

**“Life is short, have an affair”:  
Middle-age women and Extra-Marital Affairs**

This research examines why women seek extra-marital affairs. We covertly monitor Internet conversations from a geographically diverse sample of 100 heterosexual, married, female users of the website AshleyMadison.com. Findings show that these women, aged between 35 and 45, seek affairs due to a lack of romantic passion and sex in their marriages; predominantly look for one person rather than multiple partners to have an affair with; and emphasize their happiness in their marriages, and do not wish to replace their husbands. Thus, despite harsh cultural opposition to non-monogamy, women on this website find infidelity a constructive method to have their sexual and romantic desires met while retaining their current marriages. This research therefore evidentially contests the popular assumption that affairs symbolize a lack of love for one’s partner.

**Keywords:** Infidelity, Cheating, Affairs, Monogamy Gap, Ashley Madison

## Introduction

‘Life is short. Have an affair,’ is the principle advertising slogan for the website *AshleyMadison.com*. With 12 million subscribers in the United States (18 million worldwide), the website offers a space to search for extra-marital affairs. Users are predominantly male, which is unsurprising as research highlights that across cultures: 1) men desire more sexual partners than women (Lippa 2007); 2) women are less visually stimulated by photos (the kind of stimulation one achieves on a website) (Lippa 2012; Townsend and Wasserman 1996); and 3) women are considered the gatekeepers of monogamy (Campbell and Wright 2010). Accordingly, the difficulty for heterosexual, extramarital websites comes not in attracting male users, but females. If too few women are on the sites, men will not pay to subscribe.

In order to address this issue, AshleyMadison.com attracts women to their website in multiple ways, including website designs that target what they believe are women’s extramarital desires, and emphasizing affairs instead of one-off acts of cheating. They also feature women in their advertising slogans and provide them free membership. These efforts have attracted a large pool of heterosexual women, with approximately 40% of the website’s users. The website’s decision to provide free membership to women may explain the website’s exponential growth of both female and male users.

Utilizing AshleyMadison.com, we investigated why heterosexual, married women seek extramarital sex and/or affairs (henceforth, *affairs*). Most significantly, we aimed to examine whether these women seek affairs because they are fundamentally unhappy in their marital relationships, or whether they remain in love with their partners but seek affairs in order to retain their current relationship while fulfilling their romantic and/or sexual desires.

As cheating (defined as a one-off act of non-permissive extramarital sex) and affairs (where romance is sought alongside non-permissive extramarital sex) are highly stigmatized,

we sought a mechanism that would enable us to avoid researcher effects and minimize concerns about social desirability in self-report data. To do so, we covertly examined 4,156 private website user messages that 100 heterosexual, married female users had with male users from across the United States.

Results demonstrate that American women within the age cohort we examined, predominantly use AshleyMadison.com to establish affairs, and not for one-off sexual experiences. We find they love their husbands but desire an affair in order to stimulate their romantic and sexual lives – not reinvent them. In other words, these women use this website because they desire emotional and sexual novelty, not divorce.

### **Monogamism**

*Monogamy* has two meanings—both of which concern possession. In one sense monogamy refers to a marital/partnered system of coupling and is juxtaposed to polyamory, which consists of multiple partners in one relationship (Kleese 2006). The more common usage of monogamy, however, refers to the restriction of sexual activities to one's significant other. These two understandings have gained such dominance in America that we do not consider that other relationship types may exist (Duncombe et al. 2004). Most Americans do not think of monogamy as one of several options because, for example, polyamory is no longer a cultural or legal option. Monogamy is so normative that it has become invisible. Thus, in this research, we examine women whom are monogamous in that they have only one husband, but whom desire to be sexually non-monogamous through extra-marital sex and romance.

In framing this research we adopt Anderson's (2012) notion of *monogamism* which is devised from Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony. This enables us to explore the systems of power that result in monogamy holding an esteemed cultural position while all other

relationship forms remain highly stigmatized. A key component of monogamism is that monogamy is a combined practice of limiting romantic and sexual pleasures to just one other person that is so socially favored it escapes critical scrutiny, thus we do not consider alternative paths (i.e. open-relationships, polyamory, swinging) because we believe the current system to be optimal—the only moral choice. Conversely, whatever relationship defy the monogamy mandate are heavily scrutinized, something Rubin (1984) addresses as part of her ‘charmed circle’ of sexual practices. This helps to explain why couples who permit non-monogamy within their relationships still desire to be socially perceived as monogamous (Hoff et al. 2010).

Despite traditionally being the gatekeepers of monogamy (Campbell and Wright 2010), women have been shown to maintain personal expectations of monogamy while engaging with infidelity. Thus, in this research we are interested in women’s infidelity, as it disrupts gendered expectations about sexual desire, behavior, and coupling more than that of men who are socially perceived as always seeking extra-dyadic sex. In other words, whereas men’s infidelity merely extends normative expectations about their relentless quest for sex (Townsend and Wasserman 1996), women’s infidelity breaches gendered beliefs that hold women morally responsible for maintaining the institution of monogamy (Harris 2002).

Women’s investment in monogamy is not simply a misguided gender stereotype. Harris (2002) shows a significant gender difference in those who terminate a relationship after discovering that their partners have cheated. Evenly split between straight and lesbian participants, 94 percent of women said that they were the one to end the relationship when cheating was discovered. However, only 43 percent of gay and straight men said that they ended their relationship after discovering their partner cheated. Furthermore, research on undergraduates found that anti-cheating lectures influence women’s views of cheating and their behaviors more than men are influenced (Braithwaite et al. 2010). Whereas women and

men reported equal rates of cheating before the lectures, women reported less cheating at follow-up.

Accordingly, for all of the gains in women's rights, including progress in domestic, legal, and labor spheres, as well as decreases in the stigma associated with premarital intercourse and greater control over fertility, women have not been able to escape the hegemonic desire of being or wanting to be perceived as monogamous. However, this appears not to reduce the odds of women cheating, as research shows a large percentage of women still do so (Blum 1997; Wilkins and Dalessandro 2013). Thus it appears that, regardless of social convention, sexual activities will oftentimes trump social moralizing against them (Easton and Hardy 2009; Park 1929).

In fact, despite a burgeoning body of research on non-monogamies (Benson 2008; Kleese 2006), and anthropological literature highlighting a variety of successful polygamous marriage practices and non-monogamous behaviors across many cultures (Alexander 1980; Sanderson 2001), there is little acceptance of any relationship model other than dyadic monogamy in western cultures. Even as US culture is becoming more sexually permissive, monogamy may be more desired today than in previous eras (Gotta et al. 2011).

Swidler (2001) suggests that due to a decline in the institution of marriage, people are being increasingly drawn toward cultural norms of sexual morality to explain their life circumstances. Treas and Giessen (2000: 54) use *National Health and Social Life* survey results to show that, whether married or cohabiting, the expectation of sexual monogamy for those in a dyadic relationship is ubiquitous. In a study comparing responses of 6,082 couples across a broad spectrum of demographic variables in 1975, to a diverse sample of 782 couples in 2000 (gay, lesbian, and heterosexual males and females), nearly all respondents *reported* substantially greater rates of monogamy in 2000 than 1975 (Gotta et al. 2011). There was also a significant decrease in the percentage of participants who reported having an

emotionally meaningful extra-relational affair. This might reflect an increased adherence to monogamy, or it might also be explained by changing routines of identity management due to the increasing awareness, and ultimately stigma, around infidelity. Either way, it is evident that there remains a single socially positive sexual script for heterosexual couples today, and it is a decidedly dyadic form of sexual monogamy (Willey 2006).

### **Cheating in a Digital Age**

Recent decades have brought an erosion of traditional views and institutional control over sexual behaviors and relationships in North American and Western European cultures (Frank, Camp and Boutcher 2010). This is made evident by the growing percentage of people who engage in pre-marital intercourse (Laumann, et al. 1994), the social and legal permission for divorce (Jackson and Scott 2004), the markedly expanded social and political landscape for gays and lesbians (PEW 2013), the social permission to masturbate and engage in oral or anal sex (Unni 2010), and a lessening of the traditional double standard for heterosexual intercourse, enabling women to have casual sex with less social stigma (Tanenbaum 1999). Youth are more sexually liberal, particularly undergraduate students who live in a rich sexual marketplace conducive to hooking up (Bogle 2008; Wilkins and Dalessandro 2013).

McNair (2002) argues that the Internet enables greater democratization of sexual desires, suggesting that it allows people to act out sex in new ways. Anderson (2012) contends that the internet has also influenced our sexual behaviors with our partners, suggesting that the commoditization of pornography, and the numerous types of sexual acts one can observe in the course of an hour, makes previously stigmatized bedroom activities (e.g., oral sex) normal, perhaps even mundane. Thus, the range of sexual behaviors people enact and openly discuss with friends is greatly expanded, giving them even more social

permission to expand the boundaries of what is thought to be gay/straight, degrading/invigorating, dangerous/safe (Subotnik 2007).

While there are many socially positive and inclusive results concerning sexuality in the digital age, Anderson (2012) also theorizes that the combination of changing sexual mores and the lessening of stigma around sexual practices leads to a quicker desensitization of monogamous sex with our partners. That is, people may become bored of sex with their primary partners faster today than before. Key to this argument is that the panoply of accessible sexual imagery (and sex itself) reduces the timescale of fulfilling sex we have with our partners before becoming sexually habituated.

Research shows that sexual desire for one's partner fades over time, and therefore sexual frequency with that partner also dwindles (Laumann et al. 1994). This widespread knowledge of decreasing sexual interest is something that AshleyMadison.com draws on in their advertising slogan "monogamy becomes monotony;" it is a pattern that Anderson (2012) describes as the law of diminishing sexual returns.

Willettts, Sprecher and Beck (2004) contend that age accounts for some decline in sexual frequency, but habituation is a primary source of the decline (Anderson 2012). This decrease in sexual frequency is not, as earlier studies seemed to suggest, related to marital quality (i.e., lower sexual frequency does not indicate less marital satisfaction). Highlighting this, Call et al. (1995) used a national sample to show that decreasing sexual frequency is the result of marital habituation and *not* decreased relationship satisfaction. Schwartz and Rutter (2000) add that marriage also contributes to habituation and the decline in sexual frequency.

Concerning the literature on sexual habituation, the first assertion we make—that couples are destined to lose their sexual passion for one another—is enhanced by our second—that habituation is increasingly true today due to an increased availability of sex in comparison to previous generations. This is likely to make extra-marital affair seeking more

pronounced. These factors are then further enhanced by something Anderson (2012) describes as relative sexual deprivation.

### **Relative Sexual Deprivation Theory**

Relative deprivation theory proposes that people evaluate their social position in society not from any absolute standpoint, but relationally (Vanneman and Pettigrew 1972). Individuals evaluate their own standing by comparing their current position with those who have more. Anderson (2012) suggests that this hypothesis is particularly relevant to cheating and monogamy because of increasing rates of casual sex outside of marriage.

The age of the married women in our sample suggests that most have been in a monogamous relationship for a number of years, if not decades—something confirmed by the narratives we code—a much longer period than it takes for sexual habituation to occur (Bergner 2013). These women may therefore look at their monogamous relationships and consider themselves sexually deprived in comparison to what they see occurring in today's sexualized culture. This is because the sexual zeitgeist of the modern era promotes casual sex without investment (Bogle 2008; Stepp 2007). This is not to say that all single, middle-aged women are hooking up frequently, but it is to suggest that the idea of it might be alluring

Relative sexual deprivation theory (Anderson 2012) suggests that women do not expect sexual satisfaction from romance-less, long-term relationships. Long-term coupled monogamy can be boring, not only in comparison to the rich sex life that people enjoy at the beginning of their monogamous relationships, but also in comparison to what others are perceived to be doing sexually. In a digital age of extreme identity management, seeing other's selected life snapshots on Facebook leads to the impression that others are having amazing lives, and this might compound feelings of deprivation; because not only are they



not doing the things single people are doing but they are not even having good sex anymore.

Supporting this hypothesis, in an, *The Atlantic*, article on women who cheat, Kate Bolick

(2011) writes:

When I've watched women cheat in their thirties, they're not necessarily unhappy with their husbands, but they're all alpha women, and they feel entitled to what they want.

If you're a 34-year-old woman successful in your career and you've got a great husband but you're bored sexually, and you watch all your single friends run around town having sex, you think you should be able to have that, too.

However, monogamism inhibits women's pursuit of recreational sex. Thus, while American culture now permits multiple forms and types of sex when one is not in a relationship (Bogle 2008), many of the old rules still apply to monogamous couples: It is still socially unacceptable to bring others into the sex, it is unacceptable to seek sex outside the relationship, and it is even unacceptable for a member of a couple to have cyber-sex with someone else on the internet (Anderson 2012). Thus, the only real progress over this sixty-year period for those in contemporary monogamous relationships is that they can explore other forms of sex (i.e., oral and anal) with their partner (Leichliter et al. 2007).

Existing research (Barker and Landridge 2010; Ritchie and Barker 2006) attributes non-monogamous practices to moral failing, a lack of love in one's relationship, or the inability to be sexually faithful or honest with one's partner about extramarital desires. Thus, in this research we utilize both monogamism and relative sexual deprivation theory to suggest that women seek affairs due to sexual and romantic habituation, alongside a social expectation of monogamy.

## **Methods**

In this research we are interested in the multiple factors that influence how middle aged heterosexual women 1) view monogamy; 2) seek affairs; 3) rationalize their cheating in relation to the cultural esteem for monogamy; and 4) relate cheating to the love they have/had for their primary partner. In order to investigate these issues, we covertly draw upon data from users of AshleyMadison.com.

Working directly with AshleyMadison.com, we obtained an anonymous random sample of data from female users aged between 35 and 45, and living in the United States. Data included profile information that the women supplied when they signed up for the site (information not made available to other Ashley Madison users) and their profiles including self-descriptions which alongside preferences for a partner (which are made available to other users). We also acquired all private message conversations that they had with men on the website for one month.

In order to protect the users, all identifying information (including screen names, actual names, and contact information) was removed before we received the data. We acquired ethical approval from the universities of all authors. Furthermore, all users of AshleyMadison.com formally consented to having their user accounts and private information made available for possible research by the website and their third party partners. Individuals provide consent for their data to be used for research purposes when they register for the site and agree to the terms and conditions.

While this covert approach enabled us to examine the idea of cheating, we have no way of knowing what percentage of the women actually met an AshleyMadison user in person. Conversations between AshleyMadison.com users do not assure total honesty of conversation, but they reduce issues of socially desirable responding to a researcher (Kong, Mahoney and Plummer 2002).

### *User Demographics*

Our sample of AshleyMadison users included women from both one rural or suburban and one urban area of each US State. In order to avoid ‘non-users’ (accounts that are for the most part unused), we requested that each user had conversed with a minimum of ten other users (as defined by at least one message sent and returned, or received and returned). Moreover, we only sampled from women who registered with AshleyMadison.com after October 15, 2012, in order to ensure that users were recently active. These criteria resulted in a total of 4,156 conversations between our 100 women and (different) men, whom all indicated heterosexuality, with a mean average of 42 conversations per woman.

All of the female users we analyzed were married, and were aged 35 to 45 with a mean of 39. We specifically chose this age range as we determined it likely that they would have families with children, ultimately serving as a sign of a structured commitment. We were not, however, able to select for class, religion, race, or number of previous marriages. We were also unable to determine the number of children each woman had, if any.

We were also not able to control for women who were on the site at the request of their husbands (cuckolds). There is no way we could control for the women’s intentions when signing up to the website. However, the conversations we analyzed offered no indication that the women had ulterior motives than to have an affair. Even if a few women maintained fake profiles, ages, or ulterior motives within our sample, it would not be enough to alter the meaning of what the women expressed about why they sought an affair.

### *Analysis*

Conversations were often in-depth and continued over an extended period of time (in some cases up to 6 months), though they necessarily ended when users exchanged personal information and utilized another form of communication outside of the website (e.g., a

personal email or cell phone). Personal contact information was filtered out of the conversations so that researchers did not have access to them. Given that we captured messages within initial contact phase, we were still able to capture how they articulated desires for an affair, with whom, and under what circumstances.

We conducted qualitative coding of conversations from the sampled women in order to reflect on what the coded segments told us about the meanings of cheating and to let the data tell us how to construct theories about those relations. We began with topical coding before using analytical coding for the emergent themes. Thus, we identified common narratives and experiences among the women's conversations with men through two stages of analysis.

The second and third authors coded the conversations. Here, both researchers individually coded ten user's messages before co-verifying their findings and key themes. Difference emerged on about 20% of the narrative selections (IRR .8), but remedy was located in assigning them to two themes. The primary author mediated this discussion for remaining divergence to the agreement of all. After agreeing upon the major themes, the two researchers coded an additional ten users before meeting again to co-verify their coding under the auspices of the third researcher. This process was completed a third and final time in order to permit internal consistency in coding. At this stage, satisfied with the collective thematic categories, the two researchers divided the remaining 70 user's conversations for coding. Emerging themes were related back to the original transcripts, and their internal coherence again checked by the third researcher (Braun and Clarke 2006).

During data collection and analysis we constructed theoretical arguments (Charmaz 2006), as our primary concern was to develop a "theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80-81). While we recognize the inherently subjective nature of coding qualitative research, it is through this process of logical abstraction and

inter-rater reliability of the three authors that rigor is assured, and that our findings have general significance for other female users of AshleyMadison with similar demographic characteristics.

### ***Presentation of Data***

We modified the data in order to present conversations with correct grammar and spelling instead of ‘web speak.’ This includes changing Internet messaging slang, and generally presenting the women’s narratives so that they can be read without difficulty. We have not altered the meanings of their narratives. The themes we present in this research are those of numerical dominance, but their order in the results section is given according to logical abstraction of our collective findings.

## **Results**

### **Missing Passion**

Through a comparison of large-scale surveys of sexual intercourse across decades, Anderson (2012) finds that not only does sexual frequency decline with the age of the relationship, but sexual frequency with one’s monogamous partner is suggested to be declining with modernity. He attributes this to an offshoot of the positive and liberalizing trends of a digital age of sexuality, the decline of sexual taboos, and the democratization of desire (McNair 2002). Accordingly, the women we select for analysis exist at two points of decline in their sex lives. With American women marrying at the average age of 25.8 (Copen, Daniels, Vespa and Mosher, 2012), the subject-pool of women we studied have, statistically, been in a relationship long enough to experience sexual habituation in their relationships, and are yet still young enough to have had their sexual habituation occur more rapidly than married couples of previous generations.

We cannot say with this research what percent of these users we studied matriculated their conversations to actual cheating, but we do find robust evidence of the primary causes for desiring an affair. Principally, women discuss with male users declining or missing 'passion' with their husbands as the reason for seeking affairs on AshleyMadison.com. Exemplifying the ubiquities of this, of the 100 women studied, 92 wrote enough in their messages to other men to suggest why an affair was desired. The remaining users did not indicate in any of their messages as to why they sought an affair; just that they were looking for one.

Of the 92 who indicated why they sought an affair, 67 indicated that they desired an affair because they desired more romantic passion in their lives. They expressed that they were no longer getting passion from their husbands. One user writes about her passion deficit, saying:

I'm missing the fire that can make a connection between two people so hot. The same fire that keeps my thoughts busy with images of my lover. The feeling of longing for the next time we meet, and imagining all the wonderful passionate things we have in store for one another when we do get together...

Another writes, "I married my best friend with plenty of sex and chemistry. In fact I'm pretty sure we got married because of the sex. And here we are nine years later, still good friends, but the sex has no passion to it." Another writes, "I think we're experiencing something similar....a lack of passion and excitement which once was."

Not all users we coded as missing passion use the word passion directly; we infer it for others. Illustrating this, one user writes, "I'm married, and we are kind of like roommates. I'm not looking to change anyone's life. I'm just hoping to add some life back into mine."

These passion narratives are imbued with missing a certain type of passionate, novel, sex.

This user writes:

Sweetie...I don't know where to start. I've been with the same man for 19 years. Married for 17. We have 3 boys. Let's not talk about our spouses or families. It's a buzz kill. I need passion and excitement. The thrill you have when you're getting to know someone. The feeling you get right before kissing. You can hardly make it through without touching each other and tearing each other's clothes off.

Thus, consistent with social science research on long term sexual relationships; predictable patterns emerged for most of the women we studied. They showed heavy sexual intensity and novelty at the relationship onset eventually turning into sexual habituation (Schwartz and Rutter 2000). Only some of the users were aware of the normalcy of this pattern, explicating why she wants an affair with a male user:

It's just wildly unrealistic to believe that two people can stay together, raise children, and maintain sexual heat and passion throughout a lifetime. Our society constructs that love and marriage mean only one person, all the time, and forever. We often spend long periods—maybe even most of our adult lives—lacking some pretty fundamental things in our lives....

However, the narratives these women provide are strikingly different than those from research on why men cheat, which suggests that they are principally seeking carnal relations without the emotional passion (see Anderson 2012). They generally do not describe their somatic desires in terms of passion, but instead, they are borne out of horniness.

This makes us wonder whether the use of the phrase or idea of passion is not also a substitute for horniness. It cannot always be easily determined as to whether women speak of passion as a euphemism for horniness, or whether they desire a combination of sexual and

romantic interactions with their affairs. However, 'passion' is normative in their description of wanting an affair because it is used almost exclusively when discussing sex, as well as serving as a stand-alone euphemism for it. One AshleyMadison user epitomizes this blended coding, writing, "Sex without romantic passion is like a root beer float without the ice-cream."

### **Seeking Sexual Novelty**

While a lack of passion remains the most cited reason for seeking an affair, it is normally heavily imbued with sexual desire. Affairs offer women the opportunity to not only enjoy fresh passion, but passion *with* sex. Adding those 67 who discussed wanting passion (which was coded as inclusive of desire for sex, too) another 19 discussed wanting sex directly, without discussing passion. Thus, we contend that sex remains the core reason for seeking an affair, not an emotional connection. Supporting this statement, none of the women said that they did not want sex; none of the women said that they wanted sexless dating only. In other words, none of the women's narratives suggest that they are looking for sexless romance.

One user writes, "Why am I here? It's mostly because I have a high sex drive which doesn't match his." Another writes, "I'm bored too, actually. Got a great family and good husband but he doesn't have the sex drive that I do." And still another writes, "Sex with my husband is plain." This user specifies that she's only after sex, writing:

Familiarity also results in boredom. I am doing this because I am feeling very sexual and want to do something nice for myself. I am feeling restless. A lot of women probably are looking for emotional relationships when they cheat, but I am mainly looking for excitement. I need to get something out of my system.



And another writes:

I would like the best sex ever and that is what has taken me on this journey...while I enjoy making love to my husband...we don't fuck anymore, and I miss it.

This user clearly delineates to the man she messages that there are different types of sex, and that good sex can be void of romantic passion:

After however many years with the same person it would be nice to feel that hot sex and adrenalin again with a new body. Am I right? I want to experience some very specific things...things I would be too shy to ask my husband for. It's that simple! With a lover...you/we can be free to get as primal as one wants to.

Still others cite lack of sexual novelty as a reason for desiring extramarital sex. One writes, "I am an active woman who loves sex and does not get enough from my husband. He likes the same old thing and does not like for me to suck his cock...." And another discusses medical issues that prevent her from having the sex life she wants, "I am on this site because I want to have a sexual relationship as mine has been deeply impacted by my husband's recent health issues...".

Ultimately, these women do not seek affairs just because they are simply missing an emotional connection in their current relationships. Instead they desire sex that provides them with sexual novelty, excitement and passion; they seek good sex for the sake of good sex. However, this desire for extramarital sex extends only to one other partner.

### **Monogamy within Infidelity**

Unlike previous research suggesting that men seek extramarital sex with multiple partners (Anderson 2012), for the most part women in this research sought just one other sex partner. This was the case regardless of whether or not they couched their sexual desires in terms of passion. 47 women suggested they desired monogamous infidelity, conversely none explicitly stated that they were looking for a one-night stand.

The women suggested a number of reasons for desiring extramarital sex with only one other person. One of the primary reasons was a lack of time. One user writes, “Yes I’m married - looking for friend/lover - good laughs, good company and good sex. Just looking for only one man.” She then stresses her desire for monogamous infidelity, “I don’t have the time for multiple partners and the guy should be the same way.” Another said, “...I’m only looking for one guy to fill the missing piece as I don’t have the time, nor is it me, to have multiple partners.

Without interviews, we cannot know whether these women seek a long-term affair, or whether they desire serial monogamy for their affairs. We can only determine that they do not want a one night affair. Or perhaps women use the script of desiring an affair with only one other so that if/when they do meet a man for sex, they have influenced him to provide passion and romance, ingredients these women seem to indicate are necessary for an enjoyable sexual encounter.

Messages from women, however, also demonstrate that they deal with men on the website who *do* desire sex with multiple women. One user was irritated with the number of messages she received from men looking for just a one-off sexual experience. She indicates that she replied to multiple men’s messages with, “Just looking for one, not multiple!” Others are a bit more gracious in their rejection of men looking simply for one-off sexual encounters. “Sorry, but I am focusing on one AM member who caught my attention,” one writes.” Another writes, “I’m looking for just one man to connect with, so please be patient with me.”

Many women make their desire for monogamous affairs known on the 'public' section of their profile (an area that all users can see). One subscriber posts, "I am searching for just one man for long term "exciting" times to share. Ideally he would be kind, romantic and uninhibited with a sense of humor." Another posts, "I want one special friend to ROCK my world and I fully intend to give the same."

This same theme is upheld within the messages these female users send. One writes, "I am not a one night stand kinda gal." And another writes, "I am not into the one night stand scene. That is just not me. I prefer to find someone that is looking for something with a bit more substance." These messages might reflect a fear of being labeled as a slut, even in their anonymous Ashley Madison identities, or they might reflect that they legitimately desire fidelity with their infidelity.

Others provide more detail about their desire for having an affair with one person, "Your description is nice, but to be honest with you, I met a man on AshleyMadison that I'm interested in. We chatted a few times and he makes me laugh. I am happy with just him."

Another user articulates that this is because she desires more of an emotional connection:

Well, ideally, someone who I felt good being with and wanted to please and have them return the passion. I would rather not have one night stands. Being with one person ideally and learning what they liked and having them learn what I liked. Then when we are together enjoy it to the fullest.

While another suggest it is because they subscribe to self-shame about their desires:

I have never been outside my marriage and am not sure how this works. I am just looking for a single comrade and partner in crime. I don't want to hurt anyone and I don't want to be hurt. Just hugs and kisses, giggles and bliss.

Many women also say that they desire a more developed relationship with their sexual partners as they find emotional intimacy a precursor for being aroused and desiring sex in the first place. For example, one woman writes, “I need to feel connected to get off,” and another says, “...it takes a deep connection for me to enjoy sex.”

### **Husband Blaming**

The romantic, passionate connection that women desire in an affair is sometimes coded as missing from their current relationships by fault of their husbands. To be clear, while most of the users did not articulate blame onto their husbands for the lack of passion/sex in their relationships, 22 (nearly a third of those we were able to code as to why they sought a relationship outside marriage) blamed their husbands for a loss of it. Another five women indicated that declining passion was just a matter of relationship fact but, interestingly, not a single user assigned blame to herself for declining passion in her relationship. None stated that their husbands had grown unattractive; none stated that their sex lives were fine with their husbands, but that they just wanted extramarital sex.

For those who blame their husbands, some believe that if their husbands tried harder, declining passion would not occur. “Sex with my husband is plain....I have suggested exploring other avenues of pleasure, but the interest just isn’t there.” She then says to the male user, “If you are all these things you speak of...why don’t you hold your wife’s attention?” Another writes, “Well I am taken completely for granted at home, other men look at me and notice that I am sexy but my husband does not!” This user writes, “I can tell you my husband treats me more like a roommate than a wife. I decided to do something about it and create my own happiness...so here I am.” Still another suggests, “I’m looking for someone to make me feel wanted, desired, needed...obviously something I’m not getting.”

Sometimes this passion-blaming concerns sex only, “I feel horny as hell all the time.

I've suggested things but he doesn't seem willing to try stuff" while other times the idea of sex reinvigorates passion. Even discussions of having an affair with an unknown man, without even meeting him in person, helped this user feel passion:

You have brought me back to life, made the woman that I have hidden come to the surface! I thank you for that! My only hope is that you and I can continue this on here for the time being! And when things are better, we can meet and explore each other, each desire, want, need! Because I've never wanted as much as I want you now!!! My husband just doesn't give me this excitement!

While some of these women express bitterness with their husbands for their perceived lack of passion, others are were more ambivalent or accepting of it:

I am a very passionate person, so sex has never been an issue for me. The void that is missing in my life is different than yours, mine is emotional. I have realized, after years of therapy that my husband is not able to give me what I need. I have stopped taking it personally! Guess there is no such thing as a perfect mate. I have learned that different people fulfill different needs within you.

Another writes:

I've been married 24 years to a great guy, but he has only had sex for 5 minutes, missionary style...I have asked my husband to try new things and he refuses, so that is why I am on AM. I want to explore my fantasies and be able to let go!!

Whether it concerned these husband-blaming women or not, despite wanting passion, romance, or just sex with another man, only one user of the 100 indicated that she was looking to leave her husband. The rest desired infidelity and marriage.

## **Affairs as a Protective Measure**

Results from this investigation suggest that these women do not look to cheat because they have fallen out of love with their partners, but instead because they love their partners while simultaneously seeking sex with an additional person. The vast majority of women viewed having an affair, not as a way to discover a new person with whom they could escape their husband, but as a rational way to protect their primary relationship. Essentially, they cheat out of love. As with the men in Anderson's (2010, 2012) investigations, cheating served as a mechanism for gaining extra-dyadic sex without breaking up with their lovers or risking losing them by asking for an open relationship.

Cheating can, of course, be used as a way to break up with a partner without having to extol one's true reasons. For example, in their study of female college students, Wilkins and Dalessandro (2013: 19) write "...because college students understand cheating to be a common, often legitimate occurrence and an irrevocable violation of relational trust and sign of emotional disinterest, women often use cheating to reach a favorable end." However, in comparison to this, the women that we study in this research (ages 35-45) express matters differently. Their stated reasons for desiring an affair are not to gain an understanding of what life would be like with another man. 38 women explicitly stated this.

One user writes on her public profile: "Looking for a SEXY Time. Looking for a man who excites me! Gives me that, 'I gotta have him feeling.' Discretion is a MUST!!!! Not trying to ruin anyone's relationship or have mine ruined in the process. LET'S PLAY"

Another says, "I have a very blessed life and relationship, but I do miss the energy and passion of pure lust." This user writes, "I am married yet missing something essential!!!! I love my kids and husband and have passion for life, yet I want more! But I do not want to change my family unit!" Another writes, "Husband is great. I love him dearly and we have a great marriage."

The love they say they have for their husbands is supported by the fear that they express in their husband's finding out about an affair. Female users express fear that their husbands will find out about their cheating and will inadvertently lose them. This user writes, "Hi there... So tell me a little bit about yourself. I'm also looking for something discreet, and drama free. Looking for something to fill in what's missing in my life, without changing my life or yours." And this one says, "This is risky and I don't want my husband to be hurt in this process, so I too, am very cautious." Another tells a male, "I have to be careful....getting caught is not in my game plan. I very much am married and plan on staying that way!" This user's comments to another male are sarcastic but poignant, "I just want to let guys with the profiles that say 'love to travel' or 'long romantic dinners' or 'sailing' know that I won't be doing any of that! I am happy doing those things with my husband."

As the above narratives highlight, women in our sample unanimously maintain that they desire an affair. They love their husbands and desire to stay with them. 38 explicated their reasons for staying with their husbands in terms of choice, respect, and love—only one of the women indicated that finances played a role in her decision to stay with her husband, but even she indicated that she loved him, saying, "I cannot afford to change my situation.....that may sound bad but for me and my children...it is the truth, I have no personal wealth. I do still love my husband but am lacking in the affection area."

Collectively, these narratives make clear that seeking an affair, without altering one's marriage, is the common theme for married heterosexual American women on AshleyMadison.com. One user articulates our findings perfectly, "I think we are all on AshleyMadison for the same common set of reasons and no one is here to split up existing relationships."

## **Discussion**

This research presents to sociologists concerned with marriage, monogamy, infidelity and the family and a unique glimpse at the reasons why married women seek extramarital affairs, without researcher effect. Results reaffirm the hegemonic mechanisms that maintain the cultural ideal of both forms of monogamy (relationship and sexual), an ideal maintained through a process of subordination and stratification of non-monogamies. As with other forms of hegemonic oppression, we highlight that our participants desired to be associated with the privileged sexual paradigm (Rubin 1984), and consequently extol the virtues of being socially perceived as monogamous. This was true even if they did not want to adhere to its basic principles.

For all but five percent of the women in this study, monogamy existed within what Anderson (2012) has previously called *the monogamy gap*. Here, the women were caught between their socially constructed desires to both be, and be perceived as, monogamous, and their physical desires for extramarital sex. These results confirm that despite the loosening of sexual mores in contemporary society, monogamy remains the hegemonic sexual ideal (monogamism) among the female users of AshleyMadison.com. Monogamism is so powerful that only five of the women indicate that they have discussed with their husbands their desires for extra-marital sex. The rest secretly seek affairs.

Because these women desired the monogamy ideal, we suggest that cheating, or having affairs, presents itself as a rational response to the difficult situation that monogamy presents them. Cheating appears to rectify the dissonance created by wanting two contradicting things, the desire for social monogamy and the desire for non-monogamy, even though it might create a new dissonance because their behaviors don't match their social ideals.

These website users highlight that most (not all) had experienced fantastic, frequent and passionate sex when they first entered into their current dyadic relationships. As



Anderson (2010) has shown with men, the initial experience of sexual desire and intimacy from a single person makes it easy to fall into the practice of valuing of monogamy without criticism. However, as relationships progress, sex becomes less frequent and less enjoyable, a longstanding sexological finding (Schwartz and Rutter 2000).

The most frequently cited reason (67/92) for seeking sex outside the relationship is that the female users ‘desired passion.’ Although some women recognized this as a natural product of an endearing relationship, 22 women were quick to blame their husbands for their lack of it. The word ‘passion’ was sometimes used purely as a euphemism for sex, but it predominantly referred to the romantic excitement that comes at the early stage of a relationship—which seemingly always includes sex. Half as many of those explicitly stated that they were looking for sex. Thus, the root of what these women desired was sex with new partners, not simply passion without sex.

However, just because these women started to develop sexual desires for others, it did not mean that they desired a sexually open relationship. Perhaps jealousy scripts led them to seek cheating as a mechanism of having what they desired, while simultaneously denying their husbands the same benefit. Or perhaps they feared divorce or marital disharmony if they broached the subject with their husbands, the way men reported doing so in Anderson’s (2012) research. There is also the potential that, because they collectively assigned blame to their husbands for the lack of sexual activity, they viewed cheating as justified for them; but not their husbands. These narratives also tell us something about the relationship between love and cheating.

Popular and clinical psychological discourses tend to present monogamous coupledness as the only natural and/or morally correct form of human relating (Barker 2007; Ritchie and Barker 2006). There remains very limited consideration for the possibility of consensual non-monogamy within mainstream clinical psychology (Barker 2007; Richards

and Baker 2013) or relationship therapy (e.g. Crowe and Ridley 2000). Internationally best-selling relationship self-help books such as Gray's (2002) *Women are from Venus and Men are From Mars* continue to present (almost exclusively heterosexual) lifelong monogamy as the natural mode of human relating. Popular press and relationship guides, such as Gray (2002), frame the exploration of alternatives to coupledness as a distraction from reaching the 'happily ever after' monogamous ideal that everyone should inevitably aspire to.

Under these current social conditions, we suggest that any cheating or affair that materialized from use of this website occurred as a result of women contrasting the opportunity for recreational sex against the emotional hardship (and potential break-up) of telling their husbands that they desire an open relationship. In this regard, women appear to be no different than men. Both sexes appear to bemoan the sexual habituation that is mostly inevitable in a long-term monogamous relationship. However, where this research speaks to women—perhaps uniquely—is that these users—on this website—were looking for just one other sexual partner. Thus, most of the women we investigated, paradoxically, sought monogamy within their non-monogamy.

Women on this website may have self-selected into it. Those seeking one-night sexual encounters may choose to use another site, like Craig's list. So for the women, who self-select onto Ashley Madison, they may do so for multiple reasons. They may seek monogamy in infidelity because they view this as the most reasonable way of preventing their husbands from finding out about their affairs. Having just one partner for an affair might also serve as a way to engage in stigmatized behaviors while associating with the hegemonic morality of monogamy. This is related to minimizing the social stigma, even the self-stigma, of being perceived as a 'slut,' 'cheater,' or 'home-wrecker,' a reflection of their marginalized position in society (Braithwaite et al. 2010).

Alternatively, this research could also indicate that most women only enjoy, or enjoy more, sex when it is viewed as relationship building (Townsend and Wasserman 1996).

Monogamous cheating serves as a mechanism to create a hybrid between the desire to cheat and the socially sanctioned monogamy. This is also likely somewhat attributed to their desire for good sex, alongside a strong emotional, romantic connection. This, of course, is vastly different from what research shows about men's sexual needs in cheating (Anderson 2012).

Most significantly, however, the women who use AshleyMadison.com are not looking to leave their partners. They expressed strong desires for maintaining their husband's love and relationship status. Apart from missing sexual passion and the heightened romance that comes in the early days of a relationship, they were not using the website to shop for a new husband. Instead, women were seeking to enhance their lives, not deter from their relationships. In this regard, affairs ironically serve as a protection mechanism from divorce. Women recognize that their relationships are important, and not worth discarding simply for sex and passion with someone else. Affairs permit them to have all of their sexual and romantic desires met without unnecessarily terminating their primary relationships.

In light of the near-total social control that monogamism has over the practice of those who choose to enter into romantic relationships, Anderson (2012) suggests that, for men, episodes of non-romantic cheating become the *rational* answer to the monogamy gap. Here, men can have their sexual desires met without disturbing their primary relationships. For women, however, matters appear to be different. Their cheating wraps sexual and emotional desire for romance together (Townend and Wasserman 1996). Affairs enable women to have the emotional connection and passion that most—but not all—users say they require in order to have satisfying sex.

We are not suggesting that the only reason that all women cheat is because they need sexual and romantic variety in their lives; it is also possible that they cheat because they are

unhappy, yet feel stuck in their relationships. However, analysis from this investigation firmly suggests that, among these 100 women, this is not the case. Having covertly investigated, noted and analyzed private, anonymous messages to other men, it would be hard to argue that the women we studied did not actually love their partners.

Thus, instead of examining women's affairs as a product of relationship issues of lacking love, we suggest that they serve as a way of maintaining emotional monogamy with primary partners, whilst having their sexual needs and desire for romantic passion met. Cheating was therefore the best way to rectify (even if temporarily) what Anderson (2012) calls 'the monogamy gap.' These facts dispute the commonly held mantra that women who cheat on their partners do not love their partners—exposing cheating to be a much more complicated phenomena than we, as a society, currently grasp.

This research also beckons us to reexamine the social stigma placed upon those who cheat on their partners. Instead of describing these women as lacking character, love, or morality—social scripts that hold monogamy as a test of personal character and romantic fortitude (Smith 1991)—this research suggests that cheating emerges from a culture that offers no socially acceptable alternatives to the sexual habituation and frustration that occurs with relatively long-term monogamy (Glass and Wright 1985; Treas and Giesen 2000). Consequently, the monogamous mantra of 'cheating as the product of failed love or psychological disease' constrains other possibilities from social or personal consideration.

We therefore argue that these data call for a more complex view of cheating and affairs than society currently permits. The cultural ascriptions of character weakness and personality disorder that many attribute to those who cheat (Vaughan 2003) largely fail to critique the structural power relations between social morality, natural (or naturalized) sexual desires, and sexual recreation (Haritaworn et al. 2006). We contend that these important

critiques will follow from a more sociological approach to the construction of sexual and gendered identities and behaviors in the domain of non-monogamy.

This research ultimately highlights the need for the cultural recognition of varying relationship models without a presumption of the higher superiority or morality of monogamy. Yet, this possibility is currently nullified by the hegemonic control that monogamy maintains. Hopefully this research will help to ameliorate this problem by challenging the normative scripts of ‘normal’ heterosexual relationships, but until then, we explicate that these women agree with the AshleyMadison slogan, “life is short, have an affair.”

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