/support/encourage the betrayed spouse to have access to the betrayer’s computer password, cell phone records, etc.? Is there a better way to "rebuild trust?"

Sex and Love Online

• Romantic seductiveness of cyberspace: imagination, interactivity, availability and anonymity. (A. Ben Ze'ev)
• Cyber infidelities enable us to nibble on the forbidden fruit, served with anonymity from the comfort of your home, while paying a small moral and emotional price. (A. Ben Ze'ev)
• Although the relationship involves many imaginative aspects, the relationship itself is not imaginary.
• The egalitarianism of cyberspace: sexual appearance, age, gender, race and relations are scarcely relevant online.
• Detached Attachment: Distance and immediacy, Lean and rich communication, Anonymity and self-disclosure, Sincerity and deception, Continuity and discontinuity, Little physical investment and high mental investment.

Meanings and Motives of Affairs

• General circumstances: life cycle, personal history, relational vulnerability, institutional pressures, existential dilemmas, gender influences, sexual orientation.
• Affairs are less about sex and more about desire.
• To experience oneself as adult, but not old.
• Reaction to other problems of life (loss of job, parent illness, loneliness, erotic alienation). Should I stay or should I go?
• To gratify a paraphilic longing. (cont'd on next page)
Meanings and Motives of Affairs (Cont'd)

• To experience same sex experience.
• Sexual compulsivity.
• Women seeking to re-experience themselves as sexual beings after kids.
• A response to the feeling of insecurity about one’s sense of masculinity and femininity.
• Secrets are a pathway to autonomy, for in secrets we activate our own will, free from the pleasing and caretaking.
• To cope with separation, war, prison.
• To cope with a disabled spouse.
• Balance and stabilize the relation; an affair in order to preserve the marriage.

Affairs are Powered by Longing and Loss

• The quest for a new self – reconnecting with lost parts of oneself.
• Affairs often happen on the heels of death or a loss. Their intensity pushes back the imminence of death. Affairs as an antidote to death.
• A response to long-standing sexual frustration.
• A quest for aliveness and adventure.
• A desire to experience lives not lived.
• A quest for emotional connection.

Bad Marriages/Good Affairs

• To stir jealousy and get our partner interested in us again.
• To empower oneself and escape oppression and abuse.
• As an act of revenge.

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Role of the Therapist

- Awareness of our own values, beliefs, and assumptions about infidelity and monogamy can influence our therapeutic work and elude the needs of the couple.
- Our personal history and experience with infidelity (our parents, spouses, lovers, and ourselves) make our reactions even more complex.
- Infidelity can trigger curiosity, sympathy, compassion, idealization but also anger, anxiety, moral superiority, condemnation, contempt, and judgment.
- Meet the couple where they are and not be the enforcer of marriage or divorce.
- Therapist must acknowledge that the person who has an affair may value his/her experience and not feel much regret or guilt for it.
- When working with disclosed or secret affairs, the therapist needs to remain nonjudgmental, patient, calm, and open to the world of sexual possibilities, their benefits as well as destructiveness.
- Identifying with the unfaithful highlights the values of growth and autonomy.
- Identifying with the betrayed highlights loss of trust and betrayal.
- Not rush for easy casual explanation or rely on psychological judgments to mask our own values, sympathies, and gender bias (S. Levine).

The Politics and Secrets of Revelation

The truth we dimly perceive in ourselves, we stamp out in others.

Cost and Benefits of Truth Telling and Transparency:

- Positive affects of revelation: A way to end the affair. Relief to stop feeling torn and guilty, and to break the triangle.
- Positive affects of secrets: The shared complicity in the secret heightens the sexual intensity. The forbidden is exciting and the illicit brings urgency. Secrets can safeguard the marriage and protect the partner. Safeguard the autonomy of the unfaithful.
- If at first you lied to protect, when it’s open, denying no longer protects.
- Open Secret Policy (Janet Spring) Working with the secret IS the therapy and not a preliminary condition (If model is ‘marriage is for everything’, then the - emphasis in therapy is on intimacy over autonomy. (cont'd next page)
The Politics and Secrets of Revelation (cont'd)
The truth we dimly perceive in ourselves, we stamp out in others.

Cost and Benefits of Truth Telling and Transparency:

• Assumption: To permit secrecy is to discourage intimacy. Disclosure equals more intimacy. Hence, therapists move people toward disclosure and monogamy.

• Telling and Hearing: Ask patient if they want to know, “Are you ready to hear or would you prefer not to?” “Do you want to know the answer or do you want your partner to know that you have the question?” Can you live with not knowing? With uncertainty? If one doesn’t want to tell, it doesn’t mean that there’s nothing to tell.

• Sexual honesty is more than the truth about straying. It is an honesty with oneself, with one’s hypocrisy, compromises, and self deceptions as well as the ambivalence about the commitment.

• Restoring intimacy is more than confessing infidelity.

• Truth telling can be healing and productive but also traumatizing and destructive.

• Revelation can often lead to danger and violence-women.

• Often couples realize that things were going so much better when the affair was a secret.

• The discovery of an affair can lead to a loss of self and a crisis of identity.

Privacy

• Privacy is the word that we use when we have agreed by social convention, not to discuss a matter that we know exists: menstruation, masturbation, for example. (S. Levine)

• Privacy is a functional boundary.

• A secret is something that a person prefers to remain unknown, and that he or she will mislead others about, to keep them for learning about its occurrence.

• Infidelity can be a private matter or a secret.
Phases of Therapy
In the intensity of post affair therapy, couples stand to define their futures as well as their pasts. All these interventions will be repeated throughout the three phases post affair, and later in the therapy as well.

Phase 1: The Crisis Phase
• Establish Safety, be a force of stability, maintain personal balance, clarity, patience.
• Therapist acts as a container and provides calm, reassurance, and structure.
• Explore why and how the affair was revealed.
• Help stabilize the family if there are children involved.
• Separate reactions to infidelity from the matter of divorce.
• Define the affair as a two-person crisis. The therapist must hold the dual perspective, which the couple cannot sustain. (Scheinkman)
  • Each person is anxious about restructuring of the family relations.
  • Each is anxious about being alone.
  • Each is anxious about the return of the old separation trauma.
  • Each is anxious about the loss of identity.
  • Revelation humbles as it shows we have no control over our destiny. (Levine)

Interventions for the Crisis Phase
• Assess for domestic violence and suicidality.
• Assess for co-morbidity (e.g., addiction, abuse, mental illness).
• Close the exits for finite jointly-decided period.
• Separate the effects of the affair from the decision to end the relationship.
• Assess impact of the affair on other members of the family.

Unfaithful Partner
• Must show guilt and remorse.
• Must become the vigilante of the relationship.
Deceived Partner

• Normalize experience, traumatic reaction.
• Confront isolation, humiliation, and devaluation.
• Validate the maelstrom of emotions. From rage to despair, from vengeful to helpless, shame, disorientation, loss, humiliation, longing, fear, abandonment, “Leave, don’t leave, I love you, I hate you, hold me, don’t touch me, I want to stay with you, I am not sure what I want, I love you, I am not in love with you, I can’t end my relationship.

Phase 2: The Insight Phase

• Must show guilt and remorse.
• Must become the vigilante of the relationship.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unfaithful</th>
<th>Deceived</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grief, guilt and shame about the affair, or about hurting the partner, or both.</td>
<td>Shock, upset, and angry feelings about the affair. A feeling of moral superiority.</td>
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<td>Fear that he/she won’t be forgiven.</td>
<td>Struggle with trust/loss of sense of security.</td>
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<td>Fear that he/she will have to give up an important or newly discovered part of him/herself that they never had in their marriage.</td>
<td>Anger that the unfaithful partner felt entitled to experience something that he/she had not allowed him/herself to experience.</td>
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<td>Impatience with their partner to move on from the affair/frustration with their sense that they've done all they could to reassure their partner.</td>
<td>Anger and confusion at the narrative rupture that he/she is experiencing resulting in obsessional thinking and a need to ask- and repeat- many questions for clarification from the unfaithful partner.</td>
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<td>Confusion about ending the affair externally but not internally. No longer seeing his/her lover, but not feeling detached from them either.</td>
<td>Anxious feelings leading him/her to set limits around their partner’s exposure to their lover. Anger at being asked to feel compassion for their partner’s loss.</td>
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Clarify the meanings, motives, and feelings of the affair

• Integrate the differentiated meanings of the affair as an experience of growth and expansion for the unfaithful, inflicting hurt and betrayal on the other.
• What it meant for me? What it did for you? What it meant about us?
• Insight into personal, desires, needs, vulnerabilities that led to affair.
• Examine the relational context, life cycle stage, contributing circumstances that surround the affair.
• Examine the decision to enter the affair and understand how they justify it to themselves.
• Tell the story of affair in the context of the relationship.
• Shift blame to understanding.
• Explore how to move from crisis to opportunity.

Interventions for the Insight Phase:

• Shifting from detective to investigative questions:

**Detective Questioning:** Where were you? What did you do? Did you meet at the hotel? Did you do with him what we do? What positions did you do it in?

**Investigative Questioning:** Help me understand what the affair has been for you? What prompted it? Where you looking for it, or did it just happen? Did you think of me and the kids? What was it like when you would come home? What did you experience there that you wish you could experience with me? Did you think about leaving me? Did you want me to find out? Did you hope I would leave you? Did you feel entitled to your affair? Do you think that you should be forgiven?

• Help the unfaithful take responsibility for hurting, and demonstrate personal clarity.
• Help the unfaithful partner remain empathic, present, and connected to the hurt of their partner. When the pain is denied or diminishing it only fuels the obsessiveness.
• Discuss shared sense of loss.
• Explore the power of forgiveness as an offset to the power of resentment
• Acknowledge that the revelation can stimulate the marriage, lead to thoughtful discussions, and new openness to share deeper feelings and needs.
• Consider impact of the affair on other members of the family.
• “Your first marriage may be over, do you want a second one with each other?”
Phase 3: The Vision Phase

• Create the vision of a new relationship: The confrontation with an affair forces every couple to re-evaluate their own relationship, but every relationship will determine the legacy of the affair.

• Affairs can be the death knell or they can jolt a couple into new possibilities

• If the couple decides to stay together, they need to negotiate new boundaries and new relational arrangement.

• Legacy Conversations: “Do you still think of it?” “Are you glad we made it through?” “Did you believe we would?” “Do you think it was ultimately beneficial to our relationship or permanently damaging?” “I’m still hurt, but it helped us.”

Trust, Acceptance and Forgiveness

The meeting with the “other” (the lover) is a moment “that rearranges all our priorities, throws the superfluous overboard, projects a glaring light onto what is superficial and instantly discards it.” —Francesco Alberoni, Falling In Love

• What is trust?

• Is everything forgivable?

• How do we forgive ourselves for crimes imagined or real?

• What’s the difference between acknowledging what we’ve done and saying we are sorry?

• How to incorporate the affair as something with a dark part?

• Genuine trust rests on our ability to tolerate what we do not know about the other. As long as we are driven to uncover every detail, we cannot trust.

Apology and Forgiveness

• You can only forgive someone when they acknowledge that you’ve been wronged.

• You may forgive, you don’t forget, but the injury is no longer as central.

• Forgiveness is not a gift, it must be earned, and requires restitution.

• How do we heal ourselves with someone who is not sorry?

• How much trust is enough, and how much forgiving is enough? (cont’d next page)
Apology and Forgiveness (cont'd)

• Forgiving is not always good for you.
• Dangers of forgiving too easily.

Trust, Acceptance, and Forgiveness

• Assumptions that make it difficult to forgive: all-or-nothing, yes or no.
• Forgiving doesn't happen at once, partial is fine, forgiving enough may be good enough.
• I'm sorry I hurt you, I'm not sorry I had the affair.
• Forgiveness helps dissipate the anger, ends the ruminations, lessens the fear of reoccurrence, and abdicates one from the sense of moral superiority.
• Fear that forgiving minimizes the severity of the act. If I have sex with you again, I let you off the hook.

Erotic Recovery (Tammy Nelson)

• The clinical literature on infidelity generally ends with forgiveness.
• Conceptual bias: After forgiveness, sex will just happen. It will follow itself.
• Affairs are often a consequence of erotic neglect.
• Forgiveness and healing must be linked with erotic recovery or couple is at risk for future infidelities.
• Framing the recovery as a new erotic phase of the relationship.
• The fear of loss is a powerful sexual combustion. In the immediate aftermath of an affair, some couples experience an intensely renewed sexual desire. This is true also for the partner that had been sexually disengaged for a long time.
• The betrayed partner fears that engaging sexually will communicate that the affair wasn't important. “I want to make love but then I will make it easy on him or on her.”
• Refusing sex is a way to make the affair important.
• Lack of sexual intimacy exacerbates the lack of trust that it will not happen again.
• Partners experience sexual performance pressure after the affair.
• Going beyond how you feel in order to bring forward the feelings you want.
The New Monogamy
What is the cultural imperative that will define the new relationship norms?

- Our understandings and experiences of exclusivity are changing.
- Monogamy on a continuum that rests on flexibility and fluidity.
- Implicit and explicit agreements of monogamy in couples.
- The new monogamy emphasizes love, emotional commitment, and loyalty, but does not link it per say with sexual exclusivity.
- Polyamorous couples.
- Exclusiveness VS Uniqueness

Sample Investigative Questions for Couples Experiencing Infidelity
These questions are aimed at helping the couple shift from a detective to an investigative position. That is a shift from facts to meaning. They open up the possibility for broader conversations that capture the multi-dimensionality of affairs including: love, sex, desire, commitment, betrayal, loyalty, loss, secrecy, honesty, intimacy, eroticism, longing, accountability, trust and forgiveness.

These are questions to work with after the initial, acute crisis phase has subsided. Following the three-part post-infidelity model, they belong to stages two and three. These questions draw upon the work of Esther Perel, Peggy Vaughn, Michele Scheinkman and Ulrich Clement.

Meanings and Motives
- What did the affair mean to you?
- Why did it happen then?
- Were you looking for it? Did it just happen?
- Did you feel entitled to your affair?
- Did you feel guilty?
- What did you discover about yourself in that relationship? How did you feel about it? Did you discover new parts of yourself or recover lost ones in that relationship?
- Why do you think you could not express your needs to me, emotional, intellectual or sexual?
- Do you think you could show me those newly discovered parts? (cont’d next page)
Meanings and Motives (cont'd)

- Are there parts of you that you want to bring into our relation?
- Was your lover someone you thought you could build a life with?
- How important was sex?
- Did your affair having anything to do with something missing in our sex life?
- Did you ever get to a point where you felt you were losing yourself or felt torn and confused?
- Were you drawn by the general idea of having an affair or did you feel pulled toward this specific person?
- Did you think it would help you stay in our relationship or help you to leave?
- Did you ever worry that your affair would destroy our relationship?

Dynamics of Secrecy and Revelation

- What do you want me to know about your affair?
- Do you think I have a say in it?
- Is it okay if I don't want to know anything?
- Did you want me to know and were you hoping to tell me? Were you relieved when I did?
- Once I found out, what did you think would happen to you and to the two of you? • Did you hope I would find out without you telling me?
- Were you afraid I would find out or did you assume that I never would?
- Would you have ended it if I hadn't found out?
- Did you lie out of deception or were you hoping to protect me with your lies? • What was it like for you to lie?
- Did you tell anyone about your affair?
- What was it like for you when you would come home?
Reflections on the Primary Relationship

• Was your affair a rejection of our relationship? Did you see it as a sign of something missing between us?
• Do you think your affair was a symptom of flaws in our relationship?
• Did you think of leaving me?
• Did you want to leave me or was the affair just an addition to us?
• Did you think about me, and the children?
• Do you think it could happen again?
• Were does sex factor in?
• Were you trying to get my attention?

Integrating the Affair into the Primary Relationship

• Do you think your affair may have ultimately been good for our relationship or do you think it created permanent damage? Are you sure that you want to be with me?
• Did you come back to me, or to our family?
• What would have been your biggest loss in the life we have built?
• How do you think you can bring what you discovered in your affair into our relationship?
• Do you think this will hang forever over us?
• What do you think are the strong parts of our relationship?
• What is it about us that you value most?
• What are some things we can do together to make our relationship stronger?
• Do you think you could ever trust me again?
• Can you forgive me? Or, how much forgiving do you need for us to move on?
• Do you think you've changed your values in relation to monogamy?
Focus on the Hurt Partner

• Can you understand my anger and hurt?
• Are you open to further conversation if I have questions that will help me better understand your actions?
• Do you realize that I can leave too?
• What would it be like if I had an affair?

For the Partner Who Had the Affair to Ask the Hurt Partner

• Do you believe me when I say it’s you that I am coming back to?
• Do you want me to stay?
• Why are you staying?