

Beyond the Trauma of Betrayal: Reconsidering Affairs in Couples Therapy

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Kipnis, Laura. *Against Love: A Polemic*. Pantheon Books, 2003.

Mitchell, Stephen. *Can Love Last? The Fate of Romance Over Time*. Norton, 2002.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was presented with the opportunity to write an essay about infidelity, I was very glad—albeit cautious—to have a forum to discuss ideas that have been stewing in my mind for more than 25 years. Having been born and raised in Latin America, I have often felt a sense of cultural dissonance with my colleagues in the United States about this topic. Since the 1970s, when I started practicing and then teaching family therapy in Chicago, I have been concerned about the way affairs are typically approached in our field, both conceptually and clinically. Lately, as a new wave of fundamentalism has crept into American culture, I have felt that it is even more critical to reflect upon our premises. I am thinking of the witch hunt that led to President Clinton’s impeachment, and of the recent presidential election won on a platform of “absolute” family values. In this climate, I appreciate the opportunity to put on my bicultural lenses and examine the ways in which the moral imperatives of the dominant, puritanical culture may be penetrating our clinical work. Moreover, I welcome the chance to bring Laura Kipnis and Stephen Mitchell into our discussion. These two authors, because they already think outside our frame, encourage us to question our assumptions and to refocus our professional conversation about affairs from the almost exclusive angle of their impact to a broader framework that starts with the emotional forces that compel individuals to have affairs in the first place. Kipnis and Mitchell, who are not family therapists, deconstruct prevalent ideas about the institution of marriage, and in so doing, they highlight the primacy of *desire* and *romantic love* in our lives. As they recognize the contradictions inherent in our experiences of love, they encourage us to delve into love’s irrational dimensions, inviting us to embrace more complexity and more ambiguity. My main objectives in this article are to use Kipnis’s and Mitchell’s ideas to spur us to reconsider our assumptions, and to bring in the possibility of understanding and working with affairs within a multicultural perspective. The premises to be discussed allow us flexibility to address multiple values and meanings, to take into account nuances of specific situations, and

to permit the individuals involved in an affair choice and self-determination in matters of secrecy and truth-telling.

THE MAIN PROFESSIONAL BOOKS

Much of what has been written about infidelity by family therapists focuses on the impact of affairs and the trauma of betrayal. What was once for Madame Bovary a search for romantic love is today, in the professional literature, encased in a framework of *betrayal* that is less about love and desire and more about symptoms in need of a cure. This is not to say that the work on the traumatic effects of affairs is not important; it is indeed very helpful, and an essential piece of what therapists must consider. However, the problem with organizing our understanding about affairs mostly within the framework of “trauma of betrayal” is that in so doing, we skew our exploration and leave out essential questions related to the dialectic between our social constructions of marriage and infidelity (Kipnis, 2003; Mitchell, 2002; Reibstein & Martin, 1993), and the relative value placed on monogamy by different individuals and groups. In embracing this predominant framework of trauma (Herman, 1992), we also leave out our human dilemmas related to the difficulties in reconciling attachment and desire with the same person (Perel, 2003). In addition, when we consider that love and the vagaries of desire are fueled by an infinite number of emotional forces, it becomes our job to understand and grasp the meaning of these undercurrents rather than to infuse particular moral ideas into the love experience. By overfocusing on the impact of affairs, we get away from this fuller understanding about the motives, contextual forces, and cultural ideas that may propel individuals into affairs in the first place. In addition, by remaining attached in a rigid way to the American values of *transparency* and *truth-telling*—keeping them central in both our conceptualization of intimacy and in the way that we conduct couples therapy—we constrain the parameters of our clinical work, and in some situations promote the very trauma that we are trying to heal.

The current clinical framework in family therapy about infidelity has evolved over the course of the past 15 years, when several systems-oriented therapists wrote therapeutic and self-help books marketed to heterosexual couples in monogamous arrangements. As expressed in their titles, the main focus of these publications is to help couples deal with the traumatic impact of affairs, and how to rebuild their marriages after disclosure. Although aspects of this literature apply to gay couples, it doesn’t apply to those in the gay community who choose nonmonogamous sexual arrangements. David Greenan and Gil Tunnell (2003) point out that in the gay community, it is not uncommon for couples to choose nonmonogamous sexual arrangements with the commitment in the primary relationship being mostly about emotional fidelity, attachment, and dependability rather than sexual faithfulness. The family therapy literature on affairs presumes the cultural norm of long-term monogamous partnerships as an ideal, and what is considered healthy. It does not account for individuals, cultures, and subcultures that consider monogamy as a relative value.

In the last 15 years, there has been an evolution in the literature of affairs from a linear, outright moral perspective of villain and victim (Pittman, 1989) to a more balanced and tolerant understanding of the two partners in their interconnected, but also separate, dilemmas (Abrams Spring, 1996; Brown 1991, 1999; Lusterman, 1998). While Pittman’s (1989) pioneer work on the topic of affairs is based on an explicit

moral position against infidelity, most of the other writers have focused on the impact of affairs, integrating selected ideas from the trauma field. The recent work of Shirley Glass (2003) is a direct application of the trauma of betrayal framework, combined with a moral position similar to that of Pittman. A recent empirical paper by Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2004) also conceptualizes working with affairs in terms of the trauma of betrayal.

In addition to the incorporation of trauma theory, most family therapists writing about infidelity assume that an affair is a symptom of problems in a marriage. These writers tend to take the value of the institution of marriage and monogamy as givens, and consider affairs to be a problem in an otherwise ideologically and structurally sound domestic arrangement. The one exception to these basic views is the work of Reibstein and Richards (1993). Working in England, they start from different premises and point to issues that are not addressed in the American literature. They begin with the assumption that monogamy is a human dilemma, then go on to probe the ways in which the decision to have an affair and the meaning of an affair may relate to an individual's implicit or explicit sociocultural constructions of marriage.

The work of Pittman (1998), Brown (1991, 1999), Lusterman (1998), and Abrams Spring (1996) represents prevailing assumptions in the field of family therapy that are basic in the training of family therapists. In *Private Lies: Infidelity and the Betrayal of Intimacy*, Pittman views contemporary marriage and monogamy as sacrosanct and sees affairs as a violation of this ideal. Pittman tries to show that fidelity is a matter of moral values and that affairs are always wrong and destructive. He is explicit in his view that when there is an affair, there is a villain and a victim; affairs are about "a breach of the trust," a "betrayal of a relationship," and "a breaking of an agreement" (p. 20). Affairs are not only immoral; they are "abnormal behavior" and are always a sign that the person who has the affair has "a problem" (p. 51). He gives no allowance for human contradictions and does not believe that the betrayed spouse should ever take any responsibility. In Pittman's world view, honesty is the most central and absolute value, regardless of any other consideration (e.g., the couple's cultural context, other competing values, or the nuances of their very specific situation). He also holds a monolithic view of intimacy as transparency. Whether an affair is in the present or in the past, telling the truth is the only way toward "true" intimate relating and toward recovery after an affair. Pittman pays lip service to other cultural beliefs, but ultimately states that there is one right way: the moral, middle-class American way. No other values hold equal legitimacy.

In *Patterns of Infidelity and Their Treatment* (1991) and *Affairs: A Guide to Working Through the Repercussions of Infidelity* (1999), Emily Brown moves away from an explicit moral perspective. She offers a *diagnostic* approach and proposes different categories of affairs—intimacy avoidance, conflict avoidance, sexual addiction, split self, and exit affairs—each one reflecting a different message about what is wrong in the marriage. According to Brown, affairs have little to do with sex; they are mostly about fears, disappointments, anger, and emptiness. They are also about love and acceptance. She conveys empathy for the struggles of both partners. However, like Pittman, she considers transparency about affairs to be unquestionably necessary for intimate relating, and truth-telling an essential step in the therapeutic process. She gives words of caution about *telling*, but then goes on to advise her readers, "Only with honesty can you rebuild your marriage on more solid ground. You can't build

intimacy on a base of betrayal and dishonesty—intimacy requires having everything out on the table” (1999, p. 34).

Brown also gives specific guidelines about the role of the couples’ therapist. She believes that once a secret about an affair is revealed in an individual session to the therapist, nothing more can be done therapeutically until the affair is out in the open. If the individual having the affair does not want to reveal it to the partner, the couples’ therapist must discontinue the therapy, and both partners should be referred individually. Not only must the affair be revealed, but it also must be terminated. Unwillingness to tell or to give up an affair are reasons to discontinue couples’ therapy. This dogmatic no-secrets policy, a consequence of the absolute valuation of honesty, is the way that most therapists are trained to work with couples in the United States. Interestingly, therapists who practice in other cultures (e.g., France, Holland, and Brazil and other Latin American countries) have a more nuanced understanding of honesty, hence they have more flexibility about how to handle secrets because the value placed on honesty is viewed in relative terms. As I will discuss, when the therapist respects that the disclosure of an affair is a matter of self-determination, the therapist must reconsider his or her confidentiality policy and the structure of couples therapy by adopting a flexible combination of individual and conjoint sessions.

Janis Abrams Spring (*After the Affair*, 1996) and Don-David Lusteran (*Infidelity: A Survival Guide*, 1998) focus their books on the aftermath of discovery or disclosure of infidelity. Both make an effort to present a balanced view about the respective struggles of the two partners. They also steer the conversation away from the villain-and-victim model and from the view that affairs are always symptomatic of deeper problems in the marriage. But even though Abrams Spring does not use the language of trauma theory, she nevertheless gives the best and most detailed account of the traumatic effects and symptoms that typically follow the revelation of an affair. She describes the physiological, psychological, spiritual, and relational changes that occur in the betrayed partner, but she is fair and also gives an empathic account of the unfaithful partner’s struggles: his or her grief, guilt, paralysis, and difficult choices.

Given that Abrams Spring’s focus is the aftermath of affairs that have been disclosed or discovered, her definition of an affair stays intrinsically connected to the affair consequences for the partner. Despite her clear attempts not to be judgmental, in her framework an affair remains primarily defined as a violation of trust. This brings up questions about emphases and narrative. Even though we may all agree that affairs often involve betrayal and deception, it is worth considering that affairs are not necessarily *about* betrayal, deception, and the consequent damage. As I listen to life stories involving affairs, it seems clear to me that the emotions and meanings that propel someone into an affair are mostly about yearning (Weil, 2003). The yearning can be for a particular kind of emotional connection, assurance, self-discovery, novelty, or freedom; it may also involve a wish to recapture lost parts of the self, or an attempt to bring back vitality in the face of loss or tragedy. An affair can also be part of a process of individuation (Welter-Enderlin, 1993), or a way of counteracting disappointment, emptiness, or constraint. Affairs can also be about fantasy and illusions, or even related to feelings of anger and revenge. Deceiving and hurting the partner are indeed serious consequences, and the very high price an individual pays for the choice of having an affair, but deception and betrayal are rarely primary motivations.

In a short but most interesting epilogue, Abrams Spring discusses what I believe is a cutting-edge issue for couples therapists working with infidelity today. In meditating

about the value placed on honesty, she wisely recognizes that what is good for one couple may be bad for another. She considers that for some couples, telling the truth may not be healing or productive: "Even if you you're committed to rebuilding the relationship, there is no one clear way to proceed. For some couples the truth can have adverse, even destructive, consequences. For others it's essential for restoring a damaged relationship . . . so in grappling with the best strategy, it may help to ask, 'Best for whom?'" (p. 257). She goes on to say that restoring intimacy takes more than confession of infidelity: "Many unfaithful partners decide to hold on to their secret while they address what is bothering them in the relationship. That's a solution worth considering; you can certainly confront your partner with your unhappiness without revealing the affair and making your partner go through the arduous and delicate task of learning to trust and forgive you" (p. 258). After her book's publication, I have heard Abrams Spring propose an "open secrets policy" wherein the therapist provides a model of confidentiality in which he or she is given permission by the couple to keep individual secrets. This is similar to Lusterman's (1998) practice of obtaining confidentiality when he meets with individual partners. These policies represent a major step toward a new way of working in which the therapist may continue working with the couple even if the affair remains undisclosed.

Lusterman also sees honesty and transparency as major ingredients of intimate relating. However, being a master of exceptions, he appreciates the complexities of the issue. Like Abrams Spring, he recognizes that there are situations in which it is better not to tell. He says that sometimes honesty backfires, sometimes certain information overloads a particular marriage, sometimes the partner is dangerous, and sometimes there is a covert agreement for the couple not to talk about the affair, but instead to concentrate on improving the marriage. In talking directly to couples, he repeatedly stresses "how important it is to focus on the marriage itself, away from the infidelity" (p. 88). He says that keeping the focus on the third party will prevent clear thinking about what is required to improve the marriage. Nevertheless, neither Abrams Spring nor Lusterman focuses on explicit recommendations as to how the therapist should proceed in these situations involving undisclosed affairs.

Like most infidelity experts, Lusterman (1998) considers that although infidelity is often rooted in problems in the marriage, that is not exclusively the case. He recognizes that people are unfaithful for a variety of other reasons. Sometimes the reason is buried deep in the past or in the family of origin, sometimes it is related to beliefs about the opposite gender, and sometimes an affair is related to feeling vulnerable in a particular moment of the life cycle, such as the birth of a child, the loss of a parent, or being empty nested. Some affairs are related to different forms of entitlement, such as male privilege: "I am a man, therefore I have the right." Affairs may also arise from confusion regarding one's sexual orientation, sexual addictions, and acts of retaliation. Lusterman also talks about tripoid affairs: affairs that help maintain an unsatisfactory or tenuous marriage. Lusterman recognizes that that there is not one particular way of being married, and that people choose or presume different kinds arrangements. He incorporates trauma theory to understand the impact of affairs, but is careful to qualify that there are many possible reactions to an affair: "Not everyone who has discovered marital unfaithfulness is equally wounded, nor is every person whose infidelity is discovered equally affected" (p. 13).

As I mentioned, one exception to the trauma of betrayal framework in the professional literature is the work by Reibstein and Richards. In *Sexual Arrangements:*

Marriage and the Temptation of Infidelity (1993), the authors try to understand how couples might reconcile the inherent conflict of monogamy: Sexual activity tends to decline over time in long-term relationships, and sex is often more exciting and alluring with new partners. By looking at the interplay of our sociocultural notions of marriage and infidelity, they consider ways in which our very ideals of marriage may encourage affairs. They anticipate the work of Mitchell (2002) and Kipnis (2003) when they explain how today, with the ideal of companionate marriage, we expect our spouses to fulfill most of our needs; our partner must be the greatest lover, the best parent, the best friend, the intellectual equal, and the emotional companion. We also expect a lot of togetherness, and feel great disappointment when togetherness is not there. Given this “marriage is for everything” ideal, an affair will be perceived as a sign of something amiss in the primary relationship (p. 142). However, they point out that when couples embrace the model of an “open marriage”—where sex is not assumed to be sacred or exclusive—sex outside the relationship can be perceived as an enhancement to the primary relationship. Reibstein and Richards also identify what they label as a segmented model of marriage, which is common in some European and Latin American cultures. In this arrangement, the two partners enter the relationship with the expectation that the marriage will fulfill some needs but not others. Autonomy is highly valued, marriage and affairs are seen as separate domains, and affairs are presumed to be a private matter.

Reibstein and Richards (1993) consider the impact of affairs in ample terms. Not only do they look at the impact of disclosed affairs, but also of affairs that remain secret. They take into account that the impact of an affair will vary according to whether it is disclosed, undisclosed, or unintentionally discovered. They also believe that “the impact of an affair can be positive, neutral or disastrous” (p. 136). Expanding on the possibility of a positive impact, individually and for the couple, they explain, “Affairs have brought people increased self esteem, more sexual confidence, more insight into how one is with the opposite sex, a wisdom about relationships, and a greater sense of autonomy. People sometimes feel they grew while their marriages suffered. Yet others report that their own growth took place apart from their marriages and had no direct impact on them” (p. 145). “Sometimes the affair provides a context in which to reaffirm something one already knew but had lost in oneself” (p. 144). “Affairs can also produce reconsideration of the purpose of marriage: through affairs, a redefinition of marriage can evolve; and there may also be a reevaluation of what is possible and desirable” (p. 147). In writing about gay affairs, Betsy Kassoff (2003) reinforces this point, saying that “affairs can end in heartbreak, or in wisdom and renewal. Certainly, many people in long-term relationships have been able to use the experience of an affair to remind themselves of both the fragility and renewability of their bond,” (p. 13). Reibstein and Richards make one more interesting point about the impact of affairs: In secret affairs, one feels a need to confide in friends, and this can have profound positive effects on one’s friendships. The complicity involved tends to be very bonding.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Starting with similar premises as those of Reibstein and Richards (1993), Laura Kipnis (2003) and Stephen Mitchell (2002) focus their books on the complexities of monogamy and enduring love. They view such complexities as being beyond good and evil, and unrelated to ideas of the trauma of betrayal. Instead, they consider how our

struggles with love and desire are a fundamental part of our human condition. They dissect how committed relationships are constructed nowadays, and how our very constructions of companionate love are related to the demise of desire in long-term relationships. Kipnis, a Marxist media studies professor, looks at how the institution of marriage ties in with the larger context of consumer society. Mitchell, an astute psychoanalyst, considers in detail the subtleties involved in our emotional experiences.

Laura Kipnis

In *Against Love: A Polemic* (2003), Laura Kipnis takes an extreme position. She turns our dominant cultural convictions around and crucifies the prevailing American ideal of marriage—what historians of private life have coined “companionate coupledom.” She then considers infidelity as a healthy uprising against the uniformity and confinement of couples’ arrangements. In her deconstruction of “modern love,” Kipnis uses humor, sarcasm, and exaggeration as her primary analytic methods. As she questions our accepted meanings about love and marriage, she exposes a monolithic way of thinking about sexual arrangements in American culture. She also reminds us that sexual desire is a powerful force that is not so easily contained.

Kipnis describes companionate coupledom as “voluntary associations based (at least in principle) on intimacy, mutuality, and equality; falling in love as the prerequisite to a lifelong commitment that unfolds in conditions of shared domesticity [and] the expectation of mutual sexual fulfillment . . . and you will have sex with this person alone for the rest of your life” (p. 25). Her major argument is that American society, as reflected in popular culture, legal systems, and religious, political, and therapeutic institutions, has privileged this one way of being a couple to such an extent that it has become sanctified as a postfeminist ideal. However, she points out that there is pervasive dissatisfaction with the state of marriage today. Given the census data that half of all American marriages end in divorce, and the evidence that infidelity continues to rise, perhaps we should consider that the institution of marriage itself is not living up to its vows. We should be able to see that our ideal model of marriage is still in transition, and that one size does not fit all. Instead, we live in a society in which we are pressured, and pressure others, to love in a uniform way, a domesticated way—“busy worker bees and docile nesters all” (p. 25).

Kipnis (2003) sees couples’ therapy as having become part of a repressive social regimentation put in place to maintain the status quo. Whenever our prevailing model of relationships does not fit an individual or couple, rather than having the participants question the institution and consider other more fitting alternatives, modern American society insists on “shoehorning an entire citizenry” (p. 27) into the uniformity of this one arrangement. The couple who does not comply with loving in the prevalent way is diagnosed with the modern ailment of fear of intimacy, and is subsequently sent to therapy to work on themselves. In Kipnis’s view, couples therapy is a service industry that owes its “pricey existence” (p. 31) to the idea that our inherent ambivalence is a curable condition if only the partners “work at it.” The underlying assumption among clinicians is that passion is a childish form of love and that therapy is supposed to help us transform such primitive feelings into “mature love” (p. 34).

Kipnis (2003) claims that this mature kind of love—long-term love—is the form of love that is best adjusted to American society’s particular consumer ideology. “This modern belief that love lasts shapes us into particularly fretful psychological beings,

perpetually in search of prescriptions, interventions, aids. Passion must *not* be allowed to die! . . . At least this has an economic upside: whole new sectors of the economy have been spawned . . . from Viagra to couples porn: late capitalism's Lourdes for dying marriages" (p. 66). "Then there are the assorted low-tech solutions to desire's dilemmas: take advice" (p. 67). "Relationship advice is a booming business these days: between print, airwaves and the therapy industry. . . . Check out the relationship self-help aisle in your local bookstore chain, its floor-to-ceiling advice" (p. 68).

Kipnis (2003) asks, What is it about companionate coupledom that brings about its own demise? What creates the need for all this technical assistance? Her answer is that the major problem affecting couples today is the modern expectation that partners must meet each other's every need. "And so here we are, consigned to pursue an illusory completeness obviously impossible to attain, beset by unfulfillable longings, with our unfortunate mates designated as the after-the-fact scapegoats for impossibilities not really of their own making. (Thanks mom and dad!)" (p. 77). Out of these unrealistic expectations arises an inexplicable irritation and anger at a mate who fails to act in sufficiently reassuring ways by being overly independent, selfish, and not taking our feelings into account. She says, "How annoying! But scratch annoyance and you find. . . anxiety" (p. 78). Kipnis goes on to say that there is nothing more anxiogenic than our partner's independence and freedom, and that the fundamental bargain of long-term relationships derives directly from our wish to bind this anxiety. In our modern ways of loving, our individual autonomy and freedom have become secondary in importance to our partner's security and peace of mind—thus, the fabric of modern domesticity, from curfews, travel, and movement restrictions to injunctions that aim to prevent our partners from behaving in ways that cause irritation and displeasure. Hence, *mate behavior modification* is not only companionate coupledom's major bargain. . . it is "the major key that unlocks its universe" (p. 81). It is the deep structure of modern coupledom. In other words, according to Kipnis, the fault line of companionate coupledom is this anxiety that we experience about our partner's separateness and his or her inability to meet all of our needs—and all of the subsequent efforts that we make to create security and safety. She gives a litany of examples of how we desperately try to achieve this security: "You can't leave the house without saying where you are going" (p. 84), "I told you I hate when you. . . ." or "Can't you ever remember to. . . ." (p. 79), These interdictions—"highly nuanced, mutually imposed, exceedingly trivial commands and strictures extending into the most minute areas of household affairs, social life, finances, speech, hygiene, allowable idiosyncrasies, and so on" (p. 82)—become the leitmotif of domestic exchanges. Certainly domesticity offers innumerable rewards, as we all know. Nonetheless, Kipnis asks, "Why has modern love developed in such a way as to maximize submission and minimize freedom, with so little discussion about it?" (p. 94). The expectation that we meet each other's every need eventually turns domestic life into a straightjacket. It is in this context that spontaneity is lost and desire goes away.

Kipnis (2003) makes the point that modern love comes with the social injunction that we must work at love. But all of this pressure to work at love results in a labor-intensive kind of intimacy where remaining in the relationship ends up feeling like enforced compliance rather than a free expression of desire. She says, "When monogamy becomes labor, when desire is organized contractually with accounts kept and fidelity extracted like labor from employees, with marriage a domestic factory policed by means of rigid shop discipline. . . is this really what we mean by a 'good relationship?'" (p. 19). A good relationship may take work, she says, but erotically speaking,

“work doesn’t work. . . . play is what works” (p. 18). In her words, infidelity “is the sit-down-strike of the love-takes-work ethic” (p. 31).

The weakest link in this modern model of companionate coupledness is the power of desire. Desire, she says, is a freedom fighter, and it “won’t just take no for an answer” (p. 44). Desire tends to break through, protesting the limitations and confinements of couples’ lives. Desire is also the entry point in the world of our inherent ambivalence about love: “On the one hand, the yearning for intimacy, on the other, the desire for autonomy; on the one hand, the comfort and security of routine, on the other, its soul-deadening predictability; on one side the pleasure of being known (and deeply knowing another person), on the other the straight-jacketed roles that such familiarity predicates—the shtick of couple’s interactions: the repetition of arguments; the boredom and rigidities which aren’t about to be transcended in this or any life time. . . . Given everything, a success rate of 50 percent seems about right (assuming that success means longevity)” (p. 35).

Kipnis (2003) acknowledges that infidelity has its own problems and contradictions. It brings about jealousy, deception, self-deception, and ultimately, is a destabilizing experience in which one feels “awakened from emotional deadness,” but also very anxious and guilty. However, she considers that diminishing desire in long-term marriages is a serious loss. In her view, erotic energy is essential for our sense of vitality, and yet we are wired in such a way that desire and commitment do not seem to coexist well. She is radical in her conclusion that given the coerciveness built into the fabric of couples’ relationships, a happy long-term marriage that keeps sexuality alive is an impossibility. Kipnis is skeptical about enduring love, but what she does well is invite us to observe our own behavior and consider how our desperate attempts at security tend to backfire. In our efforts to contain the threats of separateness, freedom, independence, and change, we paradoxically create a jail of our committed relationships that we then long to escape.

Stephen Mitchell

In *Can Love Last? The Fate of Romance Over Time* (2002), Steven Mitchell, in a very different tone from that of Kipnis, deals with similar issues about what he considers to be the inherent difficulties of combining desire and long-term love. He writes, “Authentic romance is hard to find and even harder to maintain. It easily degrades into something else. Much less captivating, much less enlivening, such as sober respect or purely sexual diversion, predictable companionship, or hatred, guilt, and self-pity. . . . Romance thrives on novelty, mystery and danger; it is dispersed by familiarity. Enduring love is therefore a contradiction in terms” (p. 27).

Mitchell points out that historically, in most cultures, there has been a clear separation between the domestic and the erotic. People married, often by arrangement, with the goal of procreating and maintaining a family life; in this way, they achieved legal marital “rights.” Eros was either repressed or sought out elsewhere. Today, with greater expectations about sexuality and the model of companionate love, we want to combine the domestic and the erotic in one person. He considers that the reconciling of these two pulls is not impossible, but it is difficult and fragile.

Mitchell explains that human beings crave both security and adventure, both the familiar and the novel. We sometimes pursue these longings alternately, sometimes in a delicate balance with each other. But because they pull us in opposite directions, a

balance between security and adventure can only be a transitory equilibrium, a temporary pause in our struggle to reconcile these contradictory longings. “Before marriage, couples often experience themselves as free, childlike, adventurous and spontaneous. In marriage, they seek stability and permanence” (p. 50). “Total safety, predictability, and oneness, permanently established, quickly become stultifying... Because it is illusory and contrived, permanent safety stifles vitality and generates expressions of exuberant defiance” (p. 51). “Sexuality is perfectly designed for rebellion against such contracts, precisely because sexual response can be neither willed nor willfully controlled. Sexual arousal is unruly and unpredictable; it entails vulnerability and risk; it gives the lie to illusions of safety and control” (p. 51). In her article *Queer Affairs*, Betsy Kassoff (2003) resonates with this dilemma proposed by Mitchell: “We can imagine that for gay people, it is crucial in our long term relationships to feel safe and accepted, given our histories of insecurity and vulnerability surrounding our identities. And yet it is also critical to experience our erotic selves; our desire” (p. 13).

As Mitchell addresses the dialectic between commitment and the unruly nature of sexuality, he points to a promising area of clinical exploration with couples. He says that we endlessly strive to establish in our marriages the safety, permanence, and predictability that we had (or wish we had had) in our childhoods. But it is this very emotional pursuit of a safe marriage—as if it could be totally safe—that will lead to a loss of spontaneity and eventually kill desire. If we can accept that our human experience is, by its very nature, in flux, then we may be able to see that it is the static concepts of home and security that are generated through acts of our imagination. Constant change is indeed destabilizing, but it is our intolerance of and anxiety about our fluidity (and the fluidity of our partner) that compel us to quickly turn desire into obligation and our homes into prisons. He points out that certain forms of knowing the other person end up being coercive, as he or she strives to fix the multiplicity of the other person into an overly predictable pattern. These forms of knowing, prevalent in long-term relationships, have a strong appeal but unwittingly tend to kill romantic love. So when couples’ relationships become predictable, overtaxed with negotiations, obligations, responsibilities, contractual deals, and demands, our needs for freedom and spontaneity also become more pressing. This may explain why couples are particularly vulnerable to affairs during the childbearing years, when marriages, unsupported by extended family and community ties, tend to become overwhelmed. Mitchell points out that the more constrained our construction of marriage and family life is, the greater will be the urge to find freedom elsewhere. Mitchell doesn’t talk directly about affairs; he focuses on the difficulties of managing this split between the predictable and the novel. It is implicit in his statement that when we mismanage our contradictory pulls by constricting desire, we paradoxically create the ideal conditions for sexual transgressions.

THE CONTEXT : GENDER, POWER, AND THE PURITAN ELEMENT

Gender and Power

One missing piece in Kipnis’s (2003) and Mitchell’s (2002) analyses is the historical context of marriage (and long-term relationships) in terms of patriarchy and the power inequality that has existed across the world and throughout the centuries. After all, until very recently, infidelity was an absolute prerogative only for men. Both Mitchell and Kipnis look at the problems of companionate coupledness assuming equal

power of the partners, but even with all of the recent changes in women's roles and position in the world, brought on by contraception and economic independence, we still suffer from a legacy of inequality that applies to the emotional life of couples in American society and certainly in most other cultures as well.

It is only in the last 35 years that some women have dared to be sexually free. So when Mitchell and Kipnis talk about our opposing existential pulls toward security and freedom, it is safe to assume that both men's and women's experiences are still colored by the experiences of our parents and grandparents. I believe that although men today are still better prepared for freedom, adventure, and discovery, women, having the legacy of powerlessness for millennia and still carrying most of the burdens of family care, still need to hold on tightly to greater predictability and safety. It is possible that the television program *Sex and the City* was so popular exactly because it addresses these very recent changes in woman's sexual behavior in the direction of greater freedom, adventure, and discovery.

The one issue that has been common in basically all cultures across time is the double standard about extramarital sex. Women have traditionally been considered to be the property of men, and as a result, they have had different social privileges and legal rights, and have been held to different moral standards, especially in matters of sexuality. Even today, in patriarchal cultures, men are born entitled to their freedom and their pleasure; women must submit to sexuality in spite of their pleasure and without much agency. A famous Argentinian Tango, "Amablemente" (Kindly), captures the double standard in a tragic way: "When I meet her in the arms of another man, self assured and without getting angry, I say to the man, 'You can leave.' The man is never guilty in these cases. . . and then, giving her small kisses, with great tranquility, and kindly, I struck her 34 times with a knife."

Anthropologist Suzanne Frayser (1985) studied sexuality in 62 cultures, present and past, and found that in 26 of 58 societies, the husband was allowed to have extramarital sex but not the wife. In half of those, the husband was legally given the option to kill his unfaithful wife. In cultures that permitted adultery, none allowed it for women and not for men. Some cultures define adultery differently for men and women. In Jewish law, for example, it is still on the books that a married woman is guilty of adultery if she has sexual intercourse with any man other than her husband, while a married man is guilty only if he has sex with another man's wife. What he is guilty of is not disloyalty to his own wife, but of committing a property crime against another man. Under Muslim law, a man is allowed to have sex outside marriage and to kill or divorce his wife if she is found doing the same. In modern Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, women are still stoned to death for adultery. This is the case in parts of Africa as well. In Morocco today, women who are divorced by their husbands end up rejected by their families and become pariahs and beggars. Until the late 1970s in Brazil, men who were betrayed by their wives would kill their partners without legal consequences; their "crimes of passion" were considered justified. It wasn't until 1979—when the famous case of Angela Diniz, murdered by her husband for infidelity, garnered enough media attention to launch a social movement (with the slogan "He who loves does not kill")—that this legal practice turned around in Brazil. This movement changed the laws and practices in the country, and nowadays, women lawyers tend to take charge of such cases.

We have also seen in literature how adulterous women are viewed in a much more negative light than adulterous men, and are punished a lot more harshly. Tolstoy's

Ana Karenina, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Hawthorne's *Hester Prynne* are all symbols of the punishment and humiliation that followed a woman's adultery. In spite of the recent changes in the structure of marriage in Western culture there are still many remnants of a power differential in American marriages. One example is the finding by Laumann and colleagues (1994) that, in the United States, men tend to divorce their wives for infidelity more often than wives divorce their husbands. He also points out that in matters of telling the truth, women are still more harshly punished if discovered; men are less forgiving and more prone to revenge and acts of violence.

The principal motivations for having an affair may also vary according to gender. A leading reason for men to have affairs is still the sense of entitlement, like the middle-aged man who, feeling prosperous, leaves his aging wife for a younger partner (a "trophy wife"), or the philanderer whose self-esteem is based on his number of conquests. As for the women having affairs, their motivation may be more often related to romantic ideals or to disappointments with their bargain in the marriage, or rebelliousness related to a sense of constriction associated with the burdens of domesticity.

The Puritan Element

In addition to the double standards found throughout the world, American culture also has the puritan tradition. Although adultery may still have worse consequences for women than for men, within the puritan tradition, monogamy is an ideal, and infidelity is considered morally corrupt for both men and women. The confusing thing about American society today is that though it is a culture that is hypersexualized, when it comes to infidelity, there are still strong puritanical underpinnings. As we saw with the Clinton ordeal, the individual who has an affair is seen as morally corrupt and is immediately condemned.

In an empirical study about sexual attitudes in France and the United States, Abigail Saguy (1997) pointed out how the French are significantly more tolerant of infidelity than Americans. She gives the example of the public reactions to former president Francois Mitterrand in comparison with the American reactions to Bill Clinton. Before Mitterrand died in January 1996, he made meticulous plans for his funeral. Upon his wishes, his two families were to be present: his legal wife with their two sons, and his mistress with their daughter. The French press reported the event either neutrally or approvingly. Danielle Mitterrand defended her husband's liaison. In an interview she said, "Yes, I was married to a seducer. I had to make do. That's part of life. What woman can say, 'I've never been cheated on,' or that she never cheated in her own love life?" In contrast, when Bill Clinton was accused of his affair with Jennifer Flowers, he and Hillary tried to preempt the controversy by presenting themselves as an empathetic couple working together on their problems. His strategy consisted of seeking pardon and forgiveness for infidelity, a behavior that is widely condemned.

It is important to point out that this attitude in France (and other Latin and European cultures) doesn't mean endorsement or approval, but it does mean different cultural premises. As I have been discussing, in American culture, affairs are viewed as a sign of moral corruption. In other cultures, even though there is the recognition that affairs can be damaging and involve lies and betrayal, affairs are about something else. They may be about loving more than one person, or about complementing marriage with romance, passion, sexuality, or autonomy. Outside the United States—in Europe, Latin America, even India—love triangles are accepted as a painful

but still human dilemma surrounding love and sexuality. It is never just a moral issue or just a matter of disease or trauma. In the Indian movie *Monsoon Wedding*, the bride's affair brings up anger in the groom, but it also stirs up his desire because he sees that he is marrying a woman who can be passionate. It has always been interesting to me that American culture has great tolerance for divorce—where there is a total breakdown of the loyalty bond and painful effects for the whole family—but it is a culture with no tolerance for sexual infidelity.

The Heart of the Matter: New Premises

What Steven Mitchell (2002) and Laura Kipnis (2003) offer me as a couples' therapist is a new set of premises and ideas, on the basis of which I can approach the couple with a new focus and some new parameters for the clinical situation.

As I reviewed, Kipnis and Mitchell suggest that romantic love is contradictory; we long for the security and permanence of attachment at the same time that we yearn for novelty, adventure, and freedom. It is in the midst of this challenge to reconcile our conflicting pulls and to manage love's dilemmas that affairs tend to take place. As we ascribe moral values and meanings to these inherent pulls, these added meanings will inform how we handle or mishandle our love situations. Throughout history, desire has been considered by the Catholic church as a source of danger to be repressed and contained. By contrast, since the late 1960s, Western cultures have come to super-value desire as a source of vitality. Today, desire is a dominant idea in popular culture, and the overriding message is that we must embrace it.

A major value of the premises suggested by Kipnis and Mitchell is that they are not culture specific; they are articulated as being related to a universal aspect of our human condition, and therefore they can be the basis of clinical work done in many cultures. Kipnis and Mitchell help us separate the human dilemmas from the particular moral values and beliefs that we attach to them, and in so doing, they help us to recognize that these ascribed meanings vary according to historical times, religion, culture, subculture, gender, and ultimately from individual to individual. Although the framework of trauma of betrayal often suggests an implicit moral evaluation of the partners—one is the perpetrator of trauma, the other is the victim—in this existential framework presented here, it is easier for the therapist to transcend the moral debate and ground his or her understanding on the couple's fault line and their particular way of integrating autonomy and togetherness in their lives.

Kipnis and Mitchell also identify a basic anxiety we have about separateness. Out of this anxiety, we exert subtle and not-so-subtle coercive pressures on our partners, and these pressures—the couples' fault line—are related to the demise of desire. They ask us to consider how, in our postfeminist emphasis on the relational aspect of relationships, we may end up having excessive expectations for security and togetherness from our partners. In expecting so much, we may be unwittingly suffocating our equally legitimate needs for autonomy and privacy. A similar point is made by Welter-Enderlin (1993), who talks about how American couples, through their "claim to total openness and unending nurturance, lose their passion" (p. 50). Kipnis and Mitchell remind us that desire, like hunger and sleep, cannot be willed, forced, or simply negotiated; it must arise in a context of optimal conditions. Although Kipnis is skeptical about the fate of long-term relationships because she believes that the coercive aspects of commitment will always override the separateness necessary for passion, Mitchell is

somewhat more optimistic. Nevertheless, he advises us that enduring love is fragile and difficult to sustain over time.

I believe that it is this fragility of love and the difficulties we have in sustaining desire in long-term relationships that need to be the focus of couples therapy, especially in situations where affairs are a part of the couple's drama. Like Mitchell, I think that it is possible for couples to reconcile attachment and desire in their long-term relationships, but only when they are able to create a context for desire to thrive, even if only intermittently. This context must include the delicate balance of separateness and togetherness, responsibility and freedom, and transparency and mystery. As a therapist, my job is to help couples figure out the balance that will work for them. Separateness, privacy, and mystery do not need to be dirty words in couple relationships; for many couples, these are actually the missing ingredients needed to foster or maintain passion.

In dealing with desire, Kipnis and Mitchell remind us of the old Freudian realization: the more repression, the more acting out. The more pressured and constrained the relationship, the more rebelliousness and wish to escape. It is no surprise that the churchgoing red states that voted for traditional moral values in the last presidential elections are the same states that have higher numbers of divorces, higher ratings for the sexually transgressive television program *Desperate Housewives*, and flourishing swinging clubs in the suburbs. *Newsweek* magazine (July 2004) recently reported that despite the conservative trend about centrality of marriage in American society, infidelity, especially for women, continues to rise.

HONESTY, TRANSPARENCY, AND CONDUCTING COUPLES THERAPY

Transparency and Intimacy

Most of the American literature on infidelity holds a monolithic, culturally bound view about what constitutes intimacy: honesty, transparency, and talking about feelings. This particular meaning may very well be the predominant idea in modern middle-class American culture; for many couples, women in particular, transparency and safety are indeed considered essential for a satisfying sexual connection. However, this sense is not necessarily the principal meaning in every culture and for every couple. If we define intimacy as the Webster's dictionary does—as “the most private and personal” or the “very close and familiar”—then intimacy will mean different things depending on whom you ask. Different cultures and subcultures, and even different couples, will have their own ideas about what they consider “the most personal and private meanings.” Lyman Wynne (1986) has pointed out that intimacy is a subjective relational experience that happens in verbal and nonverbal ways, and in many different arenas. While for one couple, feeling connected may be related to sharing intellectual work, for another couple, that which is intimate may be related to sexuality or sharing in the experience of raising children. In an immigrant family, the feeling of intimacy may have to do with how the couple feels connected in their joint pursuit of a new life in the new country; for another couple, intimacy may be primarily about how generous they can be with one another. In Brazil, intimacy is often associated with nonverbal processes of caregiving, doing favors for one another, physical affection, playfulness, and sharing pleasure in sexual and nonsexual ways. The arena of intimacy also varies according to stages of the life cycle. For many young couples, the erotic realm is an important basis of intimacy, and its rules can be quite different from those in the verbal realm. In her article “Erotic Intelligence”

(2003), Esther Perel says that “therapists typically encourage patients to ‘really get to know’ their partners. But I often tell my patients that ‘knowing isn’t everything... . Eroticizing can draw its powerful pleasure from fascination with the hidden, the mysterious, the suggestive” (p. 27). Although transparency and truth-telling might be highly valued in a therapeutically trained population in the United States, in other cultures and subcultures, honesty is a relative matter, one value among others. One may aspire to be truthful, but in the context of other competing emotional forces, may choose not to be transparent so as not to humiliate or shame another person. In many cultures, such as those in Africa, Latin America, and Europe, there is often the idea that the truth may hurt, sometimes in ways that are irreversible. In considering whether to tell the truth, one would want to keep in mind what the point of such disclosure might be, and the possible consequences. This absolute value of honesty is a characteristic of American culture. In other cultures, avoiding confrontation, keeping information private, and even lying are at times understandable forms of protecting the self, the partner, or the relationship, and also of controlling damage. Take, for example, Sebastian, a 57-year-old musician whose life work has come together in the last 10 years. His wife Martha has developed Parkinson’s disease and has deteriorated rapidly. She has been in and out of hospitals, and has recently become bedridden. During his wife’s illness, Sebastian fell in love with Luiza and has maintained a love affair with her for the last 5 years. Sebastian loves his wife, and with help from a nurse, he is her primary caretaker. At no point has he considered leaving her; it would be inhuman. Telling her about the affair is also out of the question. And so Sebastian and Luiza go on keeping their relationship hidden, agreeing that this is the most reasonable and generous solution for the time being.

Transparency as a Dimension of Couples Therapy

Related to this idea that absolute honesty is essential for intimacy is the dictum in the family therapy field that disclosure of an affair is a nonnegotiable step for individuals in couples therapy who consider staying in the marriage. Infidelity experts may have different ideas about how much should be told, but most believe that it is essential for the one who had the affair to tell the partner and to divulge the details (Brown, 1991, 1999; Glass, 2003; Pittman, 1989). This general rule does not take into account the research that for women in particular, telling the truth about an affair may have irreversible consequences, including divorce and other serious acts of retaliation, such as violence and even murder (Laumann et al., 1994).

One outgrowth of this rule is the assumption that it is countertherapeutic, and even unethical, for a couple’s therapist to hold a secret. As I described above, the conventional way of working has been that if an affair is revealed in an individual session, the therapist must encourage disclosure in a conjoint meeting, and afterwards he or she must help the couple work through the consequence of this intervention (i.e., work through the therapeutically induced trauma). The belief here is that intimacy is supposed to emerge from the disclosure and from working through the trauma. If an individual refuses to go along with the therapist’s prescription, the professional expectation is for the therapist to withdraw from the process and refer the couple to individual therapists. It seems clear to me that this principle is flawed. In the first place, it does not respect self-determination. In addition, if the individual does not want to go along with the therapist’s prescription, the couple is left in the lurch with no one to provide a holding environment for the relationship exactly when the

relationship needs it most. This rule is rooted in the history of family therapy, where triangulation has been viewed as a great danger, supposedly holding the therapist ineffective. Nevertheless, I have come to believe that a rigid stance about confidentiality is a far worse peril than that of triangulation. A no-secrets policy holds the therapist hostage, unable to help in possibly one of the most critical moments in a couple's relationship.

Another related rule is the notion that the couple's therapy should be discontinued if the partner having the affair does not give up the affair immediately. In my view, this rule is also potentially coercive, causing the therapist once again to either exert pressure or else to abandon the couple. It is like telling a bulimic that you can't continue seeing her unless she stops bingeing before she is able to do so.

MANAGING AFFAIRS IN COUPLES THERAPY

If I am convinced of the premises discussed in this article and am able to sit with the ambiguities engendered by secrets without having to declare: "always tell" or "never tell" (Imber-Black, 1998), I then must consider carefully the ways in which I will lead the therapeutic process. First, I must organize therapy so that I have the flexibility to combine individual and conjoint sessions. Second, I must offer a clear confidentiality policy to the couple that respects the individuals' privacy and allows each to share with me what is going on without feeling pressured. In this model of work, therapy becomes the place where the individual having an affair is free to examine his or her options to tell, not to tell, or how to tell. This examination can only happen if the client feels respected in his or her own decision to disclose, to wait, or to maintain silence (Imber-Black, 1998).

Working With the Disclosed Affair

The impact of the disclosure of an affair is typically heartbreaking. Therefore, the pain and feelings of the partner who just found out about it inevitably become the major therapeutic focus, at least for a while. When an affair is discovered or revealed, it stops being a private matter and becomes the domain of both spouses—and it usually spurs the couple into a major crisis. The crisis can be productive if it leads the couple to recognize that there are problems in their relationship and prompts them to focus on these problems, or if it leads to a better understanding about matters that had not been fully addressed. It is also helpful if it leads the one having the affair to break it off and focus on repairing the damage, rebuilding trust, and looking inside the marriage. However, it is important to keep in mind that sometimes the revelation of an affair is destructive because it can lead to inconsolable despair, the breakup of the relationship, violence, and in extreme cases, death by suicide or homicide.

Working With the Undisclosed Affair

When one partner reveals an affair to the therapist in an individual session but is not inclined to reveal it to the partner, the therapeutic process must shift to include a period of individual sessions. Sometimes it makes sense to see both partners individually for a while, and sometimes it is most helpful to work mostly with the one with the dilemma. It all depends on what they are interested in doing and what is pressing. This process of individual work will certainly include sorting out the pros and cons of revelation—figuring out if, when, and how to reveal, or else how to go on without a disclosure. It will also include an exploration of the possible meanings of the

affair and what it may or may not inform about the couple's relationship. I usually help the individual translate matters revealed by the affair into matters that are relevant to the primary relationship, and I encourage those to be brought into the conjoint sessions. Ultimately, these individual sessions are a place for the individual to figure out what to do about the affair and how to proceed with the primary relationship. When I am also having individual sessions with the other partner, the focus is typically on needs that are not being met in the primary relationship, mutual complaints, or strategies with that partner on how to strengthen their bond. If the individual is suspicious, I do explore the possibility of bringing it up with the partner. The overall focus with the couple is what can be strengthened, improved, or brought into their intimacy, including different kinds of emotional connection and sexuality. Many infidelity experts like to say that affairs are not about sex. Maybe they are not just about sex, but they are definitely about desire. As therapists, I believe we must try to understand what might fuel desire for the two partners, and how to foster it inside the relationship. An undisclosed and undiscovered affair, even when it has reverberations in the couple's relationship, can remain a private matter, and it may not challenge the survival of the marriage (Reibstein & Richards, 1993).

There is a price that the individual pays in keeping the affair a secret, and a price if the secret is revealed. On the negative side, keeping a secret involves maintaining distance and the burden and tension of not sharing. The one having the affair has to deal with feeling divided, and guilty in having to deceive. The spouse may feel mystified about subtle (or not-so-subtle) cues that something is amiss, without all of the information about it. On the positive side, keeping the affair a secret may control the damage by protecting the spouse from having to deal with feelings of rejection and betrayal. The conjoint sessions may focus on the couple's relationship without being distracted by the details of the affair. One possible outcome is that when the couple's relationship is addressed and strengthened, the affair shifts in importance and is more easily given up. There are also the cases in which, no matter how much evidence there is, the partner doesn't want to know, doesn't want to talk about it explicitly, or doesn't want to have any details. This kind of choice is well illustrated in the film *The Secret Life of a Dentist*, in which the main protagonist makes a choice not to speak about the affair his wife is having, hoping to give her time and space to work it out and end it.

Concluding Remarks

Working with affairs requires that the therapist go into the clinical situation with an open mind and a flexible stance. The combined work of Brown (1991, 1999), Lusterman (1998), Abrams Spring (1996), and Reibstein and Richards (1993), and the basic premises suggested by Kipnis (2003) and Mitchell (2002), can give the therapist a very general and broad framework from which to explore the meaning of an affair, and if and how it refers back to the couple's relationship. The therapist must also be able to deal with a lot of ambiguity. The therapist's position is indeed delicate because each partner has a very different perspective, and both must be fully recognized and understood. It is a challenge for the therapist to legitimize both partners' positions, particularly in view of the hurt and damage that an affair can cause. Nevertheless, it is this "both and" dual position of the therapist—with empathy for the powerful impact that an affair may have on a partner, and empathy for the yearning of the one with the affair—that will provide the necessary holding environment for the couple in this

critical time in their lives. In working with affairs, the survival of the couple's relationship is often in question. The therapist is essential in lending hope to the couple that they will be able to get to the other side (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004), and in creating a constructive and safe process for reflection and decision making. The therapist must also help the couple rekindle an atmosphere in which love and desire can reemerge. This may include promoting negotiations and mutual accommodations, but most of all, it involves stimulating a climate in the couple's relationship of acceptance of each other as separate and fluid, of generosity, and of joint pleasure.

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