

Interpreting Infidelity: Reading a British Film, *Brief Encounter* (1945), by Hispanic Men and Women

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Abstract

This brief study presents the interpretations of a British film, *Brief Encounter* (1945), by 102 Hispanic-American college students. The film presents a tale of infidelity and deception by two married people. The subjects are invited to speculate on the responses and reactions of their partners in the event of infidelity. The subjects are also asked to contemplate their own reactions were they to face the situation of infidelity of their partner. The paper describes the differences in responses by men and women. The paper suggests that the audience's reactions and interpretations to entertainment/media materials from other cultures are viewed through one's own cultural perspective, thus people from different cultures watching the same movie or reading the same book may actually be having very different experiences and responses.

Key words: Infidelity; *Brief Encounter*; Marriage; Culture

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Vengeance is Mine; I will Repay (Romans 12, p.19).

INTRODUCTION

From playwrights such as Euripides and William Shakespeare to novelists such as Charlotte Bronte and D. H. Lawrence, writers from all ages and all cultures have used the theme of adultery as a foundation for some of the

greatest literary works (Zur, 2012). Entertaining notions of sexual desires that are condemned by a society bring to surface dramatic elements such as passion, deception, betrayal, jealousy, conflict, and tragedy. Even the intention of adultery threatens to bring dire emotional consequences for all concerned.

Since marriage and family serve as the foundation of a society, the act, or even the intent, of adultery creates an internal conflict—acting on one's impulses may lead to personal happiness; it will also lead to social disapproval and unhappiness for others. In any story dealing with adultery, the suspense lies in the readers' anticipation. Will the characters surrender to their desires or will they terminate the precarious balancing act before falling? A reader may root for the characters to take their pleasure but as soon as the act is committed the readers may turn against the adulterers and want to know if the guilty get away with the deed or receive their just due.

Attitudes towards love, marriage, monogamy, and infidelity vary across cultures. Attitudes also tend to differ based on gender. According to Levine (1993) 96% of Americans felt that love was necessary for marriage. Hsu (1981) wrote that when considering marriage in an individualistic culture such as the United States, an individual asks, "How does my heart feel?" In a collectivistic culture such as China, a person asks, "What will other people say?" In cultures such as India and Pakistan, only half of the people consider love as an important factor in marriage (Levine, 1993). In collectivistic cultures, the goal of a marriage is not necessarily the happiness of the couple; instead, the goal is to raise a family. In some cultures, the traditional institution of marriage between a male and a female may be on the decline, however, forming romantic relationships is a "universal human activity" and 95% people get married (Floyd, 2009).

Research has shown that married people live longer (Kaplan & Kronick, 2006; Manzoli, Villarti, Pirone

& Boccia, 2007) and are healthier (Macintyre, 1992). Additionally, married people are less likely to engage in risky health behavior (Floyd, 2009) and are less likely to abuse alcohol (Duncan, Wilkerson & England, 2006) or use other illicit substances (Bachman, Wadsworth, O'Malley, Johnson & Schulenberg, 1997), whereas single people are more likely to suffer from mental illness, depression, and other psychosomatic issues (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Lamb, Lee & DeMaris, 2003). With some degree of variation and diversity, in most of the cultures around the world a romantic relationship is expected to contain certain ingredients such as free will, monogamy, physical attraction, love, permanence, and be between a man and a woman. People choose their partners, sometimes with a little help from their friends, family, or dating services, and at other times on their own. Most people in the world (with a few exceptions) expect relationships to be monogamous. Cultures that permit multiple spouses and "open" relationships are exceptions that support the rule. Infidelity is the most cited reason for dissolution of a marriage or a relationship (Allen & Atkins, 2012). Most conservative estimates suggest that 40% of the marriages in the United States result in divorce (Hurley, 2005). A more recent estimate puts the divorce rate at 53% (Piepers, 2009). The most common reason for breakup of relationships before marriage is infidelity and, after marriage, the two big factors are infidelity and financial issues (Amato & Previti, 2003).

While there is a great deal of research on infidelity, there is disagreement on the definition of infidelity. When does an association outside a marriage or a committed relationship become infidelity? Does it take a sexual intercourse or simply holding hands or even entertaining the notion of committing adultery count? These and other similar questions raise the issues of definition of infidelity as well as quantification/measurement of infidelity in terms of appropriate scales, and applying statistical tools for analysis or application. For the purpose of this study, and as the story unfolds in the film, the "intent of infidelity" is treated as infidelity. One may argue that a statement such as: "My partner would divorce me" is much stronger than "My partner would leave me". However, for the present study, the author has opted to treat the anticipated outcomes on nominal scale rather than ordinal scale.

1. THE STUDY

The purpose of the present undertaking was to study the interpretation of infidelity taking place in a culture other than one's own. In this particular case, infidelity occurs in England and it is interpreted by Hispanic Americans. 102 Hispanic American college students enrolled in Interpersonal Communication or Applied Communication courses were shown the British movie, *Brief Encounter* (1945).

The movie features Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard. It is based on a play by Noel Coward and directed by David Lean. The movie tells the story of a short-lived affair between a married woman and a married man. The two meet at a train station. The location and space play an important part in telling a story (Amir, 2012), and in this particular case, the location, a waiting room of a suburban railway station, and the trains play important roles in developing and telling the story. The story begins and ends at a train station. An express train throws a piece of grit in the eye of the main character—Laura. Laura and Alec meet in the waiting room where Alec removes the piece of grit from Laura's eye. The two continue to meet, first at the train station and then, at different places. Eventually, the two develop romantic feelings for each other. The couple arranges a rendezvous with full intentions of consummating their affair. However, they are interrupted before anything can develop. Ashamed and guilt-ridden, the two lovers decide to terminate their affair and to go their separate ways.

After the screening of the film, the subjects were given a paper and pencil test and asked to respond to some questions about the content of the movie and interpret the behavior of the two people involved in the affair. The instrument is included as Appendix I.

2. THE SAMPLE

The sample of 102 participants consisted of 64 women and 38 men. All the subjects were between 20 and 29 years of age; all were Hispanic-American. In this regard, it was a fairly homogenous group. However, these students were majoring in different disciplines and the researchers were able to have access to these subjects due to the fact that all university students were required to take either Applied Communication or Interpersonal Communication. Hence, there was diversity in the sample.

3. RESULTS

In the movie, the woman, Laura, tells the story in a series of flashbacks. The audiences hear mostly her version of the affair with the "other man", Alec. She tells us about her feelings and passion towards Alec, her self-denial of infidelity, and eventually her guilt. The story, nevertheless, is about the affair between Laura and Alec. The subjects were asked whom they thought was the best communicator in the movie. 55.3% of the males responded that the woman, Laura, was the better communicator. However, 44.7% of men said that Alec, the male lead in the film, was the better communicator. 68.75% of the women said that Laura was the better communicator and 31.25% said that the man was a better communicator. These differences are not significant at 0.05 levels. Both characters have equally prominent roles in the film and both display excellent communication competence.

Both Alec and Laura share a common attraction towards one another. This, and opportunity for repeated encounters, move the relationship from initiating stage to integrating stage (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2008). Both individuals pursue the relationship. However, when the subjects were asked to identify the person responsible for the betrayal, the response was unexpected. 58% of the men and 75% of the women said that both Laura and Alec were responsible for the betrayal. A two-sample t-test between

proportions was performed to determine whether there was a significant difference between these percentages for men and women. The calculated t-statistic = 1.790, with degrees of freedom = 100, $p = .0765$ is not significant at the .05 critical alpha level. It was concluded that the difference between men and women was not significant. All statistical analysis for the remaining items uses similar t-statistics to determine respective probabilities.

Table 1
If I Acted as Laura or Alec, My Partner Would ...

	Females (N = 64)		Males (N = 38)		t-statistic	p
	Freq	%	Freq	%		
Leave me	34	53%	20	53%	0.408	0.68
Divorce me	12	19%	6	15.8%	0.468	0.64
End relationship	46	72%	26	68.8%	0.344	0.7318
Hurt/upset	8	12.5%	6	15.8%	1.572	0.12
Suggest/seek therapy	4	6.25%	0	0%	1.572	0.12
Do nothing	2	3.12	0	0%	1.100	0.274

*Significant difference.

While none of the subjects in the study identified Alec as solely responsible for the affair, 42% of the women and 25% of the women singled out Laura as the person responsible for the betrayal. Two observations are worth noting. First, a higher percentage of men tend to blame the woman for the affair. Second, none of the subjects singled out the man (Alec) as responsible for the affair. These findings seem to be in line with the cultural double-standards that are used to judge and evaluate male and female behaviors in the US and in the Hispanic-American culture.

The subjects were asked to predict or guess what their partners might do if the subjects behaved as Laura and Alec. Table 1 presents the data for five possible outcomes listed by the subjects. The table also presents the differences in responses by men and women. An overwhelming majority of men and women (68.8% and 72% respectively) said that their partner would either leave them or divorce them. 3.2% of the women felt that their partners would not do anything. This was a significant difference ($p = 0.0274$) between men and women. Previously, Gottman (1994) had reported similar differences among men and women.

Table 2
If My Partner Acted as Laura or Alec, I Would ...

	Females (N = 64)		Males (N = 38)		t-statistic	p
	Freq	%	Freq	%		
Leave him/her	36	56%	26	68%	1.198	0.23
Divorce him/her	6	9%	6	15.8%	1.039	0.30
End relationship	42	65%	32	83.8%	2.045	0.0435
Talk it out	14	22%	1	2.6%	2.670	0.0089
Give 2 nd chance	6	9%	0	0%	1.904	0.598

*Significant differences

The subjects were also asked what they would do if they found out that their partner had behaved as Laura or Alec. These responses and their statistical significance are presented in Table 2. Once again, a large portion of men (83.8%) and women (65%) said that they would terminate

the relationship. This is significant at $p = 0.0435$. 14% of the women were willing to discuss or talk about the problem while only 2.6% of the men said that they would consider talking about it. This too was significant at $p = 0.0089$. 9% of the women said they would give their

partner a second chance. None of the males listed giving a second chance as an option. 4.5% of the females reported that they would be shocked and/or hurt. None of the men listed these as possible outcomes. Table 2 reveals two interesting (and significant) differences. Men are more likely to terminate a relationship as a result of infidelity than women. Differently put, women are more forgiving and tolerant. This can be attributed to the differences in socialization of girls and boys. Similarly, women are more likely to talk about and discuss the issue more so than men. These findings are in line with previous studies (Thomson & Walker, 1991).

Infidelity, sexual or emotional, causes emotions such as sadness, a sense of inadequacy on the part of the wronged partner, and jealousy. Display rules for expressing these emotions differ from culture to culture and from one context to another (Fernandez, Vera-Villarroel, Sierra & Zubeidat, 2007; Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, Choe, Hang, Hagegawa, Hagegawa & Bennett, 1999). Men and women tend to deal with and express these emotions differently (Buss, Larson, & Weston, 1996; Liu, 2010). The present study reveals similar tendencies. Women are willing to give their partners a second chance; they are willing to discuss the issue. Women believe that their partners would not do anything to correct or fix the problem. Women admit that they would be hurt and saddened. Men do not admit to such emotions. This too is a reflection of the socialization process. Women initiate discussions about relational problems (Thompson & Walker, 1991), while men withdraw from discussions of relational problems (Gottman, 1994). It is for that reason that a greater percentage of women initiate the process of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003).

It is evident in the film that both the man and the woman participated in the illicit affair. However, men and women seem to interpret the film very differently. It has been suggested that men and women experience childhood, schooling, working life, courtship, sexual intimacy, and marriage differently (Yue & Zhao, 2013). In high power-distance cultures such as China and Indonesia, these experiences are very different for women than for the women in low power-distance cultures such as Sweden and Norway. It is also evident from the present study that our enjoyment and interpretation of an entertainment experience (reading a novel, watching a movie, or listening to a popular song) depends on our socialization and our overall experience of being a male or a female. Additionally, viewers from different cultures see and judge such materials through their own cultural codes and values.

It is the hope of this author that other scholars of media and social interaction in other cultures would undertake similar studies so that one may develop a deeper understanding of forces that influence interpretation of communication messages based on age, socioeconomic classifications, sexual orientations, and gender.

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APPENDIX I

Instrument for Measurement of Perception of Infidelity in Brief Encounter

Your participation is voluntary.

Brief Encounter (1945)

(Circle one) I am male I am female

1. Rate this movie for your level of enjoyment.

Did not enjoy it at all Enjoyed it a great deal
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Is there betrayal/deception/lying by any of the characters?

- a. Betrayal Yes No Not sure
 b. Deception Yes No Not Sure
 c. Lying Yes No Not Sure

3. In your opinion, who is responsible for the betrayal?

- a. Both Laura and Alec
 b. Alec
 c. Laura

4. If you acted as Laura or Alec what would your romantic partner do?

They would ...

- a. Leave me
 b. Divorce me
 c. Talk about it
 d. Suggest counseling/therapy
 e. Give me a 2nd chance
 f. Be hurt
 g. Feel that trust was gone.
 h. Do nothing
 i. Other. (Please list) _____

5. If your romantic partner acted as Laura or Alec what would you do?

I would ...

- a. Leave them
 b. Divorce them
 c. Talk about it
 d. Suggest counseling/therapy
 e. Give them a 2nd chance
 f. Be hurt
 g. Feel that trust was gone.
 h. Do nothing
 i. Other. (please list) _____

Thank you for your participation.