THE STATE OF AFFAIRS: RETHINKING OUR CLINICAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS INFIDELITY

Esther Perel, MA. LMFT.
estherperel@me.com
www.estherperel.com
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

- **Janis Abrams Sping.** *After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust when a Partner has Been Unfaithful* Harper Collins, New York, 1996.

- **Michele Scheinkman.** *Beyond the Trauma of Betrayal: Reconsidering Affairs in Couples Therapy.* Family Process, 44:227-244, 2005.

- **Michele Scheinkman.** Foreign Affairs: Infidelity Has Different Meanings In Different Cultures. (July-Aug 2010) *The Psychotherapy Networker*

- **Stevin B. Levine.** *Demystifying Love: Plain Talk for the Mental Health Professional.* : Brunner--Routledge, New York, 2006


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 pleasure. Marital sex is rooted in Desire

- The dilemmas of desire in modern couples.
- Sexual satisfaction becomes part of marital happiness, and happiness is the new mandate.

- Reconciling the domestic and the erotic in one relationship is the new norm.
- The 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.
INFIDELITY AND MONOGAMY: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

- 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:
  - Are always a symptom of problems in the couple.
  - Are always 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.
  - 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 fidelity and sexual exclusivity.
  - Focus on compassion for the betrayed partner, and detailed advice for the perpetrator—remorse, repent and repair.
RETHINKING INFIDELITY: HOW IT INFORMS COUPLE THERAPY

- 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 and growth and expansion.
- 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 & 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?

- 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?
ETHICAL & EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

- 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?
ETHICAL & EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

- 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?
- How do we define a “segmented view of marriage?” (Janet Reibstein)
- Does the unfaithful have a right to remain silent?
ETHICAL & EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

- 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?
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?

- Must we always negotiate Monogamy, can we no longer assume it?

- Secrets: A matter of autonomy or power over?

- What’s the difference between acknowledging what we’ve done and saying we are sorry?
SEX AND LOVE ON-LINE

- Romantic seductiveness of cyberspace: imagination, interactivity, availability and anonymity. (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.
SEX AND LOVE ON-LINE

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. (ben Ze’ev)
INTERNET INFIDELITY
(FROM MARTY KLEIN)

- Who decides whether internet activity is "infidelity"—the actor? the outraged spouse? the therapist?
- Why do some hurt spouses feel that internet activity with erotic content is a bigger betrayal than non-erotic betrayals?
- 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"?
- 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.
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.
MEANINGS AND MOTIVES OF AFFAIRS

- Betrayal can be a generative force. Betrayal isn’t only a source of pain or defeat; it expresses our need for freedom, autonomy, and change. Seen from this angle, infidelity may be a shadow part of many of us.

- Treason is the nightmare of all political systems. It also leads to new social order.

- In the presence of multiple emotional betrayals – neglect, indifference, contempt, humiliation, abusiveness – is fidelity a virtue or weakness?
MEANINGS AND MOTIVES OF AFFAIRS

- General circumstances:
  - life cycle
  - personal history
  - relational vulnerability
  - institutional pressures
  - existential dilemmas
  - gender influences
  - sexual orientation

Affairs as a way to break out of the merging, an experience of differentiation.
Affairs may always involve betrayal, but they are powered by longing and loss. (S. Weill) The quest for a new self – reconnecting with lost parts of oneself.

Affairs are less about sex and more about desire.
MOTIVES AND MEANINGS OF AFFAIRS CONT’D

- A quest for aliveness and adventure
- A desire to experience lives not lived.
- 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?
- Rebellion against the constraints of marriage.
- Affairs as an antidote to death. Affairs often happen on the heels of death or a loss. Their intensity pushes back the imminence of death.
MOTIVES AND MEANINGS OF AFFAIRS CONT’D

- To gratify a paraphilic longing
- 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 the woman is activated by her own will, free from the pleasing and caretaking.
MOTIVES AND MEANINGS OF AFFAIRS CONT’D

- 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 can revitalize a marriage:
  - Some marriages improve during the course of an affair as they rekindle the marital bed.
BAD MARRIAGES/GOOD AFFAIRS...

- To stir jealousy and get our partner interested in us again.
- Crisis of meaning and change of values.
- When affairs empower oneself and escape oppression and abuse.
- A quest for autonomy and affirmation.
- An act of revenge to even out the scores.
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.
ROLE OF THE THERAPIST CONT’D

- 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.
ROLE OF THE THERAPIST CONT’D

- When working with disclosed or secret affairs, the therapist needs to remain non-judgmental, 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 OF SECRETS AND 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, the illicit brings urgency.
    - Secrets can safeguard the marriage and protect the partner,
    - Safeguard the autonomy of the unfaithful.
    - Secrets: If at first you lied to protect, when it’s open, denying no longer protects.
THE POLITICS OF SECRETS AND REVELATION

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.

   Assumption = to permit secrecy is to discourage intimacy, disclosure equals more intimacy.

   - therapists move people toward monogamy
THE POLITICS OF SECRETS AND REVELATION

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.
THE POLITICS OF SECRETS AND REVELATION CONT’D

- 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.
- Why is the discovery of an affair so painful? (Connected to the primary bond between mother and child and the dominant current ideology of love).
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 form of a boundary; it’s 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

Post-Affair Stages: All these interventions will be repeated throughout the three phases post affair, and later in the therapy as well.

In the intensity of post affair therapy, couples stand to define their futures as well as their pasts.

- Phase I:
  *The Crisis*
  - 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)
PHASE 1: CONT’

- Unfaithful partner:
  - Crisis of identity, from honest to liar
  - The burden of causing pain
  - Maybe the victim also has a secret.
  - Why and how it was revealed.
  - He/She may experience a profound dissonance between the self-image and the behavior
PHASES OF THERAPY CONT’D

Hurt partner
- Normalize experience, traumatic reaction
- Maelstrom of emotions. Is overwhelmed by succession of intense and contradictory feelings: 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 with my “lover,” how could you do this to me, you are sick, you have an addiction, come back...”
PHASE 1: THE CRISIS

- Recommend that no decisions need to be made at this time.
- Close the exits for finite jointly-decided period.
- Separate the effects of the affair from the decision to end the relationship.
- Assess for domestic violence, suicidality.
- Assess for co-morbidity (e.g., addiction, abuse, mental illness).
- Impact of the affair on other members of the family.
- In pain, but feeling alive.
- When the revelation of the affair can deepen the relationship (opens up new depth of conversation, sharing of hopes and unmet needs).
- How Affairs can rekindle sex.
PHASE 2: MEANINGS AND MOTIVES OF AFFAIRS

- Clarify the motives and feelings of the affair:
  - from blame to understanding
  - from crisis to opportunity - *We may have many marriages with the same person.*
- Not play down the affair, hurt person emphasizes the meaning for their partner.
- Move couple from blame to understanding. Integrate the differentiated meanings of the affair as an experience of growth and expansion for the unfaithful, inflicting hurt and betrayal on the other.
- The unfaithful doesn’t have to feel bad for the affair, which is an expansive experience, but must be sorry for the damage done. Empathic, holding of the pain, be present and connect with the experience of the hurt partner. When the pain is denied or diminishing it only fuels the obsessiveness
Detective approach.

- Where were you? What did you do? Did you meet at the hotel? Did you do with him what we do?

Investigative approach

- Help me understand what the affair has been for you? Did you think of us? How? How come you were able to experience desire there that you felt you had lost? Why now? What prompted it? Did you worry about not coming back? What did it mean for you?)

- 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.
PHASES 2 CONT’

- Dialogue about meaning of affair.
  - What it meant about me
  - What it meant about you
  - What it meant about us
  - Explore how to move from crisis to opportunity

- Monitor the impatience of the unfaithful,
- What may be externally over may not be so internally. Not seeing the lover is not necessarily a sign of detachment.
PHASES OF THERAPY CONT’D

- Address the fears of the hurt party and the grief of the unfaithful:
  - When there is no room for the unfaithful partner’s experience, they may want out of the situation altogether. He/she kills the grief by closing the topic, urging the other to move on and get over it.
  - Greatest fear of the injured is not to feel safe.
  - Greatest fear of the unfaithful is that he/she won’t be forgiven. As well as that he/she will have to give up an important part of him or herself, that they may never have in their marriage.

- Give room for the unfaithful to express both sides of the affair:
  - Sorry for the damage done and feeling bad for the hurt inflicted, and
  - Feeling good for the expansive experience
PHASES OF THERAPY CONT’D

- Help the unfaithful take responsibility for hurting, and demonstrate personal clarity. To remain empathic, present, connected to the experience of their partner.
- Discuss shared sense of loss. “Your first marriage may be over; do you want a second one with each other?”
- Acknowledge that the revelation can stimulate the marriage, lead to thoughtful discussions, and new openness to share deeper feelings and needs.
- Probe the private value system
- Demonstrate personal clarity
- Guilt or no guilt?
- The shared loss
  - Fears of the hurt partner and the hurts and the grief of the unfaithful.
"Resentment is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to die."

- The obsession with the affair
- The moral superiority
- The impatience of the unfaithful
- Acceptance vs. forgiveness (Janice Spring & Ulrich Clement) – accept the affair as something with a dark part
- Maimonides (Jewish philosopher): Once you have repented three times, the burden moves to the victim
- The power of forgiveness offsets with the power of resentment
- Focus on growth and autonomy
- Privacy vs. secrecy
- Impact of the affair on other members of the family
PHASES 3: MAPPING THE LEGACY

Create the vision of new relationship:

The confrontation with an affair forces every married couple to re-evaluate their own marriage, but every marriage will determine the legacy of the affair.

- Affairs can be the death knell or a unique opportunity for a new relationship
- If the couple decides to stay together, they need to negotiate new boundaries and new relational arrangement.
- “Do you still think of it?”
- Grieve old marriage/partnership
PHASE 3 CONT’D

- “Are you glad we made it through?”
- “Did you believe we would make it through?”
- “Do you think it was ultimately beneficial to our relationship or permanently damaging?”
- “I’m still hurt, but it helped us.”
- Negotiate fidelity for new partnership
- Acknowledge fluidity.
- Same people, different partners
The point about trust is that it is impossible to establish. It is a risk masquerading as a promise. The question is not, do you trust your partner? But do you know what they think trust is? And how would you go about finding out? And what might make you believe them? And what would make you trust belief?

Trust is a word we have to put too much trust in.

Adam Phillips, Monogamy

- 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?
○ How do we heal ourselves with someone who is not sorry?
○ The power of forgiveness offsets the power of resentment.

○ You have been permanently altered, you will never trust again totally, and maybe totally is a myth anyway.
○ How much is enough trust to forgive enough?

*Genuine trust rests on our ability to tolerate what we do not know about the other, and 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.
- Forgiving is not always good for you.
- Dangers of forgiving too easily.
- 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.
Apology: “I shouldn’t have done it, it was wrong, it was a mistake.”
Acknowledgement: “I take responsibility for what I did.”

- 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, or of the hurt.
EROTIC RECOVERY

- Erotic recovery must be linked with forgiving or couple is at risk for future infidelities.
- It is important to link trust and emotional intimacy to renewal of sexual intimacy.
- 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.
- 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.
EROTIC RECOVERY

- 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.
- Framing the recovery as a new erotic phase of the relationship.
- Partners experience sexual performance pressure after the affair.
- Not treating each other the way you feel but the way you would like to feel.
- Going beyond how you feel in order to bring forward the feelings you want.

- Most people today will have two or three marriages or committed relationships in their adult lives—some people will do it with the same person.
THE NEW MONOGAMY:

What will be the next cultural imperative that has to adapt to the state of current relationships?

Exclusiveness VS Uniqueness (Ben Ze’ev)

- The new monogamy rests on flexibility and fluidity
- Our understandings and experiences of exclusivity are changing.
- The new monogamy emphasizes love, emotional commitment, and loyalty. But does not link it per say with sexual exclusivity.
- Implicit and explicit agreements of monogamy in couples.
THE NEW MONOGAMY:

- Couples negotiate fidelity by discussing the continuum of monogamy.
- The new monogamy highly respects privacy.
- Polyamorous couples.
- Explicit vs. implicit monogamy agreements of couples.
- Describes “a segmented view of marriage,” where the compartmentalization of one’s needs inside and outside the marital confines, fosters acceptance and appreciation for the relationship one has.