

Behaviours Associated with Male “Sweethearting” (Infidelity) in Heterosexual Relationships in The Bahamas

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Abstract

This paper presents incidental data on *sweethearting* from a study on sexual violence in intimate-partner relationships between men and women in The Bahamas. Females participating in the study reported male infidelity to be common (with about 20% and possibly as many as about 50% of men being unfaithful) in both unmarried and married relationships. Associated with infidelity were behaviours of concern, such as physical and sexual violence, as well as psychological abuse by male partners. These abusive behaviours were associated with the woman feeling that she would leave the relationship if she could, and that the relationship was not a loving one. Furthermore, the study suggests that unfaithful married men are more likely to demonstrate activities of concern (in the form of elevated scores for domestic violence and psychological abuse) compared to unfaithful unmarried men in relationships with women.

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Introduction

In the Bahamas, the term *sweethearting* is used to describe the phenomenon of married men who have extramarital intimate relationships with women who are not their wives (Noel, 2018). Unmarried men may have multiple intimate relationships at the same time, and so can also be considered unfaithful by their female partners. Marital infidelity is not only a topic of conversation in the Bahamian and international media (Noel, 2018; Schwartz, 2022), but also a subject of systematic research (Tsapelas et al. 2010). Although infidelity is universal in nature, a review of the Bahamian literature indicates that sweethearting appears

to be a part of the country’s historical (Ulentin, 2022), social (Noel, 2018), and cultural landscape (Storr, 2009). Case studies, such as that of Catherine Richardson from 1809, throw light on some ways men have historically treated their lovers in The Bahamas (Bahamianology.com, 2020). In the late 1950s, Otterbein (1966) described sweethearting in Andros and how it was associated with a gendered double standard of sexual ethics where women, but not men, were expected to be virgins at marriage. Men were expected to become sexually active at an early age, which would be invariably before marriage and such

attitudes still persist (Wallace, 2015). Research by Grant (1999) describes male and female infidelity in The Bahamas. In the wider Caribbean context, Wiltshire (2012) has described how men use domestic violence and infidelity to exert power over women. Some studies suggest that, compared to other Caribbean countries, The Bahamas has a relatively high per capita rate of sexual violence (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023), so any activity which may contribute to sexual violence is of concern.

Infidelity, both inside and outside The Bahamas, has long had many negative associations, these include: illicit relationships (e.g., statutory rape); divorce (Noel, 2018); trauma (Warach & Josephs, 2021); sexual health concerns (Hem-Lee-Forsyth et al., 2019), particularly when it involves unprotected sex (Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019); and even, at its most extreme, homicide (Hanna, 2017), femicide (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022) and child labour (Blank, 2005). Sutton (2016) gives an overview of violence in The Bahamas including domestic violence, which is dominated by gender-based violence. We can also note that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected intimate relationships (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020) and there have been reports that domestic violence has increased in The Bahamas (Arteaga Garavito et al., 2020). Notwithstanding the position of sweethearting in Bahamian life, there appear to be few systematic studies on the topic other than Grant (1999), although many opinions are published on the internet.

In September-October 2022, a study on intimate partner relations reported by Fielding et al. (2023) included data relating to infidelity. That paper focused on the treatment of married and unmarried women by their current male partners. This present paper reports data from that same study but as they relate to infidelity in intimate partner relationships as reported by

women in their current relationship. Accordingly, the study allows us to derive some estimates and associations between infidelity and selected behaviours but does not allow us to predict infidelity (Vowels et al., 2022).

Methodology

The data reported here arose from a study by Fielding et al. (2023) on the abuse of females living in The Bahamas by their male intimate partners. The methodology of that study was described by Fielding et al. (2023). It was an internet-based study, using a convenience sample arising from a snowball sample. The sample was seeded by students at University of The Bahamas, using their social media networks to solicit respondents. The target population was adult women (aged 18 years and older) living in The Bahamas who were in an intimate relationship with a man. The survey included questions as to how partners of respondents treated them and a scale (HITS, Hurt, Insult, Threaten, Scream, Index) to assess domestic violence (Sherin et al., 1999) and another scale to assess psychological abuse within intimate relationships (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Data were collected between September and October 2022.

Results

A total of 2,868 persons entered the survey and four refused to participate. After cleaning the data so that they reflected the target population, females, aged 18 or over, living in The Bahamas and currently having a relationship with a male intimate partner, 1,728 responses were kept in the analysis.

In summarizing these data, the information about sweethearting was obtained from a question that asked if the woman's current partner was also having sex with another woman. This question had three options: *Yes*, *No* and *Do not know*. Therefore, the measure

of fidelity is based on only one of several behaviours which can be considered to define what faithfulness means (Bozoyan & Schmiedeberg, 2022). Overall, 46.4% reported being sure that their partner was faithful, and 19.2% reported being sure that he was unfaithful (of 1,680 women). There was a difference in the percentages of married and unmarried women who did not know if their partner was faithful (28.5% of married women vs 36.6% of unmarried women, $\chi^2 = 16.6$, $df = 2$, $N = 1,680$, $p < .001$, Table 1). If the *Do not know* group in Table 1 is omitted, the percentages unfaithful become, 34.7% of married and 26.9% unmarried men, (Fisher's exact test, $p = .011$, $n = 1,102$).

The females participating in the study reported that the occurrence of fidelity was similar both inside and outside of marriage (Fisher's exact test, $p = .914$, $n = 1,680$). This suggests that marriage vows were not considered as a constraint on the sexual encounters of men with other women, Table 1. However, if we are willing to conjecture that the *Do not know* group also represents females who were

victims of infidelity, then the percentage could be closer to 53.6% ($N = 1,680$) of females who had partners who may have been unfaithful.

Table 1 *Marital Status & Reported Fidelity of Partner*

Her partner is	Marital status of woman		
	Married	Unmarried	Overall
Unfaithful	24.8%	17.1%	19.2%
Faithful	46.7%	46.3%	46.4%
Do not know	28.5%	36.6%	34.4%
<i>n =</i>	456	1,224	1,680

Faithfulness decreased with the period of time the woman has been intimate with her partner, for both married and unmarried women ($\chi^2 = 20$, $df = 8$, $n = 455$, $p = .011$, and unmarried women, $\chi^2 = 40.6$, $df = 8$, $n = 1,222$, $p < .001$, Table 2).

Table 2 *Women Reporting Faithful or Unfaithful Partners by Length of Relationship and Marital Status (%)*

Status of woman	Length of time having sex with current partner	Her current partner is			<i>n =</i>
		Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know	
Married	Less than one year	66.7%	33.3%		3
	About one year	16.7%	50%	33.3%	6
	At least 1 year and less than 5 years	15.2%	67.4%	17.4%	46
	At least 5 years and less than 10 years	15.3%	45.9%	38.8%	85
	10 years or more	28.6%	43.8%	27.6%	315
Unmarried	Less than one year	14.8%	48.8%	36.4%	324
	About one year	10.1%	58.2%	31.7%	189
	At least 1 year and less than 5 years	17%	47.1%	35.9%	429
	At least 5 years and less than 10 years	22.5%	40.3%	37.2%	191
	10 years or more	28.7%	22.5%	48.3%	89

Overall, 40.6% (of 322 women) who knew that their partner was unfaithful had conceived children with him, compared with 27.4% ($n = 778$) of women having conceived a child with their current partner who she believed to be faithful, ($\chi^2 = 19.2, df = 2, n = 1,679, p < .001$). Overall, 41.8% of women ($n = 510$) who had had children with their current partner,

believed him to be faithful. The data also showed that men were more likely to have fathered children with other women if they were unfaithful, $\chi^2 = 87, df = 4, n = 1,679, p < .001$, and that older women were more likely to have partners who had "outside children" than younger women, $\chi^2 = 219, df = 8, n = 1,680, p < .001$, (Table 3).

Table 3 Male Partners who have Children with Other Women at Some Point (before or during the relationship), by Reported Current Faithfulness (%)

Age group of woman	Current male partner is			<i>p</i>
	Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know	
18-24	25.6%	8.3%	14.4%	< .001
25-34	43.3%	28.3%	39.6%	<.001
35-44	62.3%	37.8%	57.4%	.003
45-54	56.4%	41.4%	50.8%	.014
55 or over	52.2%	38.2%	52.6%	.189

Knowledge that her partner had had children with another women (either before or during the current relationship) was associated with infidelity in the current relationship, married

women, $\chi^2 = 34.6, df = 4, n = 454, p < .001$, unmarried women, $\chi^2 = 53.2, df = 4, n = 1,223, p < .001$, (Table 4).

Table 4 Women Whose Current Partner had Children with Other Women by Faithfulness of Partner (%)

Woman's marital status	Partner has had children with other women	Current male partner is			Overall
		Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know	
Married	Yes	48.7%	24.6%	36.9%	34.1%
	No	46%	73.9%	53.8%	61.2%
	Not sure	5.3%	1.4%	9.3%	4.6%
	<i>N</i>	113	211	130	454
Unmarried	Yes	44.5%	22%	34.9%	30.6%
	No	57.6%	76%	60.2%	66.1%
	Not sure	4.4%	1.9%	4.9%	3.3%
	<i>n =</i>	209	567	447	1,223

Overall, 12.1% of 1,569 women reported being subject to physical violence from her partner. The experience of physical abuse increased when the male partner was unfaithful: married women, $\chi^2 = 37.1$, $df = 2$, $n = 429$, $p < .001$, unmarried women, $\chi^2 = 35.5$, $df = 2$, $n = 1,135$, $p < .001$, (Table 5). Married women in unfaithful relationships were more likely to be subject to physical violence than unmarried women in unfaithful relationships ($\chi^2 = 4.3$, $df = 1$, $n = 300$, $p = .039$).

Table 5 Women Never Subject to Physical Hurt by her Current Partner (%)

Marital Status of Woman	Current male partner is		
	Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know
Married	68.3%	94.5%	82.3%
Unmarried	79.1%	94.2%	87.5%

Sexual abuse was more common when the male intimate partners of unmarried and married women were unfaithful than when they were faithful, Table 6. This elevated percentage was noted in all three aspects of

unwanted sexual intercourse (the woman being a victim of coerced sex, sexual abuse, rape), all of which are considered legally rape outside of marriage, even if not viewed as such by the victim.

Both married and unmarried women whose partners were and were not faithful were subjected to similar patterns of domestic violence (as measured by the HITS Index) and psychological abuse (PSY score), Table 7. Although it should be noted that, both unfaithfulness and marriage resulted in higher scores of abuse as measured by the HITS Index and PSY (psychological abuse) score (analysis of covariance, $p < .01$). For both the HITS Index and the PSY score, the scores associated respondents who replied *Do not know* to the question about faithfulness were significantly higher ($p < .001$) than those who responded *No*, (for example, PSY scores: *Yes*: 40, $SE = .92$, *No*: 30.3, $SE = .58$ and *Do not know*, 36.1: $SE = .69$, from ANCOVA). This might be construed as supporting the conjecture that participants who responded *Do not know* to the fidelity of their partner, included partners who were unfaithful as the PSY value for the *Do not know group* was higher than the *No group*.

Table 6 Association Between Fidelity and Sexual Abuse Between Intimate Partners

Woman a victim of	Woman's marital status	Current male partner is			χ^2 $p =$
		Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know	
Coerced sex	Married	23.9%	7.5%	14.7%	< .001
	Unmarried	9.6%	4.2%	7.4%	.012
Sexual abuse	Married	21.2%	7%	14.6%	< .001
	Unmarried	13.9%	5.1%	9.8%	< .001
Raped	Married	13.3%	3.8%	11.5%	.004
	Unmarried	10.5%	3.5%	8.3%	< .001

Table 7 Association Between Fidelity and Abuse Experienced by Women (M)

Measure	Woman's marital status	Her current partner is:			Interaction p
		Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know	
HITS Index	Married	7.5	5.4	6.5	.158
	Unmarried	6.3	4.9	5.7	
PSY Score	Married	43.8	31.7	37.9	.251
	Unmarried	38.2	29.8	35.4	

There was a significant interaction indicating that the HITS scores ($p = .039$) and PSY scores ($p = .05$) were further elevated when the unfaithful male partner had children with other women compared to when he did not. When considering if the relationship was a loving

one, the perception of the female respondent was associated with the partner being faithful or otherwise, married women; $\chi^2 = 63.1, df = 4, n = 426, p < .001$, and unmarried women $\chi^2 = 98.9, df = 4, n = 1,120, p < .001$, Table 8.

Table 8 Perception of the Woman's Relationship as Loving by Faithfulness of Partner

Woman's marital status	Woman in a loving relationship	Her current partner is		
		Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know
Married	Yes	58.7%	94.4%	65.6%
	No	15.4%	2%	12.8%
	Not sure	26%	3.6%	21.6%
	<i>n</i> =	104	197	125
Unmarried	Yes	58%	89.6%	72.6%
	No	16.6%	2.3%	8.5%
	Not sure	25.4%	8.1%	18.8%
	<i>n</i> =	193	529	398

Wanting to leave the relationship was more common for women whose partner was unfaithful than when they were faithful; married women ($\chi^2 = 60.8, df = 4, n = 416, p < .001$, unmarried women, $\chi^2 = 83.7, df = 4, n = 1,112, p < .001$, Table 9). Both unmarried and married women in relationships with

unfaithful partners showed a similar percentage of those wanting to leave ($\chi^2 = 4.75, df = 2, n = 294, p = .093$). This contrasted with women whose partners were faithful where married women were less likely than unmarried women to want to leave ($\chi^2 = 22.9, df = 2, n = 718, p < .001$).

Table 9 Women's Attitude of Wanting to Leave the Relationship by Faithfulness of Partner

Woman's marital status	I would leave this partner if I could:	Her partner current is:		
		Unfaithful	Faithful	Do not know
Married	Yes	27.2%	4.7%	22.5%
	No	53.4%	90.2%	58.3%
	Not sure	19.4%	5.2%	19.2%
	<i>N</i>	103	193	120
Unmarried	Yes	36.6%	10.7%	23.7%
	No	40.3%	73.5%	57.6%
	Not sure	23%	15.8%	18.7%
	<i>N</i>	191	525	396

Discussion

As Fielding et al. (2023) point out, an internet survey using a snowball sample, as used in their study, can lead to bias. Therefore, readers need to be aware of the possibility of bias in the results presented here and exercise due caution in extrapolating these findings to the wider community. Fielding et al. (2023) showed that where data could be triangulated with other sources, the bias did not seem to be sufficient to be of concern. It should also be noted that this study only looked at the participation of men in sweethearting as reported by their female partners. Consequently, we do not have data about the faithfulness or otherwise of females. Clearly, a more balanced picture of sweethearting would be obtained when the participation of women in sweethearting is also assessed.

As noted in the results, the percentage of men who were known to be unfaithful in Table 1 is probably a lower bound estimate, and the elevated HITS and PSY scores in the *Do not know* group might support the conjecture that at a number of men in this group were also unfaithful. When compared to Grant (1999) the percentage of men who were unfaithful to their partners seems not to have decreased (she reported about 12% of married men currently being unfaithful, and 48% with a history of sweethearting), even though the study populations were different and separated by over 20 years. These figures suggest that sweethearting is an entrenched behaviour and one which is consistent with a relaxed attitude to selected Christian morals, such as adultery and extramarital sex.

The data show that the longer the relationship persists, the increased likelihood that the woman's partner will have sex with another woman. This is consistent with men wanting the company of younger women (French &

Meltzer, 2019). Having male partners who have sex with other women was experienced by both married and unmarried women and can start in the earliest stages of their relationship, (Table 2). One way unfaithfulness is manifest is by the male partner having children with other women, although the data did not distinguish if the children were born before or during the current relationship. What should be noted is that male partners who have children with another woman may result in blended families or contribute to the number of female-headed households and to the number of children born outside of marriage (Bahamas Information Services, 2012). Such births are of particular concern when the mother is a teenager, as these women struggle economically throughout their lives compared to women who have children later in life (Fielding, 2018).

Although some research in the United States has suggested that there can be benefits arising from infidelity in intimate partner relations (see, for example, Walker, 2019), the data from this study did not support that view. A negative association for women and the unfaithfulness of their partner was that they were at increased risk of physical and sexual abuse from such partners. Such abuse was associated with the woman's feeling of being in a loving relationship and even wanting to leave the relationship. Although the data from this study did not show when the woman first started to think that she was not in a loving relationship and wanted to leave, Stavrova et al. (2022) found that typically partner well-being declined before infidelity occurs, so that the findings in this study may manifest the result of a failing relationship. This is important when we consider the debate around marital rape, as women in failing marital relationships who suffer sexual abuse are not fully protected by the law (Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act, 1991).

The association between increased exposure of actions consistent with domestic violence, psychological abuse and infidelity again highlight the negative aspects to women of having an unfaithful partner. One of the effects of psychological abuse is that such abuse makes it harder for the women to leave the relationship (Sackett & Saunders, 1999) and so this exposes her to further psychological, physical and sexual abuse. Further, the health risks associated with infidelity arising from the risk of sexual diseases being transmitted from one partner to another should not be ignored.

As shown in Fielding et al. (2016), the behaviours of concern between intimate partners affect not only the partners but also any children in the household. These behaviours might indirectly affect children in around as many as 60% homes. Some voices in Bahamian society consider violence which takes place within a home as a private issue (The Official Nassau Guardian Ltd. [1844], 2017). Such views seem to reflect the attitude that the consequences of interpersonal violence are confined to the protagonists alone, which is not supported by the research evidence. Consequently, the data indicate that sweethearting is associated with effects of concern to the wider Bahamian society and across generations.

The fact that infidelity maybe closer to being a norm than an exception in Bahamian society suggests that Bahamian society does not wish to impose its displeasure on those who practice infidelity, even though it is a practice which has traditionally been viewed as detrimental to family relationships (Grant, 1999). However, the law does penalize abuse within intimate partner relationships (although with limitations within marriage) through the Sexual Offences

and Domestic Violence Act (1991). Given the connections between sweethearting/infidelity and sexual abuse in this study, infidelity can be considered a red flag which indicates that a woman has an elevated risk of harm when her partner is unfaithful. This information might be used to help protect women from further harm. However, given the possible connections with child labour and teenage motherhood, sweethearting can be harmful in ways beyond that of a man being unfaithful to his current intimate partner. Therefore, Bahamian society may wish to revisit its tolerance towards men who participate in sweethearting.

The study findings arise at a time when The Bahamas has a relatively large number of women in middle management and leadership positions. The Bahamian Public Service is populated by many women and many permanent secretaries in government ministries are female. While Bahamian women still do not fill many leadership positions in politics, in particular the House of Assembly, or in the clergy, their number is increasing, and their roles have given more visibility to women (Turnquest, 2018). This seems to show that although Bahamian women are demonstrating more agency in their professional and social roles than in their personal relationships, many are still subjected to abuse by their male partners.

While Bahamian men are not alone in exhibiting infidelity in relationships (Grant, 1999), we do not know to what extent, or in which socioeconomic groups Bahamian women may also participate in, or be victims of, infidelity. Therefore, at a time of social change, this study points to the need for more research on infidelity, which has far-reaching consequences.

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