

Is monogamy realistic?

England soccer star John Terry is the latest celebrity to be condemned for an alleged affair, but is our desire as a society for monogamous relationships truly attainable, or an unrealistic ideal?

BY KATE FIGES
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Each new month seems to bring with it a new sex scandal. Just when we were tiring of the seemingly endless list of women who claim to have had an affair with Tiger Woods, the Iris Robinson story broke. And even before the tutting at 60-year-old Robinson's affair with a 19-year-old had fallen silent, footballer John Terry relieved Robinson of her headlines by failing to secure an injunction to prevent details of his alleged affair becoming public. With the blogosphere now awash with details of Terry's alleged affair with Vanessa Perroncel and other tittle-tattle about his personal life, Terry seems destined to remain in the public eye until the next celebrity falls from grace.

There is, of course, much to disapprove of in these sorry tales. Woods, Robinson and Terry are all married with children. Their betrayals will undoubtedly have caused their families a great deal of pain, and this can only have been heightened by the way that the details have been trawled over in public. All three had fostered a public image as upholders of family values: Only days before his alleged infidelity became public Woods was telling interviewers that he "always" put his family first; Robinson, the wife of Northern Ireland's first minister, was a born-again Christian member of parliament, and a staunch supporter of conservative "family values"; Terry was voted "dad of the year" a mere six months ago. To make matters worse, all three had much to lose financially from their public image being shattered: Woods lost sponsorship deals worth millions of US dollars and has now taken a career break; Robinson has been forced to stand down as a member of parliament; Terry was dropped as England captain on Friday and his corporate sponsors are no doubt watching the story unfold with some concern.

Our cultural obsession with such salacious stories in fact says a great deal more about our confusions around sex and relationships than it does about an errant footballer and his partners. While there has been intense debate about Terry's suitability as captain of the England team, another more important question rarely gets aired at all: Why is it that sexual amorality sends people in the public eye off a cliff when so many other aspects of their importance as role models barely draws comment? (I have never understood, for instance, why footballers are allowed to argue with the referee like six-year-old children when the FA could easily introduce a ruling that such behavior provokes an immediate red card, thereby setting an example to millions of young boys. The rules are the rules. Get over it.)

We gorge on the tacky private lives of public figures as if they are the only ones to have ever made a stupid decision in pursuit of desire. They should set better standards, we cry, when in our heart of hearts we surely know they are flawed human beings like the rest of us. An unrepeatable rude song is being feverishly circulated on the Web — "Chelsea, Chelsea wherever you may be, Don't leave your wife with John Terry ..." — but how many of those singing it would have affairs if they thought they could get away with it?

We are living in liberal times; we are more tolerant of homosexuality, divorce and illegitimacy than ever before. Yet talking about sex even inside a good relationship is still difficult for many people. Meanwhile, fidelity has acquired a new importance. A Gallup poll in 2006 found that Americans were more tolerant of polygamy and human cloning than infidelity.

As our culture becomes more sexualized, with diverse real or virtual sexual experiences just the click of a mouse away (a recent study estimates that one fifth of all Internet users engage in some sexual searching) we paradoxically seem to be becoming more prudish, fiercely protecting the special sanctity of monogamy.

In reality, of course, many of us have had or will have affairs, though it is hard to know how many. Depending which study you read, between 25 percent and 65 percent of married men, and between 15 percent and 50 percent of married women, have had affairs. (Such a big discrepancy is itself indicative of how harshly people feel they will be judged.) A small number of couples do enjoy open sexual relationships, but they are reluctant to talk about their activities even with their closest friends. They know they will be disapproved of or, as one woman told me for my book on modern relationships, "The assumption tends to be that there must be something wrong with your marriage."

In reality, we know that marriage cannot be trusted to last a lifetime now that divorce is



a real possibility. So we cling perhaps a little too forcefully to sexual fidelity as a symbol of certainty and safety instead of talking to each other honestly about what we need or want from a relationship or each other, both in and out of bed.

Historically, when divorce was less threatening to the stability of a marriage, it was more accepted that countless husbands had mistresses. Marital unions were often business or social contracts and adultery with a married woman was a criminal act, theft of another man's property. The double standards were clear — men could divorce their wives on the basis of adultery alone while a woman needed to prove additional grounds such as bestiality or incest. Fidelity in a woman, along with virginity was crucial to the institution of marriage, to protect the legitimacy of children, the transfer of property and the honor of men.

With the rise of romanticism and the idea that "true love" is the most essential ingredient for a happy marriage, our expectations mushroomed. A loving spouse should now provide everything that we need and sexual exclusivity is now integral to that ideal. Fidelity, always valued, now became the number one sign of commitment in a marriage.

As a feminist I can't help wondering whether the empowerment of women played a part in this new sexual puritanism. When men could enjoy sexual dalliances outside their marriages with relative impunity it was to some extent socially acceptable. It is only now that women have just as many opportunities as men to indulge in a little nooky on the side, and



Top: Deer Sculpture by Rune Olsen, showing three deer mating, sits on display at the Museum of Sex (MoSex) in New York in July 2008. Occasionally in the wild, younger males will mount older bucks, and in some cases, group mounting is exhibited. The sculpture was on display at the museum as part of the exhibit The Sex Lives of Animals. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Above: Tiger Woods has taken an indefinite hiatus from golf since his Nov. 27 car crash, which fueled sordid tales of extramarital affairs. The world's No. 1 golfer posted a statement on his Web site in December saying that he will "take an indefinite break from professional golf. I need to focus my attention on being a better husband, father, and person." PHOTO: EPA



John Terry was sacked as England captain on Friday after intense media speculation following allegations that he had an affair with a teammate's girlfriend. PHOTO: EPA



Democratic Unionist Party member Iris Robinson, the wife of Northern Ireland's first minister, Peter Robinson, resigned from the House of Commons last month after she allegedly solicited £50,000 (US\$80,000) from businessmen so a man with whom she had had an affair could open a restaurant. PHOTO: EPA

there is a constant internal tussle of conscience going on for many where temptation has to be resisted and fidelity worked at like a test.

Perhaps this partly explains the jeering that greets people in the public eye when they fail so spectacularly. Those of us who feel guilty of having strayed sexually jeer to confirm that we are not, perhaps, so bad after all; those who have not strayed jeer because they feel superior. Celebrities such as Woods and Terry may have all that success and money, we reassure ourselves, but they can't really be in love like we are. We have stayed true to our marital vows.

This public/private split around sex and fidelity is most striking in Robinson's case. Here is a woman who believes that adultery is a sin and that "government has a responsibility to uphold God's laws morally," by keeping abortion illegal in Northern Ireland. She has had the audacity to preach to others about the morality of their sexual behavior, calling homosexuality an "abomination" on a TV show as she maintained that gays could be "turned" heterosexual by psychotherapy. She even criticized US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton for standing by her husband after the Lewinsky affair. But all the while she had boxed off her own aberrant sexual behavior. She clearly felt she didn't need to practice what she preached. Robinson would surely have had less far to fall had she subscribed to the more humbling maxim of "people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." And perhaps the same is true for all of us — if we could greet the disgrace of others with less schadenfreude, acknowledging that while fidelity is desirable, it is also difficult, we might be happier too.

The more we hear about the squalid, voracious sexual antics of celebrities, the less there is to like. But the "one strike and you're out" policy inherent to sexual puritanism isn't what ordinary folk need when it comes to making our own intimate partnerships happier. Countless couples never tell another soul when one of the pair has strayed sexually simply because to do so reflects so very badly on them both. The only way a relationship can be made to work in these sex-obsessed times is with an understanding that we should never take each other for granted. Monogamy and fidelity cannot be expected from another person as a right. It is a gift offered from one mature human being to another because they care enough about their feelings not to want to hurt them. That's the deal most of us strike, and most of us do our level best to keep to it.

enough of their own money to buy themselves a massage "with a happy ending" should they want one, that a veil of sanctimony has fallen.

We no longer need to get married to have sex or children and many now enjoy a range of sexual experiences with different people before they "settle down," at which point being faithful to that special person is completely bound up with our feelings of love for them. Given how long we live and expect to be together, achieving this can be very difficult.

You can't be just a little bit monogamous. Just one casual, meaningless, drunken shag will, it is now presumed, soil the special purity of your relationship. You have failed both the romantic dream and your partner. Couples are required to walk as if blinkered through a highly sexualized and sybaritic culture, where the prevailing ethos is that we are entitled to vigorous and ecstatic sexual activity at all times.

Good sex is supposed to hold marriages together and yet there are times in every relationship when there are either sexual difficulties. How then do you square what you might want, or indeed are told that you need, in order to be "happy" as an individual with your responsibilities to each other as a couple? The confusion over what actually constitutes infidelity doesn't help when it comes to understanding where the boundaries of the modern sexual puritanism lie. Can infidelity be emotional as well as physical? Is it only full penetrative intercourse, or does erotic flirtation online count? Is it infidelity when you lust after someone else in the street, or develop a crush that you know will never be realized? It's as if