

The (Un)Acceptability of Betrayal: A Study of College Students' Evaluations of Sexual Betrayal by a Romantic Partner and Betrayal of a Friend's Confidence

S. Shirley Feldman,¹ Elizabeth Cauffman,² Lene Arnett Jensen,³ and Jeffery J. Arnett⁴

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Because loyalty and trust are viewed as key requirements for relationships with friends as well as with romantic partners, acts of betrayal, which violate the trust on which these relationships are based, are viewed as serious transgressions. This study focused on 2 commonly occurring kinds of betrayal—betrayal of a friend's confidence despite a promise not to do so and sexual betrayal by a romantic partner despite an agreement to be monogamous. Approximately 261 college students,

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¹Stanford University, Stanford, California. Senior Research Scientist in the Division of Child Psychiatry and Associate Director in the Program in Human Biology at Stanford University. Received Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology at Stanford University in 1968. Edited several books (including *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent*) and numerous articles on child and adolescent development. Recent work focuses on adolescent intimacy, romantic relations, and sexuality. To whom correspondence should be addressed at Stanford Center on Adolescence, Cypress Hall, Building C, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305-4145; e-mail: shirley.feldman@stanford.edu.

²Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh. Assistant Professor of Psychiatry in the Law & Psychiatry Division of Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Received Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology at Temple University in 1996. Current research efforts involve the assessment of mental health and psychosocial maturity among juvenile offenders, the exploration of factors associated with female delinquency, and the study of maturity of judgment as it develops during the course of adolescence.

³Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. Received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1996 and is currently Assistant Professor at the Catholic University of America. Studies moral reasoning, behavior, and development in their cultural context. She has conducted research on morality among diverse communities in Denmark, India, and the United States.

⁴University of Maryland, Maryland. Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development at the University of Maryland. Main research interests are various topics in emerging adulthood (ages 18–25), risk behavior in adolescence and emerging adulthood, and media use in adolescence.

aged 18 to 23, answered questions concerning the acceptability of betrayal under a variety of different conditions and described their self-restraint, tolerance of deviation, and betrayal behavior. Despite pervasive disapproval of betrayal, the extent of disapproval was a function of the type of betrayal (whether of a romantic partner or a same-sex friend), the justification for the betrayal, the sex of the transgressor, and the characteristics of the respondent. There was greater acceptance of sexual betrayal than betrayal of a friend's confidence, of male than female transgression, and by male than female respondents. These results are largely accounted for by the finding that male respondents gave high ratings of acceptance of sexual betrayal by male transgressors. Acceptance of both forms of betrayal was correlated with lack of self-restraint, tolerance of deviation, and behavioral betrayal.

INTRODUCTION

The developmental tasks of intimacy and identity frequently place competing demands upon late adolescents and young adults. The development of intimacy, for example, requires trust and commitment whereas the forging of a clear sense of identity requires a period of exploration and experimentation in many domains (Erikson, 1968). This exploration often results in the violation of interpersonal commitments, making betrayal a salient phenomenon of late adolescence and early adulthood.

Loyalty and trust are viewed as key requirements for relationships with friends (Parker and DeVries, 1993; Savin-Williams and Berndt, 1990) as well as with romantic partners (Holmes and Rempel, 1989; Larzela and Huston, 1980). Friendships typically involve a willingness to self-disclose and an understanding that such self-disclosure will be held in confidence. Romantic relationships, similarly, tend to involve an explicit understanding of exclusivity. Accordingly, trust and related concepts such as honesty and truthfulness are generally ranked as core elements of both friendships (Bernath and Feshbach, 1995; Parker and DeVries, 1993) and romantic relationships (Masters *et al.*, 1982). Acts of betrayal, which violate the trust on which these relationships are based, are generally viewed as moral violations because they involve issues of fairness and justice and because they have consequences for the welfare and well-being of others (Turiel, 1998).

In the present study, we focus on 2 distinct kinds of betrayal that adolescents and young adults are likely to encounter in their lives—betrayal of a friend's confidence by breaking a promise not to tell information the friend shared with them and sexual betrayal by a romantic partner despite an agreement to be monogamous. These 2 forms of betrayal have a number of common structural characteristics: they involve horizontal (nonhierarchical) relationships with age-mates or near age-mates; they refer to ongoing personal relationships involving trust and which are of considerable significance; they involve specific negotiated arrangements (promises, commitments) designed to augment the trust that is inherent in the relationship; and finally, both forms of betrayal involve situations where the

transgressor acts as a free agent (i.e., is not under duress) and thus is responsible for the decision of whether or not to betray.

Despite widespread disapproval of sexual betrayal (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999a), and presumably of broken promises as well (Rotenberg, 1986), there is a growing recognition that moral evaluations are complex and that behaviors are rarely judged in absolute terms (Robinson, 1996). The circumstances under which an act of betrayal occurs will affect the extent to which such behavior is viewed as acceptable or unacceptable. The present study explores, in particular, the degree to which attitudes regarding betrayal depend on the following circumstances: the type of relationship (friendship vs. dating), the sex of the transgressor, and the reasons for betrayal. In addition, we explore how attitudes to betrayal are related to characteristics of the respondent.

Justification for Betrayal

Moral evaluations are rarely simple and are likely to be influenced by the justification or circumstances that surround an event. For example, to kill is generally morally unacceptable, however to kill while defending one's country is less unacceptable; to lie openly and directly is generally unacceptable, but if the lie is instrumental to saving innocent lives, it is more acceptable. Thus, the acceptability of a behavior may rely upon a variety of considerations beyond the nature of the act itself.

In empirical research, it has been found that people take into account the prevailing circumstances when judging the acceptability of behavior. Young school-aged children take into account the intentionality of the act (Piaget, 1965) whereas older children and adolescents are able to take into account more complex justifications. For example, Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman (1997) found that among adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17, transgressions such as lying, theft, and fighting were most acceptable when the transgressor was provoked or when these behaviors were performed under duress. Cauffman *et al.* (in press) found that violence against peers was more acceptable when committed in defense (of self and others) and when the transgressor was provoked. Petersen *et al.* (1983) found that self-protective lies were judged as less acceptable than other kinds of lies and untruths. One purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of different justifications on the acceptance of 2 kinds of betrayal.

Evaluation of betrayal has generally been studied on a dimension of acceptance/rejection with relatively little attention being devoted to the conditions under which betrayal occurs. Yet the literature on sexual betrayal suggests that there are many different reasons for engaging in betrayal, including dissatisfaction with the ongoing relationship (e.g., lack of communication, insufficient intimacy, lack of sexual gratification); a desire for sexual variety or excitement; revenge, anger, or jealousy; insecurity about the relationship; immaturity and lack of

commitment; and strong attraction to or being in love with the extradyadic partner (Buunk, 1980; Feldman and Cauffman, 1999a; Glass and Wright, 1992; Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; Roscoe *et al.*, 1988; Thompson, 1984). In one of the few studies that compared how justifications for betrayal influenced its acceptability, Feldman and Cauffman (1999a) found that betrayal was more acceptable when there was a bad relationship between the partners or when there was a magnetic attraction to a new partner and least acceptable when the transgressors felt they could escape detection, wanted to test the relationship, or were being vindictive and attempting to even a (real or imagined) score.

There are, to our knowledge, no studies examining the effect of different justifications on the acceptability of betraying a friend's confidence. However, we posit that such betrayal is likely to be viewed in the same light as deception, a moral violation about which considerably more is known (see Robinson, 1996). It seems likely that a broken promise, like other forms of deception, might be judged more or less acceptable depending on circumstances. For example, a broken promise so as to help a friend might be judged as more acceptable than when the motive is self-gain or revenge. Likewise, an inadvertent disclosure of a friend's secret, especially if the friend's identity is not divulged, might be evaluated less negatively than a deliberate disclosure made in the knowledge that the betrayed friend would do nothing about it. Thus, despite an absence of both theory and extant empirical work, it seems reasonable to expect that justification for betrayal will influence the acceptability of betraying a friend's confidence, just as it is likely to influence the acceptability of sexual betrayal of a romantic partner.

Sex of the Transgressor

The acceptability of betrayal is not only influenced by the justification for the betrayal but is also likely to be influenced by the sex of the transgressor as well. Historically, the double standard, which gives more freedom to men than women, has been operative in the United States as well as elsewhere. Increase in sexual permissiveness in recent decades have all but eliminated the double standard, as evidenced by similarities in the age of sexual debut and the nature of sexual activity among adolescent males and females (Katchadourian, 1990). Nonetheless, the double standard appears to be alive and well in the realm of sexual attitudes (Feldman *et al.*, 1999; Moore and Rosenthal, 1993; Sprecher and McKinney, 1993). For example, a history of sexual adventurousness and a variety of sexual partners contributes negatively to the reputation of females but positively to the reputation of males (Lees, 1989; Moore and Rosenthal, 1993). Although males and females both show vestiges of the double standard in their thinking, it appears to figure more prominently in the attitudes of males than that of females (Sprecher and McKinney, 1993). In light of the double standard in the area of sexual attitudes, it is likely that male infidelity will be evaluated less negatively than female infidelity

and that the most acceptable of all will be male infidelity as judged by males. However, outside the sexual realm, transgressions by males and females are likely to be judged similarly. Thus, we hypothesize that betrayal of a friend's confidence will be evaluated similarly whether the transgressor is male or female.

Characteristics of the Respondent

Although the circumstances surrounding an act of betrayal are expected to affect a respondent's acceptance of such behavior, it is likely that individual characteristics of the respondent will also play a role. In the present research, we focus on 4 characteristics: the respondent's sex, self-restraint, tolerance of deviation, and self-reported engagement in acts of betrayal. We do not claim that these factors are the only ones likely to influence people's evaluations of betrayal, only that they represent a reasonable starting point for exploration in an area that has been largely understudied.

Sex of Respondent

Both evolutionary theory (Buss, 1995), which posits that males and females have different mating strategies and different investment in reproductive outcomes, and social learning theory (Wiederman and Allgeir, 1993), with its emphasis on observational learning and direct training of culturally-specific attitudes and behaviors, predict that males will accept sexual betrayal more than will females. Consistent with these viewpoints, sex differences in the acceptance of sexual betrayal are pervasive, with males reporting greater acceptance than females do (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999b; Hansen, 1987; Roscoe *et al.*, 1988; Sheppard *et al.*, 1995).

Although neither evolutionary theory nor social learning theory suggest sex differences in the acceptability of betraying a friend's confidence, the theorizing of Gilligan (1982) on sex differences in moral reasoning has the potential to do so. She claims that females are more attuned to the interpersonal consequences of actions and their morality grows out of caring whereas males, with a greater focus on autonomy, develop a morality of impartial justice that is less attuned to the consequences for individuals and relationships. Because betrayal of a friend is likely to have strong interpersonal consequences, Gilligan's perspective may suggest that females are less accepting of betrayal than males are. However, from Gilligan's perspective, the opposite could also be argued. For example, males may be less accepting of breaches of trust if they conceive of them as contractual violations. Most empirical studies, however, do not find sex differences in moral reasoning, except when youth and young adults are asked to generate (rather than reason about) important moral issues (Walker, 1984). Thus, despite the absence of

a convincing theoretical perspective, understanding the acceptability of betrayal behavior for males and females remains important to investigate.

Self-Restraint

We propose that self-restraint may be 1 important characteristic associated with both sexual betrayal and betraying a friend's confidence. Self-restraint is a superordinate dimension of personality (Weinberger and Schwartz, 1990; Weinberger, 1997) and thereby subsumes a significant number of conceptually related dimensions. As described by Weinberger (1997), self-restraint refers to and subsumes tendencies to exercise impulse control, to act responsibly, and to be considerate of others, as well as to inhibit aggression. As such, this construct shares some conceptual similarities with ego-control, delay of gratification, and self-control. Youth who are low in self-restraint find it difficult to modulate impulses and postpone gratification. Because keeping agreements and promises, whether to a romantic partner or to a same-sex friend, requires exercising impulse control (in the face of opportunities and temptations for self-gratification via betrayal) as well as consideration of others' feelings, low self-restraint is likely to be associated with acceptance of betrayal.

Tolerance of Deviation

The acceptance of deviation or transgression is an attitudinal variable that refers to the degree to which individuals view specific transgressions as wrong (Jessor and Jessor, 1977). Tolerance of deviation includes the acceptance of different types of transgressions ranging from major transgressions (such as violence, lying, cheating), which violate the underlying principles of prevention of harm and the promotion of welfare, fairness, and justice to minor transgressions (such as disrespect to elders, use of swear words), which violate the social organization, accepted rules and procedures, authority relations, and traditions and values of a society. We predict that the tolerance of deviation, in general, will be associated with the acceptance of both forms of betrayal.

Betrayal Behavior

The experience of having engaged in betrayal behavior is likely to be associated with acceptance of betrayal, for in an extensive social psychological literature, virtually every domain investigated has shown a significant albeit modest relationship between attitudes and behavior (Ajzen, 1989; Festinger, 1957). The associations are stronger when the attitudes and behaviors are matched in specificity (Kraus, 1995). In the area of moral development, the study of the relationship

between attitudes and behavior has a long history, with findings for children suggesting a modest but significant association (see Hartshorne and May, 1927, 1928 for a classic early study; Turiel, 1998). Less research has been conducted on adolescents, but Jessor and Jessor (1977) identified a relation between problem behaviors (a composite of problem drinking, marijuana, nonvirginity, activism, and delinquency) and a general attitudinal measure called tolerance of deviation. Others have reported associations between a specific transgression and acceptance of that form of transgression and these associations have typically been moderate in magnitude. For example, there are behavior-attitude relationships for academic cheating (Graham *et al.*, 1994), lying to parents (Jensen *et al.*, 1998), and violence against peers and against dates (Cauffman *et al.*, in press). Furthermore, the few studies of sexual betrayal behavior and attitudes in adolescents reveal a significant association between the 2 (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999(b); Hansen, 1987). These associations lead us to expect a relationship between acceptance of betrayal in each situation and adolescents betrayal behavior.

Summary

This study investigates the moral judgments or evaluations of college students regarding 2 forms of betrayal—betrayal of a (same-sex) friend's confidence and sexual betrayal of a romantic partner. The study has 3 major foci. First, we investigate whether acceptance of betrayal varies as a function of the characteristics of a transgressor in a hypothetical situation. Specifically, we hypothesize that

- The transgressor's justifications influence the moral evaluations (the acceptability) of both sexual betrayal and betrayal of a friend's confidence, and
- Male transgressors will be evaluated more positively than female transgressors in the area of sexual betrayal, but male and female transgressors will be evaluated similarly in the area of betrayal of a friend's confidence. As described later, however, these effects are expected to be mediated by the sex of the respondent.

Second, we investigate whether acceptance of betrayal varies as a function of the respondent's characteristics. We focus on sex of respondent as well as on self-restraint, tolerance of deviation, and self-reported betrayal behavior. Specifically, based on our literature review, we predict that

- Males will be more accepting than females of sexual betrayal perpetrated by a male transgressor, but males and females will be equally unaccepting of sexual betrayal by a female transgressor. We will investigate but make no specific predictions regarding the sex of the respondent on the acceptance of betrayal of a friend's confidence.

- Acceptance of both sexual betrayal and betrayal of a friend's confidence will be negatively associated with self-restraint, but positively associated with tolerance of deviation and betrayal behavior.

Third, we compare the acceptability of the 2 kinds of betrayal—sexual betrayal of a romantic partner and betrayal of a friend's confidence. In the absence of a well-developed empirical literature on broken promises, we make no hypotheses concerning which form of betrayal is more acceptable.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

We recruited a sample of convenience from college students attending a popular introductory psychology class (attended by many nonmajors) in a large Mid-Western university. Questionnaires were distributed during class and served as one of several alternative ways to meet one of the class requirements. All students present on the day completed the questionnaires, after giving informed consent. The battery of questionnaires included background information, 6 scales concerning the acceptability of different types of violation, rating scales assessing socio-emotional adjustment, self-reports of behavior that violates community standards, and a number of other scales not used in the present study.

The sample was restricted to unmarried young adults under the age of 24. Twelve students were excluded because they did not meet these requirements. The final sample consisted of 261 single, predominantly white, college students, aged between 18 and 23 years (Mean = 20.35 years, SD = 1.23), 35% of whom were male and 65% of whom were female.

Measures

Six different violations were described in vignette form, and students were asked to rate the acceptability of each of the violations, given different justifications for the behavior. Each vignette appeared in 2 forms—one in which a male was the transgressor and a second in which a female was the transgressor. Students were randomly assigned to receive one form of each vignette, with the restriction that 3 of the 6 violations should have a male transgressor, 3 a female transgressor. The sex of the transgressor in the 2 betrayal vignettes was always the same.

Acceptance of Betrayal. We assessed 2 kinds of betrayal. The following vignette and question assessed *Acceptance of Sexual Betrayal* (with female transgressor): "Karen and her boyfriend have been going together for 8 months. They have an agreement to be monogamous, that is, not to date or have any physical relations with anyone else. One night, Karen has sexual intercourse with another man.

For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is." Twenty different justifications were given, which students rated on a 4-point scale (1 = totally unacceptable, 4 = totally acceptable).

Acceptance of betrayal of friend's confidence (with male transgressor) was assessed by the following vignette: "Tom's good friend confides in him that his girlfriend is pregnant and they have decided to get an abortion. He makes Tom promise not to tell anyone. Next day, Tom shares his friend's secret with someone else. For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is." Eighteen different justifications were given, each of which was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = totally unacceptable, 4 = totally acceptable).

To generate the justifications for each form of betrayal, we first reviewed the relevant psychological literature and constructed a large number of plausible justifications. We then conducted 3 focus groups with college students to help narrow down the list. Finally, we sought to have parallel justifications hold across different forms of betrayal. This procedure resulted in 12 different categories of justifications, 11 of which were common to the 2 forms of betrayal. We also permitted in each set of justifications any justification that was salient for 1 form (but not both) of betrayal. We then piloted these justifications with 45 students and made final editorial corrections to the wording of the justifications. The resulting justifications for the 2 types of betrayals were comparable, although not identical, as shown in Table I. For each type of betrayal, there were justifications related to self-gain, redressing perceived inequity, conformity to peers, the ability to escape detection, involuntarism, among others.

To score the acceptability of each type of betrayal, we averaged the ratings across the 18–20 items to give acceptance of betrayal scores. The 2 acceptance of betrayal scores had good internal consistency (acceptance of sexual betrayal, $\alpha = .94$; acceptance of betrayal of friend's confidence, $\alpha = .83$). Although we conducted 2 PCAs with varimax rotations—one on the sexual betrayal items and another on the betrayal of friend's confidence items—the resulting solutions yielded factors that were not parallel and that were difficult to interpret. Attempts to create *a priori* clusters results in highly intercorrelated composites (e.g., correlations coefficients greater than .60 for several of sexual betrayal scores). Thus we elected not to use the factor or composite scores but to use the overall acceptance of betrayal scores.

Self-Restraint was assessed by using a subscore from the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory (WAI, Weinberger, 1997). It was derived from 30 items which respondents rated on a 5-point scale tapping 4 dimensions: impulse control, suppression of aggression, responsibility, and consideration ($\alpha = .85$). Sample items include, "I do things without giving them enough thought" and "I think about other people's feelings before I do something they might not like." The scale has been found to have good psychometric properties and to display convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity (Feldman and Weinberger, 1994; Weinberger, 1997).

Table I. Justifications for Sexual Betrayal and for Betrayal of a Friend's Confidence

Motive	Sexual betrayal	Broken promises
Self gain (gain rewards or avoid punishments)	Fell in love with new person Wasn't sexually satisfied by her boyfriend Was sexually attracted to the new person	Would be the center of attention at a party
Conformity	Knew her friends did the same thing	Knew most people would not keep such important information to themselves Was urged by her friends to tell, since they sensed she knew some interesting information
Redressing perceived inequity	Wanted to pay back her boyfriend for bad treatment Knew that her partner had had sex with someone else	Wanted to get even with friend who once betrayed her
Psychological or personality	Was the kind of person who needed excitement and variety in her life Was feeling very unhappy and thought it would make her feel better	Was impulsive, unable to keep secrets
Autonomy	Thought her sexual relations were her business and no one else's	Felt that she had to use her best judgment whether or not to keep the knowledge to herself
Prosocial	Did this to make her new male friend happy	Believed that telling the secret would enable the friend to get help that was needed
No harm	Knew her boyfriend would not be hurt by her behavior	Told someone who did not know the friend Revealed the secret without revealing the identity of the person
Avoid detection	Had done the same thing before and no one had found out Was certain that no one would ever find out	Was sure her friend would not find out Had divulged other secrets before and gotten away with it
Challenge	Wanted to see if she was attractive to others	
Involuntarism ("not my fault")	Was under influence of drugs/alcohol and did not realize what she was doing Got carried away and could not resist	Was under the influence of drugs/alcohol Hadn't meant to tell her friends' secret—it just slipped out
Not party to agreement	Never really wanted to be monogamous in the first place Wanted to break up with her regular partner	Had not wanted to be told the secret in the first place Was no longer good friends with the person who told her the secret
Culture	Was from a different culture where women are expected to have a variety of sexual experiences before they are married	Was from a different culture where people routinely share information about others
Other	Wanted to break up with her regular partner	Thought it was relevant to a conversation she was having with friends Knew her friend wouldn't do anything if she found out

Tolerance of Deviation was assessed using a set of vignettes describing different transgressions, which respondents rated in terms of acceptability under 19 different circumstances. The acceptance score for each of the different transgressions was satisfactory: acceptance of lying to parents ($\alpha = .96$, 19 items), acceptance of cheating at school ($\alpha = .96$, 19 items), acceptance of giving a classmate a bloody nose during an altercation ($\alpha = .91$, 19 items), and acceptance of date violence ($\alpha = .91$, 19 items). The tolerance of deviation score consisted of the mean of 5 different acceptance scores—the above listed 4 scores together with a betrayal score. When we considered tolerance of deviation as a correlate of sexual betrayal, we included betrayal of a friend's confidence in the tolerance of deviation composite. Analogously, when tolerance of deviation was studied as a correlate of betrayal of a friend, we included acceptance of sexual betrayal in the tolerance of deviation composite.

Behavioral Violation was assessed by student ratings (1 = never to 5 = 10 or more times) of the frequency with which they had engaged in behavioral violations which matched the 2 forms of betrayal. *Behavioral Sexual Betrayal* was the rating of the item, "When in an exclusive romantic relationship where you agreed to date only each other, how often did you have sexual intercourse with someone else?" *Behavioral Betrayal of Friend's Confidence* was the rating given to the question, "When a friend has told you a secret, how often have you told that secret to someone else?"

Data Analysis Plan

The key variables—acceptance of sexual betrayal and acceptance of betrayal of a friend's confidence—were not normally distributed. In both cases, responses clustered around the "totally unacceptable" end of the dimension. In light of the non-normal distributions, we analyzed the data, using nonparametric analyses. Specifically, for within-subject measures (justifications) we used Wilcoxon tests and for between-subject measures (sex of respondent, transgressor) we used Mann-Whitney tests. To assess correlations we used Spearman rank correlations. The results assessing group differences were identical to those obtained from parametric analyses. Because it is easier to interpret parametric analyses (means are easier to interpret than mean ranks) and because parametric analyses permit the testing of interaction terms (whereas nonparametric analyses do not), we have chosen to present the results for the parametric analyses.

RESULTS

The results are presented in 3 sections. First, we provide descriptive information about the acceptability of sexual betrayal and examine the factors that

influence it. In the second section we undertake parallel analyses for acceptability of betrayal of a friend's confidence. In the final section we briefly compare the results for the 2 kinds of betrayal.

The Acceptability of Sexual Betrayal and Factors that Influence it

To explore the effects of justification on the acceptability of sexual betrayal, we first conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with justification as a within-subject factor. Although sexual betrayal was generally rated as unacceptable (mean overall acceptance = 1.42, $SD = 0.49$), justification for betrayal was nonetheless strongly significant ($F(19, 234) = 17.2, p < .0001$). Table II shows that the most acceptable justifications were fell in love, came from a different culture, and the regular partner had engaged in sex with someone else. The least acceptable justifications were that the transgressor had got away with the same behavior before and that their friends did the same thing. Although on 19 of the 20 items males were more accepting than females of sexual betrayal, the rank order of acceptability of the different justifications was the same for males as for females ($\rho = .94, p < .001$).

We had predicted that males would be more accepting of sexual betrayal than females, that betrayal by male transgressors would be judged as more acceptable than betrayal by female transgressors, and that there would be a significant interaction between sex of respondent and sex of transgressor. To assess these hypotheses, we conducted two-way ANOVAs on the total acceptability of sexual betrayal score. As predicted, sex of respondent was significant ($F(1, 255) = 30.5, p < .0001$),

Table II. The Most and Least Acceptable Justifications for Sexual Betrayal^a

	Mean Scores ^{b,c}		
	Total sample	Males	Females
Most acceptable justifications			
Fell in love with new person	1.90	2.21	1.72
Was from a different culture where women are expected to have many sexual partners before marriage	1.83	2.14	1.67
Knew her boyfriend had recently had sex with someone else	1.79	2.00	1.68
Wanted to break up with her boyfriend	1.65	1.88	1.52
Least acceptable justifications			
Had done the same thing before and gotten away with it	1.10	1.19	1.04
Knew her friends did the same thing	1.17	1.36	1.08
Wanted to make her new male friend happy	1.20	1.46	1.05
Was certain no one would ever find out	1.22	1.36	1.12
Was unhappy, thought it would make her feel better	1.22	1.36	1.14

^aWe present here items for female transgressors, but there were comparable items for male transgressors.

^b1 = totally unacceptable; 2 = somewhat unacceptable; 3 = somewhat acceptable; 4 = totally acceptable.

^cSDs: Total sample .41–.97; Males .62–1.08; Females .38–1.08.

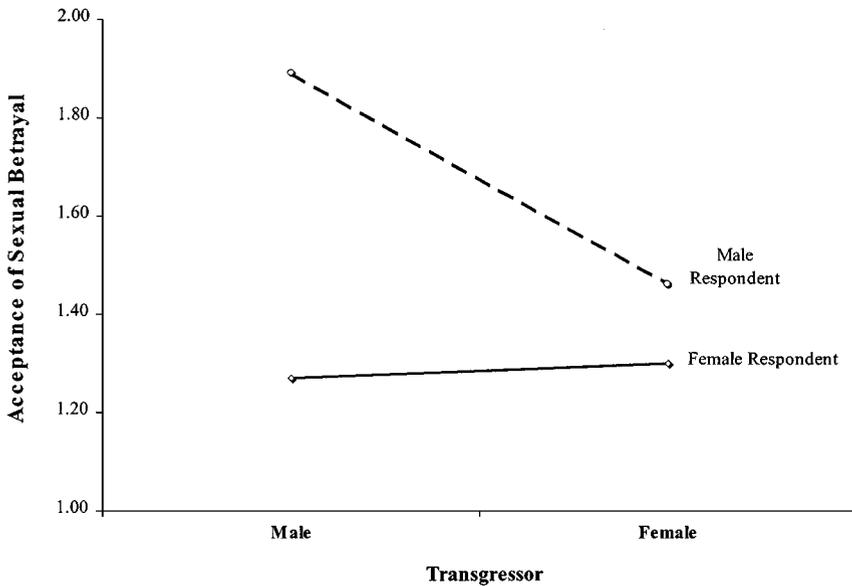


Fig. 1. The interaction of sex of respondent and sex of transgressor on the acceptance of sexual betrayal.

with males (Mean = 1.63) markedly more accepting than females (Mean = 1.31) of sexual betrayal. This result held not only for the total acceptance score but also for 19 of the 20 items. The effect of transgressor was more complex and gave only partial support to our hypothesis. Specifically, the main effect of transgressor was not significant ($F(1, 255) = 2.9, p = ns$, Mean 1.45 for male transgressors and 1.39 for female transgressors). However, as predicted, there was a significant interaction between sex of respondent and sex of transgressor, which has been drawn in Fig. 1. In accord with the hypothesis, males were more accepting of sexual betrayal by male transgressors than by female transgressors ($F(1, 89) = 11.6, p < .001$) whereas females were equally unaccepting of sexual betrayal regardless of whether the transgressor was male or female ($F(1, 166) = 1.9, p = ns$). Looking at the data another way, males were more likely than females to be accepting of sexual betrayal by males ($t(119 \text{ df}) = 6.9, p < .001$), but males and females were equally likely to judge as unacceptable sexual betrayal by females ($t(136 \text{ df}) = 1.4, p = ns$).

Personal Characteristics and the Acceptance of Sexual Betrayal

We examined the association between acceptance of sexual betrayal and 3 characteristics of the respondent—tolerance of deviation, self-restraint, and

Table III. Correlates of Acceptance of Sexual Betrayal. Spearman Rank Correlations Presented Separately for the Total Sample and by Sex of Respondent

	Total sample (<i>N</i> = 261)	Males (<i>N</i> = 93)	Females (<i>N</i> = 168)
Behavioral betrayal (via sexual intercourse)	.19**	.14	.17*
Tolerance of deviation ^a	.56***	.54***	.50***
Self-restraint	-.43***	-.34***	-.40***

^aIncludes 5 violations: betraying friend’s confidence, lying to parents, academic cheating, violence in dealing with peer conflict, date violence.

**p* < .05.

***p* < .01.

****p* < .001.

behavioral sexual betrayal. We calculated correlations for the total sample as well as separately for males on a females. The results (Spearman rank correlations) are shown in Table III.

Consistent with our predictions, acceptance of sexual betrayal was associated positively and significantly with tolerance of deviation and behavioral betrayal and associated negatively with self-restraint. The strongest correlates were tolerance of deviation (a score which included acceptance of 5 different violations including betrayal of a friend’s confidence) and self-restraint. The correlates of acceptance of sexual betrayal were generally similar for males and for females.

In summary, despite finding very low levels of acceptance of sexual betrayal, we nonetheless succeeded in identifying important factors that are associated with it. In addition to the type of justification for the betrayal, sex of respondent, and (for males) sex of transgressor, we found that tolerance of deviation, self-restraint, and behavioral betrayal were associated with acceptance of sexual betrayal.

Acceptability of Betraying a Friend’s Confidence and Factors that Influence it

The effect of justification on the acceptability of betraying a friend’s confidence was assessed by a repeated measures ANOVA. As predicted, justification significantly influenced the acceptability of betrayal of a friend’s confidence ($F(17, 235) = 22.6, p < .0001$). The most and least acceptable justifications are shown in Table IV. The prosocial justification—enabling the friend to obtain needed help—was by far the most acceptable justification; other relatively acceptable motives included ensuring protection of the friend’s identity and cultural differences. These were similar for males and females. The least acceptable justifications involved peer pressure or peer recognition, the ability to escape detection, and the knowledge that there would be no adverse consequences. The rank ordering of acceptability of the different justifications was highly similar for males and females ($\rho = .98, p < .001$).

Table IV. Most and Least Acceptable Justifications for Betraying a Friend's Confidence^a

	Mean scores ^{b,c}		
	Total sample	Males	Females
Most acceptable justifications			
Believed that telling the secret would enable her friend to get help	2.17	2.07	2.21
Revealed the secret without revealing the identity of the person involved	1.79	1.81	1.77
Had not meant to tell her friend's secret—it just "slipped out"	1.51	1.55	1.48
Was from a culture where people routinely share information about others	1.43	1.48	1.39
Least acceptable justifications			
Would be the center of attention if she told	1.08	1.14	1.03
Was sure her friend would not find out	1.10	1.17	1.06
Had divulged other secrets before and had "gotten away" with it	1.12	1.17	1.10
Knew her friend wouldn't do anything if she found out	1.12	1.22	1.06

^aItems given from vignette with female transgressor.

^b1 = totally unacceptable; 2 = somewhat unacceptable; 3 = somewhat acceptable; 4 = totally acceptable.

^cSDs: Total sample .37–.98; Males .46–.97; Females .20–.97.

Although we had not made predictions regarding the sex of respondent effects, we had predicted an absence of sex of transgressor effects. A 2-way ANOVA on the total acceptance score for betraying a friend's confidence found that sex differences were present but were modest in magnitude ($F(1, 255) = 4.6, p < .05$), with males more accepting than females of betraying a friend's confidence. At the item level, sex differences (at $p < .01$) were found for 6 of the 18 justifications. As predicted, the effect of the transgressor was not significant ($F(1, 255) < 1.0, p = ns$) nor was the interaction between sex of respondent and sex of transgressor ($F(1, 255) = 1.22, p = ns$). In other words, the level of unacceptability of betraying a friend's confidence was independent of the transgressor's sex.

Personal Characteristics and the Acceptance of Betraying a Friend's Confidence

Correlations between personal characteristics of the respondents and acceptance of betraying a friend's confidence are shown in Table V, separately for the total sample and for males and females. Consistent with our predictions, tolerance of deviation, lack of self-restraint, and behavioral betrayal were associated with acceptance of betraying a friend's confidence.

In summary, our predictions were largely confirmed. Acceptance of betrayal of a friend's confidence was related to justification for betrayal, personal characteristics of the respondent (including tolerance of deviation, self-restraint, betrayal behavior, and sex of respondent), but unrelated to sex of transgressor.

Table V. Correlates of Acceptance of Betraying a Friend's Confidence. Spearman Rank Correlations Presented Separately for the Total Sample and by Sex

	Total sample (<i>N</i> = 261)	Males (<i>N</i> = 93)	Females (<i>N</i> = 168)
Behavioral betrayal (telling a friend's secret)	.16**	.25**	.12
Tolerance of deviation ^a	.48****	.44****	.50****
Self-restraint	-.25****	-.18*	-.27****

^aIncludes 5 violations: sexual betrayal, lying to parents, academic cheating, violence in dealing with peer conflict, date violence.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

**** $p < .001$.

Comparing Sexual Betrayal to Betraying a Friend's Confidence

To compare the acceptability of the 2 types of betrayal, we used a 3-way repeated measures ANOVA with betrayal type (sexual betrayal vs. betrayal of a friend's confidence) as a within-subject factor and sex of respondent and sex of transgressor as between-subject factors. The effect of betrayal type was highly significant ($F(1, 255) = 40.4$, $p < .0001$), with sexual betrayal rated as more acceptable (Mean = 1.42, SD = 0.49) than betrayal of a friend's confidence (Mean = 1.32, SD = .36). There was also a significant effect of sex of respondent ($F(1, 255) = 24.4$, $p < .0001$), with males more accepting than females of betrayal. However, the main effects of sex and betrayal type must be interpreted in light of a significant statistical interaction term. As shown in Fig. 2, acceptance of betrayal was relatively similar across types of betrayal and across males and females with 1 exception. In contrast to the other groups, males showed relatively high rates of acceptance of sexual betrayal. Specifically, males were more accepting of sexual betrayal than betrayal of a friend's confidence ($F(1, 90) = 17.3$, $p < .001$) whereas females were equally unaccepting of both kinds of betrayal ($F(1, 165) = 2.12$, $p = ns$). Furthermore, males ratings of acceptability of betrayal of a friend's confidence were not significantly greater than females ratings (Mean Difference = .07, $t = 1.8$, 255 df, $p = ns$) whereas males were much more accepting than females of sexual betrayal (Mean Difference = .32, $t = 5.2$, 257 df, $p < .0001$).

Whether the transgressor was male or female did not significantly influence acceptance of betrayal ($F(1, 255) = 3.5$, $p > .05$), although it did interact with betrayal type ($F(1, 255) = 11.9$, $p < .001$). Specifically, there was more acceptance of male transgressors in sexual betrayal than in betrayal of a friend ($F(1, 90) = 17.3$, $p < .001$) whereas respondents were equally unaccepting of females betrayal in both situations ($F(1, 165) = 2.1$, $p > .05$). However, this finding is further qualified by a strong 3-way interaction ($F(1, 255) = 31.0$, $p < .0001$), which has been drawn in Fig. 3. Although there are many differences between the

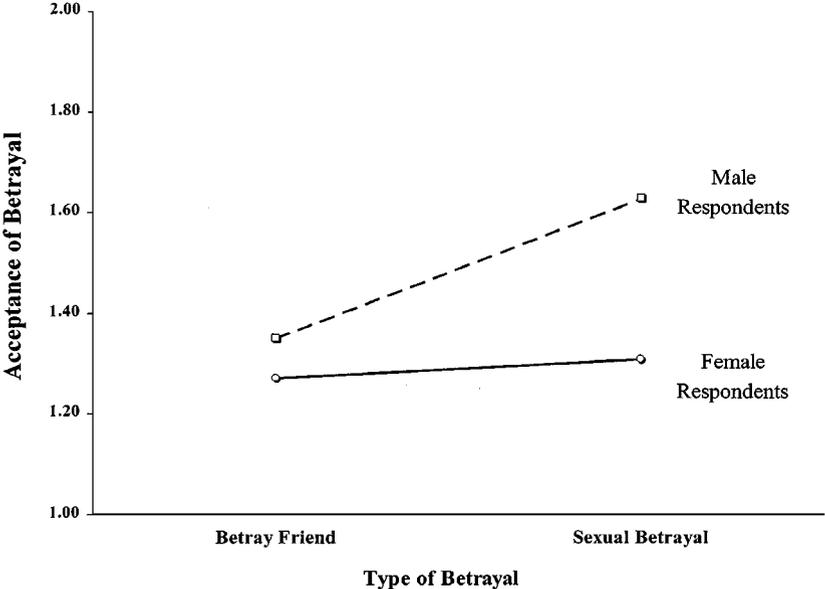


Fig. 2. The interaction of sex of respondent and type of betrayal on acceptance of betrayal.

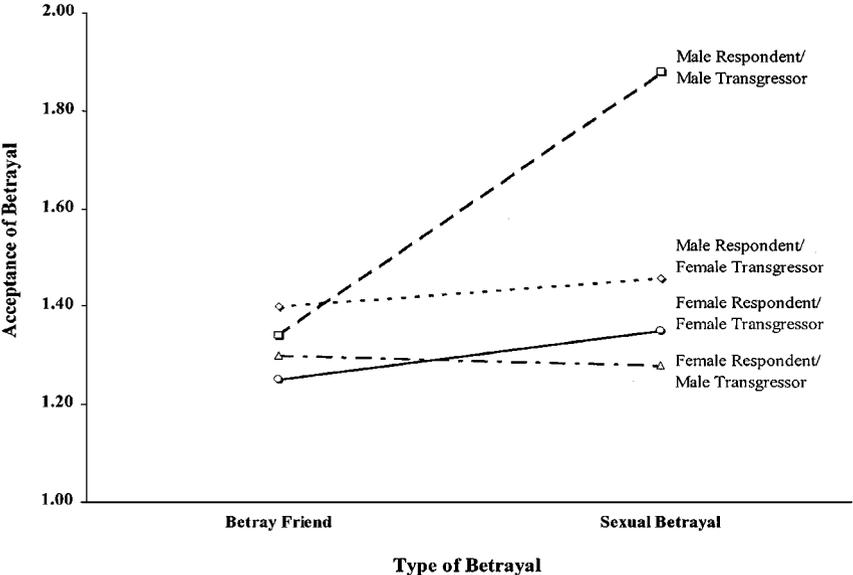


Fig. 3. Three way interaction between sex of respondent, sex of transgressor, and type of betrayal on acceptance of betrayal.

various groups in Fig. 3, there are 2 notable features. First, there is one group that shows markedly more acceptance of betrayal than any other. Specifically, males accept male perpetration of sexual betrayal more readily than male perpetration of betrayal of a friend (which is the least acceptable form of betrayal from a male's perspective). Conversely, while females are generally low in acceptance of both kinds of betrayal, they accept female perpetration of sexual betrayal more readily than female perpetration of betrayal of a friend's confidence (which again is the least acceptable form of betrayal from a female's perspective). In other words, for both males and females, the most acceptable form of betrayal is sexual betrayal by a member of their *own* sex, and the least acceptable form of betrayal is betrayal of a friend's confidence by a member of their own sex.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we found that college students strongly disapprove of betrayal, although the type of betrayal (whether of a romantic partner or a same-sex friend), the justification for the betrayal, and the characteristics of the respondents influenced the degree of unacceptability. Specifically, there was greater acceptance of sexual betrayal than betrayal of a friend's confidence, of male transgression than female transgression, and by males than by females. However, these factors interacted in important ways, and most findings of statistical significance resulted from the fact that compared to others, males showed relatively high acceptance of sexual betrayal by male transgressors. Beyond sex of respondent, characteristics such as tolerance of deviation, behavioral betrayal, and self-restraint were also associated with acceptance of betrayal.

Before we discuss these findings in detail, we discuss 3 factors that may limit the generalizability of our findings. First, our sample was limited to primarily white college students, and results may be somewhat different for high school students and for ethnically diverse samples. It is noteworthy that we sought but were denied permission (by high school principals) to collect data from high schoolers on sexual betrayal. The restriction of the sample to mostly white college students is likely to underestimate the acceptability of betrayal, as in other works we found an association between amount of education and acceptance of betrayal (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999b) and a greater permissiveness in sexual attitudes in non-Asian minority groups than in White students (Feldman *et al.*, 1999). Nonetheless, despite being limited to primarily 1 age and ethnic group, our key results were very strong and therefore likely to hold up—and even be enhanced—by a more diverse sample.

Second, each type of betrayal was assessed by only 1 vignette and it is likely that vignettes with different content may modify the results. For example, the sexual betrayal vignette in our study described a person as having sexual intercourse with a new partner while in a monogamous relationship. We know, however, from other research, that many youth include in their definition of betrayal such

behaviors as emotional involvement, dating, kissing, and petting (Hansen, 1987) although, in general, they do not judge these as serious a form of betrayal as sexual intercourse (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999a). Had we focused on 1 of these extradyadic behaviors instead of sexual intercourse, there may have been somewhat more acceptance of sexual betrayal. The vignette describing betrayal of a friend's confidence focused on an issue that involved a possible health risk—a secret about planned abortion of an unintended pregnancy. The topic of the secret may have made betrayal more acceptable, given that abortion is an issue on which emotions run high and at least some youth may have felt that there was a higher morality—saving a life—that had precedence over protecting a friend's confidence. A different vignette, in this case, may have elicited even less acceptance of betrayal of friend. Thus, the specific details of the betrayal may influence the acceptability of betrayal. Nonetheless, the very low rates of acceptance of betraying a friend's secret suggests to us that the topic of the secret, in reality, did not greatly color the findings.

Third, self-report measures used in this study are subject to reporting biases. Social desirability effects are likely to be especially salient, given the near-universal disapproval of betrayal. It is thus important to keep in mind, when interpreting the results of this study, that disapproving attitudes toward betrayal are likely to be overstated.

In recent years, alarm has been expressed about the moral judgments and values of adolescents and young adults. Specifically, concern is expressed that many youth have failed to internalize moral values and instead have developed a morality of expediency—doing what is good for them with relatively little regard as to how it affects others (Bennett, 1994). Evidence for this concern is found in increasing rates of antisocial behavior (between 1980 and the mid 1990s), including gang-related violence, sexual assault, robbery, drug use, cheating in school, among other things (Jendrek, 1992; Stahl, 1998). Our data, however, are not consistent with such pessimism about the moral evaluations and standards of youth. At least among college students, we found high consensus on the unacceptability of betrayal—even in situations deliberately designed to make betrayal somewhat more acceptable. Our findings clearly reflect that emerging adults, at least in principle, endorse “trust” as an important value and “betrayal” as an unacceptable violation of this value.

Disapproval of betrayal—whether sexual betrayal or betrayal of a friend's confidence—was widespread. Mean scores of acceptance were very low—almost creating a floor effect. For example, despite diverse justifications provided for betrayal, 20% of college students judged sexual betrayal as totally unacceptable in all the 20 circumstances that we described, and 17% found betrayal of a friend's confidence totally unacceptable in each of the situations described. However, the majority of students were more differentiated in their thinking. Although generally strongly disapproving of betrayal, there nonetheless were certain justifications that made betrayal somewhat more acceptable.

Justifications for Betrayal

Although the nature of the justification was an important influence on the acceptability of betrayal, our attempts to classify justifications were unsuccessful. There were 3 findings that led us to abandon our search for a classification scheme of justifications. First, using PCA we failed to obtain meaningful groupings of justifications. Second, despite using many parallel justifications for the 2 betrayal situations, the resulting classifications were dissimilar in structure. Third, we tried to use the classification schemes of others, based on conceptual analysis and empirical work, but did not find them helpful. For example, Gruenich (1982) described motives for an immoral act (such as lying or betraying others) as positive, negative, or neutral. Although we had no trouble finding items that fit this classification, the neutral category was very large, with very diverse justifications included. Other classification schemes resulted in highly correlated scores. In contrast to our difficulties in creating a meaningful classification of justifications, our composite score of acceptance or unacceptance of betrayal had highly satisfactory psychometric properties. Thus it remains a task for others to find a useful and generalizable classification of justifications.

We examined the effect of specific justifications (at the item level) on the acceptability of betrayal. Among the most acceptable justifications for both forms of betrayal was the justification that the transgressor was from a different culture. It appears that by invoking culture, the issue was ostensibly changed from a moral issue, one involving harm to another person, albeit psychological harm, to a conventional issue in which it was simply a matter of implicit or explicit understandings or custom as to how to behave (Turiel, 1998). Even more interestingly, while cultural norms were deemed an acceptable justification for betrayal, peer group norms were deemed among the least acceptable justifications. Respondents thus seem to indicate that one should have the perspective to avoid transgressions arising from peer pressure, but that large-scale societal or cultural influences cannot reasonably be resisted.

“Fell in love with a new partner” was the most acceptable justification for sexual betrayal in this Mid-Western sample. This finding replicates previously reported results with different samples in a different part of the country (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999b). Furthermore, it is consistent with the actual motives given by people who have betrayed a partner (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999a). Because there is evidence that the actual or expected frequency of an immoral behavior influences its acceptability (Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman, 1997; McGraw, 1985), we were not surprised that this justification was one of the more acceptable reasons for betrayal. As was the case for cultural influences, emotional or romantic attraction appears to be considered beyond an individual’s control and therefore a more acceptable justification for betrayal. This finding is consistent with previous research, which has described the “romantic narrative” as one of

the central themes of our culture, especially among young adults (Kirkman *et al.*, 1998).

If a self-serving justification was the most acceptable justification for sexual betrayal, a prosocial (or positive) justification “Enable friend to get help” was the most acceptable justification for divulging a friend’s secret. Indeed, this was the most acceptable justification for either form of betrayal and was the only justification which had a mean score greater than 2 (somewhat unacceptable). This justification potentially pits 2 moral issues—keeping one’s word and helping people from harming themselves or others—against one another. Especially since the issue involves abortion, which in the eyes of some people involves the taking of a life and at a minimum has health risks for the mother associated with it, some youth may have judged the moral priority of obtaining (unasked for) help to be greater than that of keeping a promise.

The least acceptable motives for sexual betrayal and betrayal of a friend were similar and involved the ability to escape detection. This finding suggests that college students accept the internalization of standards and it is not simply the desire to avoid getting caught or consequent punishments or embarrassments that influences their judgments of acceptability. These findings on the least acceptable reasons for betrayal, however, are at odds with the factors that influence moral conduct. Both children and adolescents are more likely to engage in transgressions such as cheating, lying, and stealing when the chances of detection are low (Dornbusch, 1987; Hartshorne and May, 1928; Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman, 1997).

Sex Differences

This study reported a number of important findings, including that there was more acceptance of sexual betrayal than betrayal of a friend’s confidence, that males approved of betrayal more than did females, and that betrayal by a male transgressor was more acceptable than by a female transgressor. However, each of these results either held under some conditions and not under others or held more strongly for some circumstances than for others. At root, there was one group that showed markedly more acceptance of betrayal than any other group and that contributed to all the major group differences in this study. Specifically, the finding that males showed relatively high approval of sexual betrayal by male transgressors accounts for virtually all other findings, including those pertaining to betrayal type (i.e., greater acceptance of sexual betrayal than betrayal of a friend’s confidence), sex of respondent, (i.e., that males approve more of betrayal than do females), and effect of transgressor (i.e., that there is more acceptance of sexual betrayal when perpetrated by a male than by a female).

A number of different theoretical perspectives help explain the greater acceptance by males of male sexual betrayal. On the one hand, from a social learning

perspective young men and women learn to value sexual involvement and emotional commitments differently by observing the actions of those around them. Mass media and popular culture are replete with male role models ranging from the classic James Bond to the more modern rap idol Puff Daddy which stress strong expressions of sexuality coupled with minimal affection for their sexual partner (Huston and Wright, 1998; Moore and Rosenthal, 1993). In fact, the masculine gender stereotype portrays males as interested in sex and attempting to get it by any means possible (Lees, 1989).

The finding that males have relatively high acceptance of sexual betrayal perpetrated by males is also consistent with a sociobiological perspective (Buss, 1995). This viewpoint suggests that males engage in a variety of different strategies, including mating with as many different partners as possible, to improve their reproductive odds. As a result, males tend to have permissive attitudes regarding sexuality, in general, and betrayal by males, in particular. In an extension of this argument, men in general are more concerned about and less accepting of sexual infidelity by females because it interferes with the likelihood that they are the father of their partner's offspring. Females, on the other hand, are, from an evolutionary perspective, likely to benefit from the assistance of a mate during child rearing, and thus they strongly value intimacy and loyalty by both males and females. They find betrayal unacceptable because it could lead to loss of their partner's much-needed time and resources in child rearing.

Our results suggest that the double standard is not yet dead, despite claims to the contrary. At least as judged by males, sexual betrayal by male transgressors is much more acceptable than sexual betrayal by female transgressors. Although data from the last decade has shown that males and females are converging in terms of sexual behavior (age of sexual debut, number of partners, etc.), our data suggest that among males, attitudes lag behind behavior, and in the realm of acceptability of betrayal, the double standard still remains in operation. It is interesting to note, however, that young adult women no longer accept the double standard—they report that sexual betrayal is unacceptable regardless of whether it is carried out by male transgressors or female transgressors.

Correlates of Acceptance of Betrayal

The present study focused on 3 correlates all related to misconduct—an attitudinal measure which involved the tolerance of deviation, a behavioral measure of misconduct relating specifically to betrayal, and a personality measure which involved lack of self-restraint. These correlates were associated in similar ways with both forms of betrayal. Specifically, college students who were tolerant of deviation, had low self-restraint, and had engaged in betrayal in their own lives were likely to be accepting of both sexual betrayal and betrayal of a friend's confidence. We had initially selected these variables because they were associated with

a wide array of problem behaviors, such as fighting, early sexuality, and heavy drug and alcohol use. We had posited that low impulse control and little consideration for others would make it likely that young adults would be accepting of behavior that had immediate gratification and self-gain as a goal. In this regard, our prediction was general to acceptance of deviance rather than specific to acceptance of betrayal. We would expect, and indeed data support the expectation, that low self-restraint and tolerance of deviation are associated with many different kinds of transgressions (Dryfoos, 1990; Feldman and Weinberger, 1994; Jessor and Jessor, 1977; McCord, 1990). The finding that the same correlates are also associated with acceptance of 2 different types of betrayal suggests that acceptance of betrayal may be part of a larger package of problem behaviors.

We predicted and found that behavioral betrayal is a correlate of acceptance of betrayal. There are 2 aspects of this finding that are worth noting. First, the size of the relationship, although significant, was of modest magnitude and notably less than the other correlates of this study. This observation raises the question as to why the association is so low, especially since the behavior and attitudes we assessed were matched in level of generality. We suspect the answer has to do with our methods. Our study focused on the evaluations or appraisals of acceptability. What we did not focus on was the salience of moral concerns to the identities of these students. When moral concerns are salient to the identity of youth there is a higher correspondence between behavior and attitudes than when moral concerns are not salient (Walker *et al.*, 1995).

Second, although we document a modest association between appraisals and behavior we do not know the direction of effects. It is as likely that behavior precedes attitudes (as claimed by Cognitive Dissonance theory) as the converse, that is, that attitudes influence behavior. Indeed, it is likely that the direction of effects works both ways. Suffice to say at this point, that the 2 were related—those with greater acceptance of betrayal were more likely to have engaged in betrayal than those who reported lower acceptance.

Our study has focused on college students' acceptance of 2 forms of betrayal. Until this point, the few extant studies on betrayal focused only on *sexual* betrayal, making it difficult to know whether the findings pertain primarily to the sexual domain (which has a strong salience for this age group) or whether it pertains to betrayal or violated agreements more generally. By including 2 different forms of betrayal and by finding marked similarities in the data, we are now in a position to answer this question. College students strongly disapprove of both forms of betrayal—and they disapprove even more strongly of betrayal of a same-sex friend than of a romantic partner. Similar characteristics—namely tolerance of deviation, behavioral betrayal, and lack of self-restraint—are related to acceptance of both forms of betrayal. However, large sex differences were found only in the acceptance of sexual betrayal and only modest sex differences were found in betrayal of a friend's confidence. Specifically, the strong finding that males show relatively high approval of sexual betrayal by males suggests that sex roles and cultural

scripts continue to influence the sexual domain in a way that they don't influence the moral domain more generally.

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