

Power Increases Infidelity Among Men and Women

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Abstract

Data from a large survey of 1,561 professionals were used to examine the relationship between power and infidelity and the process underlying this relationship. Results showed that elevated power is positively associated with infidelity because power increases confidence in the ability to attract partners. This association was found for both actual infidelity and intentions to engage in infidelity in the future. Gender did not moderate these results: The relationship between power and infidelity was the same for women as for men, and for the same reason. These findings suggest that the common assumption (and often-found effect) that women are less likely than men to engage in infidelity is, at least partially, a reflection of traditional gender-based differences in power that exist in society.

Keywords

power, sex, infidelity, status, emancipation

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Each year, many powerful people fall from their pedestals because of extramarital sexual affairs or other controversial romances. In the past 5 years (in American politics alone), Senators John Ensign and John Edwards; Congressmen Mark Souder, Tim Mahoney, and Don Sherwood; World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz; and Deputy Secretary of State Randall Tobias all were involved in sexual scandals. Such scandals are not limited to the political realm. Businessmen, such as Hewlett-Packard's CEO Mark Hurd and Boeing's CEO Harry Stonecipher, have also lost their jobs because of scandals related to extramarital sexual affairs. These examples led us to ask three questions: First, do people in circles of high power have more difficulty being faithful to their partners, compared with people who have less power? Second, if this is so, what drives this effect? And third, does power also increase infidelity among women? The examples just mentioned may give the impression that power increases infidelity mainly among men, yet this pattern may have arisen because there still are many fewer women than men in high-power positions. Could it be that power actually has a similarly strong effect on infidelity among women?

Is Infidelity Linked to Power?

Extramarital affairs have a devastating impact on relationships. Infidelity is the most often reported reason for and the strongest predictor of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). It also

increases depression and decreases general psychological health (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004). Given these negative health effects, a better understanding of the antecedents of infidelity is needed. Infidelity is an especially serious problem when it occurs among people who hold positions of power. After all, powerful people, such as politicians and industrialists, serve as important role models and set descriptive norms for the general population to follow (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2008; Nattinger, Hoffmann, Howell-Pelz, & Goodwin, 1998).

Nonetheless, to our knowledge, no research has systematically investigated the link between power and infidelity. In fact, the observation that infidelity is more likely among the powerful may be a mere consequence of the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974); the affairs of industrialists and politicians are afforded more attention by the press than are similar affairs of ordinary people.

Therefore, our first aim in the investigation reported here was to examine the relationship between power and infidelity. We tested this relationship among a large number of working professionals, across the spectrum of power—from junior employees to senior CEOs. This cross-sectional design

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allowed us to measure actual power differences in existing organizational hierarchies and actual infidelity.

Why Might Power Increase Infidelity?

The second aim of our investigation was to determine the mechanism underlying the link between power and infidelity, if such a link was observed. Following methods recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004), we tested three mediating explanations in one multiple mediation model.

Power increases confidence

The first and foremost reason why power may be associated with increased infidelity is that the psychological experience of power has transformative effects on people's psychological state (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). The powerful see the world, themselves, and other people in a different manner, and they act in a different manner, than do individuals who lack power. One important effect of power is that it leads people to behave more confidently toward potential partners. As a result of the activation of the behavioral approach system, people in power generally are more confident, self-assured, assertive, and impulsive than people low in power (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Keltner et al., 2003; Lammers, Stoker, & Stapel, 2010; Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007). Recently, researchers found that power's effect on confidence also translates to romantic behavior: Power makes people focus their attention on physically attractive others (Brady, Lord, & Hill, 2011), it increases romantic approach behavior (Wilkey, 2011), and it makes people optimistic in their perception of sexual interest on the part of potential mates (Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lerner, 2011). As a result, participants who hold a high-power role in a mixed-sex interaction with strangers are more confident and self-assured than participants who are given a low-power role (Gonzaga, Keltner, & Ward, 2008). This increased confidence may even manifest itself in actual increased attractiveness; the outward signs of confidence—direct eye contact, moving close toward other people, a self-assured posture—are associated with increased attractiveness (Friedman, Riggio, & Casella, 1988).

At the outset of our study, we preferred this explanation because it builds on a general model (Keltner et al., 2003) that has received ample evidence from controlled experiments, as well as on more specific observations that power can increase romantic confidence (Gonzaga et al., 2008; Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lerner, 2011; Wilkey, 2011). However, we also aimed to rule out two plausible alternative explanations.

Power increases distance

One alternative reason why infidelity may be more likely among the powerful is that the possession of power may

increase psychological distance from one's current partner (Lee & Tiedens, 2001). Given that psychological closeness is critical for a good relationship, increased distance may directly increase infidelity (Allen et al., 2005; DeMaris, 2009).

Power and risk taking

A second alternative reason why power may increase infidelity is that the experience of power may decrease people's sensitivity to the risks involved in extramarital affairs. More powerful people are less affected by risks and make more optimistic assessments of the likelihoods of success and failure (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Also, a powerful position typically requires frequent business trips and attendance at other social events, providing ample social contact away from one's partner and making extramarital partners more accessible (Greeley, 1994). For both these reasons, powerful people may perceive a lower risk of their partner finding out about potential affairs than less powerful people do.

Is Gender a Moderator?

The third aim of this study was to investigate gender differences in the relationship between power and infidelity. Researchers have found that men are more likely to be unfaithful than women are. Such findings are typically explained with evolutionary theories, which hold that men and women use different strategies for spreading their genes and having offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Trivers, 1972). Specifically, men are thought to be motivated to seek multiple partners so as to maximize their genetic longevity; women are thought to be less inclined to infidelity and to be more oriented toward binding with a single, successful partner, because of their greater investment when procreating: internal fertilization, 9-month gestation, and lactation (Buss, 1989; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). According to this view, power should increase infidelity mainly among men, because an increase in power—and therefore in status and wealth—should make men more attractive to women.

In contrast, other researchers have proposed that this gender difference is (at least partially) a reflection of structural differences in the socioeconomic position of men and women. Traditionally, women have had fewer opportunities than men to obtain resources, status, and security by pursuing a career. A woman's best option for obtaining a desirable socioeconomic position has therefore been to attract a powerful man with whom to form a stable relationship (Buller, 2005; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Smuts, 1992; Wood & Eagly, 2007). In this view, female infidelity should increase if women obtain independent sources of power, because then they would no longer be dependent on their partners for wealth and status. The third aim of this study was to determine whether or not the power-infidelity link is moderated by gender. If power increases adultery among men, does it also do so among women?

Method

Participants and design

We e-mailed readers of *Intermediair*, a weekly Dutch magazine aimed at professionals, to ask them to voluntarily complete a questionnaire on the Internet. To minimize selection bias, we did not disclose that some of the questions were about marital infidelity. A total of 1,561 respondents completed the questionnaire. Because we were interested in infidelity—which is logically possible only if one has a partner to be unfaithful to—we excluded from our main analyses 286 respondents who did not currently have a partner, which left us with 1,275 participants (46% women, 54% men; mean age = 39.1 years, $SD = 8.2$ years).¹ As anticipated, respondents varied strongly in workplace power; 58% had a nonmanagement function, 22% had a lower-management function (e.g., team leader), 14% were in middle management (e.g., district manager), and 6% were in top management (e.g., CEO). The sample was generally highly educated; the highest level of education attained was a bachelor's degree for 43% of respondents, a master's degree for 43%, a Ph.D. for 11%, and some other credential for 2%.

Measures

The measures that we used were collected as part of a very large questionnaire that contained about 200 items and took, on average, 29 min to complete. Because the independent variable (power) was measured at the start of the questionnaire and the other variables were measured at the end (and hence separated from the power measure by a substantial amount of time and a large number of items), it is unlikely that participants inferred the purpose of the study.

Power. We measured power by presenting a 6-cm (2.4-in.) vertical line and asking participants to indicate their position in their organization's power hierarchy by clicking with their mouse on the appropriate point along the line, which ranged from 0 at the bottom to 100 at the top ($M = 55.6$, $SD = 27.3$). This is a simple but robust measure of perceptions of power; it has been used in previous research and correlates highly with formal position in the hierarchy, degree of control over others, and influence over others (Lammers et al., 2010). In the current sample, this measure of power correlated strongly with a measure of hierarchical position,² $r = .46$, $p < .001$.

Infidelity. We measured both intentions to engage in infidelity (in the future) and actual (past) infidelity. Specifically, we measured *infidelity intentions* by asking, "Would you ever consider cheating on your partner?" Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *definitely not*; 7 = *yes, I might*).³ Because infidelity is a sensitive topic, we gave respondents the explicit option to skip this question. Sixteen respondents (1.3%) chose to do so, which left 1,259 valid cases on which to perform the analyses ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.66$). We measured *actual infidelity*

by asking respondents how often they had been unfaithful to their partner (i.e., how often they had secretly had sex with another person). Responses to this item were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *very often*). Again, we gave respondents the explicit option to skip this question, and 25 people (2.0%) did so, which left 1,250 valid cases on which to perform the analyses ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.68$). Of these respondents, 329 (26.3%) admitted having engaged in infidelity at least once, and 921 (73.7%) reported that they had never engaged in infidelity. Responses to the two infidelity items correlated highly, $r = .57$, $p < .001$.

Mediators. We measured respondents' confidence in their ability to attract a romantic partner with four items: "I feel confident that I would be successful if I wanted to seduce someone," "I feel confident that it would be easy for me to seduce someone," "I feel confident about my attractiveness," and "I feel confident about my charms." All four items were answered on 7-point scales (1 = *fully disagree*; 7 = *fully agree*). These items showed high reliability ($\alpha = .91$), and responses were averaged to create a single confidence scale ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.44$).

We measured respondents' sense of distance from their partner with four items: "I think that my position puts pressure on my relationship," "I think that my position increases the stress in my relationship," "I think that my work increases the distance between me and my partner," and "I think that my work may alienate my partner from me." Responses were made on 7-point scales (1 = *fully disagree*; 7 = *fully agree*). These items showed high reliability ($\alpha = .92$), and responses were averaged to create a single psychological-distance scale ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.55$).

Finally, we measured respondents' perception of the risk involved in infidelity with two items: "If you were unfaithful, what would be the risk that your partner would find out?" and "If you were unfaithful, what would be the risk that acquaintances would find out?" Both items were answered on a 7-point scale (1 = *a very small risk*; 7 = *a very big risk*). The items showed high reliability ($\alpha = .81$), and responses were averaged to create a single perceived-risk scale ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.55$).

To test the discriminant validity of the mediators, we conducted a factor analysis on these 10 items (using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization). Each item loaded strongly on its own component (all loadings $> .85$) and very weakly on the other components (all loadings $< .15$).

Control variables. We also measured level of education, because a higher education may lead to a more accepting attitude toward infidelity. Finally, we measured age, because older respondents may be more likely to report infidelity, simply because they have had more years in which they could have been unfaithful (Allen et al., 2005; Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

Results

Because different scale types were used for different variables (e.g., gender was dichotomous, power was measured on a scale, and age was continuous), we standardized our independent variable, power; our mediators, confidence, psychological distance, and perceived risk; and the covariates, age and education, so that we could compare their effects.

Main effect of power

We first determined the relation between power and infidelity (intentions and actual). Controlling for gender (coded as 0 for male and 1 for female), age, and education, we found a robust positive effect of power on infidelity intentions, $b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .028$; respondents who were more powerful had stronger intentions to be unfaithful. However, this analysis did not reveal a main effect of gender, $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .460$, and the observed effect of power was not moderated by gender, $b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .653$. We also found a positive main effect of age on infidelity intentions, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .043$, which is consistent with earlier findings.

Next, we examined actual infidelity. Controlling for gender, age, and education, we found a significant effect of power on actual infidelity, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .021$; respondents who were more powerful engaged more in infidelity. Again, we did not find a main effect of gender, $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .121$, and the effect of power was not moderated by gender, $b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .394$.

Multiple mediation models

Next, we investigated the process underlying this power-infidelity link. We hypothesized that confidence would be the strongest of the three mediators and would therefore be the best explanation. Again, we looked at the effect on intentions and then at the effect on actual infidelity.

Using multiple mediation with the covariate bootstrap syntax (5,000 resamples) provided by Preacher and Hayes (2004), we estimated a regression-based causal model for the effect of power on infidelity intentions through the three proposed mediators, controlling for age, gender, and education. As Figure 1 shows, confidence mediated the direct effect of power on infidelity intentions (indirect effect = 0.067, $SE = 0.014$, 95% confidence interval: [0.046, 0.111]). The mediation by psychological distance was much weaker and only marginally significant (indirect effect = 0.007, $SE = 0.007$, 95% confidence interval: [0.000, 0.021]). Perceived risk did not mediate the effect at all (indirect effect = 0.002, $SE = 0.002$, 95% confidence interval: [-0.011, 0.015]), mainly because although perceived risk affected infidelity intentions, power was not related to perceived risk. With the mediators in the model, 66.7% of the variance in the size of the direct effect of power on infidelity was explained, and power was no longer a significant predictor.

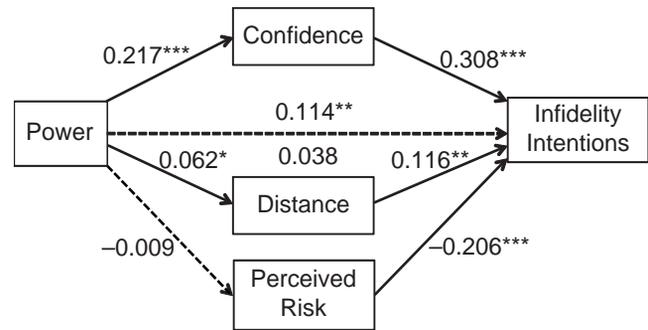


Fig. 1. Effect of power on infidelity intentions. Path coefficients represent standardized regression weights. The coefficient above the path from power to infidelity intentions represents the total effect with no mediators in the model; the coefficient below this path represents the direct effect when the mediators were included in the model. Coefficients significantly different from zero are indicated by asterisks (* $p < .06$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$), and their associated paths are shown by solid lines; dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths.

A similar analysis of the effect of power on actual infidelity closely replicated this pattern (see Fig. 2). Again, the relation between power and actual infidelity was significantly and most strongly mediated by confidence (indirect effect = 0.020, $SE = 0.006$, 95% confidence interval: [0.011, 0.033]); this relation was not significantly mediated by psychological distance (indirect effect = 0.001, $SE = 0.001$, 95% confidence interval: [-0.001, 0.005]) or by perceived risk (indirect effect = 0.001, $SE = 0.002$, 95% confidence interval: [-0.004, 0.006]). Although power increased distance, distance, in itself, was not related to actual infidelity. And—as in the case of infidelity intentions—although perceived risk affected infidelity, power was not related to the perception of risk. With the mediators in the model, 45.5% of the variance in the size of the direct effect of power on infidelity was explained, and power was no longer a significant predictor.

To further establish the validity of the models, we explored various competing models, but found that none described the

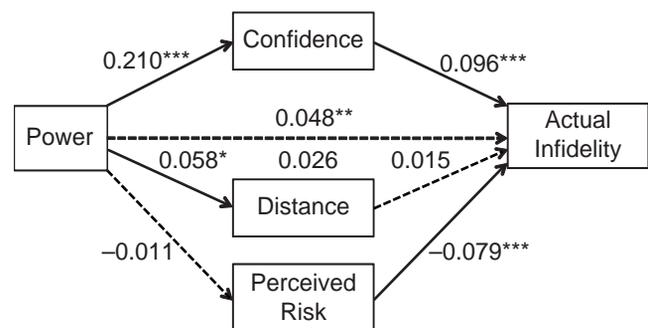


Fig. 2. Effect of power on actual infidelity. Path coefficients represent standardized regression weights. The coefficient above the path from power to actual infidelity represents the total effect with no mediators in the model; the coefficient below this path represents the direct effect when the mediators were included in the model. Coefficients significantly different from zero are indicated by asterisks (* $p < .06$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$), and their associated paths are shown by solid lines; dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths.

data better. For example, we examined whether infidelity predicted power, after controlling for the covariates. This was not the case. We also ran the analyses separately for men and women, but found two highly similar patterns that closely followed the described pattern for the combined sample. For both men and women (separately), confidence was the only significant mediator of the link between power and infidelity.

General Discussion

High-profile, anecdotal evidence suggests that the powerful are less faithful to their romantic partners than the less powerful are, and some cultural stereotypes hold that infidelity prospers in the upper echelons of society. But how veridical are such anecdotes, and how accurate are these stereotypes? Is there a relation between power and infidelity? We conducted a large field study to answer these questions. Specifically, we sought to answer three questions: Is power associated with increased infidelity? If so, why is this the case? Is the relationship between power and infidelity the same for men and women?

Power and infidelity

First, our results show that power is associated with increased self-reported infidelity and with increased intentions of engaging in infidelity. This relationship held even after controlling for gender, age, and education. Note that we measured real, structural power differences in existing power structures (companies and other organizations). This measure of power has proven to be reliable and to correlate with other indicators of power in this and previous research (Lammers et al., 2010). Also, by measuring infidelity with an anonymous, Internet-based questionnaire, we decreased the effect of social desirability on responses, particularly among women (Whisman & Snyder, 2007).

Increased confidence

Second, we measured three potential mediators to investigate the process underlying the power-infidelity link. Research has demonstrated that power leads to more confident behavior in mixed-sex interactions (Gonzaga et al., 2008; Wilkey, 2011). Our findings in the present study show that confidence also plays a crucial role in the power-infidelity link. Also, we ruled out two competing explanations. Although powerful people do experience increased psychological distance from their partners, this variable only weakly mediates the link between power and infidelity intentions and does not mediate the link between power and actual infidelity. Also, although perceptions of risk are strongly related to infidelity, differences in power do not explain differences in the perceived risk of engaging in infidelity.

Gender

Third, we aimed to determine whether the power-infidelity link was as strong for women as for men. Many researchers

have found that, overall, women are less likely than men to be unfaithful. This effect has been explained by the fact that for evolutionary reasons, women should be more oriented than men toward binding to one powerful partner in a stable relationship. Other researchers have proposed that this often-found gender difference in infidelity is at least partly due to differences in the socioeconomic position of men and women. According to this proposal, if women were to obtain independent sources of income and power, their dependence on their partners would decrease, and their likelihood of being unfaithful would increase (Buller, 2005; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Smuts, 1992; Wood & Eagly, 2007).

Our findings clearly support this latter view. Gender did not moderate the effects we found. Among women who had an independent source of income (as all our female respondents did, because they were working professionals), power had a positive relationship with infidelity, and this relationship was comparable to that found among men. These findings were not likely caused by a statistical artifact; our sample was large and included similar numbers of men and women. If social desirability had affected the responses, it most likely would have suppressed responses more strongly for women than for men (Whisman & Snyder, 2007). It also seems unlikely that the observed effects are specific to the Dutch culture. Although The Netherlands is often seen as a liberal country in regard to sexual issues, most Dutch people find adultery unacceptable (Kraaykamp, 2002). According to the World Values Survey Association (2000), the opinion of the Dutch on adultery ranks 30th among the 47 countries investigated. The Dutch score, 2.7 on a 5-point scale ranging from *unacceptable* to *acceptable*, is similar to the scores of the Belgians, Germans, Canadians, Japanese, and Russians.

Clearly, power increases infidelity among women, as it does among men. An emerging literature demonstrates that this is not an isolated finding; researchers studying the effect of (manipulated) power on participants' attention to attractive individuals (Brady et al., 2011), tendency to overestimate the degree to which other people are sexually interested in them (Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lerner, 2011), and sexual approach behaviors (Wilkey, 2011) have also found equally strong effects of power for women and for men. Together, these findings suggest that women in high-power positions are as likely to engage in infidelity as are men in high-power positions.

Limitations and future directions

Although this study answers some important questions concerning the power-infidelity link, it was correlational in design and therefore does not allow for causal claims. In addition, we measured self-reported infidelity, which is likely affected by social-desirability concerns. Obviously, ethical concerns prevent an experiment in which participants varying in power or primed with various levels of power engage in actual infidelity (e.g., while working with an attractive confederate). Other researchers have conducted experiments in which they

measured proxies of infidelity, and their results point in the same direction as ours: Power makes people more attentive to attractive others and more likely to approach them (Brady et al., 2011; Gonzaga et al., 2008; Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Lerner, 2011; Wilkey, 2011). We wanted to continue beyond where these experiments necessarily had to stop and to show the effects of power on actual infidelity—even though doing so meant that we had to accept the limitations of a cross-sectional design.

Relationship with existing literature

Our finding that power is positively associated with infidelity among women seems incompatible with Baumeister and Vohs's (2004) theory that women employ sex as a scarce resource to gain status and resources. If that is the case, more powerful women should be less—not more—inclined to infidelity; more powerful women would have less need to gain additional resources. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Baumeister and Vohs's theory is based on the premise that women have fewer opportunities than men to gain resources and status. Although this premise may not be true among our sample, it is still true in the general population. Their theory may therefore be less incompatible with our results than it appears to be at first sight.

Given our findings, why do no or only a few high-powered women end up in infidelity-related scandals in the media? All the examples in our introduction involved powerful men. A simple explanation for this discrepancy between our findings and this disproportionate media portrayal could be that there are still simply many fewer women than men in high-power positions. For example, in 2010, only 76 of the 435 (17%) members of the U.S. House of Representatives were female (U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, 2010). If such gender differences in power diminish and women gain more power, many other gender differences should also be attenuated. Gender equality should increase both virtuous and less virtuous behavior among women. As this study shows, one such less virtuous behavior may be sexual infidelity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Two of the mediators, psychological distance and risk perception, could also not be measured in participants without a partner. Of course, people may be single because of their past infidelity, but in analyses that included all participants, the main effects and mediation effects were highly similar to those reported here.

2. Hierarchical position was measured by asking respondents to indicate whether they were in nonmanagement (1), lower management (2), middle management (3), or higher management (4). This scale had a skewed distribution, and results using these data are not reported. However, analyses that included this measure yielded results highly similar to those reported here.

3. The anchors for this item were deliberately unequal in their extremity because infidelity intentions are usually low.

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