

Alicia M. Walker

**Chasing Masculinity: Men, Validation, and Infidelity**

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804 words

Infidelity occupies an unusual space in personal life. While commonplace to the point of ubiquity, it remains an almost universally condemned sexual practice. Despite a recent hardening of attitudes towards infidelity, there is little sociological research on the subject, which is often regarded as a private matter whose covert nature is difficult to capture with sociological methods. Sociology has in fact a lot to offer the study of infidelity, which reveals much about our wider expectations of relationships and the position of the sexual couple at the centre of personal life. In *Chasing Masculinity*, a US-based study of men's infidelity, author Alicia Walker provides a valuable contribution to our limited understanding of affairs, and why men have them.

Walker's research is based on email interviews with 46 heterosexual married men aged 27-70, who were active *Ashley Madison* users. *Ashley Madison* is an online 'married dating' site that offers to match users to potential affair partners (tagline: 'Life is short, have an affair'). The site is best known for a 2015 hack in which users' personal details were leaked with often catastrophic consequences, including two reported suicides. The issues with studying such a hard-to-reach group as men engaged in affairs justifies the use of the site for recruitment of participants. Participants were interviewed over email in order to protect their privacy, although this provides a partial picture with limited detail about the texture of either the men's affairs or their marriages. What the book does illuminate is men's motivations for seeking out affairs, or 'outside partnerships', and the ways in which masculinity shapes men's emotional needs and intimate relationships. Walker challenges the stereotype of male infidelity as sexually motivated, with the men here driven primarily by emotional intimacy and friendship.

Walker remains sympathetic to the men she interviewed, while gently exposing their complaints about marriages that appear entrenched in gender inequality. Infidelity is justified by participants when their wives don't thank them for 'helping' with household chores and childcare. *Chasing Masculinity* tells us as much about marriage as infidelity; the pressure placed on a relationship that has to fulfil all intimate roles, the disappointment and adjustment required in long term relationships, the impact of children and domestic life on passion, and the difficulty of adjusting expectations to a prosaic reality. The participants relied on their partners to provide what Walker terms 'relational management', or attending to their emotional needs, including praise, validation and attention. They viewed themselves in opposition to their nagging wives, resentful of the demands of family life, and refusing to take responsibility for state of their marriages. An important finding of the book is that men are more motivated to seek outside partners by the loss of emotional intimacy than sexless marriages. Outside partnerships provided the ego-boost and validation that their marriages did not. This contrasts with Walker's earlier research on female *Ashley Madison* users, who were motivated by sexual pleasure, whereas the men here lack emotionally close same sex

friendships, and seek an outside partner to confide in. Affairs provide what Walker terms the 'infidelity workaround', with participants seeking outside partnerships in order to preserve their marriages and avoid divorce.

One of the most revealing themes of the book is the fragile sense of masculinity most of the men possess, leading them to seek external validation in the form of affairs. Walker's participants experienced tremendous injury as a result of their partners' loss of interest in them, leading them to 'outsource' emotional connection and sex. For these men there was a deep sense of time passing, and an attempt to relive youth while they were still able, with affairs often embarked on in mid-life. Sex was driven by the need to receive praise and feel desired, with the ability to give sexual pleasure a type of 'compensatory masculinity' that makes up for other perceived shortcomings. Here Walker captures the poignancy of infidelity, as an attempt to cheat mortality, and soothe wounded masculine pride. While Walker views affairs as a response to a disappointing marriage, Esther Perel (2017) notes that those engaging in infidelity are often turning away from the people they have become, rather than their partners. There is an element of this in the testimony of these men, who seem to be seeking alternate versions of themselves in the eyes of their outside partners.

Beyond its contribution to sociological understanding of infidelity, *Chasing Masculinity* provides a fascinating insight into intimate relationships and masculinity. Walker gives an important account, based on a sensitive and nuanced study, that challenges taken-for-granted and reductive assumptions about why men cheat. It provides a valuable resource to sociologists of personal life and masculinity, those working in relationship counselling, and anyone wanting to know more about the secret world of *Ashley Madison*.

Perel, Esther (2017) *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*. New York: Harper Collins.