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# Is there a sexual double standard in infidelity norms?

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# Background

- **Infidelity** is the combination of (Drigotas et al., 1999)
  - Feeling that one's partner has **violated a relationship norm** regarding the nature of the partner's interactions with someone else
  - Such violation elicits **sexual jealousy and rivalry**
- **Personal normative belief** (Bicchieri, 2017)
  - What I and others should do
  - Social expectations and conditional preferences?
- **Non-trivial: even non-physical contact can be evaluated as unfaithful**  
(Bozoyan and Schmiedeberg, 2022)

# Background

- **Common phenomenon**
  - In Germany, ~24% report their own infidelity, ~30%-35% report their partner's infidelity (pairfam, 2019)
- Relevant for **family sociology**
  - More distress, less wellbeing
  - Union dissolution (Bozoyan and Schmiedeberg, 2020; Frisco et al., 2017)
- Yet, little scholarly attention (Munsch, 2012, 2015)

# Research questions

- Is infidelity considered acceptable?
- What are the mechanisms leading to its acceptance (or lack thereof)?

# Sexual double standard

- **Sexual double standard** or **shifting standards** (Biernat, 1995; Endenijk et al., 2020)
  - Culturally ingrained **stereotypes regarding sexual behavior**
  - Male targets judged relative to male standards → sexually aggressive
  - Female targets judged relative to female standards → sexually restrictive

**H1:** women's behavior as cheaters or "third persons"  
is considered less acceptable than men's

# Ingroup bias

- **Ingroup or intergroup bias** (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1982)
  - Individuals' attitudes regarding behavior shift depending on the **group membership of the target**
  - Outgroup targets are judged more harshly than ingroup targets

**H2a:** cheating or “third person” behavior is considered less acceptable when committed by people of the opposite **sex** than by people of the same sex as the judge/respondent

**H2b:** cheating or “third person” behavior is considered less acceptable when the judge/respondent has been **cheated**, and more acceptable when the judge/respondent has been unfaithful

- **Factorial survey experiment**
  - Optimal method for capturing norms and explaining underlying mechanisms (Bicchieri, 2017)
  - Full factorial
- Implemented in **pairfam** (wave 11, 2018/2019)
  - Between + within design (3 hypothetical scenarios per respondent)
  - Most existing literature focuses on the US, we focus on Germany
  - Representative sample

# Method

*We are interested in how behaviors within romantic partnerships are evaluated.*

*In the following, 3 example couples will be introduced. For all couples, both partners are approximately 30 years old. Thus far, each couple has remained faithful and do not lead open relationships.*

*Please indicate for each couple whether you would describe the behavior as infidelity, and how you would evaluate the behavior. There are no right or wrong answers. We are simply interested in your personal opinion.*



# Method

Dimension	Levels			
duration	short (0)	long (1)		
children	no (0)	yes (1)		
satisfaction	unhappy (0)	happy (1)		
unfaithful partner sex	male (0)	female (1)		
third person	stranger (0)	friend of the partner (1)		
emotion	not in love (0)	in love (1)		
online contact	no erotic messages (0)	erotic messages (1)		
frequency	one-night stand (0)	affair (1)		
action	no physical contact (1)	long hug (2)	kissing (3)	intercourse (4)

# Method

The couple is together since a relatively short period and they do not have kids. Both partner are not very happy in their relationship. At a party the man meets another women, who is single and whom he finds very attractive. She knows about his relationship. They talk with each other, but have no physical contact. They do not exchange erotic text messages and pictures. They did not fall in love with each other and do not see each other again.

The couple is together since a relatively long time and they have a child. Both partner are happy in their relationship. For two month now the woman sees secretly a male friend of her partner, who is single and whom she finds very attractive. He knows about her relationship. They have sex with each other. Multiple times they exchange erotic text messages and pictures. They did fall in love with each other.

# Method

Is this behavior an example of infidelity?

0 (1)	0 (2)	0 (3)	0 (4)
clearly no infidelity			clearly infidelity

Think about the two people who met each other in the example. List for both the man and woman whether you found their behavior to be acceptable.

	completely unacceptable					completely acceptable			
Man	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Woman	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

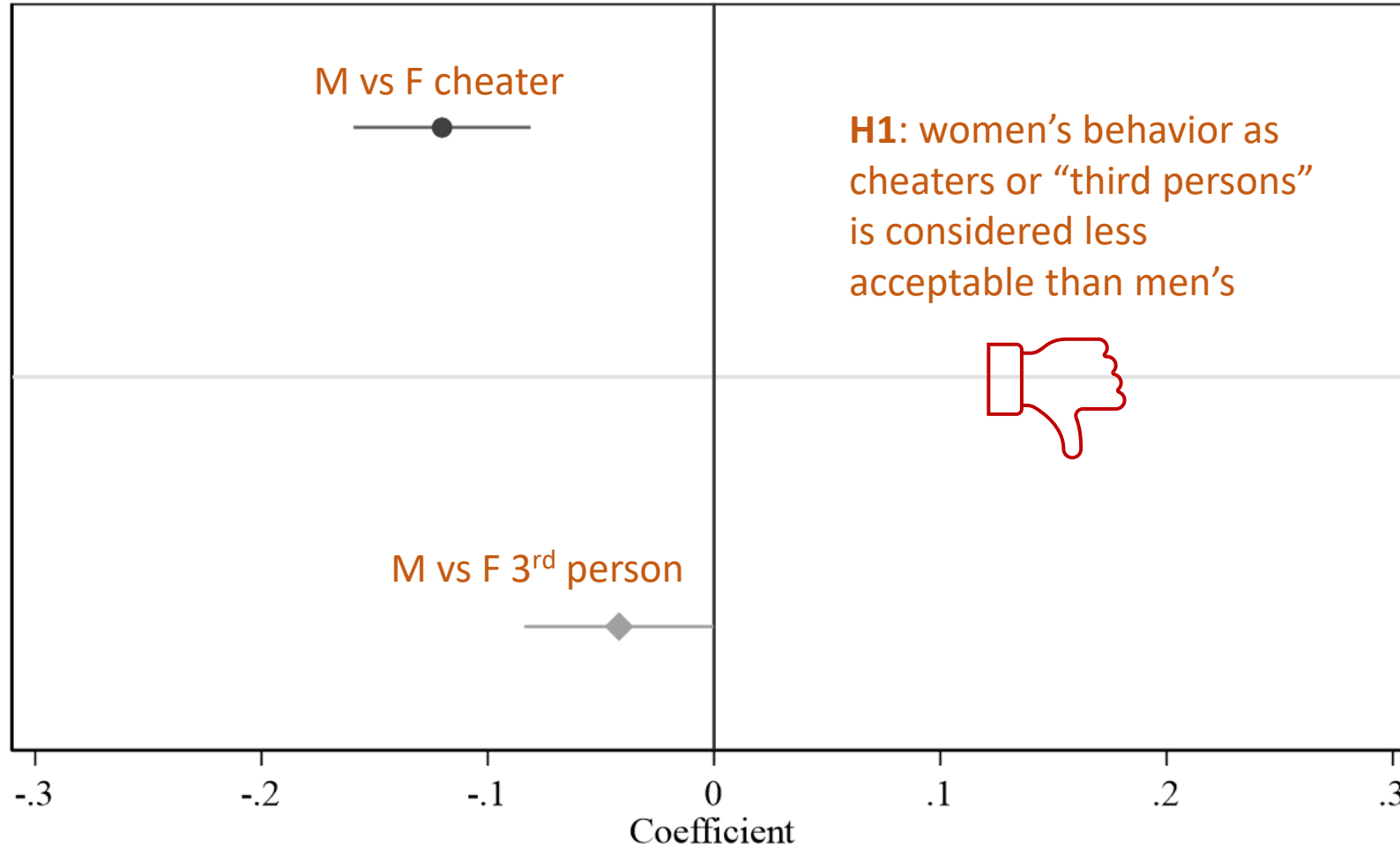
# Analytical strategy

- **Sexual double standard**
  - Effect of **cheaters'/third persons' gender** on acceptance
- **Ingroup bias**
  - Effect of the **correspondence between cheaters'/third persons' gender with respondents' gender** on acceptance
  - Effect of **respondents' experience with infidelity** (having been cheated, having been unfaithful) on acceptance

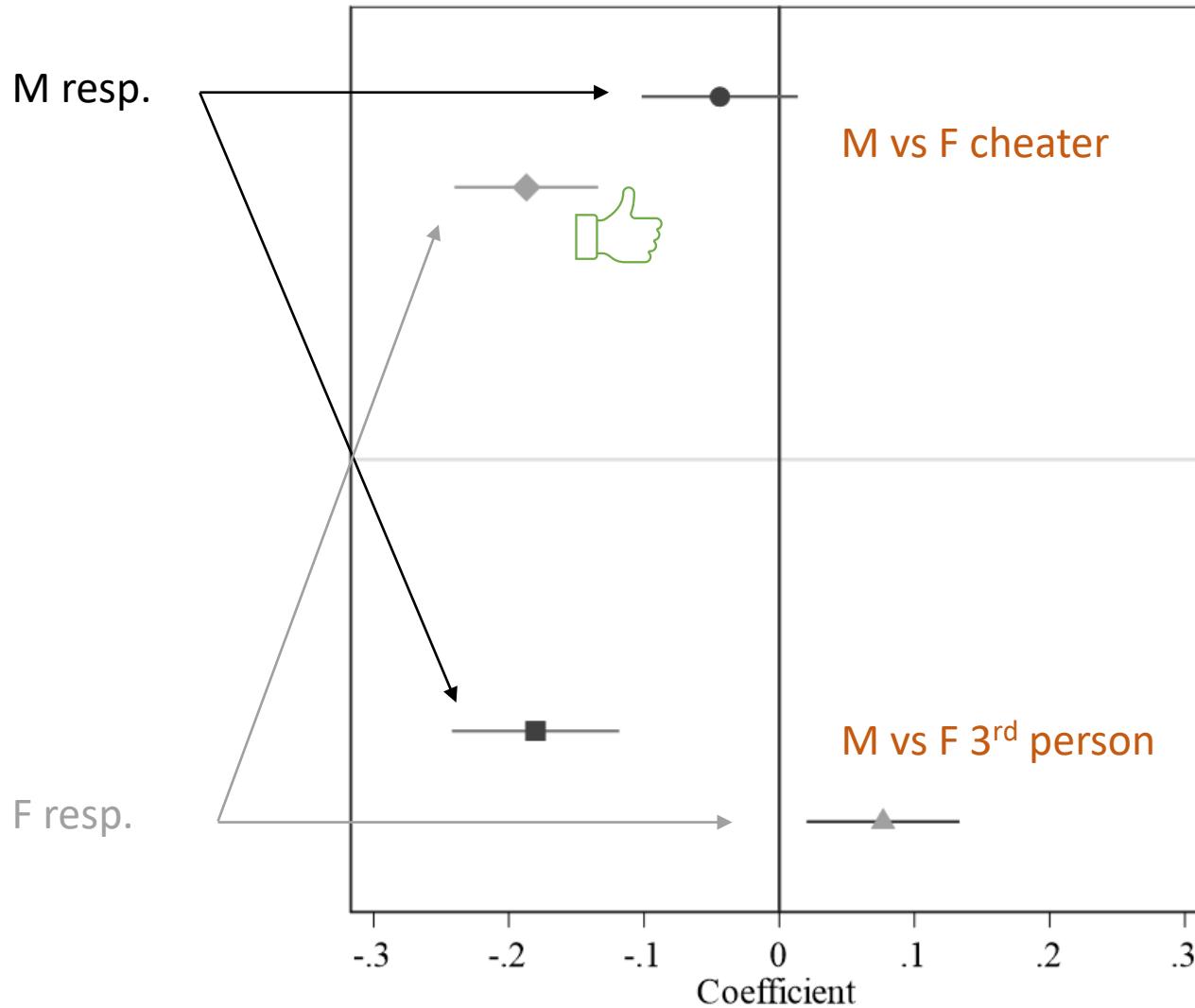
# Analytical strategy

- Random effects multilevel models
- Clustered SE (respondent level)
- Covariates
  - All vignette treatments
  - Respondents' characteristics

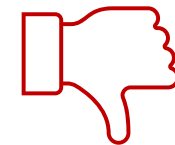
# Results: sexual double standard?



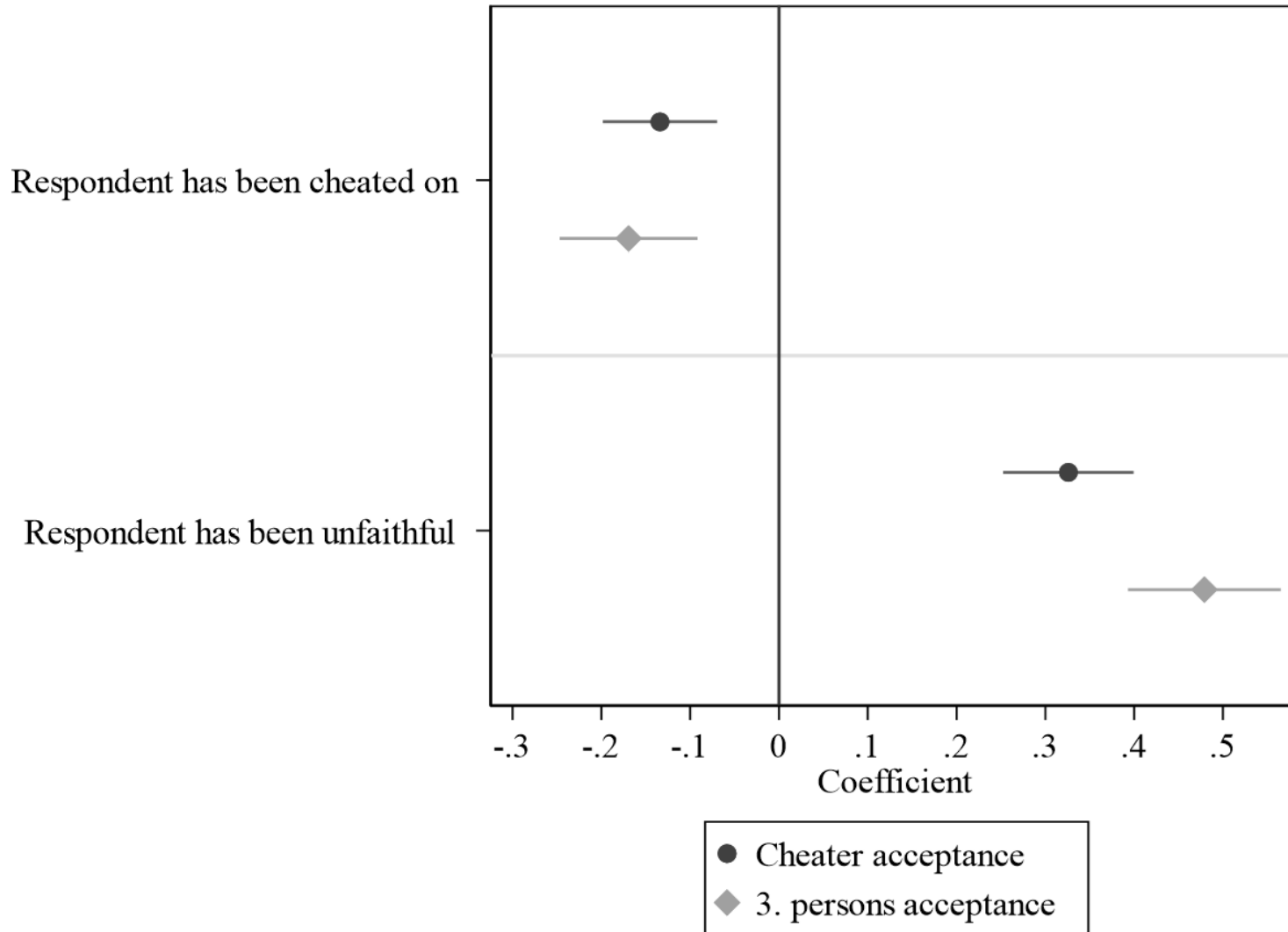
# Results: ingroup bias (gender)?



**H2a:** cheating or “third person” behavior is considered less acceptable when committed by people of the opposite sex than by people of the same sex as the judge/respondent



# Results: ingroup bias (infidelity)?



**H2b:** cheating or “third person” behavior is considered less acceptable when the judge/respondent has been cheated, and more acceptable when the judge/respondent has been unfaithful





# Discussion

- **Is infidelity considered acceptable?**
  - **It depends** on the characteristics of the respondent and the situation being evaluated
- **What are the mechanisms leading to its acceptance (or lack thereof)?**
  - No evidence of a sexual double standard (**reverse double standard?** Milhausen and Herold, 2001; Papp et al., 2015 )
  - **Ingroup bias** – different characteristics have **different salience**
    - Gender irrelevant
    - Personal experience of infidelity very salient

# Further steps

- Ingroup bias (gender): difficult to disentangle who respondents identify with: cheater or cheated?
- Individual's experience of infidelity not exogenous (possible confounders)



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Thank you!

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