

# The Influence of Moral Commitment on Newlywed Women's Infidelity Expectations

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## Introduction

"The struggle we undergo to remain faithful to one we love is little better than infidelity."

-François de la Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)

A majority of people in the United States expect monogamy regardless of whether they are married or not, and strongly disapprove of infidelity (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon & Glass, 2005). Despite this, infidelity is prevalent in relationships. Approximately 20% of women and 30% of men engage in infidelity at some point in marriage (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007), which make extramarital relations a rather common occurrence.

The negative effects of infidelity on relationships are widely known. For example, infidelity is associated with depression, anger, jealousy, partner violence, spousal homicide, and divorce. In fact, a nationally representative survey found that infidelity was the most commonly cited reason for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003).

The Commitment Framework, developed by Johnson (1999), describes commitment in terms of personal, moral, and structural factors. Flores and Campbell (2009) used this framework to ascertain newlywed women's expectations of infidelity and divorce. Findings indicated that moral commitment was significantly related to women's expectations of engaging in infidelity, but not divorce.

In the current study, we extend these findings by investigating which sub-components of moral commitment (i.e., values about relationship dissolution, moral obligations to a partner, personal consistency values) are related to women's expectations of infidelity.

## Research Questions

- 1) What are women's expectations of infidelity, particularly in the first two years of marriage when satisfaction typically declines?
- 2) Which subcomponents of Moral Commitment are related to women's expectations of infidelity?

## Method

- Target Population:** Newlywed women who
- 1) have been married two years or less
  - 2) are in their first marriage
  - 3) do not have children

## Participants

- 197 women
- Mean age = 27.3 years (SD = 4.5 yrs.)
- Mean amount time married = .86 years (SD = .69 yrs.)
- 85% European/White
- 95% heterosexual
- 94% at least some college
- 66% working full time
- 53% Christian
- 12% very religious
- Living in regions across U.S.

## Online survey:

- Infidelity expectations (Campbell, 2008)
- Commitment (Commitment Framework; Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999)
- Demographic characteristics

## Moral Commitment Subscale Items

### Values About Dissolution

- If you divorced, to what extent would you be disappointed in yourself because you had broken a sacred vow?
- How much does getting a divorce violate your religious beliefs?
- How much do you believe it's alright to get a divorce if things are not working out?
- How much do you believe that if a couple works hard at making their marriage succeed and still cannot get along, divorce is a viable option?
- How much do you believe that when you agree to get married, you are morally bound to stay married?

### Obligations to Partner

- Would you feel bad about getting a divorce because you promised your partner that you would stay with him or her forever?
- How much do you feel you could never leave your partner because he or she needs you too much?
- If you were ever to want a divorce, how difficult would it be to tell your partner?
- How much do you believe you could never leave your partner because you would feel guilty about letting him or her down?

### Consistency Values

- How much do you believe that whenever you promise to do something, you should see it through?
- How much do you believe it's important to stand by what you believe in?
- How much do you feel that you should always finish what you start?
- How much do you believe that even when things get hard, you should do the things you have promised to do?

## Results

### Moral Commitment Subscale Correlations

Subscale	Values about Dissolution	Obligations to Partner	Consistency Values
Values about Dissolution	1.00	.471*	.452*
Obligations to Partner	.471*	1.00	.384*
Consistency Values	.452*	.384*	1.00

Note \* $p < 0.01$

### Moral Commitment Subscales and Infidelity Expectations

Subscale	<b>B</b>	<b>SE B</b>	<b>β</b>
Values about Dissolution	-.237	.106	-.192*
Obligations to Partner	-.011	.163	-.006
Consistency Values	-.241	.253	-.079

Note \* $p < 0.5$

## Conclusions

Newlywed women were more likely to expect infidelity if their values about marital dissolution were liberal. It is possible that women with liberal divorce attitudes have less invested in their partnerships, and therefore have less to lose if an extramarital affair is discovered. Alternatively, these women may have already experienced infidelity in their marriage and report liberal divorce attitudes because they are already considering divorce. It is important to note that of the three moral commitment subscales, only the Values about Dissolution subscale included questions to assess religious beliefs. Religion has been identified in previous studies as a factor that protects against infidelity, and our findings support this notion. Infidelity expectations were not predicted by feelings of obligation toward a partner or by general consistency values.

These findings reinforce the idea that Americans marry primarily for love and personal fulfillment (Coontz, 2005). This focus on the individual makes infidelity and divorce more plausible when marital satisfaction declines.

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