Behavioral Convergence in Extramarital Sex in the United States

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Abstract

Marital infidelity is a serious problem because it can lead to separation, divorce, and even death. Yet, little is known about the changes over time in levels of extramarital sex by race and gender. This study uses data on ever married adults from the General Social Survey to examine the prevalence and factors associated with extramarital sex in the last 25 years. The results show an increase in percent of extramarital sex from 15% in 1991 to 18% in 2016. Previous figures indicate that black men and black women had higher prevalence of extramarital sex, compared to their white counterparts. However, these differences are not significant in 2016, suggesting a convergence of behavior where women are catching up to men and whites to blacks in extramarital sex. We also discuss the significant associations between extramarital sex, age, education, and work status under the principle of diminishing returns and opportunity theory.

Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Austin, Texas, April 10-13, 2019.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessary represent the views of the California Department of Public Health or East Carolina University.

Introduction

Americans overwhelmingly disapprove of extramarital relations (Campbell and Wright 2010); yet, empirical studies and media reports indicate that extramarital sexual relations are more common these days. Conservatively, Whisman and Snyder (2007) report that approximately 4% of men and 2% of women engage in extramarital sex per year; and according to Tafoya and Spitzberg (2007), approximately 32% of men and 21% of women commit infidelity at some point in their marriage. Further, there have been numerous reports in media outlets about cases of infidelities committed by celebrities, politicians, and religious authorities. While most of the allegations of extramarital affairs have been of men, there have been cases of married women having extramarital sexual relations. Given its private nature and the social and often political, ethical, and professional consequences, most extramarital sexual relations are hidden or at least unknown to the public. Sometimes, the alleged cheater ends the affair without the knowledge of their spouse. Or, if found out or confronted, they may confess to their spouse, family, clergy, or other related parties. As such, there are limited data on the level of extramarital sex in the United States.

One of the earliest information on national estimates of extramarital sex in the United States was 70 years ago when Kinsey and his colleagues suggested that by age 40, about half of all married men (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin, 1948, p. 585, 587) and one-fourth of married women (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard, 1953, p. 416) will have sexual intercourse with someone else than their spouse. Such estimates have not yet been found in most studies. This is because reliable and valid data on human sexual behavior were not available until recently, despite the so-called sexual revolution that begun in the 1960s.

The AIDS pandemic pushed scholars to revisit the field of sexuality research to design appropriate prevention programs. Because extramarital sex was identified as one of the key vectors of HIV infection (Reinisch, Sanders, and Ziemba-Davis 1988), questions on extramarital relations were incorporated into national representative surveys in the 1990s. For example, the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS) (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and the General Social Survey (GSS) added questions on extramarital relations in early 1990s. Estimates from first waves of these surveys show women trailing men in the prevalence of extramarital affairs. Analyzing GSS data, Wiederman (1997) reported that 12% of women and 23% of men had extramarital sex in their lifetime. Estimates from NHSLS data were 15% for women and 24% for men (Laumann et al., 1994).

This study presents changes in the prevalence of extramarital sex among men and women in the United States in the last 25 years. The analysis is based on the national representative samples of ever married individuals aged 18+ years interviewed in the GSS from 1991 to 2016. In addition, we use two theoretical frameworks to explain the observed associations between extramarital sex and several socio-demographic variables.

Theoretical Perspectives

When it comes to extramarital affairs, the main question is why do people stray? Apart from a few cases, where spouses agree not to be sexually exclusive such as consensual non-monogamy (CNM) relationships (Edgar 2017; Rubel and Bogaert 2015); and other relationships that include those couples who have memberships in swing clubs where couples accept to exchange spouses for sex (Bartel 1971). However, most married people in the

United States expect their spouses to be faithful (DeMaris 2013). For example, in their analysis of the 1992 NHSLS data, Treas and Giesen (2000) found that 99% of respondents expected their spouses to have exclusive sexual relationships. Currently in the United States, social construction of marriage is an expectation of sexual exclusiveness; and the assumption around most relationships is that of strict monogamy.

Why do some people cheat? Different theories have been used to answer that question, but none has yet produced a solid framework for studying marital infidelity. In this study, we will discuss the key assumptions of the two theoretical paradigms in social sciences that can be used to explain current trends in extramarital sex: the principle of diminishing returns and the opportunity theory.

According to the principle of diminishing returns, when the amount of input increases over time, it will reach a point where the rate of output decreases for each unit of input (Esthermsmth 2017). Applied to consumption of goods, it can be said that as a person consumes more and more units of a specific commodity, the utility from the successive units will diminish. This principle has been applied to the studies of mate selections in animal kingdom (Waltz 1982), but not yet on human beings.

We argue that sexual relations, or more specifically the pleasure of sexual intercourse that one derives from a spouse, can be viewed as a commodity whose value is high at the beginning of marriage, reaches a plateau, and diminishes thereafter. Marital infidelity would then start during the diminishing returns phase. Time variables that can be used here are duration of marriage and age of the respondent. Studies have reported that the frequency of marital sex declines with marital duration (Call, Sprecher, and Schwartz 1995); and some have found evidence that the impact of age and duration are approximately equal (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). However, given the nature of our data, and because some respondents may have been married multiple times, we only use age which is a more stable measure and a better correlate of sexual intercourse (Fair 1978; Rahmani, Merghati Khoei, Sadeghi, and Allahgholi 2011).

The second paradigm guiding our analysis is the opportunity theory, which assumes that “people like variety in their lives” (Fair 1978); everything that increases the availability of different types of goods will augment the opportunity to use more than one type of commodity. The perspective considers the availability of potential sexual and marital partners; attractive others in the market place. Therefore, it denotes that the opportunities to form sexual relationships or marital partnerships are dependent upon the availability of potential partners in the local community. South and Llyod (1992) found that residing in a community with a high proportion of potential sexual or marital partners increases the chances of finding an attractive partner for sex, which also increases the likelihood of extramarital sexual encounters. Further, South, Trent, and Shen (2001) point out that the risk of divorce is highest in areas where either husbands or wives encounter numerous alternatives to their current partner. Thus, we hypothesize that people who have opportunity to meet potential alternative mates will be more likely to engage in extramarital sex than those who have limited access to alternative partners.

In this study, we consider the work status and size of place of residence as factors that increase an individual’s exposure to alternative mates. An increase in one’s status (work/career) increases the likelihood of engaging in extramarital sex. Allen, Atkins, Baucom,

Snyder, Gordon & Glass (2005) note that increased career/work status is associated with higher income and increased opportunities for travel, which takes one away from a spouse and increases access to potential alternative sex partners. We expect individuals working full time to be more exposed to alternative mates, therefore more likely to have extramarital sex than those who are not full-time workers. In the same way, we expect persons living in largely populated areas to be exposed to more alternative partners and thus, to have extramarital sex more than those residing in less populated places.

Other studies have also examined a variety of other correlates of extramarital sex that we include in our analysis. These are gender, age, education, religion, political affiliation, and race (Campbell & Wright 2010). Although men are more likely to engage in extramarital sex than women, this finding is inconclusive. Today, with a majority of women in the labor force, extramarital relations among women are on the rise. Also, studies show that middle aged people are least likely to engage in extramarital sex (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson 2001). Although individuals with higher education have accepting attitudes about extramarital sex, research has shown that they are least likely to engage in extramarital relations (Allen et al. 2001). Further, individuals who are affiliated with a religious entity and who have conservative political orientation would be less likely to engage in extramarital sex. We also expect race to be a strong correlate of extramarital sex.

Data and Methods

We use GSS data, a nationally representative survey of adults 18+ years to examine the levels and determinants of extramarital sex in the United States. Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago since 1972, the GSS question on extramarital sex was introduced only from 1991. Therefore, our analysis covers the period of 1991-2016.

Respondents were asked the following question: “Have you ever had sex with someone other than your husband or wife while you were married?” Evidently, that question applies only to ever married respondents. As a result, we excluded never married from this study. We analyzed the trends in levels of extramarital sex from 1991 to 2016 by gender (Figure 1) and by race and gender (Figures 2 and 3).

We then chose the 1991 and 2016 data sets to examine the correlates of extramarital sex and test the validity of our theories (Tables 1 and 2). For multivariate analysis, we use robust regression, which is an alternative to least squares regression when the data set is contaminated with outliers (Verardi & Croux 2009). To verify if the gender difference in extramarital sex reported in previous studies is valid today when other socio-demographic characteristics are held constant, we ran two models for each of the two periods: Model 1 with marital status, sex, and race variables, and Model 2 with all variables (Table 2).

Results

We present the results in two steps. First, we examine the levels and trends of extramarital sex in the last 25 years. Second, we analyze the factors associated with the likelihood of having extramarital with a focus on the years 1991 and 2016.

Trends in extramarital sex

Consistent with previous studies (Whisman and Snyder 2007; Tafoya and Spitzberg 2007), our data show a big difference in level of extramarital sex between men and women. In 1991, only about 11% of women had extramarital sex, compared to 21% of men. These rates increased for both categories in 2016 to 16% for women and 20% for men. Although the gap remains, it decreased from 10% in 1991 to only 4% in 2016 (Table 1).

A similar trend is observed in terms of race. In 1991, 14% of white respondents and 26% of black respondents reported having had extramarital sex. By 2016, these two racial categories saw an increase in their rate of extramarital sex to 18% and 20%, for whites and blacks respectively. Again, the gap narrowed from 12% to only 2% between 1991 and 2016 (Table 1).

Other interesting trends observed in Table 1 are in terms age and education. For age, there has been a noticeable increase in extramarital sex among older respondents. For example, among those 65+, the rate of extramarital sex was about 8% in 1991; this figure increased to 19% in 2016. Concerning education, those with graduate level education also saw an increase in rate of extramarital sex between the two periods, from 15% in 1991 to 23% in 2016.

In contrast, there were no big change in rate of extramarital sex between 1991 and 2016 for respondents who were married; worked full-time; had family wealth below average; or lived in the South.

Are these results significant when other factors are taken into the account? More specifically, is there a significant convergence in the rate of extramarital sex, for example, between white and black respondents? Or between men and women? We examine these questions in the section.

Factors of extramarital sex

The results from logistic regression models in Table 2 show significant changes in the likelihood of having had extramarital sex by race and sex. Let's examine the results in short and full models both in 1991 and 2016. The short models contain only marital status, sex, and race. The second models are full models that include all variables.

In 1991, when only marital status, sex, and race are included in the logistic regression equation (Model 1), blacks appear almost two times more likely to have engaged in extramarital sex than whites. This racial difference becomes statistically insignificant when other variables are added into the logistic regression (Model 2). In contrast, the gender difference remains statistically significant in 1991 in both models suggesting that men were more likely to engage in extramarital sex than women in those days.

Other two significant associations in 1991 are in terms of marital status and political affiliation. In both models, respondents who were divorced or separated from their spouses were significantly more likely to have had extramarital sex than their counterparts who were married or widowed. Although we are unable to establish a causation in this study, such findings suggest that some of those union dissolutions may be linked to extramarital sex. As

for political affiliation, our results show that Republicans were significantly less likely to engage in extramarital sex than Democrats.

In 2016, the results from Model 1 show that race is no longer a significant correlate of extramarital sex. Even the sexual difference observed in Model 1 in 1991 is now marginal in Model 1 of the year 2016, suggesting a convergence in extramarital sex. These results are even more important in Model 2 where all variables are included in the logistic regression equation.

In the full model (Model 2) of Table 2 for the year 2016, the racial and gender differences are no longer statistically significant, confirming our thesis of convergent behavior in extramarital sex in the United States. Clearly, these results show that today, the likelihood of engaging in extramarital sex is no longer a matter of race or sex. Rather, sociodemographic factors such as age, educational attainment, and work status are important determinants of sex outside marriage among married people.

Those 55+ are significantly more likely to have had extramarital sex than younger people. Likewise, there is an increase in likelihood of extramarital sex by educational attainment. Apparently, education increases opportunity for extramarital sex, but the relationship is not fully linear. Nonetheless, those with graduate education where significantly more likely to engage in extramarital sex than respondents with lower less than high school education.

As for work status, our results show that part-time workers were significantly less likely to engage in extramarital sex than those working full time (Table 2, Model 2). This finding suggests that spending more time at work increases the opportunity for interaction with other potential mates, which can lead to extramarital sex.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the levels and trends in extramarital sex in the United States in the last 25 years. The results showed an increase in the percent of respondents who have had extramarital from 15% in 1991 to 18% in 2016. The most important result that emerged from our analyses is the convergence in extramarital sex between whites and blacks, and between men and women.

Although blacks were still more likely to report having had extramarital than whites, the gap is closing. Same thing for gender, where women are catching up to men. More important, both gender and racial differences became statistically insignificant in the 2016 model when all socio-demographic characteristics were included in the logistic regression equation.

In addition, we found significant associations between extramarital sex and marital status, age, education, and work status. Our results on marital status are consistent with previous work that shows a position association between marital affairs and union dissolution. As noted by Allen and Atkins (2012), we found that compared to currently married individuals, those who were separated or divorced were significantly more likely to have had extramarital sex.

For age, education, and work status, our discussion focuses on the 2016 data for which these variables are statistically significant. The results on age show positive association confirming our hypothesis of diminishing returns (Esthermsmth 2017; Waltz 1982). If the pleasure of

sexual intercourse that one derives from a spouse can be viewed as a commodity whose value decreases overtime, then the positive association between extramarital sex and age suggests older respondents are probably looking for new sexual liaisons because of the perceived diminishing returns of sexual pleasure they now derive from their spouses.

Although not linear, the association between education and extramarital sex was statistically significant with those at the graduate level being 3 times more likely to have had sex outside marriage than those with less than high school education. While we are not sure why people with such a high level of education engage in extramarital sex than their counterparts with less education, we may argue that education probably reduces the fear of social control and confirming to traditional values. It is also possible that education is a factor of exposure which increases the opportunity to alternative mates.

Moreover, the opportunity theory hypothesis was clearly confirmed in case of work status variable which shows that individuals working full time were significantly more likely to engage in extramarital sex than those who work fewer hours or unemployed. As found elsewhere, people may want variety in their lives (Fair 1978). Therefore, the more time one spends at the work site, the higher the opportunity to meet potential mates and then to engage in extramarital sex.

Overall, our results show that the sociodemographic changes observed in the last 25 years have contributed to the convergence of behaviors in the United States. Those transformations can be better explained through the lenses of the principle of diminishing returns and opportunity theory. We argue that older people are looking for new sexual adventures outside marriage because they probably reached a plateau in sexual pleasure with their spouses and are taking advantage of alternative mates they encounter at work. Nonetheless, our findings show that most married Americans are faithful, but those who reported having had extramarital sex were also more likely to be divorced or separated.

We recognize the limitations of the data due in large part to their cross-sectional nature and the potential reporting bias, but our findings suggest that spouses' diminishing sexual utility in marriage due to aging and opportunities to find alternative partners are key factors in explaining extramarital sexual behavior.

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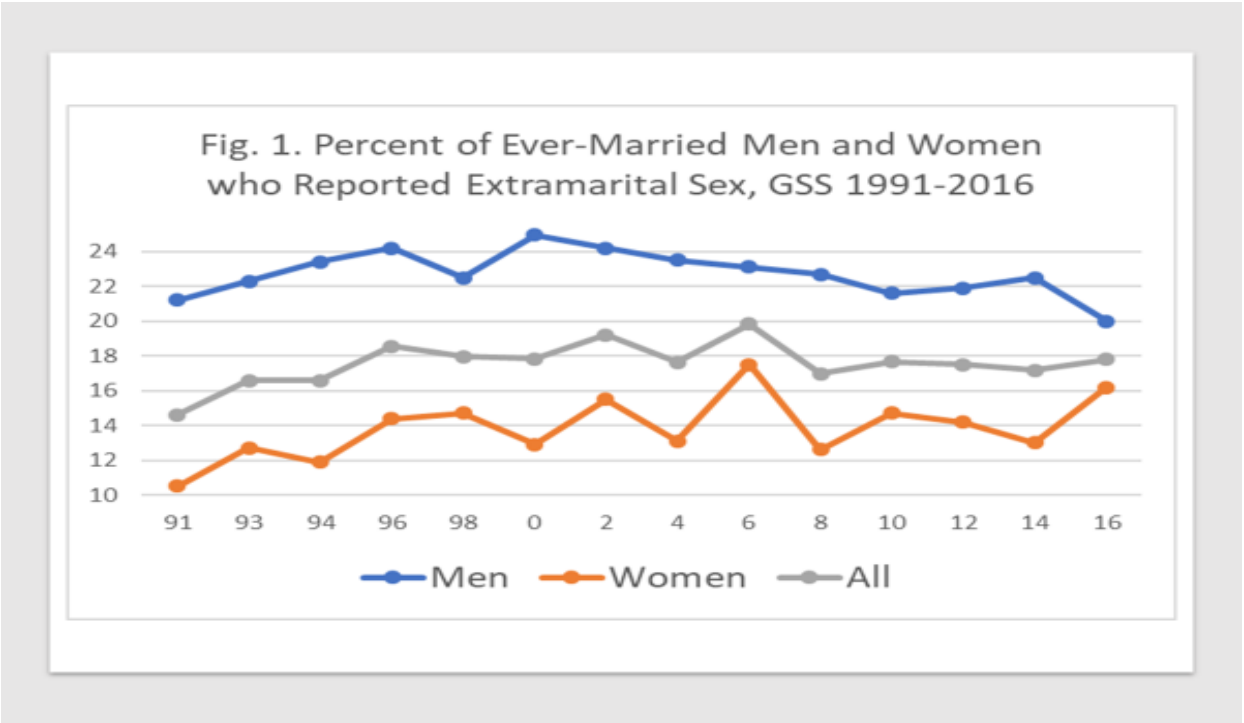
Fig. 1. Percent of Ever-Married Men and Women who Reported Extramarital Sex, GSS 1991-2016
24
22
20
18
16
14
12
10
91 93 94 96 98 0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16
Men
Women
All

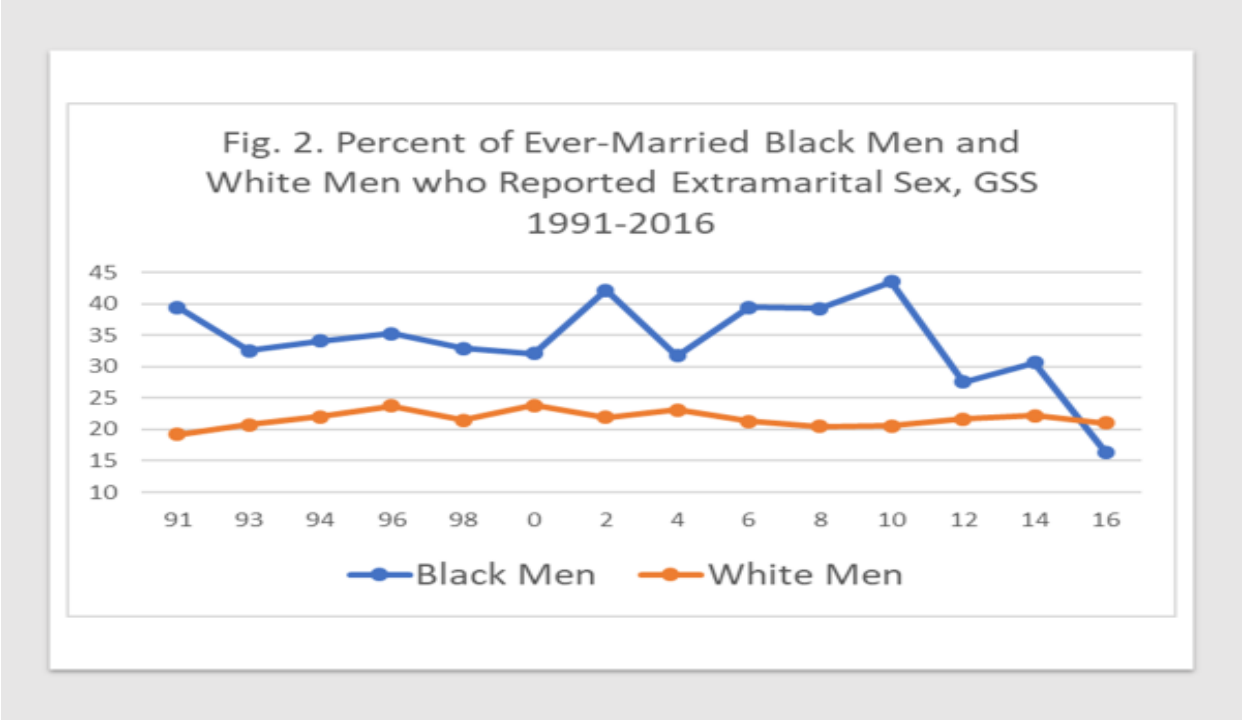
Fig. 2. Percent of Ever-Married Black Men and White Men who Reported Extramarital Sex, GSS 1991-2016
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
91 93 94 96 98 0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16
Black Men
White Men

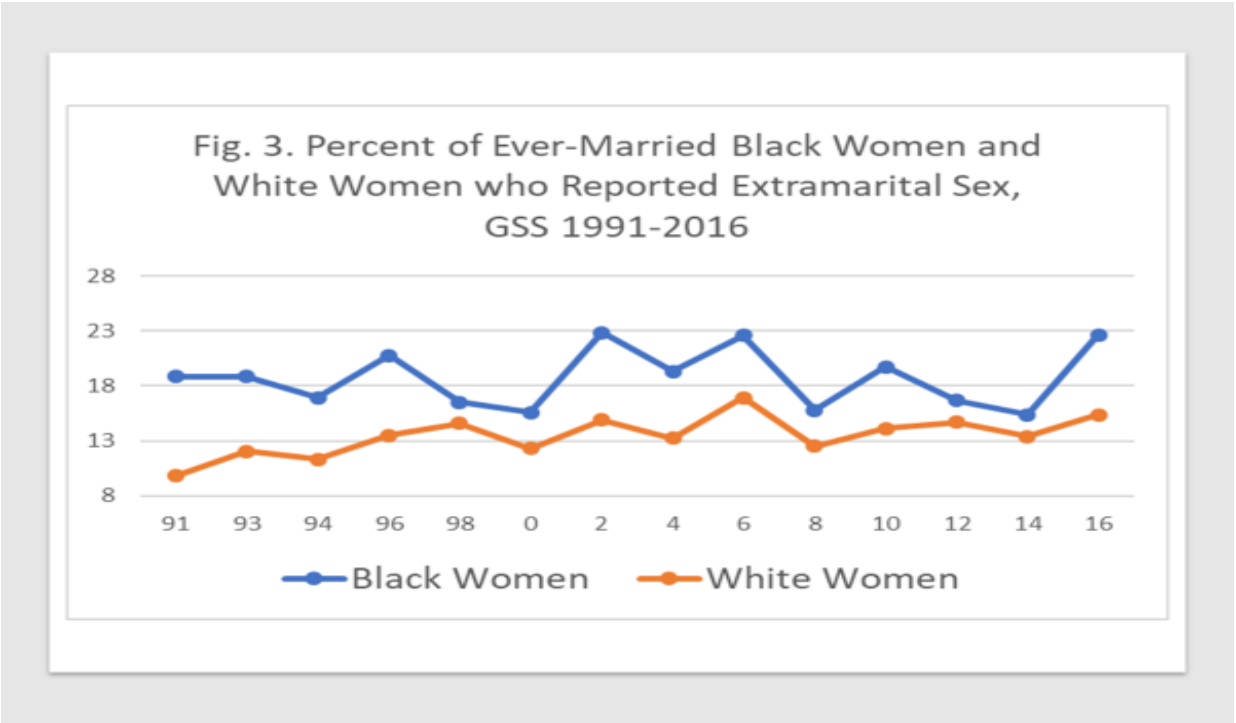
Fig. 3. Percent of Ever-Married Black Women and White Women who Reported Extramarital Sex, GSS 1991-2016
28
23
18
13
8
91
93
94
96
98
0
2
4
6
8
10
12
14
16
Black Women
White Women

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Ever Married Respondents Who Had Extramarital Sex by Background Characteristics, GSS 1991 and 2016

Background Characteristics		1991			2016	
		Number	% Who Had Ex-tramarital Sex		Number	% Who Had Ex-tramarital Sex
All		998	14.63		1,220	17.79
Marital status						
	Married	683	12.88		745	12.35
	Widowed	131	6.11		123	17.89
	Divorced	144	23.61		299	28.09
	Separated	40	40.00		52	36.54
Sex						
	Male	382	21.20		514	20.04
	Female	616	10.55		706	16.15
Race						
	Black	102	25.49		139	20.14
	Other	27	11.11		100	14.00
	White	869	13.46		981	17.84
Age group						
	18-40	403	14.89		303	11.22
	41-54	242	20.66		334	17.66
	55-64	132	14.39		270	24.07
	65+	220	7.73		308	19.16
Religious affiliation						
	Catholic	261	13.03		289	16.61
	Protestant	656	15.09		611	16.69
	Other	81	16.05		320	20.94
Educational attainment						
	Less than high school	202	11.88		109	11.01
	High school	544	17.28		603	19.07
	Junior college	55	12.73		94	20.21
	Bachelor	134	8.21		249	13.65
	Graduate	59	15.25		163	22.70
Work status						
	Full time	463	18.36		563	18.12
	Part time	107	11.21		141	10.63
	Other	428	11.45		514	19.46
Family wealth level						
	Below average	278	18.70		366	18.58
	Average	503	12.72		525	17.71
	Above average	203	14.29		319	17.24

Region of residence						
	Northeast	217	14.75		209	18.18
	Midwest	253	12.25		303	18.18
	South	334	16.47		443	16.25
	West	194	14.43		265	18.87
Size of place of residence						
	Less than 6,000 people	313	11.82		241	19.92
	6,000 to 24,999	238	15.97		371	16.71
	25,000 to 110,999	224	14.73		335	17.01
	111,000+	223	17.04		273	18.32
Political affiliation						
	Democrat	438	17.58		545	19.82
	Republican	435	12.41		458	15.28
	Other	121	12.40		203	16.75

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Likelihood of Having Had Extramarital Sex, Ever Married Respondents, GSS 1991 and 2016

Background Characteristics		1991			2016	
		Model 1	Model 2		Model 1	Model 2
Marital status						
	Married	1.000	1.000		1.000	1.000
	Widowed	0.585	0.701		1.645	1.308
	Divorced	2.442***	2.190**		2.829***	2.765***
	Separated	4.443***	4.383***		4.614***	5.724***
Sex						
	Male	2.499***	2.686***		1.405*	1.390
	Female	1.000	1.000		1.000	1.000
Race						
	Black	1.924*	1.766		0.965	0.985
	Other	0.708	0.660		0.685	0.733
	White	1.000	1.000		1.000	1.000
Age group						
	18-40		1.000			1.000
	41-54		1.522			1.571
	55-64		1.127			2.357***
	65+		0.663			1.868*
Religious affiliation						
	Catholic		1.000			1.000
	Protestant		1.064			0.982
	Other		0.663			1.196
Educational attainment						
	Less than high school		1.000			1.000
	High school		1.313			2.179*
	Junior college		0.744			2.412*
	Bachelor		0.495			1.752
	Graduate		0.802			3.067**
Work status						
	Full time		1.000			1.000
	Part time		0.670			0.523*
	Other		0.849			0.975
Family wealth level						
	Below average		1.000			1.000
	Average		0.682			1.157
	Above average		0.849			1.188
Region of residence						
	Northeast		1.000			1.000
	Midwest		0.828			1.136
	South		0.896			0.956
	West		0.959			1.109

Size of place of residence						
	Less than 6,000 people		1.000			1.000
	6,000 to 24,999		1.426			0.745
	25,000 to 110,999		1.305			0.698
	111,000+		1.066			0.703
Political affiliation						
	Democrat		1.000			1.000
	Republican		0.620*			0.750
	Other		0.619			0.836

*P ≤ 0.05 **P≤ 0.01 ***P≤ 0.001