Header: POWER INCREASES INFIDELITY

Power Increases Infidelity among Men and Women

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Abstract

Using a large survey among 1561 professionals, the current research examines the relationship between power and infidelity and the process underlying it. Results show that elevated power is associated with higher infidelity because of increased confidence in the ability to attract partners. This is found for both actual infidelity and intentions to engage in infidelity in the future. Importantly, gender does not moderate these results: the relationship between power and infidelity is the same for women as for men, and for the same reason. These findings suggests that the common assumption (and often found effect) that women are less likely to engage in infidelity than men is, at least partially, a reflection of traditionally gender-based differences in power that exist in society.

Each year, many powerful people fall from their pedestals because of extra-marital sexual affairs or other controversial romances. In the past five years, we have seen (in American politics alone) Senators John Ensign and John Edwards, Congressmen Mark Souder, Tim Mahoney, and Don Sherwood, World Bank President, Paul Wolfowitz, and Deputy Secretary of State, Randall Tobias, resign because of sexual liaisons. These scandals are not limited to the political realm. Businessmen, such as Hewlett-Packard's CEO Mark Hurd and Boeing's CEO Harry Stonecipher, lost their jobs because of scandals related to extramarital sexual affairs. These examples lead us to wonder: Do people in higher circles of power have more difficulty with being faithful to their partners than people who have less power? Second, if this is so, what drives this effect? And third, does power also increase infidelity among women? As the above examples suggest, power seems to mainly increase male infidelity. Yet this may also be the case because there still are much fewer women in high-power positions than men. Could it be that power actually has a similarly strong effect on female infidelity?

Infidelity

Extramarital affairs have a devastating impact on relationships. Infidelity is the most often reported reason for and the strongest predictor of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). It also increases depression and decreases general psychological health (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004). These negative health effects beg for a better understanding of the antecedents of infidelity. Infidelity is an especially serious problem when it occurs among people who hold positions of power. After all, powerful people, such as politicians or industrialists, serve as important role models and set descriptive norms for the general population to follow (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2008; Nattinger, Hoffmann, Howell-Pelz, & Goodwin, 1998).

Nonetheless, to our knowledge no research has systematically investigated the link between power and infidelity. In fact, the above observation that infidelity is more likely among the powerful may be a mere consequence of the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974); the affairs of industrialists and politicians are afforded more attention by the press than are similar affairs of ordinary people.

The first aim of the current investigation is therefore to examine the relationship between power and infidelity. We test this relationship among a large number of working professionals, across the spectrum of power—through junior employees to senior CEOs. This cross-sectional design allows us to measure actual power differences in existing organizational hierarchies and actual infidelity.

Why Power increases Infidelity

The second aim of our investigation is to determine the mechanism underlying the power–infidelity link. Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), we test three mediating explanations in one multiple mediation model.

Power increases Confidence. The first and foremost reason for why power may be associated with increased infidelity is that the psychological experience of power has transformative effects on people's psychological state (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). The powerful see the world, themselves, and other people in a different manner and they act in a different manner than do those who lack power. One important effect of power is that it leads people to behave more confidently toward potential partners. Due to the activation of the behavioral approach system, people in power generally are more confident, self-assured, assertive, and impulsive than people low in power (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Keltner et al., 2003; Lammers, Stoker, & Stapel, 2010; Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007).

Recently, researchers found that power's effect on confidence also translates to romantic behavior: Power makes people focus their attention on physically attractive others (Brady, Lord, & Hill, 2011), it increases romantic approach behavior (Wilkey, 2011), and it makes people optimistic in their perception of sexual interest in potential mates (Kunstman, 2011; Lerner, 2011). As a result, participants who hold a high-power role in a mixed-sex interaction with strangers are more confident and self-assured than participants who are given a low-power role (Gonzaga, Keltner, & Ward, 2008). This increased confidence may even translate in actual increased attractiveness; all the observed signs of confidence—longer direct eye contact, moving closer toward others, a self-assured posture—are associated with increased attractiveness (Friedman, Riggio, & Casella, 1988).

As this explanation builds on a general model (Keltner et al., 2003) that has received ample evidence from controlled experiments, and on more specific observations that power can increase romantic confidence (Gonzaga et al., 2008; Kunstman, 2011; Lerner, 2011; Wilkey, 2011), we prefer this confidence explanation why power increases infidelity. We aim to rule-out two alternative, plausible explanations.

Power increases Distance. A first alternative reason why infidelity may be more likely among the powerful is that the possession of power may increase psychological distance toward one's current partner (Lee & Tiedens, 2001). Given that psychological closeness is critical for a good relationship, increased distance may directly increase infidelity (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon, & Glass, 2005; DeMaris, 2009; Thompson, 1983).

Power and Risk-taking. A second alternative reason why power may increase infidelity is that the experience of power may decrease people's sensitivity to the risks

involved in extramarital affairs. Powerful people are less affected by risks and make more optimistic assessments of the likelihoods of success and failure (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Also, a powerful position brings frequent business-trips and other social events that involve ample social contacts away from one's partner, making infidelity more accessible (Greeley, 1994). For both these reasons, powerful people may think that they are at a lower risk of their partner finding out about potential affairs.

Gender as a Moderator

The third aim of the current paper is to investigate gender differences in the relationship between power and infidelity. Researchers have found that men are more likely to show infidelity than women. Such findings are typically explained with evolutionary theories, which hold that men and women use different strategies in spreading their genes and providing offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992; Trivers, 1972). Specifically, men are thought to be motivated to seek multiple partners as a way to maximize their genetic longevity, but women are thought to be less inclined at infidelity and to be more oriented toward binding with a single, successful partner, because of their greater investment when procreating: internal fertilization, nine-month gestation, and lactation (Buss, 1989; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). According to this view, power should mainly increase infidelity among men, because an increase in power—and therefore status and wealth—should make men more attractive to women.

In contrast, others have proposed that this gender difference is (at least partially) a reflection of structural differences in the socio-economic position of men and women. This line of reasoning is that women traditionally have fewer opportunities to obtain resources, status, and security by pursuing a career than do

men. A woman's best option to obtaining a desirable socio-economic position is therefore to attract a powerful man with which to form a stable relationship (Buller, 2005; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Smuts, 1992; Wood & Eagly, 2007). In this view, female infidelity should increase if women obtain independent sources of power. After all, then women are no longer dependent on their partner for wealth and status. As a third aim, the current investigation aims to collect evidence for this latter view, demonstrating that the power-infidelity link is not moderated by gender, and show that power increases adultery as strongly for women as it does for men.

Method

Participants and Design

We asked readers of *Intermediair*, a weekly Dutch magazine aimed at professionals, by e-mail to voluntarily complete a questionnaire on the Internet. To minimize selection bias, the e-mail did not disclose that some of the questions were about marital infidelity. A total of 1561 respondents completed the questionnaire. Yet because we were interested in infidelity—which is logically only possible if one has a partner to be unfaithful to—we deleted 286 respondents who did not currently have a partner, before we ran our main analyses, leaving us with 1275 participants (46% women, 54% men, M_{age} = 39.1 years, SD = 8.2 years).[1] As anticipated, respondents varied strongly in power; 58% had a non-management function, 22% had a lower management function (e.g. team leader), 14% were in middle management (e.g. district manager), and 6% were in top management (e.g. CEO). Also, the sample was generally highly educated (43% Bachelor degree, 43% Master degree, 11% PhD, 2% other).

Measures

The measures that we used were collected as part of a very large questionnaire that contained about 200 items and took, on average, 29 minutes to complete. Because the independent variable (power) was measured at the start and the other measures at the end of the questionnaire (hence the two were separated by a substantial amount of time and items), it is unlikely that participants would infer the purpose of the study.

Power. We measured power by asking participants to indicate (by clicking with their mouse) on a 6 cm (2.4 inch) long vertical line, whether they felt they were at the bottom (0) or top (100) of their organization's power hierarchy (M = 55.6, SD = 27.3). This is a simple but robust measure of respondents' perceptions of power, which has been used in previous research and correlates highly with formal position in hierarchy, the degree of control over others, and influence over others (Lammers et al., 2010). Also, in the current sample, the measure of power correlated strongly with a measure of hierarchical position,[2] $r = .46$, $p < .001$.

Infidelity. We measured both intentions to engage in infidelity (in the future) and actual (past) infidelity. Specifically, we measured *infidelity intentions* by asking 'Would you ever consider to cheat on your partner?' on a 7-point scale (1 = 'definitely not'; 7 = 'yes, I might').[3] Because infidelity is a sensitive topic, we also gave respondents the explicit option to skip this question. Sixteen respondents (1.2%) chose to do so, leaving 1259 valid cases on which to perform the analyses (*M* = 2.16, *SD* = 1.66). We measured *actual infidelity* by asking respondents how often they had been unfaithful to their partner (i.e., they secretly had sex with another person), on a 5-point scale (1 = 'never'; 5 = 'very often'). Twenty-five people (1.9%) chose to skip this question, leaving 1250 valid cases on which to perform the analyses (*M* = 1.36, *SD* = 0.68). Of these respondents, 329 (26.3%) admitted having engaged in infidelity

at least once, while 73.7% reported that they had never engaged in infidelity. The two infidelity items correlated highly, $r = .57$, $p < .001$.

Mediators. We measured respondents' *confidence* in their ability to attract a romantic partner with four items: 'I feel confident that I would be successful if I would want to seduce someone', 'I feel confident that it would be easy for me to seduce someone', 'I feel confident about my attractiveness', and 'I feel confident about my charms'. All four items were answered on 7-point scales (1 = 'fully disagree'; 7 = 'fully agree'). These items showed high reliability ($\alpha = .91$) and were averaged to create a single confidence scale ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.44$).

We measured respondents' *sense of distance* with four 7-point items using the same anchors: 'I think that' … 'my position puts pressure on my relationship', 'my positions increases the stress in my relationship', 'my work increases the distance between me and my partner', and 'my work may alienate my partner from myself' ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.55$).

Finally, we measured respondents' perception of the risk involved in infidelity with two items: 'If you would be unfaithful, what would be the risk' … 'that your partner would find out?' and 'that acquaintances would find out' (1 = 'a very small risk'; 7 = 'a very big risk') ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.55$).

To test the discriminant validity of these mediators, we conducted a factor analysis on these ten items (using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization). Each item loaded strongly on its own component (all loadings > .85) and very weakly on the other components (all loadings < .15).

Control Variables. Finally, we measured education, because a higher education may lead to a more accepting attitude toward infidelity, and we measured age because older respondents may be more likely to report infidelity, simply because

for them there have been more years in which they could have been unfaithful (Allen et al., 2005; Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

Results

Because the scale types of our variables were not uniform across items, we standardized our independent variable power, our mediators, and the covariates, age and education, to be able to compare their effects.

Main Effect of Power

We first determined the relation between power and infidelity (intentions and actual). Controlling for gender (coded as: male = 0, female = 1), age, and education, we found a robust positive effect of power on *infidelity intentions*, $B = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .028$, showing that the powerful have stronger intentions to be unfaithful. Importantly, we did *not* find a main effect of gender, $B = .07$, $SE = .10$, $p = .460$, and the observed effect of power was not moderated by gender, $B = -.04$, $SE = .10$, $p = .653$. We also found a positive main effect of age, $B = .10$, $SE = .05$, $p = .043$, consistent with earlier findings.

Next, we determined that the powerful also engage more in *actual infidelity*. Again, controlling for gender, age, and education, we found a significant effect of power on actual infidelity, $B = .05$, $SE = .02$, $p = .021$, showing that the powerful engage more in infidelity. Again, we did not find a main effect of gender, $B = .06$, $SE = .04$, $p = .121$, and the effect of power was not moderated by gender, $B = -.03$, $SE = .04$, $p = .394$.

Multiple Mediation Models

Next, we investigated the process underlying this power-infidelity link. By testing the three mediators against each other, we hypothesized to find that confidence would be the strongest mediator and therefore the best explanation. Again, we first

looked at the effect on intentions and then on actual infidelity. Using multiple mediation with the covariate bootstrap syntax (5000 resamples) provided by Preacher and Hayes (2004), we estimated a regression-based causal model on the effect of power on infidelity intentions with the three proposed mediators, while controlling for age, gender, and education. As Figure 1 shows, confidence mediated the direct effect of power on infidelity intentions (indirect effect = .067, SE = .014, 95% confidence interval: .046, .111). The mediation by psychological distance was much weaker and only marginally significant (indirect effect = .007, SE = .007, 95% confidence interval: .000, .021). Risk-perception did not mediate the effect at all (indirect effect = .002, SE = .002, 95% confidence interval: -.011, .015). As can be read from Figure 1, this latter lack of mediation is there mainly because, although perceived risks affect infidelity intentions, power was not related to perceived risk. With the mediators in the model, 66.7% of the effect size of the direct effect of power on infidelity was explained and power was no longer a significant predictor.

A similar analysis of the effect of power on actual infidelity closely replicated this pattern. Again, the relation between power and actual infidelity was significantly and most strongly mediated by confidence (indirect effect = .020, SE = .006, 95% confidence interval: .011, .033) and not by psychological distance (indirect effect = .001, SE = .001, 95% confidence interval: -.001, .005) or risk-perceptions (indirect effect = .001, SE = .002, 95% confidence interval: -.004, .006). As shown in Figure 2, this lack of mediation is there because although power increases distance, distance, in itself, is not related to actual infidelity. And—as in the previous section—although perceived risks affect actual infidelity, power is not related to the perception of these risks. Again, with the mediators in the model, 45.5% of the size of the direct effect of power on infidelity was explained and power was no longer a significant predictor.

To further establish the validity of the models, we explored various competing models, but found that none better described the data. For example, we examined whether infidelity predicted power, after controlling for the covariates. This was not the case. We also ran the analyses separately for men and women, but found two highly similar patterns that closely followed the described pattern of the combined sample. For both men and women (separately), confidence was the only significant mediator of the link between power and infidelity.

General Discussion

High profile, anecdotal evidence suggests that the powerful are less faithful to their romantic partners and some cultural stereotypes hold that infidelity prospers in the upper echelons of society. But how veridical are such anecdotes and how accurate are these stereotypes? Is there a relation between power and infidelity? We conducted a large field-study to answer these questions. Specifically, we sought to answer three questions: Is power associated with increased infidelity? Why is this? Is this relationship the same for both men and women?

Power and Infidelity

Our results show that power is associated with increased self-reported infidelity and increased infidelity intentions. This relationship held even after controlling for gender, age, and education. We found this by measuring real, structural power differences in existing power structures (companies and other organizations). This measure of power has proven to be reliable and to correlate with other indicators of power in this and previous research (Lammers et al., 2010). Also, by measuring infidelity with an anonymous, internet-based questionnaire, we decreased social desirable answering, particularly among women (Whisman & Snyder, 2007).

Increased Confidence

Second, we measured three mediators to investigate the underlying process. Previous and on-going research demonstrates that power leads to more confident behavior in mixed-sex interactions (Gonzaga et al., 2008; Wilkey, 2011). Our findings demonstrate that confidence also plays a crucial role in the power-infidelity link. Also, we ruled out two competing explanations. Although powerful people do experience increased psychological distance toward their partners, this variable only weakly mediates the link between power and infidelity intentions and does not mediate the link with actual infidelity. Also, although perceptions of risk are strongly related to infidelity, differences in power do not explain differences in perceived risk.

Gender

Third, we aimed to determine whether the power-infidelity link was as strong for women as for men. Many authors have found that, overall, women are less likely than men to be unfaithful. This effect has been explained by the fact that for evolutionary reasons, women should be more oriented at binding to one powerful partner in a stable relationship. Others have proposed that this often-found gender difference in infidelity is, at least partially, due to differences in the socio-economic position of men and women. According to this proposal, if women were to obtain independent sources of income and power, their dependence on their partner should decrease and their likelihood of being unfaithful should increase (Buller, 2005; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Smuts, 1992; Wood & Eagly, 2007).

Our findings clearly supported this latter view. Gender did not moderate the effects we found. Among women who had an independent source of income (as all our female respondents did, since they were working professionals), power had a comparably positive relationship with infidelity as among men. These findings were not likely to be caused by a statistical artifact; our sample included an equally high

number of men and women. If social desirability had affected the responses, it would most likely have suppressed responses stronger for women than for men (Whisman & Snyder, 2007). It also seems unlikely that our effects are specific to the Dutch culture. Although The Netherlands are often seen as a liberal country in regards to sexual issues, most people still find adultery unacceptable (Kraaykamp, 2002). Data from the World Values Survey Database (2010) confirms that the opinion of the Dutch on adultery falls in the middle of the scale (2.7 on a 5-point scale, ranging from *unacceptable* to *acceptable*), ranking 30th of the 47 countries investigated. As such, the Dutch score similar to the Belgians, Germans, Canadians, Japanese, and Russians.

Clearly, power increases infidelity among women as it does among men. An emerging literature demonstrates that this is not an isolated finding; in studying the effect of (manipulated) power on attention to attractive others (Brady et al., 2011), on a tendency to over perceive to what degree other people may be sexually interested in oneself (Kunstman, 2011; Lerner, 2011), and sexual approach behaviors (Wilkey, 2011) researchers have similarly found equally strong effects of power for women and for men. Together, these findings suggest that women in high-power positions are as likely to engage in infidelity as men.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current study answered some important questions in the power - infidelity link, it was correlational in design and as such, does not allow for causal claims. In addition, we measured self-reported infidelity, which is likely affected by social desirability concerns. Obviously, ethical concerns prevent an experiment where participants, varying on power or primed with various levels of power, would engage in actual infidelity (e.g., while working with an attractive confederate). However, future research could examine if it is possible in an experiment to measure changes in

behavior suggesting infidelity. Other researchers have conducted such experiments and their results point in the same direction as our findings: Power makes people more attentive to attractive others and more likely to approach them (Brady et al., 2011; Gonzaga et al., 2008; Kunstman, 2011; Lerner, 2011; Wilkey, 2011). We wanted to continue where these experiments necessarily had to stop and show actual infidelity—even though this comes with the limitations of a cross-sectional design.

Relationship with Existing Literature

Our finding that power is also positively associated with infidelity among women seems incompatible with Baumeister and Vohs' (2004) theory that women employ sex as a scarce resource to gain status and resources. In that case powerful women should be less—*not more*—inclined to infidelity; powerful women would have less need to gain additional resources. On the other hand, Baumeister and Vohs's theory is based on the premise that women have fewer opportunities than men to gain resources and status. Although this premise may not be true among our sample, it is still true in the general population. The two findings therefore may be less incompatible than they appear on first sight.

Our findings do beg the question why there are, at least in the media, none or only few high-powered women who end up in infidelity-related scandals. All the examples in our Introduction were male. A simple explanation for this discrepancy between our findings and this disproportionate media portrayal could be that there are still simply much less women in high-power positions than there are men. For example, only 76 of the 435 (17%) members of the United States' House of Representatives are female (Office of the Clerk, 2010). If such gender differences in power diminish, society modernizes, and women gain more power, many other gender differences should also be attenuated. Gender equality should increase both virtuous

and less virtuous behavior among women. As this study shows, one such *less virtuous* behavior that results from equality may be sexual infidelity.

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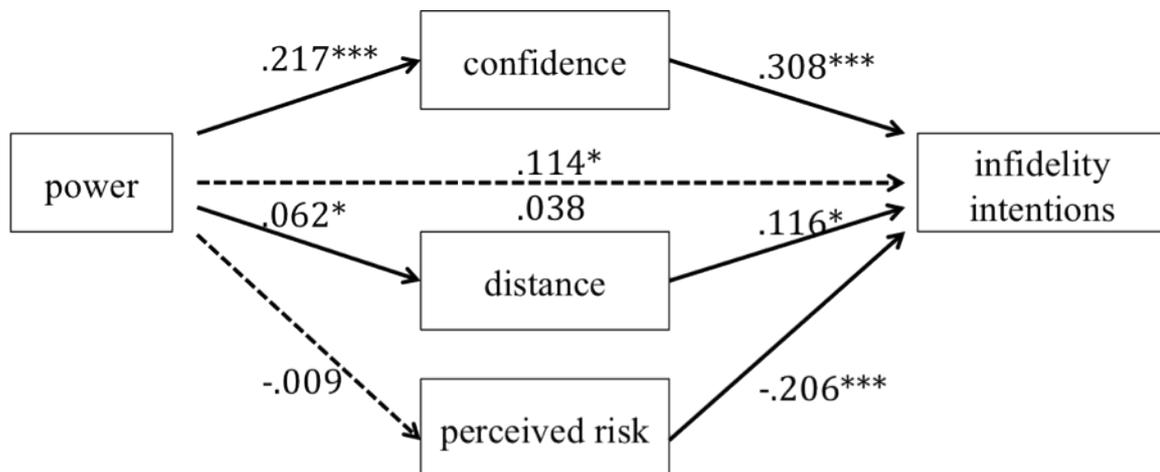
Figure 1

Figure 1. Effect of power on infidelity intentions. Path coefficients represent standardized regression weights. The coefficient above the path from power to actual infidelity represents the total effect with no mediators in the model; the coefficient below this path represents the direct effect when the mediators are included in the model. Coefficients significantly different from zero are indicated by asterisks, *p ≤ .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, and their associated path is shown solid, nonsignificant paths dashed.
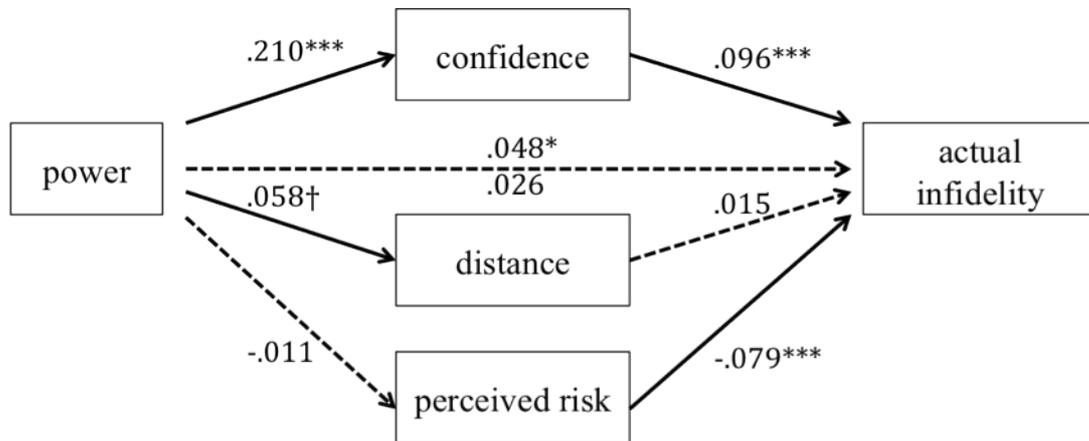
Figure 2

Figure 2. Effect of power on actual infidelity. Path coefficients represent standardized regression weights. The coefficient above the path from power to actual infidelity represents the total effect with no mediators in the model; the coefficient below this path represents the direct effect when the mediators are included in the model. Coefficients significantly different from zero are indicated by asterisks, †p = .055, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, and their associated path is shown solid, nonsignificant paths dashed.

Endnotes

[1] The mediators distance and risk-perception could also not be administered to participants without a partner. Of course, people may also be single due to their past infidelity. If all participants are included the main effects on past and planned infidelity and mediation by confidence are all highly similar.

[2] Hierarchical position was measured by asking respondents to indicate whether they were in non-management (1), lower management (2), middle management (3), or higher management (4). This scale had a skewed distribution and was therefore not used, but showed highly similar results.

[3] The anchors of this item were deliberately unequal, because infidelity intentions are usually low.