The Oral Sex Void:  
When There’s Not Enough at Home

Leanna Wolfe, Ph.D.

Abstract

Based on an Internet survey of 5,711 respondents, more than half of married/attached men believe that other couples are having more oral sex than they are and 81.1% have addressed or would consider addressing this absence through an affair. Contrary to conventional wisdom, an oral sex void is rarely filled by visiting sex workers or prostitutes; rather 33.7% of males contend that they would find a secret lover, while just 7.5% would pay for the oral sex they are not receiving at home. Participants in the survey included subscribers to Ashleymadison.com, an Internet dating site for married people, and a similarly-situated control group (married and/or attached midlife couples) with the highest concentration of women between 35 and 49 (56.5%) and the highest concentration of men between 40 and 59 (58%). Males on the Ashleymadison.com site were twice as likely as the control group males to consider pursuing a secret affair (35.6% vs. 17%) if a spouse/partner refused to participate in oral sex. Moreover, Ashleymadison.com males were more likely to pursue oral sex through an affair (48.4%) or to fantasize about having one (35.6%) than the control group where 38.7% report having had affairs and less than a quarter (21.9%) would consider having one.

While the males from all sources had parallel responses, the Ashleymadison.com females presented as a unique breed. Comprising 34.4% of the Ashleymadison.com sample, they reported the lowest rates of monogamy when compared to the males on the site (29% vs. 47%), the highest rates for current secret lovers (45.9% vs. 25.9%) and had the highest rate of oral sex infidelity (54.5%). When compared to the control group females, they were dramatically less happy in their home relationships, with 58.9% vs. 33.8% reporting “not happy.” While two-thirds of the Ashleymadison.com men did not have outside lovers and appear to be using the site to explore the possibility of having an affair, the women on the site are seasoned in the world of infidelity, using the site as a tool for sustaining themselves in their home relationships.

Introduction

Sexual affairs as a means of accessing attention, excitement and more, better and different kinds of eroticism (Wolfe, 2009) appear to be on the rise. While 60% of married men admit to engaging in an extra-marital affair at some time in their lives (Atwood and Schwartz, 2002), rates for infidelity in America according to the “Lust, Love and Loyalty Survey” (Frederick, D. and Lever, J., 2007) that polled 70,000 respondents are far lower with 28% of men and 18% of women admitting participation. Interestingly, these respondents believe that 44% of males and 36% of females engage in cheating; fueled no doubt by American media’s obsession with providing full coverage of what was once private
and personal. Still, due to the ease of conducting anonymous Internet surveys vs. the in-person interviews of yesteryear, today’s reported rates are up six-fold from the 1997 rates of 5% for males and 3% for females. Nonetheless, according to a January 1998 Time-CNN poll, 50% of Americans then contended that President Clinton’s adultery made his moral standard “about the same as the average married man.”

American media is forever sensationalizing the latest male celebrities whose infidelities have become public information. And new media, e.g. the Internet, texting and cell phone apps, has become the new bastion for extra-pair sexploration. “Sex” is the number-one Internet search term and 25% of all Internet searches are porn-related. Commenting on New York Congressman Anthony Weiner sexting a photograph of his thinly veiled crotch, New York Times columnist Mark Oppenheimer quips, “With his online flirtations and soft-porn photos, he did what a lot of us might do if we were lonely and determined to not really cheat.”

Certainly the Western cultural standard of straight-jacketed monogamy is not how humans evolved or how the vast numbers of contemporary cultures live. Across the world, 85% of cultures endorse polygamy—at least for the upper-crust 20% of men who can afford the expense of maintaining multiple wives and geometrically-expanded families. In the Western world we make no such exceptions in our till-death-do-us-part-marriages and thus cheating in our hearts (President Jimmy Carter), cyber cheating (Congressman Weiner), cheating with just oral sex (President Bill Clinton), cheating with a high-priced call girl (New York Governor Elliot Spitzer) and fathering extra-marital love children (Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Reverend Jesse Jackson and presidential candidate John Edwards) have all become part of the national (media-fueled) conversation. While many non-Western societies celebrate men with multiple wives and many children, the Western world imposes a morality that growing numbers of adults (both male and female) struggle with.

The Ashleymadison.com website inhabits the intersection of married people who seek an escape from boredom, routine sex and being taken for granted within the widening acceptance of “safe-ish” cheating (83% of divorces in the United States are not blamed on infidelity) and user-friendly new media including Internet dating and texting. Noel Biderman, president and founder, invited Sexologist Dr. Leanna Wolfe to partner to explore the motivation and dynamics of infidelity. Their research yielded some surprising findings in regards to the place of oral sex amongst those seeking extra-pair partners. Despite its taboo nature in Ancient Rome, Sub-Saharan Africa and amongst contemporary Christian and Islamic religious authorities, instructions for performing good fellatio and cunnilingus abound on the Internet with a recent Google search netting 2,780,000 hits for the former and 1,430,000 hits for the latter. The survey we conducted confirmed that it is widely desired (97.8% of our male respondents participate) and that receiving it from an extra-pair lover was far-preferred by the Ashleymadison.com cohort males (35.6%) versus paying for it (7.7%).

Perhaps oral sex’s controversial history explains the contemporary dilemma. Ancient Romans regarded it as an act of submission to perform fellatio on a lower-status person; however a statesman would experience no humiliation receiving the act. While the 1970s feminist movement may have led to a renegotiation of gender relations wherein males must do more than pump and receive fellatio, our 3,612 male respondents might nonetheless sign onto the Internet and dream...

**Methods and Data Collection**

A 32-question Internet survey titled, “Sex and Relationship Happiness Survey,” was completed by 5,711 respondents between August 23, 2010 and May 8, 2011. A link from the Ashleymadison.com website garnered 4,692 respondents between March 31, 2011 and May 8, 2011. This site facilitates
married and partnered individuals to engage similarly-situated women and men to pursue extra-relationship/marital affairs. A control group of married/partnered individuals, who found out about the survey through other means, (n. 1,029) engaged the survey between August 23, 2010 and May 8, 2011. The Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco, California provided the Institutional Review Board. The survey was designed and conducted by Leanna Wolfe Ph.D., owner of Dr. Leanna Research in Los Angeles, California.

The control group, like the Ashleymadison.com cohort, was comfortable engaging sexual topics on the Internet. The survey queried about sexual practices including frequency of sexual activity with the home partner, the presence of or interest in engaging extra-pair partners as well as the conditions under which a sexual affair might be pursued. Basic demographic data including age, gender and sexual orientation were gathered. The control group accessed the survey through links on Dr. Leanna Wolfe’s websites, www.drleannawolfe.com and www.askdrleanna.com, announcements on Facebook, the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality member discussion group, Isadora Alman’s site, www.askisadora.com website, links on www.fetlife.com, Tristan Taormino’s site, www.puckerup.com and several polyamory e-groups and discussion forums including the Loving More member’s discussion group.

Altogether 6,970 started the survey. For tabulation purposes, we focused on those who completed the survey, had current or recent relationship experience (those with no relationship experience were excluded) and who selected male or female as their gender (there were insufficient transgender respondents to include their responses in the tabulation). In order to generate a control group that matched the typical Ashleymadison.com respondent, those who selected homosexual as their sexual orientation were also excluded from this study’s tabulation.

The survey was designed and in part analyzed using Survey Monkey software. Craig Schwartz, a Los Angeles-based computer programmer, consulted on the statistical analyses using the R Statistical Software®. Participation was completely anonymous and respondents were free to terminate their participation at any point during the survey. No incentives for participation were offered. Respondents were people who are interested in and comfortable with engaging sexual topics on the Internet.

Overview of Participants

Our respondents were largely mid-life adults; 81.5% were between 30 and 59 years old with the highest concentration of women between 35 and 49 (56.5%) and the highest concentration of men between 40 and 59 (58%). Nearly two-thirds of our respondents were male (63.7%) and 80.9% were Caucasian. Our sample was primarily heterosexual with 94.7% of males and 82.8% of females selecting this as their sexual orientation. The remainder engaged in heterosexual interactions, while selecting bisexual (8.6%) and pansexual (1%) as their sexual orientation. Our respondents were largely married (69.8%) with 74.1% of males and 62.3% of females reporting this status. A majority (53.3%) had been in their current relationship/marriage between 6 and 25 years with the most frequent report (9.8%) being 20-25 years. The majority (54.9%) had had between 4-20 lifetime sexual partners, with most being between 10-14 (15.3%).
Lifetime Sexual Partners

Modal Males (ages 40-59)  Modal Females (ages 35-49)

The highest concentration for both groups was between 4-20 sexual partners, with 10-14 being the most common choice.

Weekly participation in sexual activity with one’s spouse/partner was the most reported choice both for the AshleyMadison.com respondents (15.1%) and the control group (18.3%). A larger portion of the control group reported twice weekly sex (17.9%) relative to the AshleyMadison.com respondents (12.8%).

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<th>Weekly Sexual Activity</th>
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<td>AshleyMadison.com</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
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<td>17.9%</td>
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The control group was slightly more active sexually with their spouses/home partners.

Nearly all respondents (96.4%) considered penile-vaginal intercourse to be “necessary for a successful marriage/relationship.” Oral sex was also considered important, with 85.4% contending it is necessary for a successful marriage/relationship.

Sexual Activities Regarded as Necessary for a Successful Marriage/Relationship

Penile-vaginal sexual intercourse and oral sex were considered the most important sexual activities.

When queried about the activities respondents personally engage in, penile vaginal sexual intercourse was the highest (98%), both for males and for females. Females reported higher rates of giving and receiving oral sex, and participating in mutual masturbation, anal play and BDSM. Presumably the female respondents were not the home partners/spouses of the male respondents!
More of the female respondents engage in a greater variety of sexual activities.

**Oral Sex**

The vast majority of our respondents (83.9%) reported “enjoying both giving and receiving oral sex.” Slightly more of our male respondents (97.8%) reported enjoying participating (be it giving, receiving or both giving and receiving) in oral sex than our female respondents (94.3%).

**Attitudes Toward Oral Sex**

Males enjoy participation in oral sex slightly more than females; 3% more females consider it to not be a “favorite activity.”

Altogether our survey respondents are mid-life sexually active adults who engage in regular sexual activity with their home partners/spouses. Our control group is slightly more active sexually with their home partners and a very high percentage of the study males (97.8%) enjoy oral sex.
RESULTS

We presumed there would be differences between the Ashleymadison.com cohort and our control group regarding relationship agreements and practices, being that the former would be reflecting people who are using the Internet to (potentially) engage in extra-pair sex and the latter were simply people who are comfortable engaging sexual topics on the Internet. Nonetheless, nearly half of the Ashleymadison.com male respondents (47%) report that they are currently monogamous, while a bit more than half (53.4%) of the control group males describe their relationships as monogamous. On the other hand, our Ashley female respondents were most likely to report that they have one or more secret lovers (45.9%) while out of the control group females just 17.5% reported that they have one or more secret lovers.

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<th>Relationship Agreements</th>
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<td><strong>Ashleymadison.com Cohort</strong></td>
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| Calling into question the accuracy of all previous studies done on female infidelity, Ashleymadison.com females were much more likely to have secret lovers than their male counterparts. The control group males were slightly more monogamous; they reported half as many instances of secret lovers and incidental cheating. They were twice as likely to participate in swinging and 10 times more likely to claim polyamorous (full disclosure) agreements. The control group females were much more monogamous, were half as likely to participate in incidental cheating, 2.6 times less likely to keep a secret lover and seven times more likely to identify with being polyamorous.

What we can surmise by evaluating relationship agreements amongst Ashleymadison.com males and our control group (males and females) is that monogamy is the norm for approximately 50% of these respondents. Ashley males were more robust in their disclosures regarding incidental cheating (25% vs. 11.9%) and secret lovers (25.9% vs. 12.9%) and much less likely to report a polyamorous (full disclosure) agreement (1.3% vs. 14%). The high incidence of polyamory amongst our control group reflects an artifact of our survey distribution methods wherein people who are affiliated with sexual discussion Internet sites are more likely than the general population to engage in polyamory. The Ashley females appear to be a unique group with their high incidence of secret lovers (45.9% vs. 17.5%), their relatively low engagement of monogamy (29% vs. 44.9%) and their higher involvement in
incidental cheating (17% vs. 8.4%). Parallel to the male control group, the control group females also participate in much higher rates of polyamory than the Ashley group (14.6% vs. 2.2%).

Marital/Relationship Happiness

The control group was clearly more content in their current relationship/marriage with 58.2% reporting that they are happy vs. the Ashleymadison.com cohort where just 40.8% report marital/relationship happiness.

Whereas nearly 60% of the control group males and females report happiness in their current relationships/marriages, the Ashley group females are the least happy, with 58.9% registering unhappy vs. 33.8% of the control group females. While the Ashley males also report unhappiness in their home relationships (49.2%), this assessment is statistically close to those who report happiness (45.1%). These gender differences may reflect differences in why Ashley men vs. women seek extra-pair sex. A man may be happy enough in the home relationship, but simply seek the excitement of sexual variety. Women drawn to the Ashleymadison.com site are dramatically less happy with their home partners and more likely to be involved with secret lovers. Considering the relatively high rates of monogamy for the Ashley men, these men may be engaging the site simply to explore the possibility of finding a lover. This exploration may ultimately go no further than looking at possibilities through the relatively safe vantage point of their computer screens.

Current Extra-Pair Lovers
There was little difference between control group males and Ashley males regarding the presence of an outside lover in their lives: 34.2% of the control group and 37.4% of the Ashley cohort reported such involvements. Ashley women, again, differ dramatically from Ashley males and control group females, with 63.7% reporting outside lovers vs. 40.4% of the control group females and 37.4% of the Ashley males. Perhaps the most significant standout here is how little the Ashley males differ from the control group males in their happiness in their home relationships and the rate in which they engage extra-pair lovers.

*Oral Sex*

The Consideration that Other Couples Are Having More Oral Sex

A majority of males in the survey believe that other couples are having more oral sex than they are. The Ashleymadison.com cohort believes this more strongly (59.9%) vs. the control group males (45.5%). While females were more evenly distributed among the choices (*more, about the same* and *less*), in both cohorts they were most likely to select *about the same* (42.5% control group and 40.9% Ashley). Whether or not the women in the sample are the partners of the males, they nonetheless do not experience the sort of oral sex void that the males do. Perhaps this is reflected in differences in the psycho-emotional experience of oral sex for men vs. women. For a man it may reflect a grand acceptance of his penis as it is enveloped by a willing woman, while for a woman, the oral sex experience may be experienced as a foreplay/prelude for penile vaginal intercourse or simply an effective means of reaching orgasm.
The Extra-Pair Encounter for Oral Sex

When queried regarding whether one has gone outside their home relationship for oral sex, the Ashley females were the most robust in having done so (54.5%). Nearly 40% of the control group males and over half of the control group females (52.1%) have not and would not consider it. Altogether just over 60% of the control group males have done so or would consider it, while 84% of the Ashley males consider themselves ripe for extra-pair oral sex. One thing that stands out for the Ashley males is their high rate of interest in giving it a try (35.6% vs. 21.9% for the control group males). These are men who may be using the site to fantasize about activities they may never actualize beyond their computer screens. Perhaps the assurance that willing-sounding women exist to satisfy their erotic yearnings may be enough for them.

Age appeared to be a factor for whether one had gone outside the home relationship for oral sex. Older respondents had a higher incidence of this, having had more time to do so. Amongst the Ashley cohort 54.2% of those over 40 have gone out for oral while ten percent less of respondents of 39 and younger (44.2%) have done so. As for the control group, 40% of the older respondents have gone out for oral while 31.8% of the younger respondents have done so. The most dramatic age difference we found was between the control group and the Ashley cohort regarding the consideration of venturing outside of the home relationship for oral sex. While 48.9% of the younger (<39) and 42.6% of the older (>40) control group would not do so, just 23.2% of the younger (<39) Ashley cohort and 19% of the older (>40) Ashley cohort were adverse to pursuing oral sex with an extra-pair partner.
Negotiation When the Home Partner Refuses Oral Sex

When faced with a home partner who refuses to engage in oral sex, both groups were most likely to select, “I’d let it go and focus on what my partner likes,” with the control group claiming this a bit more vehemently with 69.3% of males and 68.4% of females vs. 65.6% of Ashley males and 60.9% of Ashley females. What’s perhaps most dramatic here is the openness to addressing this void with a secret affair with 35.6% of the Ashley males and 35% of the Ashley females as well as 17% of the control group males and 15.2% of the control group females. Finding an open/polyamorous lover was a relatively popular choice for the control group (26.5% of males and 22.2% of females). The Ashley cohort also found value in this option with 14.9% of males and 14.8% of females selecting it. The traditional practice of going to a sex worker or prostitute was a dramatically low choice for both Ashley males (just 7.7%) and control group males (5.6%). Understandably very few females (Ashley 0.4% and control group 0.9%) selected hiring a sex worker for such services.

What we are seeing is a widening acceptance of the sexual affair as a means to access sexual activity (e.g. oral sex) that is no longer available or interesting in the home relationship. This affair for the Ashley cohort would most likely be secret, but possibly be an open/polyamorous arrangement. As for the control group, while less accepting of a secret affair, they were relatively likely to endorse an open/polyamorous arrangement. The conditions of both a polyamorous arrangement and an Ashleymadison.com affair would be to respect the continuance and integrity of the (ultimately important) home relationship, while safely accessing pleasure, excitement and attention from an outside lover.
The decision to go outside the primary/home relationship for erotic connections is not an easy one. In the Western world the norm is to form sexually exclusive monogamous relationships. The brain chemistry of romantic love ensures we focus intensely on a beloved for the first cycle, the attraction phase. People, who have been married for upwards of 20 years, as was typical for the participants in our survey, are well beyond this dopamine-rich attraction phase. Nonetheless, many have social, emotional and financial reasons for preserving their marriages despite diminished sexual passion. This condition very much fits the profile of many of the men in our survey—they’ve been married upwards of 25 years, they’re somewhere in mid-life, the home nest has perhaps emptied and sex with the their wife isn’t all that interesting. Nonetheless, they do engage in weekly sex with their home partner and honestly have little or no desire to end their marriages. But, they’re looking for a bit of erotic intrigue, with perhaps the opportunity to feel special again. Thus, they found our “Sex and Relationship Happiness Survey,” either through exploring the Ashleymadison.com website or on another Internet site that engages erotic discussion.

For this study we created a control group of people who found out about the survey through means other than the Ashleymadison.com site and we compared the responses from these two groups. The men from these two sources were relatively similar. About a third had a current extra-relationship lover, the majority contended that other couples were having more oral sex than they were and a miniscule amount were open to paying a sex worker/prostitute to satisfy their appetite for oral sex. They differed, too. The control group had 5% more twice-weekly sex with their home partners than the Ashley cohort did—probably not enough to avert an affair, but maybe.

A bigger difference was that the control group was far happier in their marriages/relationships (59.2% vs. 45.1%). A unique artifact of our control group was its openness to engaging in a polyamorous/open relationship vs. a secret affair as a means to address the oral sex void in their lives. Here 26.5% of the control group men would seek a polyamorous relationship while just 17% would have a secret affair, at the same time 35.6% of the Ashley cohort selected a secret affair and just 14.9% would pursue a poly/open relationship. Still, very few of our respondents (7.7% of the Ashley cohort and 5.6% of the control group) considered going to a sex worker/prostitute to satisfy their desire for oral sex. Why?

The answer may lie in the intimacy and connection a man feels in receiving oral sex from an interested partner. In the graphs below we note that men both in the Ashley cohort and the control group were similar (56.6% and 53.1%) in their appetites for “receiving good oral sex.” The control group men were about 8% more interested in “exploring with a new lover,” while 18% more of the Ashley cohort males contended that their home partner/spouse was not interested. Considering that these men were unhappy in their marriages, it certainly follows that their partners would not be likely to engage them intimately.
Reasons for Going Out of the Home Relationship for Oral Sex

Another possibility is that following the ultimate exoneration of President Bill Clinton in 1998, oral sex with a lover has gained cachet as being a normal part of contemporary adult behavior. Adoring girlfriends offer it to their new boyfriends and vice versa. And long-time married people don’t do it as much as they did when they first connected. As for our respondents’ unwillingness to pay for oral sex, several things may be in play. One possibility, which ultimately would warrant further study, may simply be the economy. In a recession, luxuries like high-priced call girls may give way to consenting married adults making do with other consenting married adults as is the edict on Ashleymadison.com. Note that Eliot Spitzer stepped down from the office of Governor of the State of New York following the media blitz detailing his encounters with a pricey call girl, while Bill Clinton finished his presidency of the United States following the discovery of his consensual oral affair with Monica Lewinsky. Bill Clinton’s popularity rose during his impeachment trial—American women fell in love with him and American men empathized. Having a sexy young intern engage them intimately was a scenario which many American men would have devoured.

Does the perception that others are having more oral sex lead men to pursue oral affairs? It appears to be one factor. The Ashleymadison.com cohort was more vehement in this observation than the control group with a 14.4 percentage point difference (59.9% vs. 45.5%). And 84% of the Ashley group had either had an oral affair or was open to having one, while 24% less of the control group (60%) were so inclined. Considering that both these cohorts have pretty much the same amount of sex at home, the answer may be more personality-based. Some men seek the excitement and attention of a secret lover (the Ashley cohort), others may find open relationship arrangements to be more manageable (some members of the control group) and others (upwards of 65% of our respondents) decide to “let it go and focus on what their partner likes.” The confluence of desire, opportunity and risk assessment can lead to an affair, but certainly not always.

Finally the Ashley women were a unique cohort. While they were the most likely to have participated in an extra-pair encounter for oral sex (54.5%), there was little difference between their cohort and the control group women regarding the perception that other couples were having more oral sex. They were the least happy in their marriages/relationships with 58.9% registering as unhappy vs. 33.8% of the control group women and 49.2% of the Ashley men. These women were much more likely to have an extra-pair lover with 63.7% claiming the affirmative vs. 37.4% of the Ashley men and
40.4% of the control group women. They were also the least likely to report that they were in monogamous relationships with just 29% claiming so vs. 47% of the Ashley men and 44.9% of the control group women. Many of the Ashley men were using the site to explore the possibility of having an affair in that about two-thirds (like their control group male counterparts) do not have outside lovers. For these men the site offers the opportunity to assess what’s out there and jump or not. Meanwhile, the Ashley women remain a unique cohort in that they are largely unhappy in their marriages and actively involved with extra-pair partners. At the very least, an absence of oral sex appears to correlate to higher infidelity.

**Limitations**

Internet surveys such as the “Sex and Relationship Happiness Survey” are wrought with limitations. Respondents may not read the questions carefully and ultimately pick inaccurate or untruthful selections. Being a single-time engagement that typically lasts about 10 minutes, their current emotional state may color their answers in an overly negative (or positive) way. Some respondents believed they were still on the Ashleymadison.com site in that they were invited to click a link to the survey as they exited the site. This may have clouded their survey taking experience in that they may have believed their answers might in some way assist them in making a connection.

**End Notes**

i The rates noted here are from Infidelityfacts.com. Sex researcher Pepper Mint, contends that, “There is a cottage industry dealing with cheating or fear of cheating, and they have a strong motive to inflate their statistics.” Mint believes current rates are unlikely to be higher than 35%. According to Kristen P. Mark, Erick Janssen, Robin R. Milhausen in their 2011 article, Infidelity in Heterosexual Couples: Demographic, Interpersonal, and Personality-Related Predictors of Extradyadic Sex In *Springer Science + Business Media*, 12, February 2011, infidelity rates for their 918 respondents with an average age of 30, hovered around 20% in their current relationship with 23.2% for males and 19.2% for females.

ii Time-CNN Poll, January 1998


References

Atwood and Schwartz, *Journal of Couples and Relationship Therapy*, Taylor and Francis, 2002


Time-CNN Poll, January 1998