

cybercheating

What do people perceive to be infidelity in online relationships? Dr Monica Whitty explains why counsellors need to be aware of the new diversity in relationships

AS far back as November 2001, *CPJ* published an article (Anthony, 2001) describing a client's experience of her counsellor being unable to take seriously a non-physical relationship she had with a man over the Internet. With the advent of websites such as friendsreunited.co.uk (to rediscover past relationships, most infamously old school romances), and gaydar.co.uk (linking like-minded gay men and women), the potential for offline established relationships to be threatened by emotional or physical infidelity has increased. As a counsellor with an online presence, I find that an increasing number of potential clients are seeking an online therapist because they believe that he or she will be better able to empathise with the concept of the emotional damage such a relationship can cause.

Intense online relationships, whether romantic or sexual, are quite usual, and yet are still considered as 'not real' by many practitioners who are unfamiliar with cyberspace. Dr Monica Whitty is a renowned expert in the concepts of how these diverse relationships impact on a client's emotional health, and I invited her to share some of her research findings on the topic. Kate Anthony

Playing at love on the Internet can be potentially therapeutic. Cyberspace is known to be a place where individuals can feel less inhibited and safer to flirt and develop relationships (Whitty, 2003; Whitty & Carr, 2003).^{1,2} It is a place where diverse relationships can be developed. However, we cannot dismiss the notion that engaging in intimate relationships online can also have a negative effect on an individual's life offline. If one is already in a relationship offline, then are acts, such as cybersex, hot chatting, emotional disclosure or viewing pornography acts of infidelity? This short paper discusses this notion (see Whitty, 2003, Whitty, in press, Whitty & Carr, in press, for a more detailed discussion).³⁻⁵

Online versus offline

It is generally taken for granted by heterosexual couples that engaging in an intimate relationship with someone of the opposite sex, especially one involving sexual activity, is unacceptable and a breach of the rules of the relationship. Research has found that sexual infidelity is one of the most common causes of marital break-ups. Pittman and Wagers (1995)⁶ found, in their clinical experience, more than 90 per cent of divorces were attributed to sexual infidelity.

While individuals might have scripts available to them as to what are acceptable face-to-face interactions with others, while still maintaining a romantic relationship, given the nature and the newness of the Internet, the rules are yet to be clearly established as to what are acceptable online encounters. In a recent study in which I considered people's attitudes towards online infidelity, I found that individuals do consider some interactions as acts of betrayal (Whitty, 2003).³ It revealed three main components of infidelity: sexual, emotional and pornography. Sexual acts online included such behaviours as cybersex (when two or more individuals use the Internet as a medium to engage in discourses about sexual fantasies; the dialogue is typically accompanied by sexual self-stimulation) and 'hotchatting' (when two or more individuals engage in discourses that move beyond light-hearted flirting), and emotional acts included disclosing intimate information to a significant other. Interestingly, cybersex was perceived as almost equally threatening to offline sexual intercourse. Moreover, sexual acts (online and

offline) were seen to pose a greater threat than other acts, such as viewing pornography. It is not so surprising that people perceived these acts to be acts of betrayal when we consider that research on offline infidelity has revealed that couples often expect both sexual and mental exclusivity (Yarab, Sensibaugh & Allgeier, 1998).⁷

Moreover, as Julie Fitness (2001)⁸ contends: 'Essentially, betrayal means that one party in a relationship acts in a way that favours his or her own interests at the expense of the other party's interests. In one sense, this behaviour implies that the betrayer regards his or her needs as more important than the needs of the partner in the relationship. In a deeper sense, however, betrayal sends an ominous signal about how little the betrayer cares about, or values, his or her relationship with the betrayed partner. Hence, it is not merely the act itself that is the betrayal, but the energy being diverted to another significant other - energy and time that the partner perceives should be given to them.'

Fuzzy boundaries

In saying this, my work has also suggested that what is acceptable behaviour online is not that clear cut. I found that when presented with a hypothetical scenario of a partner potentially cheating online, not all participants were convinced that this was 'real' betrayal (Whitty, in press).⁴ In the study referred to here, participants were given one of two versions of a story-completion task based on a task devised about traditional offline infidelity by Kitzingner and Powell (1995):⁹

Version A: Mark and Jennifer have been going out for over a year. Then Mark realises that Jennifer has developed a relationship with someone else over the Internet...

Version B: Jennifer and Mark have been going out for over a year. Then Jennifer realises that Mark has developed a relationship with someone else over the Internet...

While Kitzingner and Powell found that 90 per cent of their sample interpreted their cue story, which was developed in respect of offline infidelity, to be an act of sexual involvement, this was not the case in this particular study. While all the participants understood this to be a dilemma about infidelity, some were divided as to whether the betrayer believed they were committing an act of infidelity, while others wrote that the partner was not certain they had been betrayed. Moreover, when participants interpreted the cue story as one about sexual involvement, this was not necessarily about a sexual relationship, but in many cases was an emotional involvement.

Where participants believed this was not a case of infidelity, the reasons given were as follows:

- the interaction was 'just a friendship';
- the interaction was merely flirtation or fun;
- the relationship was with an object (computer) in virtual space, rather than a real human being;
- the interaction was with two people who had never met and did not ever intend to meet;
- it could not be infidelity, as there was no physical sex taking place.

This suggests there is something different about the relationships we form online and can be partly attributed to some people's beliefs that these are not completely real.

A seductive appeal

Although the motivations for engaging acts of betrayal online might be the same as the reasons offline, we have previously argued that the Internet might be even more of an appealing place to seek out affairs in spite of the absence of physical sex (Whitty & Carr, in press)⁵ for several reasons, including:

- drawing from Melanie Klein's work, we have suggested that the online relationship can become idealised through the process of splitting. Hence, it might be easier to idealise an individual online;
- drawing from Bollas' work on object relations theory, we believe that cyberspace presents more radical opportunities to find the perfect object (individual);
- cyberspace is potentially a safer space to play at love - and people may perceive that it is less likely they will be caught out. As Cooper (1998)¹⁰ contends, three factors make the Internet a powerful medium for online sexual activities: access, affordability and anonymity. These aspects suggest that cyberspace is not only a different place for infidelity but possibly a more attractive space.

Conclusion

Despite the lack of real bodies, online affairs can have an impact on the offline relationship. Individuals might be more able to rationalise their betrayal, but this does not always make it any less severe or painful. Given the seductive appeal of the Internet, it is possible that an online relationship is even more damaging to an offline one.

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