

Why the children of the Coldplay 'kiss cam' couple



are the real victims of their infidelity

When their affair was caught on screen at a stadium concert, the fallout for this pair was immediate. But, says psychoanalyst *Juliet Rosenfeld*, the future repercussions for their children could be even more devastating

An affair, whether in gossip columns or real life, fascinates us, as the 'Coldplay couple' have proven. When married tech CEO Andy Byron and his married head of human resources, Kristin Cabot, were caught on a 'kiss cam' at a Coldplay concert in Boston, millions watched the video, hundreds of memes and commentaries quickly followed. His wealth, their deceit, the very public 'outing' and perhaps the pleasure we get from comeuppance, particularly when privilege is involved, kept the story alive. The headline-grabbing reveal of two attractive people who are having sex (we presume) but are married to others was shown to have a timeless appeal, leaving some with a pleasing sense of moral superiority and others feeling Schadenfreude.

What is less well understood and much more enduring – sometimes lifelong – is the disastrous impact of an affair on children. Cabot is a stepmother to her husband Andrew's children, while Byron and his wife have two sons together.

Parental infidelity can profoundly damage a person's capacity for loving relationships. Trust is at the centre of family life. If trust is broken by a parent, it is extremely hard to regain, especially at an unconscious level.

As a psychoanalyst I have seen many adult patients who remain badly affected by a parent's emotional or sexual disloyalty in their childhood. Divorce law reform in 1971 means a great deal of research exists on the impact of separation on children, exploring how their educational and social outcomes are affected. However, less is known about how infidelity determines a child's ability to have relationships in adulthood. Statistics about affairs are unreliable but they seem to be most common in middle age*.

In my consulting room these patients speak of low self-esteem and feeling responsible, as well as persistent difficulties with trust. Alongside this I have noticed repetitions, whereby people embark on affairs themselves, despite the pain they have been caused by them. An affair often becomes the reason someone seeks psychotherapy, and I believe the motives for infidelity are frequently deeply intertwined with someone's relationship history and unconscious fantasy. In other words, our childhood experience of relationships profoundly influences us as adults. My book *Affairs: True Stories Of Love, Lies, Hope And Desire* seeks to understand the reasons why apparently rational people put themselves in such jeopardy, risking damage to loved ones

and themselves. To help me understand this secretive behaviour, I invited people involved in or affected by affairs to contact me, and I was overwhelmed with replies.

Louise was 45. She told me she'd had serial affairs with unavailable married men. Her husband was faithful, but she felt him to be cold and uninteresting. The last affair she had, which prompted her to see a therapist, was sexually thrilling until her lover, without warning, returned to his wife. 'It was not until I saw I was constantly chasing men who would



PARENTAL ADULTERY CAN PROFOUNDLY DAMAGE A PERSON'S CAPACITY FOR LOVING RELATIONSHIPS

leave me that I realised in some way I was repeating something very painful. I was always hoping to get my father back. He had left my mother, who he felt was "dull", for another woman. He also left her a few years later. I realised I almost always had to feel second best. The feeling of being "the chosen one" was just not something I could recognise in any way. My affairs were a terrible repetition, and I had married a man I found boring but who would never leave me.'

Ben, a single father of a 15-year-old daughter, said his mother's overt cheating on his father meant he could never face marriage

or a committed long-term relationship. Since he was nine, his mother had shared her crushes and pursuits with him when he was far too young to understand. 'I wasn't interested in what she was doing and I felt it was forced in my face, presumably to alleviate her guilt. I didn't want to know. I just wanted to get on with my life and for her to get on with my father.'

Children are scrupulously fair with their parents as well as generally uninterested in their romantic interests, either inside or outside their relationship. In Ben's case, the result of his mother's affairs meant he could never trust a woman enough to commit to her. I was moved by the fact he had wanted to become a father, but he told me he felt disappointed and sad that he knew he could never live with his daughter's mother. He felt his own romantic feelings for women had been overwhelmed by his mother's actions.

We often talk about children's resilience and adaptability when parental relationships end – perhaps as it brings relief to parents who often feel guilty about ending a marriage. But children have to adapt and so they do. They must believe what their parents tell them, and important emotional beliefs are set very early on by our primary caregivers. When everything changes – and the life you had is changed by an affair – difficulty in believing what you are told is hard to overcome.

An affair has primitive roots that consciously or unconsciously everyone can relate to. We have all been shaped by the universal experience of the Oedipus complex. In ordinary language: this is how we learn to love. Neuroscience can now prove that how we are cared for shapes our own emotional capacity to form loving relationships. It is critical for a child to realise at about nine months they are not the only apple of their mother's eye – there is also a daddy (or a mummy, work, siblings and other demands). This is the moment we begin to contend with the reality of seeking our own relationships, beginning with friendships in childhood.

From this time onwards we are aware of potential loss. A cheating parent shatters emotional development in ways that may not be obvious for many years, but can continue to wreak havoc in adult relational life. Interest in the Coldplay couple will fade – but the devastation for adults affected by betrayal in childhood will continue.

Affairs: True Stories Of Love, Lies, Hope And Desire by Juliet Rosenfeld, is published by Pan Macmillan, £20**

*IFS 2018 INSTITUTE OF FAMILY STUDIES. **TO ORDER A COPY FOR £17 UNTIL 17 AUGUST. GO TO MAILSHOP.CO.UK/ BOOKS OR CALL 020 3176 2937. FREE UK DELIVERY ON ORDERS OVER £25. FACEBOOK. BACKGRID