

Book Review

Sexualities

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Alicia M Walker, *The Secret Life of the Cheating Wife: Power, Pragmatism, and Pleasure in Women's Infidelity*, Lexington Books: Lanham, MD, 2018; 204 pp.: ISBN: 978-1498544603, \$90.00 (£60.00)

At present, challenges to the idea that gender and gendered distinctions are natural, innate, and unchanging seem to be gaining more momentum outside the academy. Yet despite this trend, beliefs in 'natural' variances between women and men—such as differences in sexual preferences and desires—continue to persist in the USA. As Alicia M Walker points out in *The Secret Life of The Cheating Wife*, stereotypes abound in terms of gendered sexual preferences. While popular stereotypes situate men as inclined to desire unemotional sex with multiple partners, women are expected to prefer emotional, monogamous bonds. Though the existence of women who pointedly seek out sexual affairs challenges this expectation, this group remains something of an enigma. Who are these women, why do they seek out sexual affairs, and how do they make sense of their transgression of gendered sexual expectations? In researching a group of women who actively use the Ashley Madison website to seek sexual affairs, Walker sets out to answer these questions.

In addition to challenging the notion that unemotional sexual affairs are primarily of interest to men, Walker's book provides an important snapshot of a difficult-to-reach group: women who have secret sexual affairs. Owing to the taboo and delicate nature of infidelity or secret non-exclusivity (also described in the book as 'non-consensual non-monogamy'), Walker uses email to interview women who use the Ashley Madison website—an online dating site targeting those who are in relationships and interested in finding outside partners. In total, the book covers interviews with 46 women, most of whom are in their 30s and 40s.

Among the sample, Walker found that the women situated their use of the site in reference to their 'primary' monogamous relationships. However, their specific reasons for pursuing affairs outside those relationships varied. One popular response offered by the women was sexual incompatibility with primary partners. This incompatibility could be due to differences in libido as well as differences in preference regarding certain sexual practices. Yet, while many women cited their affairs as a mood- or esteem-boosting activity, most women also stressed that they did not seek out affairs to fill an emotional void. These women were generally not looking for new monogamous partners or emotional bonds. However,

many women shared with Walker that they had to carefully navigate around *men* on the website who were looking for emotional, monogamous commitments.

At the same time that these women challenged gendered expectations about preferences for emotional monogamy, women's affairs could also serve as space of resistance against the gendered expectations they had to deal with in their primary partnerships and public lives. For women, home lives could be a space of constraint with heavy emotion-work demands. Women made sense of their affairs as a space in which to reclaim power and to have experiences for no one else but themselves. Women considered the temporary nature of their affairs to be liberating, since affairs could serve as an arena in which women set the rules. This differed from women's primary relationships in which they often felt pressure to cede to partners' wishes. However, women's experience with finding outside partners was not uncomplicated, as women still often faced gendered backlash from men on the Ashley Madison site when they asserted their agency.

In addition to the finding that women's affair experiences challenged gendered expectations, Walker found evidence that women achieved a non-normative 'perspective shift' regarding beliefs about monogamy and relationships. Rather than blame their individual partners for dissatisfaction in their primary sexual relationships, some women problematized monogamy as a societal expectation. Though women did keep their affairs secret out of concern for how their primary partners might react, women decided that relationships can indeed be fluid and that the rules of relationships should ideally be defined by individuals rather than by society.

In general, *The Secret Life of The Cheating Wife* sparks an interesting conversation about the ways in which infidelity operates in the lives of adult American women. I appreciate the novelty of the study design and the accessibility of Walker's prose. As a scholar who studies aged meanings, I would be interested to hear more from the author about how age or generational effects could be significant to the findings. Most of the participants profiled in the research are from a specific age group (30s and 40s), and infidelity may serve different purposes across the life course. Ultimately, this book makes important contributions to the field and would be of interest to those studying heterosexuality, gendered sexuality, and intimacy.

Cristen Dalessandro

Pacific University, USA

Email: dalessandro@pacificu.edu