

cheating hearts

by **deborah carr**

Tiger Woods probably let out a huge sigh of relief in March 2010, when the tabloids leaked that motorcycle aficionado and reality TV star Jesse James had been cheating on his wife, Academy Award-winning actress Sandra Bullock. For a brief moment, Tiger was no longer the most reviled man in America. Entertainment reporters and bloggers were flabbergasted that anyone would cheat on America's sweetheart Bullock—let alone with a string of vastly less glamorous strippers and barmaids.

The nation's moral indignation was déjà vu all over again. Just months earlier, Woods's string of tawdry affairs had dominated headlines, and an outraged public asked how the gifted golfer could betray his beautiful young wife and two adorable children. And before Woods, South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford humiliated his dignified wife Jenny by "hiking the Appalachian Trail" with his Argentine mistress. Jenny Sanford was in good company, joining Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Edwards, and Silda Spitzer in the ranks of wronged political wives.

These high-visibility incidents of marital infidelity raise an important question: has cheating become more common in this era of personal cell phones, clandestine text messaging, and Facebook "friending"? If so, how many Americans stray from their spouses? And who's doing the cheating? Answers to these questions are notoriously difficult to find. Experts agree that marital infidelity is under-reported in surveys, as study participants feel pressure to conceal this socially undesirable behavior. Still, analyses of survey data can provide some insights into the social and demographic correlates of infidelity and how our attitudes toward them have changed over time.

The General Social Survey (GSS), a large, nationally representative survey of

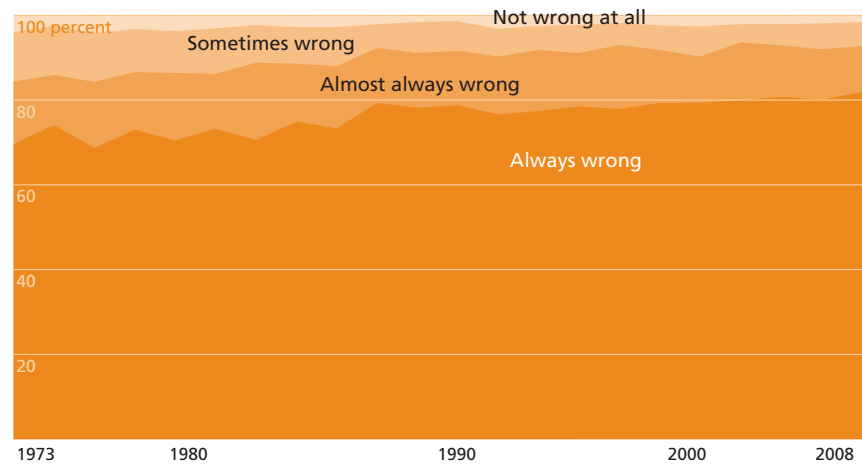
Americans, has collected data on attitudes towards marital infidelity since 1973 and on infidelity experiences since 1991. The vast majority of Americans believe that "having sexual relations with someone other than one's spouse" is wrong: about 80 percent say it's "always wrong" and about 11 percent believe it's "almost always" wrong. The proportion with more flexible views on infidelity—those who rate cheating as

"sometimes" or "not at all" wrong—has declined steadily since the years of the sexual revolution in the early and mid-1970s. While nearly 16 percent endorsed such beliefs in 1973, the proportion was less than half that in 2008.

While attitudes toward infidelity have become less forgiving in recent decades, self-reported rates of one's own infidelity have remained very steady over time—with a significantly higher pro-

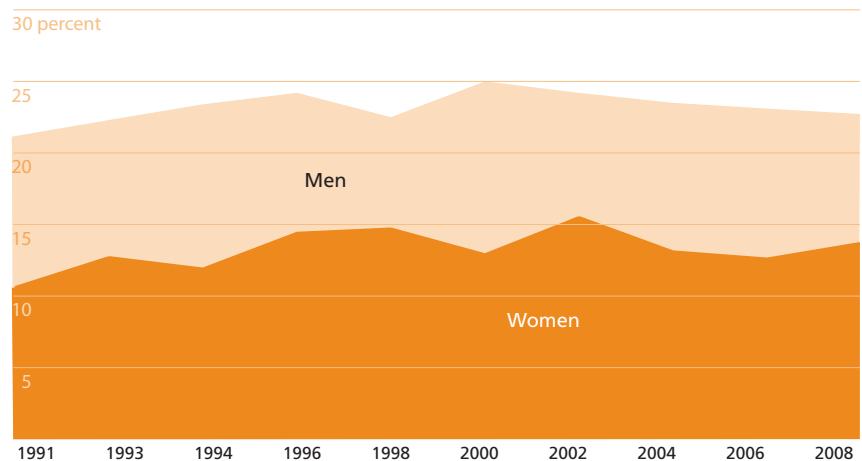
Attitudes about marital infidelity

A married person having sexual relations with someone other than their spouse is...



Source: General Social Survey (data collected biennially)

Ever-married individuals reporting cheating on their spouse



Source: General Social Survey (data collected biennially)

portion of men than women acknowledging that they've strayed. The proportion of ever-married men who admit that they "ever had sex with someone other than their spouse while married" has wavered between 20 and 25 percent over the past twenty years, while the rates for women have fluctuated between 10 and 15 percent.

Closer inspection of the GSS data shows that not all people are equally likely to cheat (or at least, to own up to it in a survey), nor are all people equally likely to condemn infidelity in others. Overall, women are less likely to cheat and to approve of marital infidelity. However, analyses of recent GSS data (from 2000-2008 only) reveal that the gender divide diminishes greatly among more recent birth cohorts. Among persons age 65 and older, women are less than half as likely as men to report that they have ever cheated (9.5 versus 25 percent), yet women ages 18 to 24 women are 81 percent as likely as their male peers to stray (12.9 versus 15.9 percent).

Race and education also are associated with infidelity attitudes and behaviors. Blacks are more likely than

Latinos, who in turn are more likely than non-Hispanic whites, to both acknowledge that they have been unfaithful and to rate infidelity as "always" wrong. The relationship between education and infidelity is complex. As educational attainment increases, the proportion who say marital infidelity is "always wrong" declines steadily (albeit slightly). How-

far more accepting attitudes toward infidelity: of those who admit to having an affair, just 64 percent say marital infidelity is always wrong, and 16 percent say it is not always or never wrong. By contrast, 86 percent of persons who describe themselves as faithful spouses say infidelity is always wrong (and just 4.7 say it is sometimes or not at all

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ever, when it comes to behavior, education matters differently for men and women. Data reveal that men with college or post-college education are far less likely than their less-educated peers to cheat. For women, by contrast, rates vary only slightly by educational attainment, with high school drop-outs most likely to have strayed.

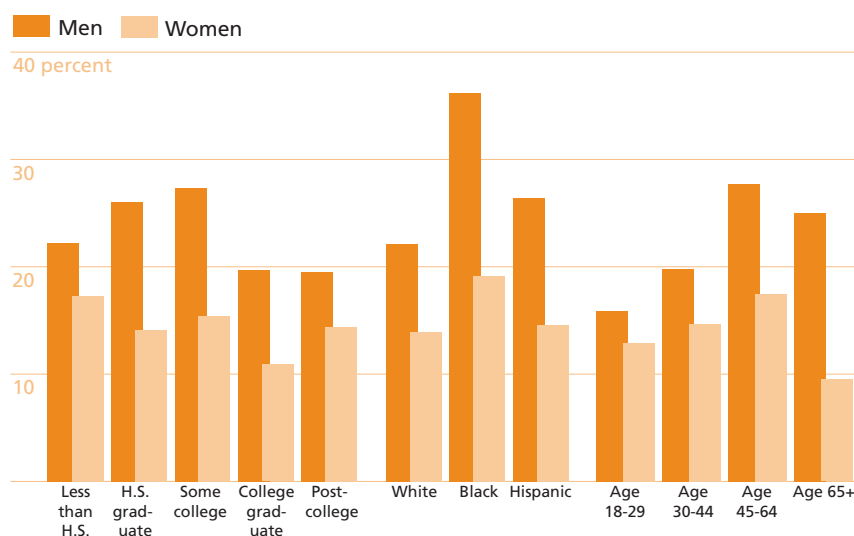
Not surprisingly, the most powerful correlate of attitudes toward fidelity is one's own marital experiences. Those who have cheated on their spouse report

wrong). Divorced or separated people also report far more forgiving attitudes toward infidelity than do their currently married or widowed counterparts. These patterns are consistent with classic "cognitive dissonance" theories, in which people are thought to bring their attitudes in line with their behavior so as not to experience distressing feelings of personal inconsistency.

Survey data and incendiary tabloid journalism notwithstanding, adultery is nothing new. Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage: A History*, recently spoke at the annual meeting of the Council on Contemporary Families. Coontz noted that infidelity is far less common today than in the past, when aristocratic married men were presumed to have extra-marital affairs, and when levels of prostitution and venereal disease were high. What has changed are perceptions of what marriage should be. Contemporary marriages based on love and companionship—rather than economic necessity—are presumed to be immune to the threats of infidelity. When a "soul mate" strays, it carries an especially painful and shocking emotional zing.

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Ever-married individuals reporting cheating on their spouse



Source: General Social Survey 2000-2008

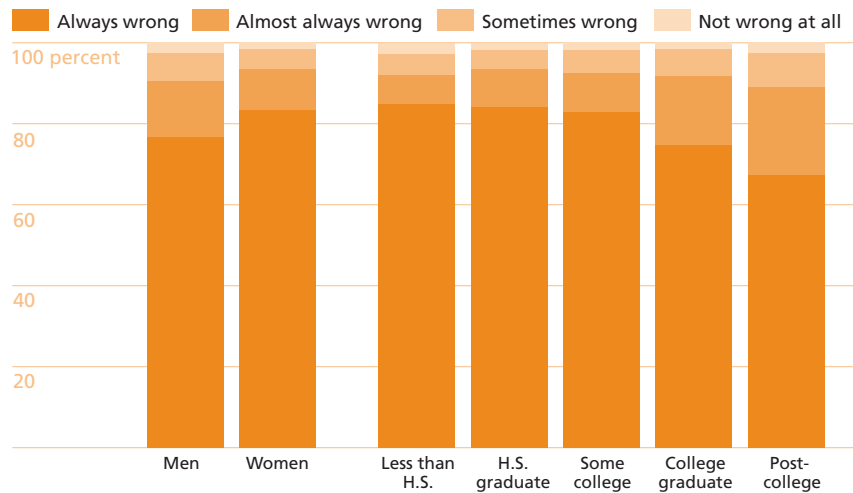
trends

social change has altered the landscape of marital (in)idelity: the growing economic and social power of women. In past decades, married women who were economically dependent on their spouses would have to turn a blind eye to their husbands' indiscretions. Today, many women have the economic resources to leave a philanderer. And, it's no longer husbands who bear sole responsibility for home-wrecking. As more women work outside the home and earn their own income, there's less at stake for them if they are caught cheating. Technological advances, the prevalence of business travel, and the ubiquity of personal cell phones (rather than a shared, landline telephone sitting in the kitchen or married couple's bedroom) allow more men and women to hide their private exploits from their family members.

Marital infidelity is as old as marriage itself, and analysts don't see it disappearing in the future. The critical question is how couples adjust to

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Source: General Social Survey 2000-2008

betrayal. Demographers have documented that infidelity (along with a couple's financial troubles) are among the strongest predictors of divorce. However, data now show that younger cohorts have more flexible views toward infidelity than their older counterparts and that advanced education is associated with

more open-minded views toward infidelity. In the coming decades, a spousal betrayal may not necessarily sound the death knell for a marriage.

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Parks's role in the legendary Montgomery Bus Boycott. But it has another layer of meaning for anyone familiar with Guyton's work and with Detroit history. "Rosa Parks Boulevard" (the sign's original site) is the name currently given to the former 12th Street, where the infamous July 1967 Detroit civil disturbances began. It was an attempt by municipal officials to make amends by rebranding the neighborhood.... The city of Detroit is even more devastated now than it was then, so the battered sign serves as a grim reminder of promises unfulfilled.

Indeed, Guyton's larger enterprise, the Heidelberg Project, an urban street installation of abandoned houses painted with bright colors and festooned with a panoply of castoffs, continues to draw attention to the virtual annihilation of the once vibrant Motor City brought on by disinvestment, racism, and other social calamities....

The social effects of that destruction and its implications for the rest of America with the decline of the working class—epitomized above all by the unionized auto workers who gave Detroit one

of the highest standards of living in the nation for blue-collar families—serve as the backdrop for the film *Gran Torino*, also featured in the same issue of *Contexts* and erroneously reported as being set in a Detroit suburb when it takes place primarily in the city itself.

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