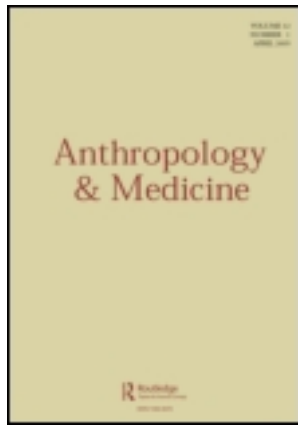


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A cultural model of infidelity among African American and Puerto Rican young adults

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Having concurrent sexual partners is a risk factor for STIs and HIV/AIDS, yet few studies have investigated the cultural meanings and functions of concurrency. A multi-method qualitative/quantitative study of sexual ideas, attitudes, and behaviors among inner-city Puerto Rican and African American emergent adults (age 18–25) in Hartford, Connecticut, USA, suggests that having concurrent partners is common in this population. Using data from 12 focus groups and 40 participants in systematic data collection techniques (e.g., pile sorts), the underlying cognitive structure of concurrency and cheating/infidelity are explored. Results suggest that participants are less tolerant of multiple partners in more committed relationships, but that very few relationships can be considered committed. Furthermore, participants see cheating as inevitable even in committed relationships. Sexual transgressions are considered the most severe form of cheating. Having an outside partner for emotional reasons or to have access to one's child were seen as more acceptable/forgivable than doing so for sexual satisfaction, social status or material goods. Multiple partnerships must be seen in the context of the inner city where resources and opportunities are scarce and young adults attempt to protect themselves from emotional injury. Documenting new and changing social constructions of infidelity is important for understanding the social context of sexual behavior in our global world and for designing culturally appropriate health interventions.

Keywords: medical anthropology; social construction of infidelity; sexual and reproductive health; multiple concurrent partners; cheating; inner city; emergent adults

Infidelity-related beliefs and behaviors are relatively understudied in medical anthropology, despite their global pervasiveness (Jankowiak et al. 2002). The contemporary concept of infidelity originates in cultural and religious proscriptions on adultery in monogamous heterosexual marriage, the punishment for which is often applied more stringently to women. Thus, infidelity has been constructed as a highly gendered social and moral issue, ignoring the many examples in the ethnographic literature of overlapping sexual partners among the married that are

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considered normative, appropriate or prescribed in other cultures (Jankowiak et al. 2002), and, until recently, the implications of infidelity for unmarried couples in the West. New sexual scripts are constantly under construction in response to globalization and heightened attention to human, women's, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) rights, as well as to the ever-increasing global levels of structural (Farmer 2004) and actual violence (Rylko-Bauer and Singer 2011). New social constructions of infidelity are emerging and need to be understood within their social contexts (Hirsch et al. 2002).

Infidelity among couples is also an important issue in sexual health; having multiple partners raises the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS (Foxman et al. 2006; Manhart et al. 2002). Despite the fact that sexual context globally is in constant flux in response to new norms, needs, and social circumstances (Erickson 2011), interventions are still based on slowly changing frameworks for understanding sexual behavior, especially infidelity, in relationships.

The health threat is real, as the growing health literature on partner concurrency (having had more than one sexual partner within a specific time frame, usually one year) attests. About 33% of men and 23% of women age 20–24 interviewed for the US National Survey of Family Growth had had at least two sexual partners in the year prior to the survey (Chandra et al. 2005; Martinez et al. 2006). Manhart et al. (2002) reported that 35% of men and 24% of women studied had concurrent or overlapping partners. In one of the only population-based studies of American sexual behavior, Laumann et al. (1994) found that, in 1992, 23% of men and 8% of women between 19–28 years old interviewed had extra-relationship sex partners. More recent studies suggest infidelity is more common in non-marital than marital relationships and that it is associated with heightened levels of instability, intimate partner violence, and sexually transmitted diseases (Miller and White 2003; Treas and Giesen 2000; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Concurrency surveys capture both serial and overlapping partners, but rarely the social context of the relationship. Not all concurrency is infidelity, which is defined by the nature of the relationship. Furthermore, since most studies only assess adultery within marriage, it is difficult to estimate infidelity for other relationship types. That there is much speculation but little research on infidelity has been acknowledged among researchers in health and in anthropology (Blow and Hartnett 2005). Important for medical anthropology, infidelity has not been systematically studied as a cultural domain, and surprisingly little is known from a cultural, meaning-centered perspective about the ways young adults experience sexual and romantic relationships, and by extension, how and why they engage in a sexual relationship outside of their primary one.

This paper focuses on cultural understandings and meanings of sexual infidelity among African American and Puerto Rican emerging adults (age 18–25) living in the hyperghetto of Hartford, CT (Singer 2009; Wacquant 2002), using data from Project PHRESH, a five-year mixed method study that explored the sociocultural context of sexual behavior (with a focus on barrier contraceptive use) among inner-city, African American and Puerto Rican heterosexually active young adults in Hartford, Connecticut and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Here, data are reported from the Hartford site only for focus group discussions (FGDs) and systematic cultural assessment (free lists and pile sorts) relevant to the topic of infidelity that were only fielded in Hartford due to constraints at the

Philadelphia site. Additional study methods included sexual and romantic life history interviews ($N=62$), coital diaries ($N=38$) and a structured survey ($N=241$).

Two sets of FGDs were undertaken. FGD1 (fielded in 2004) covered six topical areas, two of which were relevant to this paper:¹ (1) types of relationships, commitment and monogamy with probes for gender and ethnic differences, meaning of commitment and meaning of monogamy and infidelity; and (2) types of physical and emotional risk involved in sexual/romantic partnering with probes for gender and ethnic differences and ways people assess partner risk. FGD1 included eight, extended (4–6 hour) FGDs (two for each gender/ethnic combination).² A total of 73 people participated: 23 African American females, 21 Puerto Rican females, 15 African American males, and 14 Puerto Rican males.

FGD2 was fielded in 2006 to investigate emerging topics from FGD1 and life history interviews (2005–2006). Four topics³ were addressed at both sites and an additional topic, infidelity, was addressed in Hartford. Domains of infidelity included: attitudes towards infidelity, ways people cheat, reasons for cheating, and kinds of relationships in which cheating is possible, with probes for gender and ethnic differences. Four⁴ 2–3 hour FGDs were convened. A total of 31 people participated: eight African American females, seven Puerto Rican females, seven African American males, and nine Puerto Rican males. All FGDs were tape recorded, transcribed and coded in ATLAS.ti for major themes of interest and emerging themes. Free lists elicited from the FGDs were analyzed using Anthropac (Borgatti 1996).

The free list and pile sort activities were designed to understand the cognitive structure surrounding relationship types and infidelity/cheating behaviors. Pile sorts are a type of cultural domain analysis in which individuals are asked to sort items (e.g., terms listed on separate cards) into piles based on their perceived similarities. The domain items used in the pile sort were free listed in FGD1 and FGD2 and narrowed to terms mentioned by more than one group. Investigators used both free sorts, in which the respondents determine the sorting strategy, and directed sorts, in which participants are asked to sort items in a specific way (Borgatti 1994, 1996). A total of 40 people participated in the pile sorts with equal numbers stratified by sex and ethnicity. Sample size was based on the goal of saturation, which existing qualitative research indicates occurs at between 20–30 participants (Morse 1994), a criteria met for sex and ethnicity subgroups.

Pile sort data were analyzed using multidimensional scaling (MDS), which produces a two (or more) dimensional graph in which items that are more similar are closer to each other; and Johnson's hierarchical clustering (JHC) in which items are aggregated into successive clusters based upon similarity (most similar items are clustered first and then placed in larger clusters). For each pile sort, the MDS graph is provided (Figures 1–3) along with a table that lists the abbreviations for the variables included (Tables 1–3); which are arranged to reflect the results of JHC analysis and are labeled based upon participants' names for their piles. Shading indicates major divisions between groups of variables (darker shading indicates more fundamental divisions). Preliminary analyses revealed no significant differences in MDS results by sex or ethnicity. Thus, only aggregated data for the sample are reported.⁵

Participants were recruited by experienced Latino and African American outreach workers through street outreach at two kinds of venues: (1) general street

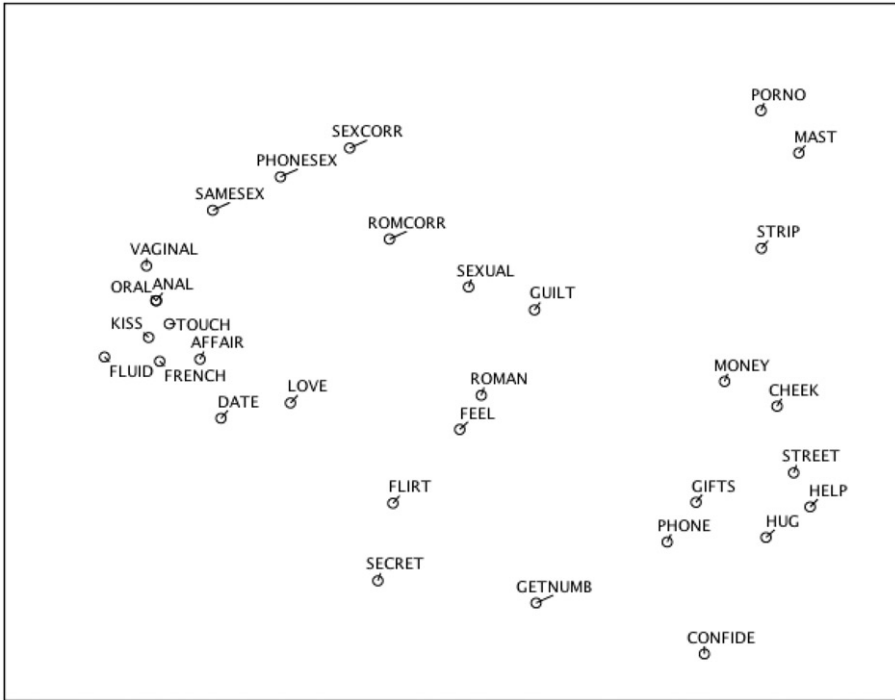


Figure 1. MDS: Types of cheating ($N = 32$).

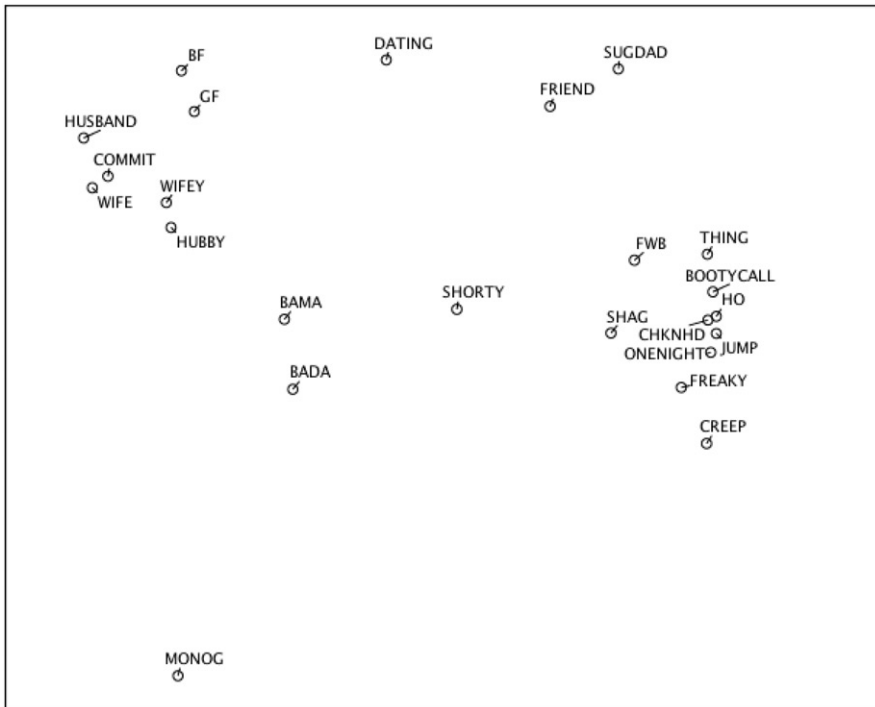


Figure 2. MDS: types of Relationships ($N = 24$).

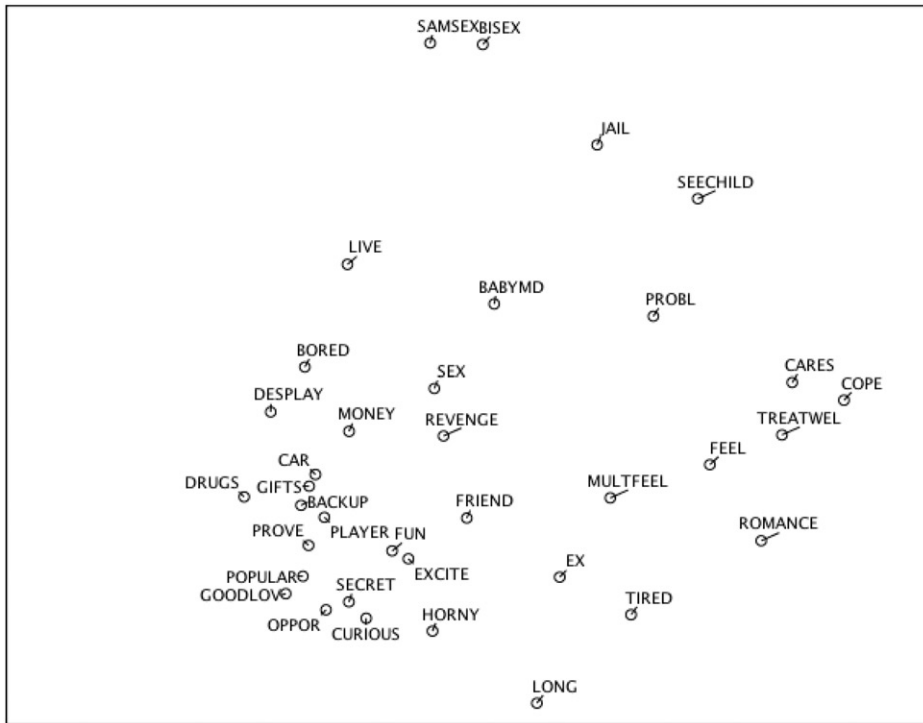


Figure 3. MDS: reasons for cheating in serious relationships ($N = 36$).

settings (e.g., street corners with heavy pedestrian traffic) identified as high density Puerto Rican or African American neighborhoods; and (2) specialized activity sites (e.g., community college, youth and young adult programs, clubs, shops, and recreation sites). Eligibility requirements for participants in FGDs and pile sorts included being 18–25 years old, self-identifying as African American or Puerto Rican, having had sex with a member of the opposite sex in the last year, not currently pregnant, and English-speaking. Participants were interviewed at a community-based organization in Hartford where they provided written informed consent and were compensated about \$15 per hour for their time. Bilingual research staff, of similar ethnicity, fielded FGDs and SCA methods. Participants for each method were recruited separately.

Sample description

The average age of participants was 20 (range 18–25). Forty percent had not completed high school, 44% had completed high school or had a GED, 12% had attended some college, 1% had completed college, and 27% were employed. In the 30 days before participating, 10% had not had sex at all, 67% had had sex with only one person, 18% had had between two and five partners, and 5% had had more than five partners. Fifty-six percent had been pregnant or had impregnated someone, 41% reported having a child and 4% were married.

In contrast, nationally in 2000, 19% of men and 27% of women 20–24 were married (Kreider and Simmons 2003) and 36% of women 20–24 had had a child

Table 1. Types of cheating ($N = 32$).

Emotional cheating	Abbreviations
Thinking about someone else in a romantic way	ROMAN
Thinking about someone else in a sexual way	SEXUAL
Having feelings for someone else	FEEL
Being in love with someone else	LOVE
Flirting with someone else	FLIRT
Having a romantic correspondence on the internet	ROMCORR
Having a sexual correspondence on the internet	SEXCORR
Phone sex	PHONSEX
Sexual cheating	
Going out on a date with someone else	DATE
Having an affair	AFFAIR
Having anal sex with someone else	ANAL
Kissing someone else on the mouth	KISS
Touching someone else in a sexual way	TOUCH
Having oral sex with someone else	ORAL
French kissing (deep/tongue) someone else	FRENCH
Having vaginal sex with someone else	VAGINAL
Having a same sex relationship	SAMESEX
Any exchange of bodily fluids	FLUID
Suggestive social interactions	
Talking to someone on the street	STREET
Hugging someone else	HUG
Being nice or helpful to someone else	HELP
Kissing someone on the cheek	CHEEK
Giving someone gifts	GIFTS
Giving someone money	MONEY
Confiding in someone else	CONFIDE
Autoeroticism	
Looking at pornography	PORNO
Masturbation	MAST
Going to a strip club	STRIP
Ambiguous	
Talking to someone on the phone	PHONE
Getting someone's phone number	GETNUMB
Being secretive/hiding your business from your partner	SECRET
Anything you feel guilty about doing with someone else	GUILT

*Shading represents divisions between items above and below the line. Darker shading represents greater differences.

(Bachu and O'Connell 2001). In 2006–2008, the estimate for US school completion was 30% only completing high school, 20% with some college, and 25% with an undergraduate degree. Furthermore, 65% of the US population over 16 was in the labor force (US Census Bureau 2008). Although there are differences in reporting

Table 2. Kinds of sexual and romantic relationships (*N* = 24).

Sexual relationships	Abbreviations
Booty calls	BOOTYCALL
Thang thang/thing on the side/little thing	THING
Chickenhead (one who freely gives oral sex)	CHKNHD
Ho/whore	HO
Jump/jump off	JUMP
One night stand	ONE-NIGHT
Freak/freaky one	FREAKY
Creep shots/creepin'/creeps (secret side partner)	CREEP
Friends with benefits	FWB
Shag/shag partner/shaggin'	SHAG
Sexual: monetary	
Sugar daddy (someone who provides money)	SUGDAD
Sexual: longer term or evolving	
Friend/friendship	FRIEND
Dating	DATING
Shorty (long standing sexual relationship)	SHORTY
Committed (supposed to be monogamous)	
Boyfriend	BF
Girlfriend	GF
Hubby (committed relationship but not legally married)	HUBBY
Wifey (committed relationship but not legally married)	WIFEY
Committed	COMMIT
Wife	WIFE
Husband	HUSBAND
Committed because of parenting	
Baby mama/baby's mother	BAMA
Baby daddy/baby's father	BADA
Monogamous (by definition)	
Monogamous	MONOG

*Shading represents divisions between items above and below the line. Darker shading represents greater differences.

techniques, it is apparent that this study population has less education, lower marriage rates, and less employment opportunities than the US as a whole.

Results

Singer et al. (2006) have described how participants in this study divided relationships into two kinds – relationships that were primarily sexual and those that were primarily romantic and emotionally meaningful as well as sexual, which they called ‘serious’ or ‘committed’ and that construct is used to define relationships in the pile sort.

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Table 3. Reasons to cheat in a committed relationship ($N = 36$).

Extenuating circumstances	Abbreviations
Current partner is in jail	JAIL
Interest in same sex relationship	SAMSEX
Interest in bisexual relationship	BISEX
Social status/ self esteem	
Revenge for being cheated on by partner	REVENGE
New person is popular	POPULAR
To be a player	PLAYER
To have insurance/back-up partner	BACKUP
To prove you can do it (prove you are desirable)	PROVE
Material goods	
To get money	MONEY
To get gifts or other things	GIFTS
To be able to use their car	CAR
To get drugs	DRUGS
Sexual satisfaction	
Curiosity about having sex with someone new	CURIOUS
Excitement of a secret relationship	SECRET
The opportunity to have sex/just happened	OPPOR
Person has reputation as good lover	GOODLOV
To have fun	FUN
Excitement of a new partner	EXCITE
Desired person is a player	DISPLAY**
Horny/sexual desire	HORNY
To get kind of sex that can't get in current relationship	SEX
Boredom	BORED
Continuing long term relationship	
Because person is your baby mama/baby daddy	BABYMD
Because you have known the person for a long time	LONG
Because you used to be with that person	EX
Because you are friends with the person	FRIEND
Emotional needs	
Problems in current relationship	PROBL
Tired of current relationship	TIRED
Caught feelings for someone else	FEEL
Having feelings for more than one person at the same time	MULTFEEL
Romance	ROMANCE
Being with someone who cares about you	CARES
Being with someone who treats you good/makes you feel good	TREATWEL
Being with someone who helps you cope emotionally	COPE
Survival strategies	
To get a place to stay/live	LIVE
To be able to see your children	SEECHILD

*Shading represents divisions between items above and below the line. Darker shading represents greater differences.

**DISPLAY, HORNY, SEX and BORED showed low correlation and late clustering with the other satisfaction/material/self-esteem reasons for cheating.

From FGD1 and life history interviews, it was clear that multiple partners were common in both casual and committed relationships. Fewer than 5% of life history participants had ever been in a self-defined serious relationship in which neither they nor their partner had had side partners (Singer et al. 2006). In the structured survey, 48% of respondents in serious relationships reported either they, their partner, or both had had sex with someone else during the course of the relationship. Thus, infidelity is common in this population.

What counts as cheating?

Participants were asked to free sort 32 cheating behaviors derived from FGD2 (Table 1). MDS and JHC analysis suggested there were five clusters that the research team labeled (1) emotional cheating; (2) sexual cheating; (3) suggestive social interactions; (4) autoeroticism; and (5) ambiguous. These clusters are reflected in the MDS plot (Figure 1).

The sexual cheating behaviors are tightly clustered in the mid-upper left quadrant, emotional cheating behaviors are in the middle, and the social interaction behaviors are in the bottom right, forming a sexual-social diagonal dimension. The horizontal dimension (left to right) is the cheating–not cheating dimension on which participants sorted the items. The sexual behaviors are definitely considered cheating by participants. Most different from this group are the behaviors in the lower-right quadrant that are seen as everyday social interactions, including kissing on the cheek, offering help, hugging, and giving gifts. These behaviors are ‘not really’ cheating, but according to participants across research methods, it is exactly this type of social behavior that is closely monitored by serious partners who are always on the alert for signs of infidelity (Who does s/he talk to on the phone or ask for a ride?):

Participant: Just them, by them talking to somebody else, it may not be cheating at that moment, but as for what’s to come in the future if you all do decide to break up, they got –. Just like you don’t want to quit a job... unless you got another job. (African American Male FGD)

Between these two extremes are behaviors that participants called emotional cheating, such as having romantic feelings, flirting, and having romantic or sexual correspondence. This group of behaviors is viewed as less of a betrayal than overt sexual activity, but still hurtful and as cheating by some (e.g., see Harris 2003); as these participants expressed:

Participant: If you found out that your boyfriend was emailing this girl for the past six months. They haven’t had sex. They haven’t had anything. But the fact that they’re just having a relationship is involved, it’s still – it’s not intimate but it’s still, you know, it’s still a relationship... I think that’s cheating. (African American Female FGD)

Participant: You don’t even need to have sex. If he is holding some girl’s hand, or even, I don’t know, talking to a girl, I don’t know. (Puerto Rican Female FGD)

The intense monitoring of a partner’s social interactions reflects the constant movement of participants in and out of relationships, something of which the participants are painfully aware: As one African American female commented during the FGDs ‘You gotta keep movin’.

The ambiguous behaviors hover between social and emotional cheating and were interpreted as being ‘on the road to cheating.’ The autoeroticism group

(e.g., looking at pornography), is sexual but does not involve another person, and it is not considered cheating by most of the respondents.

Relationship types and cheating

Themes of infidelity and concurrency were widespread throughout all methods. To corroborate this formally, participants were asked to sort 24 relationship types into three piles: (1) relationships in which having sexual intercourse with another would clearly constitute cheating; (2) relationships in which it would be unclear whether intercourse with another would be cheating; and (3) relationships that were considered too casual for cheating to be possible. The relationship types clustered into six groups that were labeled sexual, monetary, longer term/evolving, committed, involved because of parenting, and monogamous (Table 2).

The clustering shows the more committed relationships concentrated in the upper left hand corner and the purely sexual relationships at the far right middle of the MDS plot (Figure 2). The position of monogamous far from all other relationships, but clearly on the 'committed' side indicates the rarity of truly monogamous relationships for the study participants or alternatively its lower cultural saliency as a type (versus a descriptor). Between these more cohesive clusters were relationships in which it is ambiguous whether having concurrent partners is cheating. These are the longer term but not romantically committed (baby mama/daddy, shorty) or evolving (dating, friend) relationships.

Although participants indicated that cheating becomes less acceptable in serious emotional relationships, they also were resigned to its frequency:

Participant: Even if you say that you the wifey, like how we say we got a hubby, we still got our man on the side. Just like you the wifey, he still got the other girl on the side. You ain't goin' to never know. (African American female FGD)

Participant: But man, most of the time you think somebody is wifey material, they be f-king around behind your back. (Puerto Rican Male FGD)

Why people cheat

Participant: Then you have your committed relationship where you do stuff on the side, though. So, it's, like, committed but she knows about you, you know what I'm saying? Sometimes you can't get your nut off [*have sex*] because certain things happen. If you have a baby's mom, you still with her, you still live with her and stuff, but it's because you don't want to pay child support.

Participant: Sometimes you just tired of the same thing. (Puerto Rican Male FGD)

Throughout the qualitative narratives participants indicated that cheating can only occur in committed relationships, and participants believed it happens frequently. To understand why, interviewers asked participants to do a directed sort of 36 reasons to cheat into three piles: (1) acceptable reasons to cheat on a serious partner; (2) reasons that are not acceptable; and (3) reasons the respondent is uncertain about. The less acceptable–more acceptable axis runs horizontally from left to right on the MDS plot (Figure 3). Reasons clustered into seven groups: extenuating circumstances, social status/self-esteem, access to material goods, sexual satisfaction,

continuing long-term relationships, emotional needs, and survival strategies (Table 3).

The least acceptable reasons for cheating (lower-left quadrant) were related to personal desires – such as wanting excitement, to have fun, excitement of a secondary relationship, being horny, getting access to a car or drugs, etc. Participants indicated that these are things people in serious relationships could control and should reject. It should be noted, however, that the relationship types that involve sex for resources are considered culturally normative exchanges for desired or needed items (e.g., diapers, drugs, shoes) not commercial sex work (Singer et al. 2006). Most acceptable in the far-right lower quadrant are the emotional needs, including filling a need not found in the current relationship (to be cared about, treated well) or because one has developed feelings for someone else. The vertical dimension top to bottom reflects personal reasons of greater to lesser necessity. In the top two quadrants are reasons associated with having access to your children, having a partner in jail, having a place to live, and bisexual needs. Many of the participants had been incarcerated (43% of survey participants), and social norms allowed people thus deprived of their primary partner to have sexual relationships while their partners were in jail. About half of the participants already had children, and most were no longer involved in a serious relationship with their baby mama/daddy, yet having sex with your baby mama/daddy to have access to your children was considered an acceptable infidelity, since children are highly valued. Similarly, bisexual needs were understood to be not necessarily controllable.

Discussion

These results show that tolerance for multiple partners is highly dependent on relationship type. Relationships that have an emotional component cluster together and infidelity is less acceptable in relationships that have a high degree of emotional attachment. Nevertheless, the number of relationships in which one should not cheat is small, three to six, and the vast majority of relationships have a degree of fluidity and tolerance for multiple partners. Similarly, reasons to cheat that are based upon emotional fulfillment cluster together and are viewed as the most acceptable reasons for cheating. Cheating in a serious relationship for sexual gratification, material, or non-emotional reasons is far less acceptable. These gradations in potentially forgivable infidelities make multiple partners possible under conditions of disparity.

One of the major findings is the lack of significant differences in this cultural model by sex or ethnicity. This runs counter to the widespread belief that infidelity beliefs and behavior vary by gender, and challenges common stereotypes about ethnic variation. While participants acknowledged a sexual double standard for gendered sexual behavior, both men and women and Puerto Ricans and African Americans cheat for the same reasons and assess the acceptability of cheating in similar ways. Perhaps this gender egalitarian social construction of cheating reflects more the material constraints of life in the hyperghetto than an actual convergence of gendered sexual and romantic roles, but further insight into this awaits research with other ethnic and socio-economic groups.

These findings suggest that common factors shape the lived experience of the participants. Notably, they live in a socio-economic context in which resources and choices are limited and health disparities apparent. To survive, they maintain a

socio-sexual network of people on whom they can depend for assistance in matters of daily living (Stack 1975), primarily because they have little chance of being economically viable by relying on only one partner. They recognize that some relationships exist for material resources or pleasure, some involve emotional commitment, and some are maintained to avoid unacceptable emotional and financial deficits. Since everyone is always 'on the move' to survive emotionally and physically and can be involved with several different people on different emotional levels, they expect that even in a committed relationship their partner likely has someone on the side. Thus, to prevent emotional injury, the cultural norm is having someone on the side or waiting in 'the wings' even though they recognize that this is a violation of trust that can undermine the development of the very relationships they yearn for (see also Singer et al. 2006). What the authors have attempted to characterize is the cultural model of infidelity guiding their behavior – what is cheating, when is it necessary to achieve goals, when is it forgivable, how are trade-offs assessed, what are the possible consequences? Knowledge of this cultural model of cheating at once humanizes and renders understandable the seemingly irrational sexual risk choices that people make in the context of their daily lives.

This research underscores the need to include a cultural approach in understanding matters of the heart in order to ground interventions in the complexity of the social context in which sexual choices are made by human beings. Clinicians, patients, and the general population need to understand that the causes of infidelity and the associated risks of HIV and STI infection may not be lack of knowledge or lack of self-control, but a response to a specific and deeply rooted set of socio-economic and emotional-biological realities. Corroborating this interpretation will require further research into understandings of infidelity in different cultural and socio-economic groups, a task for which medical anthropologists are well prepared.

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Conflict of interest of authors: none.

Notes

1. FGD1 guide on sexual relationships, sexual behaviors, condoms and contraception, risks of relationships, factors in partner selection, and social influences on sexual behavior is available on request.
2. For consistency across sites, all sites agreed to conduct interviews in English only, in order to control for potential cultural/accluturation confounders – e.g., participants who had spent relatively little time on the US mainland. All sites also agreed to conduct the same number of FGs/interviews/surveys with each subgroup (e.g., PR females, AA males) to ensure sufficient data to identify potential ethnic/gender differences.
3. The topics included children and family, drugs, incarceration, and violence.

4. FGD1 suggested that one set of FGDs per sex/ethnicity group was sufficient to reach saturation.
5. The authors used quadratic assignment procedures (QAP) to test for differences by sex and ethnicity. QAP computes the correlation between two pile sort similarity matrices (i.e., males/females; African Americans/Puerto Ricans – Borgatti 2002).

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