

An Autoethnography of Sweethearting through the Eyes of an Inside Child

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Abstract

Using autoethnography, I describe sweethearting through the eyes of an adult who would be considered by Bahamian society as an *inside* child—that is a child born to married parents when one is involved in an extramarital relationship. In recent years, sweethearting has received renewed attention by scholars in The Bahamas. To date, these studies have tended to be quantitative and descriptive in nature. On reflection it is evident that as a child and an adult I did not seek to confront or understand that my dad had a string of sweethearts while at the same time wanting to maintain a matrimonial home. Overall, my dad nearly always supported the household financially, despite causing my mom great mental anguish as she tried to cope with his continuous infidelity. The fact that he had *outside* children, some of whom, even now, I barely know, has resulted in an extended family which has limited knowledge of itself. While my experiences are unique, it is also clear that aspects of them are more common than I had thought. Accordingly, this paper may allow others to reassess their understanding of infidelity in marriage and deepen their awareness of the outcomes associated with infidelity.

Introduction

Sweethearting has been described by Storr (2009) as a national pastime in The Bahamas. Over the years, I have heard numerous comments from Bahamians on the topic of marital infidelity like, “*He jus like he pa!*” or “*Chil he can’t do no better!*” or “*Why is she staying with him? If it were me, I would be long gone!*” or “*Don’t leave your husband, he’s not going nowhere, you’ll always be the wife!*” Growing up in a family where my father engaged in sweethearting, I was often confused by the things I heard, saw, or was told, but I dared not to ask or to question my parents regarding these circumstances. Even

as adults, we don’t truly talk about this situation. My mom would randomly express her frustration at times, but she tolerated her lot, I think, for the sake of her children. My dad talks about his mistresses (how many he had at a time I do not know) as if they are distant ex-lovers. Honestly, it is the strangest thing and writing about it all makes it even stranger.

The Bahamian Literature

In situating this autoethnography of sweethearting in the Bahamian context, I attempt to use only Bahamian literature wherever possible. While there are other

aspects on infidelity other than merely having sex outside of marriage (Bozoyan & Schmiedeberg, 2023), my autoethnography, arises from the effect that my dad's extramarital sexual affairs have had on men and my family. Schmid (2019) contends that "autoethnography inspires me because it creates a virtual circle for sharing narratives and offers me a platform to, in my own voice, speak to my unique insights and realities" (p. 265). This approach allows me to share my experiences in ways which reflect the Bahamian context of infidelity.

While infidelity is universal (Barrow, 1976; Kempadoo, 2003), this paper attempts to situate it within the Bahamian context, specifically in Nassau on the island of New Providence. *Sweethearting* is a rather softer word than *infidelity*, but they are the same. Notwithstanding the seeming social acceptability of sweethearting in the Bahamas (Hall Campbell-Dean, 2026), infidelity is generally accepted as being detrimental to marital relations, and infidelity is a reason accepted by the courts for granting a divorce (Matrimonial Causes Act, 1879). However, those who participate in sweethearting can obtain benefits from these relations (Fielding et al., 2026). Therefore, there is a tension between the benefits derived by those who have/are sweethearts, and those who suffer from not having the anticipated exclusive relationship associated with marriage.

This autoethnography provides a case study from a psychological emotional perspective as to how sweethearting can affect children whose parents are unfaithful (to each other) and so highlight some of the issues which can arise for the children who may suffer in silence, and not know who they can trust to speak about such experiences.

On reflection, it is apparent that my family was complicit in my dad's sweethearting. Because he typically

looked after us well, we, including my mother, tolerated the status quo even though we had misgivings about what he did. Turning a blind eye to his actions outside our home was probably our defence mechanism which maintained the unity of the matrimonial home.

The Sweethearting Narrative: Earliest Memories- Act 1, Scene 1

I remember like it was yesterday. My mom was on the phone with my godmother telling her how she couldn't believe my father's sweetheart was staying with her sister-in-law. She was deeply hurt after all she had done for my dad's sister. Mom felt like a fool, and she felt betrayed that her sister-in-law didn't stand up for her and tell my father that this was wrong. Maybe she did, who knows? My dad was the financial provider for his family, so perhaps my aunt benefited from father paying the rent for his sweetheart to stay at my aunt's house.

I can also recall another conversation between my godmother and Mom, but this time, it appears that my mom was following my dad, or maybe someone saw him and told her where he was. Like a detective, she confirmed his whereabouts, and it appeared that although she was upset that he was cheating again, she seemed more upset that he was cheating so close to her mother's house. Mom was livid, and I can recall my grandmother agreeing to talk to my father about his behaviour, but nothing seemed to change. As a matter of fact, a friend of mine confirmed that she saw my dad coming to and from that house as she lived nearby.

Having sexual encounters with a sweetheart at the sweetheart's home is relatively common (Fielding et al., 2026). The

complication in this case is that the husband's sister facilitates the illicit relationship.

I was 11 or 12 at this point, and it was very troubling to me, but I couldn't say anything. I didn't even talk to my sister about it, and she and I shared a room. Somehow, I thought that if I ignored the situation, it would just go away.

This reaction of children wanting to restore the situation to what it was before the extramarital relationship occurred, or was appreciated, has been noted by Dindoost and Cheraghi (2024). Their research from Iran shows, how such responses transcend cultural backgrounds.

The Narrative Continues: The Teenage Years-Act 1, Scene 2

Ignoring a problem doesn't cause it to go away. My father continued with his extramarital affairs, and he even started to accuse my mom of having a sweetheart. He was very jealous occasionally, but his accusations appeared to be his way of taking the attention from himself. I can recall my mom asking him about strange numbers on his pager, but he would say that they were work related. There was another time I heard my mom saying how he would rent rooms at a specific motel and meet his women there. Every time my mom approached my dad about it, he would come up with some excuse and make her out to be the crazy one. It was so bad; my mom even hired a private investigator to catch my dad with his mistresses.

Of course, both husbands and wives can be victims and/or inflict physiological abuse on the other (Fielding & Ballance, 2023a; Fielding et al., 2023). While there tends to be a focus on physical abuse and domestic violence in failing relationships, more subtle

forms of abuse can also occur, as seen by my dad suggesting that my mom was crazy. In a tourist-based economy, with many hotels close by, it is understandable that hotel rooms are relatively common placed to sweethearts to meet (Fielding et al., 2026). In The Bahamas there are several firms which advertise private investigation services for people who feel that their partner is being unfaithful, so an industry exists to gather information which might be used in a divorce court.

At this point, it appeared that she had finally had enough and was ready to leave my dad. I was about 18 and honestly my mom kept it together pretty good; she never discussed these events with us, but we knew what was going on. I think she tried to spare us the pain, but over the years, we heard the disagreements, although the door was closed, and the phone calls to my aunt that were supposedly private.

I think my mom was considering all sides of the situation. Here it is; she was married with five children who were well taken care of by their father. She was also financially taken care of, no longer working a full-time job, but rather, she was a stay-at-home mom now. Based on the conversations I heard back then, it appears that she was also concerned about how the assets would be shared if she left my dad. Moreover, it appeared that she was not willing to leave home but hoped that he would.

When set alongside the study of Heron, et al. (2022), my mom's responses seem almost normal. By staying, she kept the family together, she was economically dependent upon my dad, and she never really stopped loving my dad. The literature shows that financial levers can be used to keep women in abusive relationships (Huggins & Mungal-Bissessar, 2022). Likewise, financial

insecurity can result in women remaining in abusive relationships (Johnson et al., 2022). Both of these concerns may have been what underpinned my mom's decisions. However, as can be appreciated below, there are limits to this suffering.

The Narrative Continues: The Courage to Leave, Act 2, Scene 1

After what appeared to be some 10 or more years to my estimation and an unconfirmed outside child, my mom finally had the courage to leave my dad. I was 19 and away at university during that time.

I don't recall if she told me she was planning to leave or if she told me when she left. Either way she was now living at home in my grandmother's house with my aunt who she often shared these experiences with over the years. My older sister was already married, so my mom took my younger brother and sister to live with her. My cousin, who is like my brother as well, was given a choice, and he decided to stay with our dad. In hindsight this was best, as my dad, from what I was told, was unreasonably upset that my mom left him. I was told how he would come to my grandmother's house insisting that my mom and siblings come home. He was violent at times, even breaking a window as he tried to get into the house. My little sister shared stories of the loud arguments they would have and occasionally Dad would push Mom so as to make her fearful of him. I don't recall that he ever hit my mom, but the emotional stress might have been just as bad.

At this point, my mom had to work two jobs as he insisted that he was not taking care of any children who were not at home with him. This was his way of controlling her and getting her to come

back home, I think. Nonetheless, he still paid our school fees and would give them food and money when they came to visit him on weekends. I recall my mom expressing to me how sorry she was that my dad was not sending my monthly allowance when I was away at school. He did this being spiteful towards her, but I comforted her by letting her know that this was not her fault and that I supported her decision. I think this continued for about a year or so, but once he saw that my mom was moving on with her life, he started to take care of us again, as he did in the past. I must say that despite the sweethearting, my dad always took good care of his children. Minus his foolishness for that year or so, he always took care of his children financially.

As a provider, he was an excellent dad, but as a faithful husband he had many struggles. Perhaps he liked the attention, perhaps he did what he saw others doing when he was growing up, or perhaps he felt marriage was some kind of bondage. I'll expand more on this later in this paper, but let's continue the story.

Mom and Dad were separated for about six years, and during this time, Dad started a relationship with another woman who he said the relationship started after Mom left him. During this time, my mom was also involved in a relationship.

During this time of their separation (about four years), I had completed my university degree and was back home living with my dad. He was glad to have me at home, along with my other brother.

Things were very different as he had renovated the house and the room that he and my mom lived in was now being rented as an efficiency. He asked me at

one point to ask my mom to come back home. I don't recall answering him, but deep down although I wanted my parents to be back together, I didn't want them together if things hadn't changed. I knew that mom was no longer in a relationship, but I knew that dad was still sweethearting as he hardly ever slept home at night. I never had that conversation with my mom. If she were to return, it would be on her own accord, it would be her choice. I would not pressure her into anything.

If my mom had admitted that my dad would not change, this may have encouraged her to initiate the change to exit the relationship. If so, this would be consistent with Karakurt et al (2021). Further, men who have sweethearts are more likely, than those who do not, to be abusive to their wives (Fielding & Ballance, 2023b). Johnson (2016) describes how violence between parents can have a detrimental effect on the children. Children who witness this violence can be disruptive in class and so the violence in the home is manifested outside the home.

Separation, outside of the protection of the law, leaves partners at risk of abuse. Further, without a formal divorce, the upkeep of any children is the sole responsibility of the person who cares for them, as there is no requirement for any form of child support to be provided. It appears that more former partners live apart outside of the legal protection of the law, than are legally separated (Fielding & Moxey-Adderley, 2026). This is important because, domestic violence, which includes, shouting, threatening as well as hitting, can continue after a partner has left the place of cohabitation, and shows the need for "safe houses" to provide protection from partners who may pursue those who have left them (Russell, 2024).

Maybe Dad was living out what it is to be a

"man" in The Bahamas as visualised by Ian Strachan's documentary *I's Man: Manhood in The Bahamas* (2013). But although in the popular imagination typically men are seen as entering into sweethearting relationships, this is not so, as shown by my mom. Emotional support (feeling needed) is a benefit arising from sweethearting. Accordingly, when a relationship fails, a sweetheart can provide the emotional support which an ex-partner now lacks (Fielding et al., 2026).

The Narrative Continues: The Decision to Return, Act 2, Scene 2

It was now six years later and after hiring a lawyer to begin the divorce process, my mother decided to give my dad a second, or should I say, another chance. Perhaps I was too in love and consumed in planning my wedding, but I didn't even know when my parents were discussing getting back together. I do recall my fiancé, now husband, saying to me that he thought my parents were getting back together, but again, I didn't pay much attention to the thought.

After being married for about six months, my husband and I moved from my parents' home into our home. The next thing I knew, my mom and siblings were back home with Dad. I don't recall talking to my dad, but I do remember my mom saying she was coming home to work on things. In the first year of returning, I didn't hear anything about my parents' relationship or how the marriage was going. It appeared that things were going okay and that my younger siblings were happy to have their own space again.

About a year or so later my mom explained that my dad was still with his sweetheart, and he told her when she

returned that he needed some time to end the relationship because he couldn't just leave her just like that because she was there for him when my mom left. My mom knew that Dad wasn't being honest because she thinks this lady was in a relationship with Dad before they separated. Nonetheless, she agreed to give him the time he asked for. To our disappointment, the request for time to end the relationship, as resulted in a long-term sweetheart that as even resulted in another outside child.

As my story shows, not all attempts to engage the judicial system are followed through. Law cases are sometimes dropped by women who claim to have been subject to domestic abuse (see Johnson, 2021), so again the change of heart by my mom is not unusual.

Typically, both men and women have more than one sexual partner in their lifetime, although men typically have more partners than women (Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019). In my dad's case, he seemed to have serial or concurrent partners outside of his marriage. Marriage does not stop men, or women, from have multiple partners (Rolle-Sands et al., 2026); however, married men typically have fewer current partners than their single counterparts (Fielding et al., 2026).

Completing role models

The behaviour of my dad now complicates the family picture for my children, his grandchildren. I'm not sure that the younger one understands the situation, but I tell them that Pappa has another family. It clear that the adults in our family are sending mixed messages about relationships and what may or may not be appropriate behaviour. My older son, who is now an adult, asked about my half-sisters, his "outside" aunt, and I explained the situation to

him. However, it is difficult to fully explain what you truly don't understand. It's been 20 years since my mom returned home, and my dad is still in an adulterous relationship. Over the past two or so years, I have developed a relationship with my half-sisters. They could actually be my children, so it is kind of awkward at times but I've decided to leave the lines of communication open as I would never want them to feel that because of the circumstances they are not loved or accepted. On the contrary, I am proud of the young women they are becoming.

Men with multiple partners have higher paternity rates than men who have one partner (Fielding, 2017), and children are often conceived in sweethearting relationships, irrespective of the marriage already having produced children. Despite people in sweethearting relationships not wanting to have children with their sweetheart, "outside" children do result from these partnerships (Fielding, et al., 2026). Strachan (2013) provides a case study of benign acceptance of a wife to the outside children of her husband, and the impact of the child in being acknowledged by his biological father.

What about the other woman/women?

Why did they stay in a relationship with a married man? I think it was also about the money for them (or should I say financial gain) as my dad was relatively well-off and he gave his mistresses many expensive gifts. From what I've heard and seen in some instances, he repaired their homes, built one of them a house, gave another a car and financed a business, notwithstanding the unaccounted monetary gifts given.

In addition to emotional support and sexual

encounters, sweethearts receive money from their partners (Fielding et al., 2026), so money can be an important benefit of being a sweetheart, to the extent that a sweetheart may not need to have a job.

Personal reflections

Let me start by saying that sharing this experience has given me the opportunity to deeply reflect and answer the various “whys” I never addressed. Why is my father living like this? I believe that my father knows that this isn’t within God’s original design. Further, he knows he is hurting his wife, and these extra marital affairs have separated them, although they are still married. Moreover, I know my dad loves his wife, in fact, it seems like he would do almost anything for her, except stop cheating. Perhaps he continues in this situation as it is so familiar to him. My grandfather, like my father, had two homes/families, with children, and from what I understand, back then, the children interacted with each other as if they were one big happy family. I’m not sure about the women, but from what I’ve heard, they were not friendly towards each other. Maybe Dad is only doing what he is allowed to do. If my mom gave him an ultimatum, would things be different? If I spoke to him again, would he change? In The Bahamas, bigamy and polygamy is against the law, but some of these long-term sweethearting relationships are like a common law marriage. If there were laws that persecuted such acts, would my dad stop? As I reflect more deeply, could a part of Dad’s commitment issues be related to the fact that he grew up too quickly? You see, my parents married while they were teenagers, when my mom was pregnant with my eldest sister. After giving birth to my sister, soon after, she was pregnant with me. Could this be

a factor? Did he feel that he missed the opportunity to have a good time before settling down and so is still making up for what he perceives is lost time, as he feels enmeshed by fatherly responsibilities? Maybe my dad has an addiction to sweethearting; maybe this is normal for him? Personally, I believe that my dad needs “a come to Jesus moment”. As a follower of Christ, I believe that He alone can change the heart of man. It is my prayer that Dad is converted by the Holy Spirit and is fully delivered from sweethearting. As for my mom, I pray that God continues to lead her throughout this situation because it is truly complicated.

Maybe, my dad is an example of a Caribbean man who lives in polyamorous relationships. However, we should also note that infidelity is associated with the Caribbean view of masculinity (Simpson, 2023). Early initiation of Bahamian boys in having multiple sexual partners may be a prelude to them being unfaithful in marriage (Kim et al., 2024), so maybe he developed this habit at an early age. As noted before, men typically have more partners than females, which points to the transient and potential lack of commitment towards partners. When such encounters result in teenage motherhood, these mothers would typically be unwed (Bahamas Department of Statistics, 2012), and these girls face the prospect of not matching the economic status of women who have children later (Fielding, 2018). We can conjecture that the financial concerns/insecurities of a young mother like my mom might have been heightened if she left her husband.

Words of Encouragement to Impacted Adult Children

Dear inside and outside adult children, know that you have no control over what your parents decide to do or not do. Further, we will never know the full

story, only versions of the “truth”. To this end, don’t be bitter or hateful towards the other woman or man, either parent, or certainly don’t hold in malice towards any siblings who are the result of such relationships. Remember and

hold fast to the words of Hebrews 12:14, found in the Holy Bible, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord”.

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