

# THE BIOLOGY AND ECONOMICS OF SEXUAL INFIDELITY

Donald Cox  
Department of Economics  
Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
[donald.cox@bc.edu](mailto:donald.cox@bc.edu)  
(617) 332-7040

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**Abstract.** Why might spouses cheat on one another? How might demographic or economic variables be implicated in sexual infidelity? Does it matter whether the cheating spouse in question is male or female? Answers to these questions are highly pertinent to our understanding of the economics of the family. For instance, one of the most devastating economic calamities to befall a family—especially mothers and children—is divorce; and a leading correlated of divorce is sexual infidelity. In addition, the otherwise compelling analogy between worker-firm matches and spousal matches that is the hallmark of standard models of marital matching can become strained once the possibility of cheating enters the picture. Though infidelity happens, it is seldom addressed in the economics of the family. In fact, the economic literature on sexual infidelity is quite limited. In contrast, cheating plays a significant role in biological models of mating and matching. I blend insights from biology and economics in order to generate hypotheses concerning a spouses' propensity to commit infidelity. Central to this approach is the idea that spouses behave as if reproductive concerns drive behavior, and that the distinct differences in female versus male reproductive biology imply corresponding differences in the incentives, concerns and interests of male versus female spouses. For instance, since men can at least in principle produce a large number of offspring via multiple mates whereas women cannot, male cheating would be expected to be consistent with the idea of pushing at the margin of child *quantity*, while female cheating would be expected to be consistent with the idea of advancing child *quality*. I investigate hypotheses connected to sexual infidelity, using a nationally representative household survey for the United States. I find marked differences between male and female spouses, partners and singles with respect to both attitudes and behavior regarding sexual behavior and infidelity. These patterns are consistent with a “bio-founded” economic model of the family that gives a prominent role to the exigencies of reproductive biology. Such findings strongly suggest enormous potential of biological thinking for sharpening predictions of economic models of matching, mating, marriage and divorce.

**Keywords:** Evolutionary biology; Hamilton's rule; marriage; divorce; intergenerational transfers; paternity; grandparents

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