

Infidelity is less common than pop culture suggests

By LYNN STEINBERG
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It is rare these days to pick up a newspaper that does not contain a story about adultery. Pop psychologists tell us, in magazines and on daytime television, that more than half of Americans engage in extramarital affairs. Friends, neighbors, even colleagues, will confess to a moment of weakness, a dalliance or two.

No one, it seems, is immune. Not heirs to the British throne. Not network sportscasters. Not even four-star generals.

PRETTY SOON it starts to feel as if everybody's doing it. And that leaves the happily married man or woman to wonder: "How could 50 percent of people like me be having an affair?"

"The answer is, 'They're not,'" said Scott Stanley, co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver.

Last year, Stanley and associate Howard Markman designed and conducted a random phone survey in which only 4 percent of respondents — either married, engaged or living together — reported having an affair.

The highest incidence — 10 percent — was among males 35 and younger.

While Stanley concedes that his results may underestimate the situation, one of the most respected studies on the subject also found that relatively few Americans engage in extramarital affairs.

In 1994, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago reported that one-fifth of men and one-tenth of women said

they had engaged in sexual relations with someone other than their spouse.

In a recent discussion of those findings, Tom W. Smith, a principal investigator at the center, wrote that "there are probably more scientifically worthless 'facts' on extramarital relations than on any other facet of human behavior."

Smith discounted what he called "pop and pseudoscientific accounts" and concluded that "the best estimates are that about 3 to 4 percent of currently married people have a sexual partner besides their spouse in a given year and about 15 to 17 percent of ever-(been)-married people have had a sexual partner other than their spouse while married."

The sexual revolution may have liberalized attitudes toward premarital sex, but surveys show it has done little to change the way Americans view adultery. The vast majority of people continue to think it is always or almost always wrong.

STILL, THERE seems to be more of an attempt to understand if not accept affairs, to view them as "emotional solutions to emotional problems," as therapist David Moultrup wrote in his book, "Husbands Wives & Lovers."

Spouses are unlikely to condone such transgressions, but they are often reluctant to call it quits because of them. In her study of 50 happily married couples, psychologist Judith Wallerstein asked each of her subjects what it would take to break their marriage.

Not one of them said adultery. Violence was the only place they drew the line, Wallerstein found.

RELATIONSHIPS

"Marriage is a major achievement in life," she explained. "And they weren't going to sacrifice it because a man or woman got lonesome on the road 5,000 miles away."

None of the couples were casual about infidelity, but they were able to distinguish between a sexual encounter, which would cause a temporary rift in the marriage, and an affair of the heart, which would end it.

AMERICANS can be just as forgiving at the ballot box. Polls show that only about one in six Americans say they won't vote for candidates who have committed adultery.

Consider President Clinton, who has long been dogged by rumors of infidelity. Yet he easily won a second term in office and continues to enjoy high ratings from the American public. Some say Clinton proved, during his first term in office, that his personal life would not affect his public behavior. Others argue that when it comes to putting someone in the White House, a prosperous economy may matter more than morality.

University of Washington sociologist Pepper Schwartz explains the adultery issue this way: "People are saying, 'That's not my cup of tea. I don't like it. It's objectionable, but not as objectionable as electing the other guy or risking that the tax structure will change.'"

Clinton had a rougher ride during his first presidential campaign when he was a virtual unknown. He dealt with persistent inquiries about his personal life, by going on national

television with his wife, the former Hillary Rodham, admitting to problems in the marriage and assuring voters that all was well now.

"It was a crucial moment in the campaign," said Patrick Dobel, associate dean of the University of Washington's graduate school of public affairs.

Dobel argues that marital fidelity is important to voters, but only under a fairly narrow set of circumstances — when candidates purport to embody family values or when there are already doubts about their integrity.

In such cases, reports of adultery can spell doom.

"It is a pretty damning indictment of a person," Dobel said. "It demonstrates that you are capable of breaking solemn vows, of deceiving and lying to the people close to you — that you are perfectly willing, for your own interest, passion and desire, to risk hurting your spouse and children and ruining your marriage."

THAT PROVED too much for presidential contender Gary Hart to overcome in 1988. A front-runner for the Democratic nomination, Hart bowed out of the race after his relationship with model Donna Rice became public knowledge.

The media frenzy that ensued soon enveloped other politicians and presidential candidates. "Do you have a Gary Hart problem?" was the question of the day.

Sex scandals in the military became more noteworthy recently because they posed questions about fair

play and public hypocrisy.

Earlier this month, Army Maj. Gen. John Longhouser, the commanding general of the scandal-ridden Aberdeen Proving Ground, said he would retire early after it was learned he had a relationship with a civilian employee while separated from his wife five years ago.

THEN AIR FORCE Gen. Joseph Ralston, in line to become the nation's top military officer, withdrew his name from consideration after news reports that he had had an adulterous affair in the 1980s.

Though he was legally separated from his wife at the time, stories about the affair proved critical because they surfaced soon after the contentious dismissal of Air Force bomber pilot Kelly Flinn.

Flinn was accused of having an affair with the husband of an enlisted woman, denying it to her superiors and disobeying an order to break off contact with the man.

But Ralston's behavior, including his failure to report his affair until recently, when reporters began asking questions, bore a closer resemblance to that of Air Force Lt. Gen. Thomas Griffith.

Griffith, a 28-year Air Force veteran, was stripped of his command in 1995 and forced to resign after admitting to an adulterous affair with a civilian. The irony: It was Ralston who decided Griffith's fate. The Air Force said Ralston had "lost confidence in Griffith's ability to command due to inappropriate personal conduct."

Military law does not specifically ban adultery, but its code against conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline historically has been ap-

plied to adultery cases.

So along comes someone like Mike Bowers, Georgia's former attorney general, who admits carrying on an adulterous affair while in office. He resigns his commission as a major general in the Georgia Air National Guard but announces that he will still run for governor.

To this day, adultery remains a crime in half the states, but people are rarely prosecuted. Some states, such as Idaho and Oklahoma, have gone so far as to make adultery a felony.

The statutes are artifacts from a time when people believed that sin could be outlawed. But there has been no rush to strike such laws from the books. As Schwartz, of the University of Washington, observed, no one wants to be accused of further unraveling the nation's moral fabric. No one wants to go down in history as the one who made infidelity legal.

ONE THING remains clear: Adultery is the crime of the moment with the power to sink promising careers. Some argue for a more reasoned response to the situation — and more room for redemption.

"I think public officials have to embody higher standards," Dobel said. "But they should not be impossible standards."

"One of the things we tend to forget in the heat of the media moment is there always should be a place for forgiveness."

"Someone like a Gen. Longhouser can have an affair when he is separated then go back and rebuild his marriage and have an exemplary career. So, 'Why are we punishing him?' is a legitimate question."