

Anja KOZINA

Differences in self-esteem among individuals with various experiences of infidelity

Razlike v samospoštovanju med posamezniki z različnimi izkušnjami z nezvestobo

Težave z nezvestobo so pogosta izkušnja v partnerskem odnosu. Dejavniki, ki prispevajo k njej, so kompleksni in različni. Ponavadi gre za prepletanje osebnih, partnerskih in družbenih dejavnikov. V naši raziskavi nas je zanimalo, ali obstajajo razlike v samospoštovanju med posamezniki, ki imajo različne izkušnje z nezvestobo v partnerskem odnosu. Sodelovalo je 296 odraslih, od tega 76 % žensk in 24 % moških. Povprečna starost udeležencev je bila 29 let. Višino samospoštovanja smo merili z Rosenbergovo lestvico samospoštovanja (Rosenberg, 1965 v Zeigler-Hill, 2006). Rezultati so pokazali statistično pomembno razliko v samospoštovanju, kjer imajo posamezniki brez izkušenj z nezvestobo v povprečju višje samospoštovanje od tistih, ki so bili nezvesti. Iz rezultatov lahko sklepamo, da je nizko samospoštovanje lahko dejavnik, ki prispeva k nezvestobi v partnerskem odnosu, lahko gre tudi za posledico nezvestobe ali pa celo oboje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE

Samospoštovanje, nezvestoba, partnerstvo

ABSTRACT

Problems connected with infidelity are frequently experienced in couple relationships. The causes leading to infidelity are complex and varied. They generally consist of a mixture of personal, interpersonal and social factors. In our study, we were interested in investigating the existence of differences among individuals, who had experienced infidelity in a relationship. A total of 296 participants took part in the study, 76% of which were female and 24% were male. The average age of the participants was 29 years. Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965 in Zeigler-Hill, 2006). The results revealed a statistically significant difference in the levels of self-esteem. People who have not experienced infidelity have on average shown higher self-esteem than those individuals who had been unfaithful. From our findings we can gather that low self-esteem can be a factor that leads to infidelity in a relationship. It can also be a consequence of infidelity or even both of these things.

KEY WORDS

Self-esteem, infidelity, couples

Introduction

Infidelity is a frequent problem in relationships (Glass, 2003). It is a complex phenomenon, influenced by genetic, social, personal and interpersonal factors (Kmet, 2008; Glass, 2003).

Researchers have varying opinions about what (in)fidelity is, making it a concept which is difficult to define precisely. Individuals also have different subjective ideas about what infidelity means. Some individuals define infidelity as including only physical acts, meaning sexual relations, kissing, sexual affairs etc. Others identify it as only emotional actions, such as affection towards another person, dedicating time to another person, thinking about another person, having feeling towards another person, seducing, flirting, fantasizing about another person, being in love etc. Still others consider infidelity to consist of both the emotional and physical behaviour of a relationship partner. Another group of people defines infidelity in terms of the relationship to the partner or family. This consists of neglecting the family, absence, (not) being committed, honesty/dishonesty, respect/disrespect, lying, betrayal of trust, keeping secrets, distancing in a relationship (emotional, physical), violation of an agreement, etc. (Kozina, 2013).

Recent studies have stated that fidelity is an agreement between partners where honesty is of the utmost importance (Kmet, 2008). Most researchers are in agreement that infidelity means a breach of trust (Seles, 2009; 2011; Glass, 2003; Lusterma, 1998; Peluso, 2007; Subotnik and Harris, 1999; Duba, Kindsvatter and Lara, 2008). Infidelity is about broken trust and the violation of a psychological agreement about the longevity of an intimate relationship (Duba, Kindsvatter and Lara, 2008; Glass, 2003; Peluso, 2007; Seles, 2011; Subotnik in Harris, 1999). This is often a traumatic experience for an individual, due to the fact that a partner is hurt by the act of infidelity itself, and, even more frequently and intensely, by the acts of lying and keeping secrets. These carry the meaning of distancing from the relationship partner and of a symbolic termination of the relationship (Milivojević, 2011).

Research has confirmed that infidelity was one of the most destructive factors to impact a relationship and one of the most difficult to treat (e.g. Snyder, Baucom and Gordon, 2007; Blow and Hartnett, 2005; Fife, Weeks and Gambescia, 2008).

In the process of treating problems connected with infidelity it is important to take into account the broader circumstances and to view infidelity as a traumatic experience. If we focus solely on the affair itself, we may not see the whole picture i.e. the crucial segments that have caused it (Scheinkman, 2005). Usually affairs have a non-obvious underlying motive: it can be that an individual was unable to develop genuine intimacy in a relationship, or it can be an unconstructive way of resolving conflict, a lack of passion in a relationship, sex addiction, important turning points in life, an inability to set boundaries, personal structure of an individual etc. (Subotnik and Harris, 1999). With our study we wanted to test whether some other psychological characteristic namely an individual's self-esteem, was connected to infidelity in couple relationships.

Self-esteem represents the value aspect of the self-concept and relates to how people feel about themselves. This affects relationships with surroundings and with other peo-

ple. It is one of the most important areas of personality development, a complex concept, which includes beliefs, tendencies, expectations, emotions and actions, which in turn express or make up the feeling of one's own self-worth. It includes the recognition of self-worth, as well as a wish and disposition to protect and preserve this worth (Kobal Grum, Kolenc, Lebarič and Žalec, 2004). It has a significant impact on how individuals establish contact with themselves and the world. It is developed in the context of social interactions in which individuals perceive themselves as important or unimportant to other people. Self-esteem is affirmed and increased by small achievements, which are given value by ourselves or by others.

Different definitions of self-esteem can be found in literature, and researchers use various methods to measure it. Some researchers thought of self-esteem as a stable personal trait, others believed that it is an ongoing process (Kobal Grum and Avsec, 2007). Researchers (Rosenberg in Avsec, 2000) who viewed it as a stable personality trait, were of the opinion that it is characteristically stable through time and during various situations. For measuring self-esteem, a general factor is most commonly used, which defines self-esteem as a personality trait, independent from context and content.

Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as an individual's ordinary, global evaluation of oneself, a positive or negative orientation toward oneself. It expresses approval or disapproval and also measures an individual's belief in his own ability, importance, success and respectability. If the individual accepts himself as he is, he feels he has worth, thus has high self-esteem. Persons with low self-esteem do not appreciate themselves, do not approve of their characteristics and have a negative opinion about themselves (Rosenberg in Avsec, 2000).

On the other hand, some researchers have postulated that self-esteem is a process, a variable view of oneself (Burns 1979; Markus and Kunda, 1986). It includes a fundamental or standard evaluation of oneself, while also including smaller deviations from this. Therefore, an individual has a sort of general level of self-esteem, which fluctuates somewhat during certain situations or days (Kobal Grum and Avsec, 2007). During this process, the individual evaluates his abilities, undertakings and traits in accordance with his internalized standards and values (Burns, 1979).

Brissett (1972) stated that self-esteem includes two fundamental psychological processes. The first process of self-esteem is self-evaluation, which stems from meeting one's own standards or the expectations of others. The second process of self-esteem is self-worth, in which an individual feels important and efficient and is aware of himself. Lamovec (1994) added that the feeling of self-worth is more fundamental than self-evaluation. It includes a feeling of competence, which is not dependent on external evaluation. The process of self-worth always develops within the boundaries of a certain social reality, hence self-esteem changes if the social environment changes. It is also true that an individual's response to his social environment is itself already a function of self-esteem. This is therefore a mutual relationship. Being judged by their surroundings will not have a significant impact on persons with high self-esteem and will not induce immediate changes of self-evaluation. This is a form of protection from the influences of the environment, which can be crucial, especially in stressful situations. Persons with low self-esteem have their evaluation of their own worth directly influenced by the con-

ditions in the environment. Hence their self-system is constantly at risk of falling apart, while their behaviour is inconsistent and unstable.

Another part of self-esteem is self-liking, which is the social, external dimension of self-esteem, and is conditioned by society (Rogers, 1961). It is formed by the mirror image of the self, which we see in others when they regard us. These judgements become internalized in the development of the thought of oneself as a social object. Persons with high self-liking are accepting of themselves and relaxed in social situations. People with low self-liking are self-restrictive and dysfunctional in social situations (Blatt and Zuroff, 1992).

The internal dimension of self-esteem is the feeling of competence. This feeling develops when a person is successful in dealing with the environment and achieving goals. If the goals have been achieved and the intentions satisfied, and the individual can attribute this to his own actions, the feeling of competence increases. Persons with a high sense of competence are more motivated and focused on goals, while also having greater trust in their success. Persons with a low sense of competence have low motivation, suffer from anxiety and are depressed (Tafarodi and Swann, 1995).

In literature (Kobal, 2000; Lamovec, 1994) authors often describe a correlation between self-esteem and emotional stability. Persons with low self-esteem are said to be less emotionally stable than those with higher self-esteem. Emotional stability is fundamental for mental well-being. The level of self-esteem is connected to a large number of personality traits and various behaviours. Positive traits and behaviours are generally linked to high self-esteem, while the negative ones are linked to low self-esteem (Tafarodi and Swann, 1995).

Development of self-esteem

The development of self-esteem begins very early. As soon as the baby is born, it is faced with everyday challenges. The subsequent achievement of success builds up its self-esteem. A baby is very sensitive to tiny stimuli from significant others. It is susceptible to the way a parent looks at it, it responds to the muscular tension of the person holding it and to the way adults respond to its crying – all of this develops self-esteem (Satir, 1995). To the child every action is important, every movement, every facial expression, and every word said by a significant other person. All of this gives it a message of its worth, importance and competence (Humphreys, 2002).

To a baby, being able to hold a toy seems like a big achievement. The child's persistence is very important during this – trying until it achieves a set goal. When parents or significant persons notice the child's efforts and praise the child, they contribute to the development of high self-esteem. Researchers believe that the development of self-esteem is most intense during the first five years of a child's life. During adolescence it tends to fluctuate, due to the diverse social environment experienced by a young person growing up, and becomes relatively settled and formed in adulthood and is not influenced by the social environment as much as before (Burns, 1979).

Therefore, these primal relationships are the most important contributors to the development of a child's self-esteem. This is affected by the attitudes the parents or significant others have towards the child, as well as the opinions and attitudes they have towards themselves. The child's self-concept is connected to how the parents regard the child. If a child has received support, praise and validation while growing up, if it felt the parents were affectionate, gentle, understanding, encouraged the child and set challenges, validated them, then the child develops into a person with high self-esteem. In the case of the child missing affection and care, if the parents repeatedly mocked, humiliated, criticized or ignored it, or if their relationship was cold and abusive, the child develops a negative self-image and low self-esteem (Humphreys, 2002; Jourard and Remy, 1955). Parents who have high self-esteem encourage their children to also value themselves, be proud of themselves and trust themselves (Humphreys, 2002).

High self-esteem

People with high self-esteem appreciate themselves for who they are. They are content with themselves, feel worthy of respect and do not doubt themselves. Criticism encourages them to take on problems and these do not harm them. People with high self-esteem believe they are good at many things and efficiently cope with disappointments and failures (Brown, 1999). They are also more successful than individuals with low self-esteem (Starbek Potočan, 2005). They have more positive personality traits, positive expectations, are more sure of their abilities and actions and are better at carrying out assignments. They are more persistent in pursuing their goals, even if they face failure. They adapt more easily, experience more positive emotions and have less anxiety than individuals with low self-esteem. They have a clear, consistent and stable self-image, better techniques of coping and self-regulation and healthier interpersonal relationships. They are able to express their opinions very clearly, are not too susceptible to criticism, and they trust their perception and thinking. They think of themselves as important, worthy of respect and capable of influencing others. They are optimistic and they expect success (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger and Vohs, 2003; Burns, 1979).

High self-esteem is regarded as the epitome of good health, but some authors warned about its negative consequences. Baumeister and colleagues (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger and Vohs, 2003) believed that individuals with high self-esteem also have more characteristic aggressive tendencies, which can be harmful to others.

Low self-esteem

Low self-esteem concerns the maintaining of a negative opinion of oneself and a negative self-image. Environment usually plays a key role in influencing persons with low self-esteem. Their behaviour is varying and inconsistent. These people often present a false image of themselves, which causes tension and anxiety. Research has shown that people who feel less worthy, capable and successful, have more anxiety. People with low self-esteem are also more sensitive and susceptible to information that increases their negative self-image. The feelings of being worthless and inefficient usually cause emotional as well as physical isolation from others, which can in turn lead to even greater feelings of fear and anxiety (Lamovec, 1994). Adolescents with low self-esteem

are characterised by being more conformist and more easily led, because they have a tendency to please others (Rice, 1998).

Also characteristic for persons with low self-esteem are (Humphreys, 2002): relationship problems, inability to establish close and meaningful relationships, manipulative and possessive couple relationships, psychological isolation and the resulting feeling of loneliness, a feeling of being watched, feeling inappropriate, inadequate, fear, negative thinking and negative self-image, constant seeking of validation from others, lack of initiative and decisiveness, being introverted, inability with simple communication, submissiveness and fear of rejection, feeling of guilt, inflexibility, denial.

Research hypotheses

Self-esteem is therefore an important dimension of the worth of the self, which influences the individual's way of living, his actions, relationship to himself, relationship to his loved ones and his surroundings. The purpose and goal of this study was to determine the connection between an individual's self-esteem and infidelity in a couple relationship. Our research question was: Are there differences in self-esteem between groups with differing experiences of infidelity?

For that purpose, we formed two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who have been unfaithful in a relationship have lower self-esteem than individuals who have not been unfaithful.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals who have been cheated on in a relationship have lower self-esteem than individuals who have not been cheated on.

Method

Participants

296 participants took part in the study ($M = 29$ years, $SD = 8.89$), consisting of 65 males (24% of sample) and 205 females (76% of sample). Participants were adults, who were at the time involved in a relationship or had been in the past. Inclusion factors were: age of participant 18 years or more, the experience of being in a relationship.

We used the method of snowball sampling. The questionnaire was distributed among users of internet social media (forums, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter). Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, we only included questions about gender and age in the questionnaire, omitting any other demographic questions in order to obtain credible answers.

Instruments

1. The questionnaire: it included general questions about gender, age, infidelity, causes of infidelity etc. (Kozina, 2013, 2015).
2. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale RSES (Rosenberg, 1965 in Zeigler-Hill, 2006): the Slovenian adaptation of the scale was used (Avsec, 2007). The scale consists of 10 items, five of which were expressed in a positive and

five in a negative form. This instrument is highly reliable. The value of Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 (Cusatis and Shannon, 1996), 0.82 (Glindemann, Geller and Fortney, 1999) and 0.83 for the Slovenian population (Marčič, 2006). Avsec (2007) mentioned a somewhat lower coefficient ($\alpha = 0.81$) for a Slovenian sample.

Procedure

The data for our study was gathered using a questionnaire, in which were written instructions and inclusion factors. The participants were informed of the confidentiality of their answers. The gathering of data lasted for four months, from November 2011 to March 2012.

The questionnaire was assembled in electronic form and published on various forums that pertain to matters dealing with interpersonal relationships. It was also distributed through various e-mail addresses, mailing lists and social media. The protocol of the study was inspected and verified by the Commission for Medical Ethics of the Republic of Slovenia on 28th February 2011 (no. 90/03/11).

Infidelity in a relationship was determined using two questions: (1) »Have you ever been unfaithful in a couple relationship?« and (2) »Have you ever been cheated on in a couple relationship?« We divided the participants into three groups. Based on their answers:

- Unfaithful (answered first question with YES)
- Cheated on (answered second question with YES)
- No experience with infidelity (answered both questions with NO)

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale RSES (Rosenberg, 1965 in Zeigler-Hill, 2006) was used and scored as a whole. The participants evaluated the items on a Likert type scale from 1 (completely true) to 4 (completely false). A high score indicates high self-esteem, while a low score indicates low self-esteem

Results

Descriptive analysis was used to describe the participants' pattern and determine their experiences with infidelity. For determining the correlation between infidelity and self-esteem a nonparametric test was used, namely the Kruskal-Wallis test, after the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of the normality of frequency distribution had shown the distribution as not normal ($d < 0.05$). Groups that showed statistical significance were also put through the Mann-Whitney U test (Corder and Foreman, 2009), with which we checked the variations between the average values of the individual groups.

The participants have been divided into three groups, based on their responses regarding infidelity: the unfaithful, cheated on and those without any experience of infidelity. Of the 296 participants, 92 (31.1%) admitted to being *unfaithful* in their relationships, 96 (32.4%) had been *cheated on*, 108 (36.5%) had *no experience with infidelity*. None of the participants answered both questions with YES, which came as a surprise

to us. We attribute this to the sensitive nature of the subject and possibly even untrue answers from participants, even though they had been guaranteed anonymity.

The group with no experience of infidelity has the highest mean and median in self-esteem, but the group of unfaithful and cheated were very similar (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in self-esteem between the groups with various experiences of infidelity – descriptive statistics

Groups with various experiences of infidelity	Mean	N	SD	Med
Unfaithful	34.37	92	5.85	34
Cheated on	34.69	96	6.10	34
No experience with infidelity	36.23	108	4.62	37
total	35.15	296	5.56	35

Legend:

N = Numerus

SD = Standard Deviation

Med = Mediana

We intended to find out whether there were any differences between the defined groups with various experiences of infidelity and their self-esteem. We tested this using the Kruskal-Wallis test, because the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of the normality of frequency distribution had shown the distribution as not normal (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences in self-esteem between the groups with various experiences of infidelity – Kruskal-Wallis test

chi-squared	6.864
g	2
p	0.032

Legend:

g = degrees of freedom

p = p-value or probability value

Self-esteem varies in a statistically significant way, according to the defined groups (unfaithful, cheated on and no experience with infidelity). The Mann-Whitney U-test was used to determine the differences between the groups with various experiences of infidelity. The results have shown a statistically significant difference between *the unfaithful* group and the *no experience with infidelity* group, which confirms hypothesis 1. The group *with no experience of infidelity* has a higher mean rank. Furthermore, the results have not shown a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between the group with *no experience of infidelity* and the *cheated on* group, which disconfirms hypothesis 2. There was also no statistically significant difference between the *cheated on* and *unfaithful* group (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences in self-esteem between the groups with various experiences of infidelity – Mann-Whitney test

		self-esteem
Comparison of unfaithful – cheated on	U	4066.5
	p	0.347
	r	0.069
Comparison of unfaithful – no experience with infidelity	U	3959.5
	p	0.013
	r	0.175
Comparison of cheated on – no experience with infidelity	U	4441.5
	p	0.077
	r	0.124

Legend:

U = Mann-Whitney U-test

p = *p*-value or probability value

r = effect size

We have also tested the reliability of the whole questionnaire. The value of Cronbach's alpha was 0.85, indicating high reliability of the questionnaire (Kozina, 2013).

Discussion

Infidelity is one of the more common, as well as difficult and painful, problems in a relationship. Experts have often treated it in a very narrow way, focusing solely on the affair and not taking into account other, broader aspects, which may have led to infidelity in a relationship (Kozina, 2013).

Different information concerning the number of people who have cheated or have been cheated on can be found in literature. Some data has shown that the percentage of unfaithful men varies between 27 and 75%, and that of unfaithful women between 15 and 60% (Powell 2001). Infidelity is a sensitive subject and is still viewed as taboo, therefore it is hard to determine the exact percentages of unfaithful persons (Spring and Spring, 1996; Vaughan 2005).

Our study has shown that 31.1% of participants admitted to being *unfaithful* in their relationships, 32.4% have been *cheated on*, and 36.5% had *no experience with infidelity*. A study was carried out in Slovenia in 2006 that showed 78% of the participants to have been unfaithful (Seles, 2008), which points to the fact that this type of study is multifaceted and the unfaithful percentage most likely varies due to the different samples included in the studies, different moral values, cultural environment, methods and processes of research etc.

The results have shown a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between the *unfaithful* and the *no experience with infidelity* groups. Individuals with no experi-

ence of infidelity have higher self-esteem on average than those who were unfaithful. Gostečnik (2010) stated that a man who respects himself will stay true to his wife because of him, not because of her. Beach, Jouriles and O'Leary (1985) also elaborated how persons who constantly engage in affairs have very low self-esteem. Also Zeigler-Hill, Fulton and McLemore (2012) found out that men with low self-esteem perceived a greater likelihood of future infidelity in their relationships, which supports our findings. These findings provide additional support for the idea that fragile self-esteem may have consequences for the manner in which individuals perceive their relationships. Low self-esteem can therefore be a factor that contributes to infidelity in a couple relationship or it can be a consequence of infidelity, or even both of these things.

This can perhaps also be attributed to the fact that individuals with low self-esteem use infidelity to gain validation or they try to satisfy some relational needs (for love, being desirable, wanted, being important to someone) by being unfaithful. On the other hand, these very acts of infidelity can confirm and reinforce their contempt for themselves.

We have not found a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between the group *with no experience of infidelity* and the *cheated on* group in our study. Some other studies have illustrated the low self-esteem of persons who have been cheated on (Shackelford, 2001). Furthermore, Slovenian marriage and family therapists have reported low self-esteem among clients undergoing therapy due to problems with infidelity, where almost none of these clients seemed to have particularly high self-esteem (Kozina, 2013, 2016). We attribute this to the sample being non-representative, while another reason might be the untruthful answers by participants caused by the intimate nature of the subject.

This current study has certain limitations, which must be taken into account. The sample of the study was not representative, because the participants were mostly young adults ($M = 29$), so the findings cannot be applied to the whole of the Slovenian adult population. This was most likely caused by the questionnaire being distributed via web-based media (forums, mailing lists, social media), which are mostly used by younger generations. A study by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia for the year 2012 states that the most common internet users are between 16 and 34 years old (92%) (Uporaba informacijsko-komunikacijske tehnologije v Sloveniji, 2012).

In order to apply the results to the entire Slovenian population, a proportional sample would have to be acquired, taking into consideration gender, age and other demographic data. Another limitation regarding participants is that they might systematically differ from people who have decided against participating in the study. This may have affected the results.

The definition of infidelity also presented a limitation, because individuals have different personal criteria. These shortcomings could be partly dealt with by providing participants with a definition of infidelity for the purposes of the study, but this would entail the loss of valuable information, which was provided by each individual's subjective experience of infidelity.

In our study it was necessary to pay special attention to the fact that this was a sensitive subject. Individuals could be detached from their feelings, in denial of such problems or simply did not want to reveal such intimate thoughts and feelings to the researcher. Thus a participant could, consciously or subconsciously, have given false or more socially acceptable answers.

Conclusion

Research in the field of infidelity in couple relationships is demanding because we are dealing with a complex problem with different causes and consequences for the individual, couple or family. With this research into the differences in self-esteem between groups with differing experiences of infidelity, we have made a small contribution to the better understanding of the dynamics of such problems in couple relationships.

For further research we would suggest the correlation of infidelity to other psychological traits of the individual. The knowledge of these traits (self-esteem of the individual, family environment, attachment type, traumatic experiences in the immediate family etc.), different types of infidelity, dynamics and reasons for the occurrence of infidelity, can be crucial for a good therapeutic process (Kozina, 2013).

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