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A GROUNDED THEORY INVESTIGATION OF THE SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES FROM
PARTNERS IN COUPLES WHERE INFIDELITY HAS OCCURRED

by

MALIKA BHOWMIK, M.A., M.Ed

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

2020

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

A Grounded Theory Investigation of the Subjective Responses from Partners in Couples Where
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by

Malika Bhowmik, M.A., M.Ed

Advisor: Steve Tuber

This qualitative study investigates the subjective responses elicited by partners in long-term committed couples where infidelity has taken place. Each of these couples attended a couple therapy session in the aftermath of their experience of an affair, and the transcriptions of these therapy sessions served as the data set for this investigation. In their seeking of help, most couples articulated a broad, comparable trajectory of the issues; their post-affair understanding of their pre-affair relationship including the state of their pre-affair sex, the origins of the unfaithful partner's ability to stray from the primary relationship, the impact of the affair on the couple, and the couple's efforts to move beyond the affair. However, while some couples demonstrated an ability to arrive at new hope for the future of their relationship, others were unable to move past the challenges of the impact of the affair on the couple. Within the couples that were more focused on the impact of the affair, betrayed partners were more likely to remain in a state of anger and mistrust, while unfaithful partners maintained an effort to rationalize their actions. Within the couples that demonstrated an effort to move past their affair, partners experienced a greater degree of post-affair clarity, yielding a collaboration of strategies towards transcending the rupture caused by the affair. The study also explores implications for the clinical practice of couples who present to therapy due to infidelity, as well as suggestions for future research with this population.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Infidelity is one of the most challenging and emotionally laden issues to treat in couple therapy. When a couple presents to treatment because of infidelity, it is almost always with considerable emotional turmoil. This breach of trust within a couple can result in intensely difficult emotional, relational, familial, financial and structural conflicts.

The prevalence rates of infidelity in married couples in the United States have varied widely across studies conducted within the past 25 years, ranging from 20% to 71% (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994; Sheppard, Nelson & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995; Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Choi, Catania & Dolcini 1994; Weeks, Gambescia & Jenkins, 2003). Current estimates suggest that 22%–25% of men and 11%–15% of women in marital relationships have been involved in an infidelity (Allen & Atkins, 2005). Inherent to the challenge of determining accurate statistics is the absence of an operationalized definition. While some researchers focus on the sexual contact, others stress the amount of emotional investment (Glass & Wright, 1992; Thompson, 1983). Additional definitions place emphasis on the dimensions of secrecy and diverted intimacy (Lusterman, 1998; Fife, Weeks & Gambescia, 2008; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Without a consensus on the constitution of infidelity, prevalence rates show substantial fluctuation from one study to another.

While it is difficult for researchers in the field to agree upon precise definitions and figures, on the personal level, infidelity results in clear consequences to a couple's emotional life. Partners of couples in which an infidelity has occurred experience diminished mental health, increased exposure to sexually transmitted infection, and adverse effects on shared children (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Allen & Atkins, 2012; Crouch & Dickes, 2016; Amato & Rogers, 1997;

Charny & Parnass, 1995; Amato, 2010; Fincham & May, 2017; Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick & Valentine, 2013). Relatedly, infidelity has been shown to be a strong predictor of relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Crouch & Dickes, 2016).

A study by Atkins, Baucom and Jacobson (2001) determined that 50%–65% of couples in treatment decided to pursue therapy because of relationship conflicts resulting from an affair. Couple therapists have reported extramarital affairs to be one of the most challenging problems that a couple experiences, as well as one of the most difficult issues to treat (Geiss & O’Leary, 1981; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Of note, each couple treatment has its own style of intervening and unique treatment focus. Where some highlight the quality of the attachment between partners (Johnson, 2004), others stress the need for healthy boundaries within the family system (Minuchin, 1974; Negash & Morgan, 2016). Some couple treatments aim to modify behaviors that are observable or cognitions that can be easily accessed (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004), whereas others are primarily focused on each partner’s unconscious representational world and its impact on the current relationship (Scharff & Scharff, 2000).

A review of the history of the first four decades of couple and family therapy reveals a strong emphasis on the distinctiveness of therapy models in place of an acknowledgment of what they had in common (Sprenkle, Blow, & Dickey, 1999). Efforts to establish empirical support further resulted in each discipline being in competition with one another and highlighting their disparities, though to date no model has emerged as a front runner (Weeks & Fife, 2014). The primary finding that has been consistent in couple therapy research is that couples who choose to attend therapy demonstrate better outcomes than those who do not (Shadish & Baldwin, 2003; Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin & Fawcett, 2009). Sprenkle et al. (1999) set out to study the common factors of change across the vast models of couple therapy and determined that key

elements to treatment efficacy across models include an ability for partners to be able to conceptualize one another's hardship and a recognition of the interactional processes that reinforce these relational issues.

In an investigation of the major branches of couple therapy and their respective efforts to treat infidelity, it is revealed that all couple therapies incorporate interventions aimed at developing deeper insight to facilitate each partner's sense of being known, and of knowing the other. Insight-based interventions are utilized across all couple therapy approaches to deepen each partner's understanding of the occurrence of, and the associated intense feelings connected to, the affair. The intention is to bring into awareness the subjective aspects of the relationship, the partner, and the self that the couple had not been aware of prior to treatment. Given this overlap, a research study investigating the subjective responses of partners within couples that have experienced infidelity may be useful in designing and refining treatment interventions across all couple therapy approaches.

While all affairs are unique and the effects are highly variable based on the sensitivities of each member within the couple, each infidelity story has a common trajectory: the couple's life pre-affair, the occurrence of the affair, the discovery of the affair, the emotional crisis from the revelation, the couple's assessment of the causes and motives, and, provided there's a mutual desire to move forward, each partner's respective goals with regard to repair and recovery. Given these commonalities, when couples who have experienced an infidelity discuss their affair in a therapy session, they may respond with similar content. The purpose of the present study is to investigate common themes communicated by partners of couples where an infidelity has occurred. The data set will be retroactive couple therapy session transcripts. The grounded theory methodology will be utilized so that the participants' responses can be assessed in the

unrestricted, spontaneous and authentic manner in which they were offered. Through investigating the themes that arise as partners respond to questions regarding themselves, their partner, and their relationship, a broad theory of infidelity can be determined. The theory can then inform treatment interventions designed to elicit insight between partners by helping therapists to better target the themes and constructs most salient to couples recovering from an affair. Given the universally acknowledged value of partner subjectivity across all couple treatment modalities, findings from this study can be broadly applicable to the field of couple therapy.

CHAPTER II

Literature Overview

Prevalence of Infidelity

The occurrence of infidelity in committed couples is a challenging and multifaceted phenomenon. In her book *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*, Esther Perel (2017) writes, “it can rob a couple of their relationship, their happiness, their very identity. And yet, this extremely common human experience is so poorly understood. Adultery has existed since marriage was invented, and so too the prohibition against it. So what are we to make of this time-honored taboo – universally forbidden yet universally practiced?” (p. 12). Opinions regarding the meaning of the term *infidelity* vary widely (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a), making it “a topic of discussion in the scholarly literature for at least 20 years” (Hertlein & Weeks, 2007, p. 96). While most individuals enter into their relationships anticipating monogamy (Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995; Treas & Giesen, 2000), infidelity is increasingly common (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). In recent Gallup Poll (Negash, Cui, Fincham & Pasley, 2014; Gallup 2007, 2008), the majority of Americans expressed their disapproval of infidelity, with 90% describing

it as “immoral” and 65% describing it as “unforgiveable.” Despite these seemingly universal attitudes, rates of infidelity offer contradictory information (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). A study by Allen et al. (2005) found that 22%–25% of men and 11%–15% of women in marital relationships engage in infidelity, and in long term dating arrangements, the percentages are higher. Further, Atkins, Marín, Lo, Klann and Hahlweg (2010) found that the lifetime rate of infidelity for men over the age of 60 increased from 20% in 1991 to 28% in 2006. For women over 60, the rate has risen more dramatically, from 5% in 1991 to 15% in 2006 (Parker-Pope, 2008). Recent estimates of the prevalence of infidelity among American couples vary widely, ranging from 26% to 70% for women and from 33% to 75% for men (Eaves & Misty Robertson-Smith, 2007).

Definition of Infidelity

In efforts to understand, study and treat the occurrence of infidelity, clinicians and scholars have made various attempts at defining the phenomenon. Their operationalized focus ranged from the degree of sexual contact to the level of secrecy to the notion of averted intimacy to the amount of emotional investment (Glass & Wright, 1992; Thompson, 1983; Lusterman, 1998; Fife et al., 2008; Weeks et al., 2014).

Sexual infidelity. Thompson (1983) was one of the earliest writers to grapple with the definition of an extramarital affair. He determined, “Extramarital sex is defined as genital sexual involvement outside the marriage without express knowledge or consent of one’s partner” (p. 240). While this definition seemingly makes clear whether or not a sexual infidelity has occurred, there remains ambiguity around the meaning of genital sexual involvement. One partner in the marriage may identify genital sexual involvement to mean sexual acts including oral–genital sex, mutual masturbation, or fondling while the other may not. Further, Thompson’s

definition does not address the dimension of emotional intimacy, which for some couples is the defining feature of the betrayal.

In large sample research that aims to estimate prevalence rates (Whisman & Synder, 2007), infidelity is often expressly defined as sexual intercourse. This is problematic in that it assumes the term sexual intercourse to have a universal meaning. Research indicates that the significance attached to sexual terms is largely determined by cultural and contextual factors (Carpenter, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Tawfik & Watkins, 2007), rendering the process of defining infidelity only through sexual descriptors too limiting. Further, this definition would not be applicable towards couples for whom sexual fidelity is not a defining feature of their commitment, such as swinging couples (Visser & McDonald, 2007) or polyamorous couples (Jamieson, 2004).

When the research shifts its focus from extradyadic sexual intercourse to extradyadic sexual activities, higher prevalence estimates are reported (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007). When broadened in this way, behaviors that qualify as infidelity included but were not limited to kissing, masturbating in the presence of another, performing oral sex, engaging in sexual play, visiting strip clubs, watching pornography, and having sexual fantasies about a person other than the partner (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Randall & Byers, 2003; Whitty, 2003; Yarab & Allgeier, 1998; Yarab, Allgeier, & Sensibaugh, 1999; Moller and Vossler, 2015). When extended to internet activity, sexual infidelity includes cybersex, exchanging sexual self-images, online dating, online flirting, and using online pornography (Henline, Lamke, & Howard, 2007; Hertlein & Webster, 2008; Whitty, 2003).

Emotional infidelity. While defining infidelity through sexual contract violations proves challenging, it's made even more difficult by the need to account for the breach of emotional

intimacy. In recognizing the limitations to Thompson's (1983) definition, Glass and Wright (1992) revised and expanded infidelity to exist within three major categories; affairs that are primarily sexual, primarily emotional, and a combined type (emotional and sexual). While these categories are intuitively clear, the issue of operationalization remains. There is particular ambiguity in the category of emotional affair. Existing attempts to define this phenomenon include but are not limited to, "deep emotional attachment" and "falling in love with another person" (Buss et al., 1999, p. 132); feeling "deeply connected" (Sabini & Silver, 2005, p. 721); an investment of romantic love, time, and attention in a person other than the primary partner (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000); sharing intimate details; discussing complaints about the primary partner and meeting for an alcoholic drink (Henline et al., 2007; Luo et al., 2010). Weeks and Fife (2014) have refined the notion of an emotional infidelity through the following qualifiers: (1) considerable emotional intimacy; (2) sharing thoughts and feelings which are not revealed to one's partner; (3) a strong urge to spend time with the extramarital partner; (4) maintaining secrecy around the relationship; and (5) a sense in the betrayed partner that a line or boundary has been crossed whereby matters that are private to the couple are discussed with the extramarital partner.

Secrecy. Secrecy is often a key element in defining infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Information being withheld from one's partner, and relatedly, the potential for that partner to experience betrayal upon discovering the information, are concepts commonly found in the infidelity literature. However, understanding infidelity in this way further complicates efforts to offer clarity, as within its parameters any behavior that is kept secret or evokes a sense of betrayal can be interpreted as infidelity, thereby substantially broadening the definition (Hertlein, Wetchler, & Piercy, 2005). In his book entitled *Infidelity: A Survival Guide* (1998), psychologist

Don-David Lusterman stresses the role of secrecy by claiming, “once a committed relationship is established, if there is a secret sexual and/or romantic involvement outside of the relationship, it is experienced as an infidelity” (p. 186).

In research conducted by Charny and Parnass (1995) findings revealed another dimension to consider with regard to secrecy. In their surveying of therapists who had extensive experience in treating affairs, they determined that most therapists believed the betrayed spouse knew the “secret” affair was occurring and was in collusion with its continuation. They stated, “Even the majority of the betrayed spouses who claimed consciously that they opposed their spouses’ behavior were unconsciously in collusion with them” (p. 100). Among the respondents, only 10% believed that the betrayed partners were genuinely and actively opposed to their partner’s affair. Given the emotional, marital, familial, and economic consequences to the revelation of an affair, it is not entirely unlikely that betrayed partners may feel a degree of motivation to deny that an affair is occurring. With regard to the issue of defining infidelity, partners who may be colluding with their partner’s involvement in an affair pose an interesting quandary in that the argument could be made that no violation of trust is occurring if in fact the potentially injured partner has given implicit approval.

In their book *Couples in Treatment*, Weeks & Fife (2014) put forward a current and comprehensive definition for infidelity. Starting with the belief that most couples in committed relationships have a “stated or implied commitment to both sexual and emotional fidelity between partners” (p. 249), they define infidelity as “any form of betrayal to the implied or stated contract between partners regarding intimate exclusivity. With infidelity, emotional and/or sexual intimacy is diverted away from the committed relationship without the other partner’s consent” (Fife et al., 2008, p. 101). With its emphasis on implicit or stated contracts between

partners, it is inclusive towards married couples, partners in long-term commitments, heterosexual and gay/lesbian couples, and those in polyamorous arrangements or open marriages. While this definition continues to pose obstacles in the realm of operationalization, the authors suggest that the need to create explicit definitional parameters may be more urgently needed by researchers than clinicians, as it is implicit to the work of clinicians to explore ambiguity and recognize the couples' unique experiences of relationship violation. They explain, "...once the discussion begins most couples do not quibble over definition, but agree that something was inappropriate. This is not to suggest partners do not deceive or deny that an affair has occurred or is occurring. Once the admission has been made that "something happened," it is usually with the idea that it was inappropriate." They suggest that it is the clinician's work to assess the particular ways in which each couple identifies inappropriateness and experiences betrayal.

Labels. In a discussion of the efforts towards defining infidelity, it is important to note labels that are commonly used in the infidelity literature. If a sexual boundary violation occurs between two people who are married, it may be referred to as *extramarital sex* (EMS). In the case that the partners are not married but are in a committed relationship, the term *extradyadic sex* (EDS) has been used. This term evolved in the literature as a result of the finding that many unmarried couples present for treatment as a result of infidelity. Recent research and literature on infidelity has used the more inclusive terms *extradyadic sex*, *extradyadic relationships*, and *extradyadic involvement* (Weeks, Gambescia & Jenkins, 2003; Weeks & Fife 2014).

Beyond the challenge of defining infidelity through sexual or emotional qualifiers, terms that are present throughout the infidelity literature often carry with them their own emotional valence, such as unfaithfulness (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988; Yarab, Allgeier, &

Sensibaugh, 1999), cheating (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007), and affairs (Atkins, Dimidjian, & Jacobson, 2001). Perel (2017) writes, “The language that is available to us clasps in its bosom the taboo and the stigma that infidelity represents. [...] The entire lexicon is organized around an axis of wrongdoing that not only reflects our judgment but fosters it” (p. 15). Hence, there are inherent challenges to the scientific study of infidelity.

In the infidelity literature, definitions and theories have been put forth largely by researchers and theorists, leaving out the voices of the clinicians working with these couples and, importantly, the individuals experiencing the infidelity themselves (Fincham & May, 2017). Despite the undeniable advantages to examining this construct from their vantage point, there is a notable lack of research exploring how patients and practitioners define infidelity. The limited research available in this realm has investigated individual perceptions of infidelity through hypothetical infidelity scenarios, or by presenting participants with pre-set lists of behaviors (Henline et al., 2007; Yarab, Allgeier, & Sensibaugh, 1999). This methodology ultimately restricted participants from responding authentically and subjectively. Of the five qualitative or mixed-method studies referenced, four had focused on infidelity online (Henline, Lamke, & Howard, 2007; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Mileham, 2007; Whitty, 2005), two employed a story-stem completion assessment (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005), and only one asked respondents about their own experiences with infidelity (Mileham, 2007). Relatedly, minimal research has been conducted with a focus on infidelity in the context of couple treatment (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).

Consequences. While precise definitions and figures remain elusive, there are clear consequences of infidelity on the life of a couple. Infidelity is consistently associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety and PTSD (Cano & O’Leary, 2000), as well as relationship

dissolution (Allen & Atkins, 2012; Crouch & Dickes, 2016). Within marital couples, Janus and Janus (1993) determined that infidelity was correlated with increased marital distress, conflict, and divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Charny & Parnass, 1995). Further, the distress does not remain within the couple. An estimated 11–21% of individuals with children commit infidelity (Spence, 2012; Weigel et al., 2003). Parents who do not effectively cope with infidelity expose their children to increased conflict (Blodgett Salafia et al., 2013) as well as trauma and grief-like symptoms (Dean, 2011). Parental infidelity can also cause feelings of guilt, anxiety, fear, worry, depression, shock, and aggression in children; all of which can hinder healthy emotional development (Ablow et al. 2009; Blodgett Salafia et al., 2013; Dean, 2011; Lusterman 2005). Across 160 societies, infidelity has been determined as the greatest predictor of marital dissolution (Betzig, 1989). Research has also revealed a link between infidelity and domestic violence (Buss, 1994).

Risks in the realm of sexual health are also present in couples where an infidelity has occurred. Studies show that approximately half of the partners who engage in extradyadic sex are using condoms, indicating that the other half are engaging in sexual activity that leads to the possibility of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (Fincham & May, 2017; Conley et al, 2013). These findings reveal that infidelity is not only a crisis on the micro-level of the relationship, it also poses a critical threat to public health (Hall, Fals-Stewart & Fincham, 2008).

Major Branches of Couple Therapy

In the aftermath of an affair, couples seek stabilization and healing. Many view couples therapy as a place where this can be accomplished. Clinicians report high estimates of couples who present with infidelity in their practices, yet they continue to find the problem of infidelity to be difficult to treat (Marín, Christensen & Atkins, 2014). Further, there are disparate ideas

surrounding the best approach to couple therapy and the particular challenge of infidelity. An overview of the major couple treatments and their methodology to address infidelity would provide insight to the ways in which these methods are similar and different, as well as potentially reveal avenues for intervention not yet explored.

Emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT)

Theoretical background of EFT. Developed in the 1980's by Sue Johnson and Les Greenberg, emotionally focused couple therapy (EFT) is regarded one of the most popular couple treatments today. Studies utilizing EFT have produced substantial empirical support in that 70-73% of couples move from a state of distress to a state of recovery, and 90% show significant relationship improvements (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999). Emotionally focused couple therapy finds its origins in attachment theory, humanistic-experiential theories, and systems theory (Johnson, 2004). In EFT, attachment is interpreted through a lens of secure dependence. This security is considered an innate motivating force for all human beings across the lifespan, from birth through adulthood. By providing an essential safe haven and secure base from which individuals can explore, attachment fosters independence and autonomy (Bowlby, 1968, 1982; Johnson, 2004). Emotional accessibility and responsiveness build bonds, as emotions direct communication to the self and others about motivations and needs. Relationship distress is therefore caused by a lack of interactions that are open and responsive. As a result, individual attachment needs are left unsatisfied, leading to deprivation and distance, and ultimately conflict and distress. These conflicts can only be resolved through appropriate responses to attachment cues, as they are the building blocks of the secure bond (Johnson, 2004). EFT draws upon humanistic-experiential theories in that it focuses on process, empathy, emotion, and corrective emotional experience (Johnson, 2004). In EFT, the emphasis is on how

individuals actively process their experiences in their environment in the present moment. A major goal of EFT is the fostering and heightening of new, corrective emotional experiences in the here-and-now of the therapy session. It addresses how inner and outer realities define each other, in particular, how emotions orient individuals to their world and tell themselves and others what they need and what they fear. EFT draws from systems approaches in that each partner is considered to be creating the responses of the other partner without any awareness of this dynamic (Johnson, 2004). These interactions are characterized by circular rather than linear causality, in that they reciprocally determine each other.

Primary assumptions of EFT. Emotionally focused couple therapy has five primary assumptions (Johnson, 2004). First, an emotional bond is the most appropriate paradigm for adult intimacy as it addresses every individual's innate need for contact, security, and protection. Created by accessibility and responsiveness, this bond is essential in minimizing marital conflict. Second, emotions are essential in organizing attachment behaviors in that they make the self and other aware of whether and how attachment needs are met. Emotion is both a crucial target and an agent of change in that it guides and gives meaning to perception, motivates changes in behavior, and communicates the needs of the self and the other. The creation of new, corrective emotional experiences is considered the most important factor in intrapsychic and interpersonal change. Third, circular causality—or the ways in which a couple's interactions are organized—is what maintains conflict in the relationship. Fourth, attachment needs are healthy and adaptive; it is how these needs are enacted in a context of perceived insecurity that creates problems. Needs must be recognized and validated, not ignored or dismissed. Fifth, change is facilitated by accessing and reprocessing emotional experience. The creation of new elements of emotional experience and new ways of expressing that experience allows for new interactions, yielding a

redefinition of the couple relationship.

EFT Treatment Intervention. The change process in emotionally focused therapy is made up of three stages: (1) de-escalation of negative cycles of interaction, (2) changing interactional positions, and (3) consolidation and integration (Johnson, 2004). During step 1 of the de-escalation stage, the therapist creates an alliance and begins an assessment of the core attachment struggle within the relationship. During step 2, the therapist helps the couple to identify the negative interactional cycle. The focus of step 3 is accessing unacknowledged emotions and attachment needs, and the focus of step 4 is reframing the problem in terms of the negative cycle, underlying emotions, and attachment needs. During stage 2, changing interactional positions, steps 5 through 7 involve promoting identification with disowned emotions and needs, promoting acceptance of the partner's experience, and facilitating expression of needs to redefine attachment. This stage is repeated for both partners. During the final consolidation and integration stage, the therapist facilitates the emergence of new solutions to old relationship problems (step 8), and helps the couple to consolidate new positions and new cycles of attachment behaviors (step 9).

Infidelity treatment using EFT. In emotionally focused couples therapy, infidelity is viewed as an "attachment injury," which is defined as an "intense trauma or violation of trust that brings the nature of the whole relationship into question and must be dealt with if the relationship is to survive," (Johnson, 2005, p.19). The affair is experienced as a relational trauma in that the revelation of the affair results in the shattering of one partner's basic assumptions about the person they're with and the relationship they're in. The betrayed partner is then in a highly vulnerable state where they feel they cannot rely on their partner for emotional safety. Their responses to the partner who betrayed them then alternate from anxious clinging to avoidance

(Johnson, Makinen & Milikin, 2001). Johnson et al. (2001) suggest that emotional sensitivity is typical in the trajectory of post-affair dynamics within a couple, and the next step in the progression is a repetitive process wherein the injured partner experiences repeated flashbacks of the event with intense emotion, not unlike a traumatic flashback. These reactions hold the potential to overwhelm the offending partner who then reacts with defensiveness. This dynamic blocks off the possibility of safe interaction with healing potential. The offending partner's inability to comfort the injured partner at a time when the injured partner is experiencing a great need for comfort results in a relational impasse. Makinen and Johnson (2006) conducted a study in which they developed a model for treating infidelity and other attachment injuries entitled the *attachment injury resolution model*. They believed that this model could be replicated by clinicians treating extramarital affairs using an EFT framework (Schade & Sandberg, 2012). They outlined the following steps:

1. The injured partner begins to describe with high affect the event that he or she experienced as a violation of trust and that hurt his or her belief in the relationship as a secure bond.
2. The offending partner will respond defensively and will discount, refute or minimize the injured partner's hurt feelings.
3. The injured spouse continues to stay in touch with their pain and begins to communicate its impact and attachment significance. Expressions of anger shift towards expressions of hurt, helplessness and shame.
4. The partner who had committed the attachment injury starts to listen to their partner and recognizes the underlying significance of the injurious incident. They begin to understand it in attachment terms as a reflection of their significance to the injured partner, in place

of experiencing their partner's pain as a reflection of their personal inadequacies or "crimes." The offending partner is then helped by the therapist to explore how the injurious event occurred so that their actions become clear and understandable to the injured partner.

5. The injured partner gradually moves toward a more integrated and complete articulation of the injury. The injured partner exposes their vulnerable feelings connected to the loss of the attachment bond.
6. The offending spouse engaged more deeply on an emotional level and takes responsibility for the ways in which they contributed to the attachment injury by exploring their part in the attachment injury or infidelity through the expression of empathy, regret, and remorse.
7. From a state of vulnerability, the injured spouse then asks for comfort and care from the offending partner, which had been unavailable at the time of the incident.
8. The offending partner offers comfort and care which serve the function of reducing the trauma of the attachment injury incident. The partners then develop a new narrative of the injury collaboratively which includes, for the injured partner, an understandable explanation for how their partner became involved with another person and a resolution of this crisis in their relationship (Schade & Sandberg, 2012; Makinen and Johnson, 2006).

When the attachment injury is resolved, the couple can then enter into a cycle of positive interaction where the secure bond can be reinforced. Equipped with their mutually built couple narrative around the injurious event, the couple can enhance responsiveness, comfort and reassurance towards one another (Schade & Sandberg, 2012).

Gottman Method Couples Therapy

Theoretical background of the Gottman Method. In the 1970s, Robert Levenson and John M. Gottman (1984, 1988, 1992, 2002) began investigating couples' dynamics through a focus on physiology, behavior and perception. Through observations of couples in a laboratory, they developed a rating scale based on moment-to-moment perceptions of how partners within a couple were feeling on a numerical scale, ranging from the "very positive" score of +9 to the "very negative" score of -9 (Gottman, 2013). They determined a distinction between couples who are happy and stable, which they titled the *Masters* of relationships, and couples who were unhappy or unstable, dubbed the *Disasters* of relationships. To make their assessments, they used behavioral cues such as couples' voice tones, speech disturbances, gestures, movements, emotions, facial expressions, decision making processes, use of humor and show of affection. Further, they developed a coding system to categories statements made between partners of a couple in interviews. Through these means, Levenson and Gottman designed and validated a set of questionnaires designed to assess a profile of strengths and weaknesses in relationships (Gottman, 1999). Levenson and Gottman found empirical support for their methods in a follow up study conducted 3-years after collecting couples' data. They determined that they could predict the future of a relationship with reasonably high accuracy (high correlations of .90s) with only several hours of collected data of a couple. These findings reinforced their belief that physiological responses of partners within a couple reveal relationship happiness and resilience.

Primary Assumptions of the Gottman Method. Gottman and Gottman (2013) state that their research has revealed specific correlates to couple unhappiness. They identify eight major predictors of divorce and/or continued couple dissatisfaction. These predictors can be understood as the areas of dysfunction that underlie the couples' distress.

1. *More negativity than positivity.* Gottman and Gottman (2015) have determined that the necessary ratio of positive interactions to negative interactions during moments of conflict for couples in stable relationships is 5:1. Conversely, a ratio of 0.8:1 was found in couples that ultimately divorced. Positive affect is of particular importance because it has been found to reduce physiological arousal. However, negative affect is also necessary in that negativity plays the prosocial function of eliminating relational patterns that aren't effective. Negativity also results in emotional distance which is eventually bridged again when couples become close, and this process is a necessary renewal of a couple's courtship over time.
2. *Escalation of negative affect: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.* The four primary factors that predict relationship demise are criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling. Even for couples in happy and stable relationships, the rapid escalation of negativity between partners is a high predictor of divorce. Couples who escalate conflict are found to divorce an average of 5.6 years after their wedding (Gottman, 2015).
3. *Turning away.* Connected to an escalation of negativity is a negative style of everyday interaction in which partners turn away from one another when one or the other is seeking emotional proximity through attention, interest, humor, affection, or support.
4. *Turning against: Irritability, emotional disengagement, and withdrawal.* Another negative style in everyday interaction is responding to one's partner's bid for emotional connection with irritability or short-temperedness. For these couples, while there may not be an escalation of negativity during conflict, they ultimately experienced minimal positivity during conflict. These couples were found to divorce an average of 16.2 years after their wedding (Gottman, 2015).

5. *The failure of repair attempts.* In the Gottman method, the goal is in having improved processing abilities at moments of miscommunication. They believe that arguing itself is inevitable but by helping patients to better understand their arguments, the couple can more effectively repair the emotional wounds experienced.
6. *Negative sentiment override.* Robert Weiss (1994) defined negative sentiment override as the moment when an observer views a message conveyed to their partner as neutral or positive when the other experienced the comment to be negative. When this occurs, the partner begins to understand the other as possessing negative traits such as selfishness or insensitivity. The Gottman approach refers to Fritz Heider's (1958) *fundamental attribution error* to explain this tendency. In fundamental attribution error, an individual tends to minimize their own errors by attributing them to temporary circumstances while maximizing the errors of others by understanding them as connected to lasting negative personality traits. The Gottman method purports that the same phenomenon is occurring in unhappy couples. Further, they suggest that the negative traits people see in their partners are particularly present when partners use negative terms to tell the history of their relationship.
7. *Diffuse physiological arousal.* When a partner perceives that they are being emotionally attacked during a conflict, the fight-or-flight response may become activated. The heart rate may elevate and the body may secrete adrenaline due to feeling overwhelmed by their partner's communication style. In these moments, partners are less capable of processing information and have less access to their creativity and humor. The Gottman method understands these tendencies as the partner being in a state of *flooding* due to experiencing diffuse physiological arousal, in which a person wants to flee, aggress or act

defensively (Gottman, 2015). Gottman and Gottman consistently found that men have a higher probability than women to rehearse distress-maintaining thoughts during an argument, hence they are the more likely partner to remain in a diffuse state of physiological arousal. The Gottman method encourages that partners in this flooded state take breaks from the argument in order to self sooth and minimize conflict escalation. They work with couples to integrate structured breaks, relaxation instructions, and biofeedback devices during moments of conflict.

8. *The failure of men to accept influence from wives.* In the Gottman method, there are two major patterns of rejecting influence: (a) male emotional disengagement, which evolves into emotional dis-engagement from both partners, and (b) male escalation, including belligerence, contempt and defensiveness, in response to their wives' low-intensity negative affect such as in the case of complaining. In the Gottman method, an emphasis is placed on being able to accept the influence of one's partner in order to be in a high functioning relationship.

Gottman and Gottman (2013) determined that these eight factors accurately predicted relationship demise. In their quest to understand how to best intervene with couples, they set out to develop a theory that incorporated their findings.

Gottman Method Treatment Intervention. In the past 16 years, Gottman and Gottman (2015) have developed interventions that enhance relationship viability and help couples and the therapists with whom they work to transform their unhappy and unstable relationships into happy and stable ones. The *Sound Relationship House Theory* is the result of a compilation of their research findings on relationships designed to help clinicians intervene effectively with couples

(J. M. Gottman, 1999; J. S. Gottman, Driver & Tabares, 2002). The theory is comprised of seven areas of focus which are referred to as “levels” (Gottman, 2013).

1. *Build love maps.* A love map is a road map of one’s partner’s inner psychological world that helps the members of a couple to feel more seen and known to one another. Inquiring, “What are your worries and stresses at the moment?” or “What are some of your hopes, aspirations, dreams and goals in life?” helps partners to learn about one another and build love maps of one another’s worlds.
2. *Share fondness and admiration.* This level is comprised of two aspects, (1) the seeking of admiration, appreciation and pride in your partner, and (2) the verbal expression of those admiring thoughts.
3. *Turn towards versus away.* Partners within a couple make *bids* for emotional connection in order to enhance intimacy through shared attention, interest, conversation, humor, affection, warmth, empathy, help, support, and so on. When a partner makes a bid and the other partner responds by turning towards their partner and receiving them with warmth, the relationship is strengthened.
4. *The positive perspective:* When there is relationship distress, partners within a couple may hear criticism where none was intended, or feel that they should not give their partner the benefit of the doubt. However, when a relationship is working well, partners within a couple are more likely to utilize *positive sentiment override* by recognizing their partner’s negativity not as a personal criticism but as evidence that their partner is experiencing stress.
5. *Manage conflict.* As conflict is natural and has functional and positive aspects, it is not something to resolve but rather to manage. Strategies such as being gentle towards one

another, softening the start-up of a conflict, preempting repair, accepting influence from one another, self-soothing and compromising have been observed to facilitate conflict management. *Master* couples, or couples with stronger prognoses, respond to problems with acceptance, amusement, respect and affection, whereas *Disaster* couples become gridlocked, escalate the conflict or avoid one another. When a couple experiences gridlock, it can be understood as stemming from a deep and meaningful place in one's core belief system, needs, history or personality. It may relate to a strongly held value, or to an aspiration not yet lived. Because compromising would feel like a betrayal on issues intimately connected to one's core, the partners remain entrenched and polarized from one another. Relatedly, they feel fundamentally rejected by their partner, and sense that discussing conflicts is the experience of "spinning their wheels". Dialogues result in more hurt and frustrated feelings. In contrast, when a relationship feels safe, partners are able to convey that they wish to understand the underlying meaning of their partner's position. Their partner can then do the vulnerable work of sharing feelings, dreams and needs. In this process, persuasion and problem solving are postponed as the objective is simply to understand each partner's underlying issue. The Gottman Method (2008) refers to this intervention as the *dreams-within-conflict* intervention.

6. *Make life dreams come true.* An atmosphere that encourages partners to talk freely about dreams, values, and aspirations and feel that the relationship supports those dreams is crucial. By incorporating this information into one's love map for their partner, they can strengthen their relationship by helping their partner to make their aspirations come true.
7. *Create shared meaning.* Referred to as the "attic" of the Sound Relationship House, this level emphasizes the space where couples build shared purpose and meaning. By creating

formal and informal rituals of connection, creating shared goals and life missions, supporting one another's basic roles, and agreeing on central values and symbols, a deeper shared meaning between partners can develop.

Infidelity treatment using the Gottman Method. Gottman (2015) emphasizes that betrayal exists in many forms other than an affair, such as lying or forming a coalition with a family member against the marital partner. However, Gottman suggests that affairs can be best predicted if partners begin to believe that they could conceivably be in a better relationship. This lack of commitment to the relationship is itself a form of betrayal, as it results in less gratitude, appreciation, or overall positive affect towards the primary relationship.

While there is no formal infidelity treatment developed within this method, recent modifications to the *Sound Relationship House Theory* have been made to address the significance of trust and commitment within a relationship (Gottman & Silver, 2012). In the newly designed house, *trust* and *commitment* are pillars that bolster the seven levels. Gottman, Gottman and McNulty (2017) outline the following ways to build trust, love and loyalty within a marriage:

1. Make trustworthiness a main priority in your relationship.
2. Act to maximize your partner's well-being.
3. Know that trust is built in small positive moments.
4. Avoid negative comparisons.
5. Generate frequent thoughts and acts that cherish your partner's positive qualities and minimize your focus on their negative faults (Gottman et al., 2017).

Cognitive-Behavioral Couple Therapy (CBCT)

Theoretical background of CBCT. Cognitive-Behavioral Couple Therapy (CBCT) was developed through the merging of three major schools of thought: (1) behavioral couple therapy (BCT), (2) cognitive therapy, (3) information processing research in the field of cognitive psychology.

Developed in the early 1980s, CBCT is a recent advent to the field of couple therapy. However, it has adopted clinical assessment and intervention strategies from BCT and CT, each of which have long standing histories in the psychotherapy literature (Baucom et al., 2015).

Behavioral Couple Therapy (BCT) was developed in the late 1960s and was rooted in the application of the reinforcement principles of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1963). Stuart (1969) offered the first published application of behavioral principles to work with couples. Through the use of social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 2008), Stuart proposed that successful marriages experienced lower distress because these couples exchanged a higher frequency and broader range of positive acts than couples in distressed marriages. Further, operant conditioning principles suggested that partners would be more likely to behave positively towards one another if they experienced positive consequences from one another for those positive acts (Baucom et al., 2015). Patterson, Weiss and Hops (1976) applied operant principles from parent-child dynamics to treat relationship distress by using reinforcers and punishers to increase desired behaviors and decrease negative behaviors. Traditional BCT suggests that a couple's relationship is comprised of reciprocal and circular sequences in which one partner's behavior simultaneously influences and affects the behavior of the other. The dependence of each partner on the reinforcing and punishing behaviors of the other determine the terms of a functional analysis of the couple's behavior patterns, where events accruing within the couple's interactions as well as in their broader environment titrate the frequency of positive and negative

acts by each partner in the relationship (Baucom et al., 2015). BCT ultimately expanded to incorporate Cognitive Therapy (CT), to account for the ways in which a person's emotional and behavioral reactions to their environment are often mediated by idiosyncratic interpretations that are influenced by cognitive distortions (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979; Ellis, 1962; Meichenbaum, 1977).

In CBCT, the focus is on cognitive, behavioral and emotional factors (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Rathus & Sanderson, 1999). A foundational premise in this treatment methodology is that partner's dysfunctional emotional and behavioral responses to events within the relationship are affected by information-processing errors that result in distorted cognitive appraisals of these events (e.g. "You went out for drinks after work because you like your friends more than me") (Baucom et al., 2015, p. 25) or extreme, unreasonable standards (e.g. "If we really had a healthy marriage, we would always get along and never fight") (Baucom et al., 2015, p. 25). In these instances, partners are trusting in the validity of their subjective automatic thoughts in response to internal or external events experienced throughout the relationship (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 2002).

After BCT and CT, the third major influence on the development of CBCT is information processing research, particularly in the realm of social cognition (Jacobson & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1986; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Fletcher and Fitness, 2014; Noller, Beach & Osgarby, 1997). The two main areas of focus of social cognition research that have influenced research on intimate couple relationships are *attributions* that individuals make about determinants of positive and negative events within their relationships, and generally stable *schemas* (e.g. the notion of a "loving spouse") that individuals form based on relationships from their past and continue to utilize in understanding present day relationships.

While CBCT is established as an empirically supported treatment for couples in distress (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Diauto & Stickle, 1998) recent updates to CBCT have been made to account for areas of focus that had previously been minimized. Among these is consideration of “macro-level” patterns and themes, such as the differences between partners’ desired levels of closeness and intimacy (Epstein & Baucom, 2002) to place in context the existing focus on “micro-level” relational behaviors and events. Another update is the focus on the influence of each partner’s personality and other stable individual differences between partners within a couple (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). While cognitive distortions and behavioral deficits remain key to determining the core aspects of a couple’s distress, this modification allows for the acknowledgement of disparate characteristics each partner brings to the relationship. This assessment helps to illuminate why partners behave and construe events in ways that are maladaptive. As a couple is comprised of two partners, each individual has their own history, preferences, needs and motives that influence micro and macro-level relational events. Studies show that individual differences among both psychologically healthy partners as well as partners where psychopathology is present directly influence relationship functioning and satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Other shifts include increased attention to the role of the environment as informed by systems and ecological models of relationship functioning (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1989), a shift from viewing emotions as secondary to acknowledging them as increasing the range of CBCT interventions (Epstein & Baucom, 2002), and a stronger emphasis on positive valences of particular emotions, behaviors and cognitions.

Primary Assumptions of CBCT. Epstein and Baucom (2002) determined several fundamental needs and motives that, when not managed properly, are at the core of couple distress. These

include communal or relationship-focused needs such as the need to affiliate or be part of various relationships including a marriage, the need for intimacy with one's partner, the desire to be kind and caring towards one's partner, and the need to have one's partner attend to them. Relatedly, the needs of the individual within the couple that may affect relationship distress include autonomy, control and achievement (Baucom et al., 2015).

When there are differences in what each individual within a couple desires, partners who have different needs regarding intimacy, control, organization and planning may experience frustrated feelings. This may result in partners acting negatively towards one another, experiencing upsetting emotions, and distorting the intentions of their partner's behavior in their efforts to have their needs met. When the fundamental needs of a partner in a relationship are unmet, they experience "primary distress," in that they have a basis for dissatisfaction with their relationship. Further, when partners employ maladaptive strategies to mobilize their partner in response to their unmet needs and desires (e.g. when a partner withdraws from the other, or when partners become verbally abusive towards one another), these relational patterns can result in "secondary distress" (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). The work of the couple therapist is in addressing both primary and secondary distress by facilitating partners in identifying methods to navigate and reconcile their differences.

The presence of significant psychopathology or long-standing unresolved individual issues in one or both partners within a couple can result in additional stressors for the couple and potentially be damaging to both partners, as in the case of major depression in one partner resulting in an imbalance in the relationship. Lastly, the couple's broader social and physical environment may at times pose obstacles to the couple that strain their coping capacities. A pile-

up of stressors, or a significant medical condition, can overwhelm a couple and result in the experience of crisis and intense distress within the relationship (Baucom et al., 2015).

CBCT treatment intervention. The key premise in CBCT treatment intervention is that all interventions aim to highlight the interplay of behavior, cognitions and emotions. Further, it is believed that changes in any one domain will result in changes within the others. In CBCT, an individual's subjective experience is understood to be a blend of cognitions and emotions that are interwoven with one another. Hence, while interventions are categorized to target either the domain of behavior, cognition, or emotion, it is understood that these distinctions mostly exist for heuristic purposes as most of the CBCT methods of intervention are designed to affect all three relationship domains at once. In the behavioral realm, interventions such as *guided behavior change*, where partners in a couple make constructive behavior changes to decrease the frequency and magnitude of negative behaviors and increase positive behaviors (Halford, Sanders & Behrens, 1994), or *skill-based interventions*, where partners are given instruction through didactic teaching to improve the process of their communication (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 2002) are common. When partners of a couple present with cognitive distortions in the ways in which they process information, the therapist employs *cognitive restructuring* techniques. Cognitive interventions target areas such as *selective attention*, *attributions*, *expectancies*, *assumptions* and *standards*. Intervention strategies include evaluating the logic that supports a cognition, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of a cognition, considering worst and best possible outcomes of a situation, providing education via mini-lectures, readings and tapes, using the inductive "downward arrow" method, identifying macro-level patterns for cross-situational responses, recognizing macro-level patterns in past relationships, enhancing relationship schematic thinking by noting repetitive cycles in the

couple's interaction, and the use of Socratic questioning (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Intervening in the emotional domain may be necessary when a partner within a couple experiences *restricted* or *minimized emotions*. Strategies in CBCT designed to help partners access and heighten their emotional experiences draw upon emotionally focused couple therapy (Johnson & Greenberg, 1987). Therapists may intervene by asking the couple to describe a particular incident in detail in order to evoke emotions or use metaphors and images to convey emotions. Therapists may also seek emotional content through questions, reflections and interpretations. Emotional interventions are also needed in the scenario that one or both partners are struggling to contain their experience, or the expression of their emotions, particularly if the emotions are highly negative. Emotion regulation interventions in CBCT are also drawn from Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (Linehan, 1993) which integrate cognitive-behavioral strategies with acceptance interventions. While DBT interventions are not designed to be utilized in an interpersonal context, they lend themselves to working with partners. As a result, CBCT therapists have taken steps towards integrating these treatment methods in order to assist couples that are experiencing emotion dysregulation. Techniques from DBT such as observing strong emotions, identifying what these emotions are, and the effect of those emotions on their partner are also employed in CBCT. This improved emotional awareness can result in greater communication skills between partners. Another intervention designed to modulate emotion is seeking support outside of the relationship to express concerns before addressing those concerns with one's partner. When one partner experiences intense emotion, the other might serve as strong negative stimuli in those moments. Seeking outside support would enable the intensely emotional individual to regulate their emotions prior to addressing the relational concern.

An important mention here is Integrated Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT) (Christensen, Jacobson & Babcock, 1995; Jacobson & Christensen 1996; Jacobson et al., 2000; Mairal, 2015) as a couple therapy that mirrors CBCT in that it makes use of behavioral interventions developed in BCT. However, it emphasizes acceptance based strategies to help partners to accept aspects of one another that were previously viewed as unacceptable. Where CBCT attempts to change cognitions directly by identifying and correcting cognitive distortions, IBCT is geared towards creating these changes by focusing on and facilitating acceptance-based patterns of interaction (Roddy, Stamatis, Rotham & Doss., 2019). However, both treatments are outgrowths of BCT and, as such, both utilize fundamental behavioral interventions such as *behavioral exchange* and *problem-solving skills training* to enhance positive change within the couple (Dimidjian, Martell, & Christensen, 2008; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979).

Infidelity treatment using CBCT. CBCT approaches to treating infidelity draw upon the trauma literature, as the experience of an affair is conceptualized as an interpersonal trauma (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004). The literature on violated assumptions is particularly referenced (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; McCann, Sakheim, & Abrahamson, 1988; Resick & Calhoun, 2001). Further, as the discovery of an affair may be experienced as a major relational betrayal, this treatment also makes use of Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder's three-stage *forgiveness model* (Gordon & Baucom, 1998, 1999, 2004; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000) which combines cognitive-behavioral strategies for couple therapy with insight-oriented interventions (Snyder & Wills, 1989; Snyder, 1999). The treatment of infidelity in CBCT stresses collaboration between both the individual who participated in the affair and the injured partner. Goals and interventions are organized into three stages, outlined below.

In Stage 1, the impact of the affair is addressed. The initial goal is to assess the functioning of each individual in the couple as well as the relationship itself. These assessments are designed to target the following areas: (a) identify immediate crises requiring intervention, such as suicidality or physical violence, (b) construct an initial formulation summarizing partners' individual and relationship strengths, as well as vulnerabilities potentially contributing to and resulting from the affair, and (c) develop a shared treatment plan outlining each participant's responsibilities (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004, p. 214).

Initial interventions in Stage 1 are born from cognitive-behavioral thinking. The first step is to assist partners in determining boundaries or guidelines of interaction between themselves and with others in their lives. Partners may wish to decide how much time they do and do not want to spend together, whether or not they will continue to have sexual relations, what contact, if any, the offending partner will have with their affair partner, and what to share with children, friends, in-laws, and others close to the couple. With an intention to address feelings of anxiety, depression and shame, individual sessions and written guidelines are used to encourage self-care through improved physical well-being (e.g. sleep, diet and exercise). Connection with social and spiritual support as appropriate is also advised. Further, utilizing "time-out" and "venting" strategies are taught to partners to help them to de-escalate when their emotional level becomes too high. Individual sessions also help to build rapport between each individual partner and the therapist. Once stabilization of the individual and relationship functioning has been accomplished, the focus then becomes the affair's impact on each partner and the relationship. The therapist seeks each person's major assumptions about their partner, their relationship and themselves to assess the specific violations experienced as a result of the affair.

The intensity of hurt, angry, or shameful feelings post-affair may result in escalating negative exchanges. As a result, couples are taught to use appropriate emotional expressiveness skills for both the person speaking and the person listen to enhance communication (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Supervised letter writing is also used as a means for helping partners to improve their reflective capacities, particularly as injured partners are asked to consider why the infidelity had the particular impact upon them that it had. Guided by the therapist, the partners explore the particular reasons the affair may have had the impact on them that it had, with an emphasis on their developmental history. Letters are then read aloud to one another with special instruction to the affair-participating partner from the therapist as to how to manage their reactions and listen nondefensively (Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Snyder et al., 2004, 2007). Episodic “flashbacks” experienced by the injured partner are characteristic of this initial stage of affair recovery, and they may persist at a reduced intensity and frequency for months or years after the initial discovery or disclosure. As such, a crucial aspect of this stage of treatment is to work with couples to understand what flashbacks are and why they occur, as well as steps couples can take individually and together to minimize their reoccurrence or emotional impact.

In Stage 2, the focus is on exploring content and finding meaning. It involves exploring the factors that contributed to the occurrence of the affair and evaluating their on-going effects and potential responses to treatment. A comprehensive conceptual model is proposed to the couple that integrates both recent (proximal) and early developmental (distal) factors across multiple domains that may influence the vulnerability to, engagement in, and recovery from an affair. Domains of potential contributing factors include (a) aspects of the couple’s own relationship (e.g., high conflict, low emotional warmth), (b) situational factors outside the relationship (e.g., work-related stressors), (c) characteristics of the affair-participating partner

(e.g., anger at the injured partner, insecurities about self, unrealistic relationship expectations, developmental history, or enduring personality disorders), and (d) characteristics of the injured partner (e.g., discomfort with emotional closeness, avoidance of conflict, developmental history, and long-standing emotional or behavioral difficulties) (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004, p. 215). In exploring these factors, individual responsibility is placed on the partner involved in the affair, but a thorough assessment of the context within which the individual decided to have an affair is also emphasized (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004, p. 215-216).

There are three major goals in the second stage of treatment. The first is to determine a comprehensive explanatory formulation of the occurrence of the infidelity that helps to appraise the potential for reoccurrence as well as an understanding of the couple's relationship, both prior to the affair as well as in the present, particularly for the injured partner for whom recovery is dependent upon relational security. A second goal is to facilitate the affair-participating partner in tolerating the injured partner's persistent inquiry about the affair and continued emotional reactivity. Recovery timelines between partners are often incongruent, with participating partners preferring to "move on" at a faster rate than their injured partners. Without normalizing this difference, and engaging the participating partner in exploring the context as needed by the injured partner, a couple's post-stabilization of affect is compromised. A third goal in this stage is to determine changes that can be made, given the contributing factors of the affair, to enhance the viability of the relationship (Snyder & Schneider, 2002).

In Stage 3, moving on is addressed. This stage of treatment integrates information obtained in the former stages to reach a collaborative decision about how to move forward. Interventions include verbal and written summaries by the therapist as well as letters written by each partner to construct a formulation of the occurrence of the affair (Snyder et al., 2004, 2007).

While building this formulation, particular attention is paid to how the couple now interprets previously violated assumptions. Like the cognitive processing therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder outlined by Resick and Calhoun (2002), remaining questions and fears about the relationship are addressed and recreated beliefs about the relationship are evaluated. At the completion of this goal, handouts and written exercises are used by the partners to assess relationship viability and the potential for lasting change (Snyder et al., 2004, 2007).

An important element in Stage 3 is an examination of personal beliefs regarding *forgiveness*. In this treatment model, forgiveness is viewed not as excusing or forgetting the infidelity, but a process whereby partners pursue increased understanding to minimize the impact of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Gordon & Baucom, 1998). An additional important aspect of this conceptualization is that forgiveness does not stipulate that partners must reconcile in order for forgiveness to take place. Forgiveness can occur in a relationship where partners also decide to end the relationship. The authors (Gordon & Baucom, 1998) outline the three components of forgiveness to include (a) a realistic, undistorted, balanced view of the relationship, (b) a release from being controlled by negative affect toward the affair-participating partner, and (c) a lessened desire to punish the participating partner (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004, p. 216-217). If the forgiveness process is successful, negative affect no longer dominates the partners' lives or controls their actions, and the injured partner will not carry the negative effects of the injury into other relationships.

Moving on is also considered with regard to potential risks and benefits. Research on the adverse consequences of sustained anger on one's physical and emotional health, as well as the potential impact of one's anger on other important relationships, is provided (Johnson, 1990). During Stage 3, if a couple decides to continue their relationship, sessions are provided to

support the couple in identifying where they require additional assistance and provide strategies to target these difficulties. However, if by this stage the couple had decided to separate or move towards divorce, the focus of remaining sessions is then designed to ensure the minimum negative impact upon each partner and those they care about, particularly children and extended family. These sessions are intended to problem solve the issues that couples face as they separate and guide them in compromising on the issues outlined (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004).

The CBCT infidelity treatment intervention is designed to be implemented in approximately 26 sessions over a 6-month period depending on the degree of affective dysregulation, the complexity and chronicity of factors that contributed to the infidelity, and the consideration of additional factors with regard to the couple's decision to either maintain or end their relationship.

Structural Couple Therapy (SCT)

Theoretical Background of SCT. Structural couple therapy (SCT) developed from structural family therapy. Pioneered by Salvador Minuchin (1974) structural family therapy (SFT) was born from a skepticism of the psychoanalytic perspective that human behavior should be understood from the inside-out and through a lens of internal psychodynamics (Simon, 2008). Where in psychoanalytic thinking, human behavior could be understood linearly as intrapsychic aspects make themselves known through actions, systemic thinkers (Jackson, 1970; Hawkins, 2004) suggested human behavior may manifest from circular causality, where the family system has an "outside-in" effect on an individual's behavior and each person's behavior is both an effect and a cause of the interactions between family members (Simon, 2015).

The tenets of SFT suggest that family functioning is dependent upon the ways a family is organized and that problem behaviors and interactions within families are created and resolved

systemically (Negash & Morgan, 2016). Structurally, a family is organized into subsystems. For subsystems to operate well, appropriate interpersonal boundaries, which can be understood as invisible barriers that regulate interpersonal contact between the different members of the family and subsystems, must be maintained (Nichols and Schwartz, 2001). Minuchin (1974) proposed that boundaries vary in permeability, from diffuse to rigid. He described a “diffuse” boundary between two family subsystems to be one that does not adequately differentiate the functioning of the two subsystems, resulting in a deprivation of resources to the family as a whole. The presence of a diffuse boundary can be assessed when two family subsystems have no clear division of labor and/or focus between them. Subsystems separated by a diffuse boundary are said to be “enmeshed.” Equally problematic is the presence of “rigid” boundaries between subsystems. Here, differentiation has been carried to the point that resources in one subsystem are unavailable to the other. Subsystems separated by a rigid boundary are said to be “disengaged” (Minuchin, 1974, Simon 2015).

Primary assumptions of SCT. Structural theorists understand the couple to be a subsystem within the family system. As such, the expectations for functioning well are the same as in other family subsystems. Here too, boundary permeability is assessed with attention paid to the appropriateness of coalitions, triangles and alliances (Ford, Durtschi & Franklin, 2012).

Functional couples actively encourage internal differentiation within their subsystem as they recognize their partner’s differences to be a resource, and not a threat, to the subsystem.

Structural theory suggests that couples are susceptible to developing a dysfunctional structure during transitional experiences. Whether the transition is normative, as in the event of the arrival of a first child or of an older child leaving the home, or a more acute stressor, such as the occurrence of a natural disaster or one partner’s extended unemployment, the couple is at risk for

developing dysfunctional patterns. Because of the complex, multifaceted nature of human systems, structural theorists believe that the subsystem of a couple could be affected by the interplay of numerous factors, such as the experiences within the family of origin of each partner, or the sociocultural environment surrounding the couple (Simon, 2015).

SCT treatment intervention. In SCT, the causes of a couple's patterned behavior are rooted in the proximal here-and-now experience of each other. Interventions are designed so that partners within a couple change how they experience one another, as the mechanism of change is believed to be the creation of new relational experiences. The belief is that partners within a couple change by receiving different behavior from one another, and responding differently based on the different behavior that they're experiencing. A primary intervention is an *enactment* (Aponte, 1992; Simon, 1995). An enactment is a moment in therapy when the couple members interact directly with one another and, through this interaction, experience new relational dynamics that constitute the mechanism of change. Through enactments, partners within a couple come to recognize the futility and dysfunctionality of their existing ways of relating and begin to consider the possibility of relating in different and more functional ways. SCT utilizes assessment and therapeutic techniques to probe, challenge and restructure interpersonal dynamics (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

The first intervention is *joining*, where the therapist accepts the couple and their view of reality. Therapists remain nonjudgmental and seek positive ways of understanding couple dynamics. The therapist then *contracts* with the couple to ensure the therapy stays focused on the presenting problem. *Understanding the couple structure through its repetitive sequences* is an intervention designed to investigate the power and boundary cycles embedded in the presenting problem. *Reframing* is then used to create an alternative reality that is therapeutic. *Homework* is

assigned to couples to address the presenting problem outside of the therapy session. The therapist then *restructures* the present sequences of the couple by “heating up” the interaction through addressing conflict that had been avoided (Minuchin, 1974). From the restructuring phase of treatment, family-of-origin issues or unresolved pain, trauma or abuse from the past or present became known to members in the system, and are used to *create themes* to better understand one another’s thought processes and behavioral choices. In the final phase, *termination*, the couple ends their work with the therapist due to improved relational dynamics (Fish, Busby & Killian, 1994).

Infidelity Treatment and SCT. SCT understands infidelity as disrupting the family structure and producing dysfunctional boundaries. This shift in boundaries can result in harmful individual relationship outcomes and fractures in the family (Winek, 2010). For instance, the effects of infidelity on the intimate partner subsystem can generate an environment where one or both partners withdraw support, withhold affection, and avoid communication (Schade & Sandberg, 2012). Where some families are able to reorganize themselves to protect their family system from the harmful impact of the infidelity, others are unable to adapt to changes in the system and experience greater distress in the form of growing conflict between members of a couple or parents in a family, or physical and emotional distance between partners (Levine, 2005; Mark, Janssen & Milhausen, 2011).

The SCT style of intervention to address infidelity is not unlike the methods by which other presenting problems are targeted. Here too, *joining* through alignment with the varying subsystems aids in encouraging the family to address the issue of infidelity. A *maintenance* of existing family structure and patterns is identified as an important first step to earning the respect of the system. An articulation of *boundaries* within and between members of the couple is also

of importance, as infidelity is itself a violation of boundaries in the partner subsystem (Cravens et al., 2013). When children are present in family sessions, *blocking* via rearranging seating arrangements can be used to weaken and eliminate rigid triads and to help establish clear boundaries between the parent/child hierarchies. *Tracking* is then utilized to determine diffused boundaries. The therapist may use metaphors to convey how the diffused boundaries impact the system by referring to the infidelity as an uninvited guest that enters the system. Thus, by aiding the couple in addressing the diffused boundary the couple is also aided in addressing the infidelity (Negash & Morgan, 2016). In this way, the infidelity can be viewed as a symptom born out of the diffused boundaries in the couple relationship. As in the treatment of other issues, *reframing* can also be helpful in treating infidelity, particularly to support the family in considering alternative explanations of the injurious event. In highlighting the significance of the lack of structural foundation behind the infidelity rather than focusing on the infidelity itself, the family deepens its understanding of the event. It also provides the couple with an opportunity to explore issues that may have caused the infidelity, as well as reduce blame and improve empathy. *Enactments* can also be helpful, as in addition to improving couple dynamics, they can also demonstrate to parents how the current circumstances around the infidelity are impacting the family system (Peluso, 2007). For example, a couple could act out a conversation about the infidelity that would typically occur when the children were in the home and children could use puppets to express how they feel about parental conflict. The information gained from these enactments can educate the family towards new ways of responding to the infidelity, and inform strategies to improve the structure of the system (Negash & Morgan, 2016).

Object Relations Couple Therapy (ORCT)

Theoretical background of ORCT. Object relations couple therapy (ORCT) finds its origins in object relations theory, which is based on the belief that all people have within them an internal, often unconscious world of relationships (Klein, 1944; Klein, 1946; Klein, 1952; Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1955; Winnicott, 1975; Ogden, 1977). At times, those internalized experiences can be more impactful than what is happening in a person's external world of interactions. Thus, the theory focuses on the interactions that individuals have had in their earliest relationships and the process by which those early interactions become internalized by the individual and play a role throughout that individual's psychological life, particularly with regard to their relationships with others. Hence, the term *object relations* refers not only to present day relationships, but also to the internal mental representations of others and, relatedly, to internal images of oneself (Klein, 1944; Klein, 1946; Klein, 1952; Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1955; Winnicott, 1975; Ogden, 1977).

Primary assumptions of ORCT. Over the past thirty years, object relations concepts have been used to shape couples therapy (Siegel, 1992). Dicks (1963) noted that spouses with marital conflicts seemed to be unconsciously testing each other against their original love objects with whom they had ambivalent relations. He suggested that marital discord is the result of mutual projection and the perception of each spouse as a previously internalized object. This notion was expanded upon by Framo (1969), who suggested that spouses are assigned irrational roles that are built from the internalized past of each partner. These unconscious remnants recreate the dynamics from each spouse's family of origin and are the root cause for many of the conflicts that arise. These dynamics provoke or elicit particular responses from each partner, and as a result, the issues that developed during each partner's respective past become perpetuated in the present-day relationship. Further support for this was found in a study conducted by Zinner and

Shapiro (Shapiro et al., 1977, Zinner and Shapiro, 1972, 1975). In this study, the concept of internalized family of origin dynamics was investigated in a clinical research project. Their results indicated an emphasis on the presence of splitting and projective identification in both family and marital dynamics, as well as the re-emergence of internalized object relations in present day family dynamics (Scharff, 1989). Scharff and Scharff (1987) had similar findings, and suggested that children internalize their parents' relationship to one another as well as the family's beliefs and conflicts. They found that, as these children grow into adults, they establish new intimate relationships and their internalized exciting and rejecting objects, formerly repressed, become re-experienced and projected.

ORCT treatment intervention. In their book *Object Relations Couple Therapy*, Scharf and Scharf (1991) outline the steps taken in this style of treatment. They describe that therapists begin treatment by *setting the frame* to establish a reliable space for work. The therapist then meets with partners of the couple both together as well as separately typically for five sessions before offering formulation or recommendations. *Creating psychological space*, an intervention designed to convey the intention of dealing with the couple relationship over the individuals that comprise it, is employed to illustrate a way of listening and a style of expressing feelings. The couple then identifies with the containing function of the therapist which facilitates the development of a space for understanding. Next, the therapist *listens to the unconscious* as the couple speaks in a relaxed but attentive manner. By following the themes that emerge from the verbal associations, noting silences, integrating observations of nonverbal language with words and silence, and working with fantasy and dream material, unconscious processes can be revealed. The therapist then *follows the affect* to determine unconscious areas from which salient feelings emerge, and utilize *negative capability* to remain in a state of uncertainty without

seeking to resolve the confusion. *Transference* and *countertransference* are also key mechanisms of change. The previous interventions come together at a nodal point in the countertransference where the therapist can receive the transference from the couple as well as both partners. Through tolerating and analyzing countertransference, the therapist can experience inside themselves the couple's transference based on unconscious object relations. The therapist also utilizes the intervention of the *interpretation of defense* to help the couple to understand their defensive patterns, which is particularly effective when pointed out through a countertransference experience. By pointing out the pattern and the way in which the therapist became involved, the therapist can support the couple in working out what each member has been defending against. *Confronting basic anxiety* enables anxious feelings that were once too unbearable to allow into conscious awareness to be addressed. In earlier phases of the work, basic anxiety connected to defensive patterns is acknowledged, and as the work progresses, a more thorough exploration is undergone. Throughout the treatment, resistances surface and the therapist must address and work through them while also establishing and maintaining an alliance to the couple.

Infidelity treatment using ORCT. In ORCT, an affair is interpreted as a symptom of a flaw within a marriage (Scharff & Scharff, 2000). Affairs are seen as arising from deficits in holding relationships, and they represent issues that have been split off and placed outside the boundary of the couple relationship. The therapeutic aim is to identify patterns of unconscious cooperation, and to illuminate instances of splitting, projective identification, and repressed, painful object relational issues felt to be unmanageable.

When a couple presents to treatment due to an affair, the following steps are taken:

First, an *Assessment of Commitment* is made to determine the couple's investment in the relationship. Then, the therapy begins with an *Examination of Splitting and Projective Identification* to explore the meanings of the events and secrets held through the lens of the couple's object relations. The therapist then guides the couple towards *revelation*, if appropriate, as this process enhances the foundation of the treatment. In order for the treatment to be effective, it is essential that there is *no ongoing affair* as it is at odds with the interest of rebuilding the couple. In such instances, the couple can be offered the opportunity for each of them to connect with individual therapy. If the decision is made to move forward in the treatment, the core of the work will be in the *interpretation and reintegration* of split-off aspects of the relationship. For these couples, these exciting, feared, or denied aspects have been projected into the affair. Just as an evaluation of the *transference and countertransference* is crucial in addressing other marital issues, here too this intervention is important. The treatment will be analogous to the affair in that a third party, in this instance the therapist, is again present. The therapist's countertransference reactions of excitement, guilt, pity, or anxiety can be understood as projections from the couple given the therapist's third-party standing. Attacks on the therapist's holding through individual transference is a method by which the couple will reveal the deficits in their own shared holding that resulted in the breached couple boundary.

The role of subjectivity within major branches of couple treatment.

While each major approach to couple therapy is rooted in its own distinct set of influences and origins and employs its own particular treatment methods, across the board there are interventions designed to bring into awareness the subjective differences in each partners' interpretation of the other, and the relationship as a whole. The process of accessing each partners' subjective interpretations and the role they play in each partners' decision making

processes and behavioral choices is touched upon throughout each of these treatments through their own vernacular and style of intervention. Where in emotionally focused therapy (Johnson, 2004) or structural couple therapy (Salvador Minuchin, 1974; Simon, 2015) circular causality is explored in an effort to more deeply understand relational patterns, in object relations theory (Siegel, 1992) the process of exploring projective identification aims to reveal the same underlying information. The Gottman method (2015) utilizes love maps to reveal one's partner's inner psychological world just as cognitive behavioral couple therapists (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004) work to help couples recognize and articulate cognitive distortions rooted in their subjective, automatic thoughts.

In all the above instances, the intention is to bring into awareness subjective aspects of the relationship, the partner, and the self that, prior to treatment, had not been known to the members of the couple. The belief is universally that, by knowing one's partner better and by feeling more known to one's partner, each partner will have an enhanced capacity to respond to the other, and ultimately, couple dynamics will improve. This is particularly present in the existing efforts to treat infidelity. Invariably, all couple treatment approaches include interventions intended to bridge and integrate the subjective narratives of one partner's migration towards an affair and the other partner's sustained injuries.

In tracking the history and evolution of couple therapies, it becomes apparent that modifications made to couple therapy interventions were consistently rooted in the distinct issues with which the couples themselves presented. Taking heed of couples' issues as they themselves understood them has played an instrumental role in refining couple therapies to date. This trajectory, taken together with the fact that today the majority of couples present to treatment due to the occurrence of an affair, alerts us to the value of listening closely to what these couples

have to say about their experience. Hence, a deeper analysis of the subjective experiences of couples who have lived through an affair is at the heart of advancing infidelity treatments across couple therapies.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

The methodology employed in the present study is best understood with some context regarding the principal investigator. After earning a Master's degree in 2009 in counseling psychology with a focus on children, I spent the next four years working with underserved youth in the field of mental health. However, in my work in the nonprofit sector, I was often instructed to provide services not to the children, but to the *family*. I became acutely aware of my limited skillset in working with systems- specifically, couples and families- in a therapeutic capacity, and I determined it would be wise to return to school to hone these skills. In my first few months at City College, a faculty member linked me with a couple therapist who was at the time writing a book about infidelity and seeking interns to support the process. Eager to learn more about therapeutic interventions for couples, I signed up. Among my responsibilities as a research intern, I was asked to transcribe previously collected recordings of couple therapy sessions so that excerpts could be used as case illustrations for the book. In taking on this task, I began to identify repetition and patterns throughout the text. Noting these patterns led me to recognize that these transcripts hang together as a meaningful data set, ripe for deeper textual analysis. I shared this thinking with the couple therapist who conducted and recorded the sessions, and she gave me permission to use these transcriptions as data for my doctoral thesis.

This investigation has particular value to the treatment of infidelity across couple therapies in that, at present, there is no study investigating the subjective responses of partners within a couple where an infidelity has definitively occurred. Existing research in infidelity is limited, with previous studies investigating attitudes through hypothetical scenarios or pre-set lists of behaviors from which participants were asked to choose (Henline et al., 2007; Yarab, Allgeier, & Sensibaugh, 1999). Further, infidelity research has often sought responses from a general population, mixing in those who have had personal experience with infidelity with those who have not. Hence, an in-depth investigation of infidelity via an analysis of the subjective contributions of those who have conclusively lived through an affair may reveal a distinctive viewpoint.

The following study will explore common themes expressed by partners of couples where an infidelity has occurred. As such, the grounded theory methodology is fitting in that it allows the researcher to generate hypotheses retrospectively through the subjective statements made by research participants, in place of approaching the study with pre-determined hypotheses to test (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The open-ended design of this method allows participant responses to be unrestricted, spontaneous and authentic. The nature of this methodology will allow for unexpected themes and questions to arise and be explored, and may reveal findings that are phenomenologically closer to the construct of infidelity than previous research designs.

Sampling and Description of Participants

In total, 14 couple therapy transcripts had been generated for the purposes of the book. However, among this group, only 10 couples arrived to their therapy session with a determination to move past the affair. Of the remaining four couples, three had determined that

they would separate. In addition, one couple presented due to one partner's concerns that the other was attracted to a mutual friend, but both partners were in agreement that there had not yet been an affair. For the group separating, the exploration around the infidelity was limited, as neither party expressed particular interest in understanding or expressing the nuance behind the occurrence of the infidelity. For the one couple in which one partner feared the other's potential to stray, the exploration was rooted in hypothetical realities. As such, the 10 couple transcripts that were selected for this study have in common the lived reality of an affair and the desire to move forward from the rupture.

These 10 couples attended a minimum of one therapy session to address their experience of infidelity between November of 2013 and December of 2016. Specifically, eight of these couples attended one session and the other two attended two sessions. The therapist conducting the therapy sessions had received verbal consent to record these couple sessions from each couple. The sessions were then transcribed by a group of interns working for her, one of whom is conducting the present study. All session transcripts were de-identified and no record was kept of the true identities of these individuals in connection to their transcript documents.

Given the retroactive nature of this data set, demographic information regarding partners within each couple was not readily available. In some of the transcripts, the couples mentioned details regarding their work, family, race, and religion. Other pertinent information among this group that was only sporadically available was how long the couple had been together, the length of their affair and the amount of time between the end of the affair and the date of the therapy session. Among the transcripts, what was made explicit was that one partner of a couple was an Italian immigrant, one partner from a different couple was a Polish immigrant, and two couples identified with both partners as Indian, though their respective birthplaces were not made

explicit. Religiously, one couple identified as orthodox Jews, one as Hindu, and one partner within a couple made reference to being raised Catholic. Six couples mentioned having children, spanning in ages from toddler to high school, two couples definitively did not have children, and in two transcripts no mention was made of children. Professionally, one couple mentioned meeting via their work in finance and another mentioned they were both in medical residency together. Other partners among different couples mentioned working in product development, intelligence, or for large corporations but without naming the capacity. Others mentioned working, but didn't name specifics regarding the nature of their work, and some partners of couples did not mention work during their session, making their work status unclear.

Either due to an explicit statement made by the couple or because of inferences that could be drawn from the text, it was apparent that all 10 of these couples were in relatively long term relationships with one another. Seven of the couples stated that they were married and the others alluded to being together for long stretches of time and having spent holidays together, raised children together, or blended their families. Of the couples that spoke about the length of the unfaithful partner's affair, one couple named their affair as spanning 4 years and another as spanning 7 years. For others, while not made explicit, the reader could infer that the affair had been shorter in duration. Only one couple mentioned how soon after the discovery of the affair that they attended their therapy session, which was two months. For all the other couples', the exact time frame was unclear. However, the reader could infer from the nature of the dialogue that this discovery had taken place in the recent, and in some cases very recent, past.

Data Analysis

The methodology that best serves this qualitative research investigation is one that is discovery-oriented and focused on what research participants say. The grounded theory method

is well suited for this study in that it allows the researcher to use the research participants as a source of knowledge on the phenomenon being investigated. Given these couples are each experiencing the occurrence of infidelity directly, they are experts in this phenomenon. Thus, exploring their subjective experiences allows for broad hypotheses regarding infidelity to be developed from their personal contributions. Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and refined by Glaser (Glaser, 1978, 2003), the grounded theory methodology allows for the development of theory that is “grounded” in the transcription text, and hones the researcher’s ability to assess the ways in which people make meaning of their experiences and locate themselves in the events of their lives. Where in quantitative research the objective is often to test a particular hypothesis, this qualitative research methodology is concerned with hypothesis generation that is born out of the subjective experiences of the research participants (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Through a process of “fracturing” the data (Strauss, 1987, p. 29), the raw text is coded into meaningful concepts. Coding, the primary categorization strategy, is described by Strauss and Corbin (2008) as the process by which raw data is raised to a conceptual level. This restructuring allows for broad categories to emerge that then allow for within and between category comparisons. The analytic process of comparing different pieces of data for similarities and differences as they emerge is known as *constant comparison*. The components of the data that are found to be conceptually similar are grouped together and refined in a category, and through this process the researcher is able to identify the different properties and dimensions specific to each category identified.

The coding process was done by approaching each session transcript with an eye towards *relevant text*, which for this investigation was text related to the specific research concern of

learning more about the subjective experiences of couples in the aftermath of an infidelity in their relationship. Once relevant text was selected, that text was further distilled into categories called *repeating ideas*, in which participants used the same or similar words and phrases to express similar concepts. To use an example from the present study, the ideas “loss of innocence,” “not special,” “sharing of sacred things,” and “no longer a role model couple” presented in the raw transcription text are conceptually alike in that they refer to a broad sense of loss that the post-affair couple, or partner within the couple, experiences. Once repeating ideas were determined, they could be further grouped by the *theme* of what they had in common. The theme that encompasses the range of repeating ideas of loss at the demotion of the couple from affair-free to affair-stricken could be categorized under the heading, “fall from grace.”

Once themes are determined, they could then be consolidated into larger, more abstract ideas called *theoretical constructs*. To continue with the example, “fall from grace” is a phenomenon associated with the theoretical construct of the couples’ understanding of their post-affair relationship, or “the impact of the affair on the couple.” Lastly, these theoretical constructs could be organized into a coherent *theoretical narrative*, which links the research concern and the raw transcription data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). This narrative weaves together the participants’ subjective experiences of their affair and the researcher’s distillation of the abstract concepts relevant to the phenomenon of infidelity. While this procedure is outlined in a linear fashion from the level of text-based categories to the abstraction of theory, the process does not in practice develop linearly because the categories are continually revised as the analysis proceeds in order to reflect the researcher's evolving interpretation of the text (Auerbach, Silverstein & Zizi, 1997). The end result is the production of theory that is rooted in the data and can provide explanations, predictions and applications to the clinical phenomenon being

investigated (Anderson, 2006). Theory developed from this particular investigation can inform treatment interventions that will help therapists to better target the areas of concern most salient to couples recovering from an affair. Given the emphasis on subjectivity between partners across all couple therapy disciplines, and the universal understanding that healing is facilitated by bridging both partners' respective interpretations of themselves and the other, findings from this investigation can be broadly applicable to the field of couple therapy.

Coding Process

In meeting with my dissertation chair, it was determined that sharing in the coding process with another person would bolster the reliability of the results. I sent an email out to the City College clinical psychology PhD program describing the investigation and offering compensation, and was fortunate to have a friend in the program respond to the inquiry. My friend was familiar with the work of the couple therapist who conducted these sessions, including the book for which these transcriptions were collected, which drew her to the study. She also was in the process of designing her own qualitative research thesis, specifically a structured interview investigating transgendered and gender non-conforming persons on their experience of gender related issues. Given our respective areas of interest, we occasionally interpreted the data set differently and needed to negotiate these differences as they arose. We also identified our respective attitudes and biases regarding infidelity. We were in agreement that the stigma and polarization around the topic of infidelity often resulted in the short circuiting of a richer exploration and level of understanding that partners and their broader social system of friends, family and community, stood to gain. Further, we connected on having been personally affected by infidelity ourselves, and noticed the disparate ways in which we responded to our unique circumstances. Hence, in analyzing the data, both personal and theoretical variances

emerged, and our collaboration enabled us to arrive at a consensus regarding which codes and categories best captured the deeper meaning behind the transcribed text. Having her perspective enriched the coding process as we grappled with disparities in our viewpoints. An area where we spent considerable time navigating our thinking was in the use of the language itself. We experienced the language that couples used to discuss their affair to be constricting, particularly with regard to the positions partners occupy in the aftermath of an affair. As a shorthand, we used language such as “unfaithful,” “betrayed,” and “lover” to dialogue about the main players in each transcript, but always with a degree of frustration that those terms lacked the nuance of the story being told. As we encountered transcripts in which terms such as “open marriage” were used, it occurred to us that couples who are seeking variation from the traditional norm inadvertently use language that continues to tether them to those norms, in that the terms remain organized around an axis of “monogamy” as the default arrangement for couples in committed partnerships.

Methodological Soundness

Reliability and Validity

Distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research designs are most pronounced when considering the researcher’s subjectivity and unique interpretation applied to the analysis of the data. Quantitative designs emphasize the importance of eliminating researcher subjectivity and maintaining objectivity in the data analysis procedures, which then yield reliable and valid results and universally applicable findings. In qualitative designs, it is taken that all projects have the researchers’ subjectivity and distinct interpretative style invariably within them, and that these elements of research practice should not only not be eliminated but in fact are essential to the research objectives. As Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) put it, “We think it is justifiable,

even inevitable, for a researcher to *use* his subjectivity in analyzing and interpreting the data. However, it is not justifiable for him to *impose* his subjectivity in an arbitrary manner, that is, in a way that isn't grounded in the data." (p.83). The criteria for distinguishing between justifiable and unjustifiable ways of factoring researcher subjectivity into the interpretation of the data is by establishing a procedure which is *transparent* to the extent that another researcher can know the steps by which the researcher arrived at her interpretations, *communicable* in that the fracturing and sorting of the data makes sense to other researchers, and *coherent* meaning the theoretical constructs arrived at fit together in a coherent narrative (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). My fellow coder and I worked towards transparency by ensuring that we could explain to one another the thought processes behind our respective interpretations of the text. As a result, we believed the sorting and grouping of our data to be communicable to other researchers, and to hang together in a coherent, intelligible narrative.

In order to counter the "researcher bias" that all investigators inevitably bring to their research phenomena, they must attempt to make explicit their assumptions and expectations (Maxwell, 1996). In this particular study, my friend and I formed a two-person research committee, and our upfront exploration of our respective biases and assumptions supported our effort to consistently check one another's interpretations of the data. While the collaboration with my fellow coder does not guarantee the validity of the interpretations, I believe that greater reliability and validity was achieved in that my methods were made transparent and communicable and produced coherent findings.

The table below outlines the available demographic information of the participants of the study, including which partner in each couple is the "unfaithful" party and which is the "betrayed."

Table 1.

Participant Demographic Information

Couple	Length of Affair	Time Since Affair Ended	Race/Religion/Ethnicity	Work	Married	Have Children Together
Tim (U)	4 years	Two months	Grew up Catholic, unclear if currently identifies as Catholic	Formerly worked in intelligence	Yes	Yes, 2 children
Caitlin (B)	4 years	Two months	Not stated	Not stated	Yes	Yes, 2 children
Matteo (U)	7 years	Unclear/ Less recent	Italian	Product Development Manager	Yes	Yes, 1 teenage daughter
Tina (B)	7 years	Unclear/ Less recent	Not stated	Works, but exact profession not stated	Yes	Yes, 1 teenage daughter
Akash (U)	7 years on and off	Unclear/ Less recent	Indian	Medical doctor	Yes	Yes, 1 toddler daughter
Priya (B)	7 years on and off	Unclear/ Less recent	Indian	Works for a large corporation (unclear in what capacity)	Yes	Yes, 1 toddler daughter
Dan (U)	Unclear	Unclear	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated
Amy (B)	Unclear	Unclear	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated
Dev (U)	Unclear	Unclear/ very recent	Indian	Medical doctor	Yes	Yes, 2 children
Urmi (B)	Unclear	Unclear/ very recent	Indian	Medical doctor	Yes	Yes, 2 children
George (U)	Unclear/ multiple years	Unclear/ recent	Not stated	Works, but exact profession not stated	No	No
Brooke (B)	Unclear/ multiple years	Unclear/ recent	Not stated	Not stated	No	No
James (U)	Unclear	Unclear/ Recent	Not stated	Worked in finance at the	Yes	Yes, one child

				time of the affair		
Rosalia (B)	Unclear	Unclear/Recent	Immigrated from Poland	Worked in finance at the time of the affair	Yes	Yes, one child
Dovid (B)	2 years	1 week	Orthodox Jewish, American Born	Upper management at a marketing company	Yes	Yes, four children
Rivka (U)	2 years	1 week	Orthodox Jewish, American Born	Held an administrative position at a nursing home at time of affair	Yes	Yes, four children
Jason (B)	Unclear	Unclear/recent	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	Yes, at least two
Marcy (U)	Unclear	Unclear/recent	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	Yes, at least two
Matt (B)	Unclear	Unclear/recent	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	No
Laura (U)	Unclear	Unclear/recent	Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	No

“U” indicates the partner who had been unfaithful

“B” indicates the partner who had been betrayed

CHAPTER IV

Results

In distilling the data for prominent themes, four primary areas emerged with regard to how couples navigated the experience of their affair. They were the couples’ retrospective conceptions of the relationship pre-affair, the origins of the affair, the impact of the affair on the couple, and the couples’ efforts to move beyond the affair. Each couple was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity, and also to facilitate the reader in linking text between and within the couples across these four primary themes. It is important to note that despite the sorting of these categories, they are not mutually exclusive, nor did they emerge in a linear fashion across transcripts. Still, while there is a degree of permeability where one category ends and another

begins, the broad distinctions allow for organization and deeper understanding of how these couples locate themselves in their infidelity experience.

Retrospective Conceptions of The Pre-Affair Relationship

The natural starting point in the synthesis of these data is in exploring each couples' retrospective conceptions of the pre-affair relationship. After parsing through this text, two major subcategories emerged; the roles of each partner in the pre-affair relationship and the quality of the sex pre-affair. The first subcategory, the roles of each partner in the pre-affair relationship, encompasses the quality of the couples' relationship pre-affair as the partners understood it retrospectively, and the ways in which both partners experienced themselves and the other in the context of the relationship. The second subcategory, the quality of the sex pre-affair, speaks to the couples' sexual connection, including their attitudes about sex, their mismatched interest in sex, their sexual health, and their respective relationships to their own sexuality.

The Roles of Each Partner in The Pre-Affair Relationship

Throughout their narratives, the couples spoke to changes that they experienced in their relationship over time. Many of them overlapped in their retrospective interpretations of the quality of the relationship as having stagnated, and each partner feeling distanced from the other, regardless of whether they themselves were the partner that ultimately had the affair. Tim explained it in this way:

I think I had kind of given up. There was a ceiling on your affection for me, and we became more like coworkers at home. We did start living our separate lives, she became the self-reliant mom and ran the house and dealt with her family, and I-we've had this flavor of conversation 1 million times. Caitlin would say, Tim I need this this and this from you, and I'd be putting up a wall. We kind of each put up the red light to each other, like I'm working in my area and trying to keep that together, you're working in yours. And we just went into different orbits.

Matteo described a similar quality of feeling out of sync:

I still don't know why Tina shut down at some point, so that's the part that I would like to understand. There was a point where she absolutely cut herself off from the relationship. And I don't think it had entirely to do with me...[but] I'm sure it's not entirely isolated and I did something to make her feel that way.

Priya spoke to a long history of companionship that, while positive, became imbued with a sense of listlessness:

We've known each other for so long, we've been friends and best friends for so long, so it's hard to get out of that, we get along so well, it's a friends energy we genuinely enjoy being together.¹

Despite feeling positively about Amy as the person he chose to marry, Dan recalled that he began to experience a disconnection between them:

I got married to the perfect person for me. And it wasn't working out like that. Now, as we talked about it afterwards it wasn't working out like that because I did things for you with the thought to make you happy but really...it might have gone a different way. In doing that, I gave up things that I wanted or didn't express what I wanted.

Dev related this shift to the demands of his and Urmi's professional growth, as they were both medical doctors:

Our lives have been so regimented. Undergrad, med school, residency, this is the way it is. It's true, we were super free when we met.

Some couples described stressful dynamics that began to afflict their marriage, like George and Brooke. Brooke described:

He loves stressful financial situations...He loves to go into businesses that aren't doing well and fix them and then he's done with them...And our whole married life, that's what he's done. So it doesn't surprise me when he takes on a big financial project. But it's really stressful, it can risk everything.

George echoed her sentiment:

I think it's 100% accurate, and the only person whose approval I had was hers, and I lost that over the financial crisis. We had the worst fights of our marriage as I was gathering

¹ Some minor edits have been made to the syntax of quotes throughout this document. The removal of repetitive statements such as 'like' and 'you know' was done to improve clarity and flow of the text.

that cash. She has always given me autonomy to handle our finances, and I think she lost confidence in me.

As the quality of their relationships shifted, a sense of each of them occupying different roles to one another emerged. Often for the unfaithful partner, those roles highlighted their shortcomings and inadequacies. Laura elaborated:

The roles in our relationship had become very defined. I basically describe it as, he's good and I'm bad. In so many places in my life, I don't like doing something unless I do it well. So I think that gets in the way.

She offered this example to illuminate this dynamic:

I said Olivia [our daughter] and I could go get a manicure. We were right by the place. Matt was so disgusted with the prospect that I would suggest it. And his reaction – [and I thought] nothing I do is going to be okay. I suggested it and he was so upset...I just remember the feeling of, I can't do anything right. It has just been the feeling of futility.

Tim described a similar feeling of failing his wife Caitlin:

And all those days that you were hammering me, saying "be more like this, stop being in your rut" and I just wanted to be okay with who I was at that point...And am I concerned that I will never be who you want me to be? Like, I love you but I'll never be accepted for who I am? Way before the affair, we had years of discussions around that.

Like Dev and George, Tim also attributed stress connected to his professional identity as having played a part in his sense of self in the marriage:

My career, which I put so much stock into, has not worked out. I lost prestige and power in my profession, I'm not a good athlete. And after all of my work, it's all absurd. I still love and appreciate my wife, but I no longer have the autonomy I once had. I'm not good at a lot of things. And yeah, seducing a woman feels good. I'm always in my head, but I always felt no autonomy, powerless, victimized, those were emotions that I deeply felt.

While some unfaithful partners experienced themselves as falling short, others experienced themselves as burdened by their partner's shortcomings. As Rivka experienced it:

He wasn't social like me, and in our community you need to be social. I felt like I needed to take care of him, watch him, mother him, make sure he's making friends. He ended up being all this work! I felt burdened, everything was heavy. I'd tell him "you don't get it, get me, I don't feel close to you." It just seemed like he didn't care.

The Quality of the Sex Pre-Affair

Several of the partners who had been unfaithful described a shutting down of sex in the relationship prior to their affair. Matteo noted a link between changes in his emotional connection to Tina and their sexual connection:

Long before the affair, 2004, 2005, she shut herself off. Physically for sure, sexually for sure. It became routine and unimaginative. It felt forced, like routine. And I feel like it was a piece of her not feeling good about herself. I did at some point, not with the frequency I should have, but of the two of us I was the only one who said, Tina this is kind of dying. But also, it was not just the physical aspect. Emotionally to a large extent, intellectually a lot, and so the circumstances in which I found myself when I met Amanda [my affair partner] were not the best.

In some cases, changes in sex were due to mismatched interest. For men in particular, this mismatch led to feelings of physical and emotional insecurity. James described his experience by saying:

When we got married, from my perspective and I think that you would agree with this, she started shutting down sexually. And I started feeling pushed away. If we would have sex, it would be quick and easy, which is not the biggest turn on for a guy who's already got insecurities about the sexual aspect of his life. and I didn't want to push [for sex]. I thought it was impolite. I thought I would rise above it. Pretty quickly after we were married, when we had sex it was for procreation. We were affectionate but not sexual. We would cuddle and do things, but we weren't sexual at all.

Akash experienced similar insecurities connected with sexual rejection from Priya. He described his dilemma of longing for his partner but recognizing that his advances were upsetting to her:

I feel like in our relationship more often than not it would be me initiating sex. And normally she'd be like no, I don't feel like it. So after a while you don't want to go down that road again and again. And now I feel like if I initiate, I most certainly will be shut down. I don't want to feel that, and I don't want to put her in a situation where she's upset or angry at me for doing that. So I just don't act on it. It's not that I don't feel it with her, I feel it with her all the time.

Tim also reported a loss of validation in Caitlin's declining interest in sex. He described sex as holding deeper meaning for him with regard to their bond:

Sometimes Caitlin would say things like does sex tonight have to be the whole experience? I'm happy to be there for you, do what you need to do, I'll enjoy myself, quickie. And I was crestfallen, because not only was sex something that I wanted and that regulated my brain, I think I looked for that connection. That's what sex always was for me, it wasn't just the act. Whereas I think for you, after a while, that was what you wanted.

When asked to elaborate on their reduced interest in sex, the partners who had been betrayed had varied interpretations. Urmi named Dev's direct approach and the overall lack of novelty as being problematic in cultivating her interest:

I want spontaneity, not, can we do it tonight? I want to do things that are adventurous, unexpected. Not the same thing all the time. We could try different things, we haven't tried anything!... You could help me get there by being connected to me, holding me, not just rushing into, let's have sex.

Rosalia, James' wife, linked her reduced interest in sex with her shame connected with own history of affairs, and her contracting sexually transmitted infections as a result:

[After my affair] I discovered for the very first time that I had HPV suddenly. Herpes. And I was like, wow! What is this? This sex business is scary! I thought it was guilt and shame from the previous infidelities, you know that kind of squashed my erotic juices, because I felt guilty and ashamed when I did that during my first marriage. As I grew more mature, I started feeling shameful and embarrassed about my past transgressions, and I started developing this feeling of myself as a bad girl. My shame and my guilt hit me in the heart and I thought, these viruses, what are they? So I kind of started feeling really bad about myself and my sexuality, and I thought this is just not a business to be in, I don't want any of this.

Brooke and Priya echoed similar sentiments regarding changes in the physical body and feelings of discomfort as at the heart of their disconnection with their own sexuality. Brooke described pain during sex as fundamental to her loss of interest:

But for 20 years we had no issues, I enjoyed sex... We never had children, I quit taking birth control pills that I've been taking for 30 years. And I start having dryness and I can't have sex... I was dry, I could not have sex, it was painful when we tried. And different doctors would tell me I needed an ultrasound or a scan, after a while you just say, I'm taking a break! I'm done. And I asked him, does this need to be resolved tomorrow? And he said no, I'm fine! Now I know why he said that!

Priya located her loss of desire for her partner in broad shifts that she experienced in her identity. She referenced becoming a married woman and a mother as transitions that led to feelings of “inappropriateness” with regard to her sexuality. Like Urmi, she also noted a sense of “familiarity” as playing a part in these feelings:

Getting married turned off something sexual for me... My gaining weight and covering up, like I can't be the person I was when we were dating now that I'm married and a mother and being responsible. I was definitely attracted to him in that way, in that hypersexual way [at the beginning], so I know I have that in me, and with him. But then it got too familiar. Maybe there's something about that. There's just something that just doesn't feel like, like it doesn't feel sexy, it feels like a little inappropriate, not because it is, like you're my husband, it's not like you're not supposed to be behaving that way.

Despite a recognition that she had undergone shifts in her sexuality, Priya reacted with frustration when Akash described her as being sexually timid and his needing to “drag” her into an erotica store in the past. She shed light on her dilemma of struggling to connect with her sexuality within the couple's dynamic:

Why are you saying “drag” like that? He makes me feel like I'm an uptight cold fish! That characterization, like ‘I have to drag her in there.’ It's annoying, that upsets me. Cause like, I've never been dragged in there. That disconnect of feeling like, I *can't* then be that person because his assessment of me is that I'm so *not* that person.

Priya highlights the difficulty not only of experiencing her partner differently, but also of being experienced differently by her partner, that contributes to the calcifying of the roles in their relational dynamic. Ultimately, as each of these couples were asked retrospectively to reflect on who they had been to one another prior to the occurrence of an affair, there was broad consensus among them that role rigidity had contributed to mismatched interests in sex, which had been instrumental in setting the stage for an affair to take place.

Origins of the Affair

When the couples explored their sense of how the affair originated, four major subcategories emerged in their assessment; feelings of disillusionment, improved sense of self in

the affair, the role of family histories of infidelity, and a loss of control. The first subcategory, feelings of disillusionment, incorporates a tendency for the unfaithful partner to experience life as having misled them and to begin to have different perspective on their destiny. The second subcategory, improved sense of self in the affair, speaks to the unfaithful partner's capacity to connect with their own more positive qualities, or experience improved affect, in the context of the affair. The third subcategory, family history and infidelity, encompasses theories that both partners harbored regarding the role of the family history of infidelity on their own experience of an affair. The fourth subcategory, loss of control, speaks to the compelling nature of the affair and the unfaithful partner's difficulty in containing it and/or bringing it to an end.

Feelings of Disillusionment

Several of the partners who had been unfaithful described moments of feeling disillusioned about what they had been led to believe about life. After meeting their affair partner, they began to consider that things in life aren't as they appear, and perhaps ideas that they'd been taught to believe had not been accurate. Tim spoke to his religious identity as where he first became in touch with this feeling:

I was sent to an all-boys Catholic school. In my 30s, and with all the pedophilia scandals that came out, there were numerous among those that taught me. And the men who taught me have been accused of pedophilia, or have left the monastery because they now have lives in homosexual relationships with other monks that left. I just thought it was completely absurd. I thought in my 30s, everything I understand or was taught about sexuality, I can't believe I was taught by these people. That my parents sent me to to understand for years, and would have classes on sexuality, *that's* who taught me. Clearly I'm reaching middle age, no one knows anything. This is absurd. So I rejected everything.

He then connected this with his professional and personal disillusionment, stating:

I did everything right, and behind-the-scenes I was working with criminals. So there's the world that we portray to investors, auditors...And it's completely the opposite behind the scenes. The entire world says, this is the way the world works. Your dad, my dad, politicians, whoever. Behind-the-scenes, that's not what actually happens in reality...Maybe I got to that very deeply cynical point where I thought everything was a

sham...And I thought that I had just reached the point that everything that we were taught, it's like, behind it is something else. Even your [his wife's] dad, who was a judge and a wonderful guy, behind the scenes he was a different and complicated man.

Rivka too described feeling disillusioned with life at the time that she met her affair partner:

At our worst, Dovid was jobless, I was pregnant with our 3rd child, we had just moved back from Israel, I guess I was so angry at him. I felt alone. After I had the baby, I ended up getting a job because I had no other choice...The truth is, I liked working. I liked doing something different than everyone else. I liked knowing that I wasn't like my sister, like how everyone else was. Going grocery shopping and having the same conversations every day like she does was making me feel like dead inside. And I met [my affair partner] at that job.

Rivka and Tim had in common that shifts in how they conceptualized life led them to become differently attuned to a lack of pleasure their own lives. Tim elaborated on how this disillusionment led to different perspective regarding his own views, specifically with regard to affairs:

[I thought] this is just what men do. If men have the opportunity, I'll put it that way, they're going to have affairs with their secretaries, etc. And I convinced myself with all of my international travels, and everywhere around the world it happens. Only in America, we were so puritanical and we put up the heavy curtain...I felt like the world was unfair but this was a hidden rule, no one ever talked about in society and the hidden rule is that men can do this. I just had rationalized it this way.

Rivka had a similar experience of awakening when confronted with alternative choices that she could all along have been making:

I saw another way of life. At that job, everyone was having affairs, like it was normal. They were like, "yeah, we all do this." So I thought, maybe this is how things are. I also felt like, I was rebelling against everything and I was different from other people. I was angry with Dovid, it felt like a release.

Tim also named the "anthropological destiny" of men as the source of his desire to be sexual outside of the marriage, despite being aware of the societal consequences:

The conflict was, this is my anthropological destiny. I'm doing something that every generation of human beings, you know, males have done forever. I just happen to live in a puritanical society. Even in this country 100 years ago it would happen and no one

would ask. And maybe 50 years from now it may be a very different mindset in society, but I just happen to live in this particular time when this action [is unacceptable].

While Tim had connected with a sense of anthropological destiny, James had linked his interest in an outside partner with his spiritual destiny:

I went to the annual [work] event... in Montreal and I met this girl for the first time with my friend. [We] went out to dinner...and we ran into her again together. And then I couldn't get her out of my head...And I walked out of [a different] bar thinking, I'd like to see her. And then she walked out of the bar and passed me, trying to get a cab. And I saw that as a sign of the universe. And I just read the Chopra book that talks about how you look for coincidences, and my job was great, at this point I'm loving [my recent move to] New York. So it all made sense.

Both men experienced a new outlook on the world, however, they remained tethered to their partners. To manage this dissonance, they began to construe their partners differently, which allowed them more latitude to act on their impulses. Tim described having convinced himself that Caitlin was permitting him a “biological pass”:

I was like a lawyer picking pieces of evidence that would support my case and ignoring the evidence – one time Caitlin said while doing the dishes, like that thing with Spitzer, there's such a biological drive with men, but American women don't want to accept it because if we come out and acknowledge that than all of you have a free pass. And I went to my therapist that week, and she said that truer words have never been spoken. And I left feeling like, okay I get the biological pass. Caitlin understands the male needs, evolutionary development, so I processed that, and didn't listen to all the times when Caitlin would say no, I'm not giving you permission in many different ways... I thought, or convinced myself, that women don't want to know. That's how I dealt with it.

Like Tim, George also grappled with the dilemma of whether or not to disclose his affair with Brooke. He, too, determined from external sources that to disclose would be a selfish act:

We had a scare right before Christmas of 2014, the discovery of the relationship. 3½ years in, she discovered an email correspondence that got stuck in an outbox, of course I denied it. At that point I started reading about, should I be coming clean at this juncture? And everything that I read was, the only reason you would come clean is for yourself.

Similarly, James began interpreting Rosalia's resistance to the idea of permanently moving to New York as a symbol of a deeper divide between them, which ultimately granted him freedom to connect with another person:

In the beginning, there was a time that she wasn't interested [in moving], and this is where we kind of are different on the interpretation. I was getting the feeling that she didn't want to move to New York...In what I remember, you didn't really have much of a reaction [to me saying "you're not ever really coming to New York, are you?"]. You just sort of looked at me, and I interpreted that as disinterest.

Family History and Infidelity

As part of the effort to understand their ability to stray, several partners who had been unfaithful made associations to their own family history. They referenced messages they had received about the act of infidelity, or about their own personal desirability. George named his father as being instrumental in his own attitudes towards sex outside of the marriage:

My father who is 80 years old has been a bitch of a cheater. He honestly believed that men required more sex than women, so he felt entitled to get all the sex he could wherever he could, because my mother didn't want to have sex as frequently as he did. And he explained that's just how the world worked.

On some occasions, their partners bolstered their responses with recollections of prior conversations they had had about the trickle-down impact of family infidelity. Brooke, George's wife, elaborated on his response:

When he was 13, at this impressionable age and forming all these opinions, his mom and dad went into therapy and it eventually included the kids. And the therapist told the whole group, "I'm more concerned about you [George] than anyone." Because his dad wanted to justify his behavior to his son...And they had three kids, she didn't have any income, they had a nice lifestyle. She really didn't have other resources, she came from a poor background. She didn't have a lot of choices. But she was bitter over it, and this is when he was 13. I met him when he was 26 and I thought it happened in the last year, they were still carrying it around! As they evolved over the next 27 years, they're very disjointed now. Him and his sister don't even speak. I told him it's because they had to pick sides. And I think that's the root of it.

Tim had spoken of experiencing “the entire world” as saying infidelity “is the way the world works behind-the-scenes” and citing “your dad,” and “my dad” as examples. His wife Caitlin responded:

He doesn't want to acknowledge the fact that he knows his father is and has been having an affair with a woman at work for 15, 16 years. His mother, we're pretty sure, knows but is in denial. No one talks about it, no one knows, his dad doesn't know that Tim has a feeling about it, it's under the surface... So to me, that insidious silent permission, says this is acceptable to me because it's not discussed, it is a silent permission, and I said that message is not going down to our son, this is not how you deal with loved ones, you don't treat them like this, you don't get a mistress, you find another way to deal... look what [your father's behavior] has done to you and your perception of how men and women relate. I don't like that, and I'm angry that [my father in law is] not helping his son understand this is not how you deal with emotions.

Despite her frustration with Tim and her clear assessment that Tim was mistaken about his understanding of “the world,” Caitlin revealed a degree of her own uncertainty in considering her own father's actions:

My dad was a charismatic party guy, a big drinker. And he was really emotional too, and I was the only girl in the family, and he took me under his wing... And he would tell me, this is the way guys are. A man will tell you anything to get your clothes off, don't always believe him. He'd have these honest heart-to-heart talks with me. And before he died, he said to me, I think monogamy is unrealistic. And I don't know why, but once in a while he would say that when I was in my 30s, and I didn't push that conversation, and I regret that now because I don't really know what he was saying. And even in front of my mom, he was very flirtatious. And she'd be right there, and she'd get so upset, one time she ripped up their wedding picture. It was painful for my mom, painful. But she felt stuck she was a stay-at-home mom, but what do you do divorce him?

Both Brooke and Caitlin spoke about how their partners' fathers' infidelities played a part in the occurrence of an affair in their own relationship, however, they both also made mention of what their partners' mothers were faced with under those circumstances. They both spoke to unanticipated and unjust hardship that those women experienced, revealing that as the betrayed party they are just as concerned with their partners' family history of betrayed partners as they are with the trends of the unfaithful partners.

As George and Tim referenced dynamics with their parents as contributing to their infidelities, Laura spoke about her sibling dynamic. She described her appealing older brother leaving her feeling rejected and not special. As she described his magnetism, she referred to wanting to both be more like him as well as be desired by him. She linked this with the event of her affair:

My being drawn to [my affair partner] has a lot to do with my brother. My brother is an asshole. He's 3½ years older than me, and we've had a relationship that's at times amazing and at times awful. He's a magnetic person, very good looking, amazing smile, very charismatic, people just want to be around him. Or did, not so much now. I certainly don't. I think that early on for me, it was never my dad's attention I was trying to get, it was my brother's. I looked up to him, and he had what I wanted, and he was a guy. He was this good-looking guy. I would compare myself to his girlfriends. I wanted to be special to him, and I wasn't, and it sucked. I spent my whole life kind of chasing after him.

Like Laura, James struggled with his confidence and fears of rejection. He described feeling uncertain as a result of messages he received from his mother about how to behave in the presence of women:

I had a lot of insecurities about women... And I think some of it came from my mother, because my mother told me not to do things so I had less confidence around women and that was a barrier for me, a fear that drove a lot of my insecurities in approaching women because I wasn't sure what I was doing. I almost didn't want to be found out, and I had a huge fear of rejection. I didn't want to ruin a relationship with someone by making a move and having them say no.

Improved Sense of Self in The Affair

When unfaithful partners elaborated on what drew them to their affair, they described the affair as a space where they were able to again feel positively about themselves. With their affair partner, they experienced an excitement about life that they struggled to access in their primary relationship. While with their primary partner they grappled with feelings of inadequacy or resentment, with their affair partner they experienced themselves as desirable and gratified.

Many described connecting with a feeling that something had been “missing” from their primary relationship that they were able to fulfill in their affair.

Laura described her kind of knowing her actions would hurt Matt, but feeling that she deserved happiness:

[The affair] was just very separate. It wasn't a rejection of Matt at all, it's just that I was so unhappy for so long and this is something that makes me happy. And I'm a better person when I'm happy. So it's very hard to leave it, because it was like my antidepressant at the time.

Laura had previously described that she couldn't “do anything right,” in Matt's eyes. This long held feeling of inferiority in the presence of her partner led her to feel entitled to her affair. Tim, who had previously described losing his job and “never being able to be who [his wife] wants him to be,” portrayed the origin of his affair similarly:

I think when I came out of what I would call a severe depression [after losing my job], at that point it can be hard to just get through the day...when I came out of that, it was like a – I don't want to over dramatize, like a near death experience – but it was like contemplating suicide as an option, and then coming through with that and saying now I'm going to enjoy my life. That is my number one and only goal, and its entitlement and it was selfish and it was all about me. None of the rest of it worked, and our marriage wasn't working that well, and that drive was enough for me to put the commitment to us aside.

Several of the unfaithful partners spoke of something “missing” from their primary relationship.

Despite Akash's tendency to suppress his reflections on how he was able to have an affair, he recalled an absence of a “physical” connection with Priya:

I was trying to remember how I felt. I've blocked out everything especially around that time. I mean I think I felt very emotionally connected, like I want to start a family. But...I guess I obviously felt very disconnected physically.

Like Akash, Matteo also linked his affair with a feeling of something “missing”:

Tina, I had an affair because there was a lot of stuff missing. I think it was because you closed yourself off from me, I don't know what caused that and I don't think you know either. And I think that at some point we need to look at that. I don't know if I did

something to make you feel that way. That's why I'm somewhat anxious, because I think that's part of how I had an affair.

In making meaning of how he was able to have an affair, Tim described a sense of adequacy and desirability with his affair partner that he struggled to access with Caitlin:

[My affair partner] never dated anybody like me, so I would feel different. Special. Which I certainly didn't feel in my professional career, or at home, I was the ADD guy at home, not doing what I needed to do at home, and [my affair partner] Nina only knew 1/10 of me compared to you... I think it was that power of, I'm the sort of man that could seduce a woman, I felt like that's something I can do. I wanted her to fall in love with me. So it wasn't, give me the affection and attention, it was to seduce her. And maybe I felt that was missing in our relationship.

Dan echoed Tim's experience of adequacy and likability when with his affair partner. He understood these feelings as having an adolescent quality, given their lack of a real shared adult life:

[She was] someone not to fight with, who wasn't angry at you about anything...It was a very new relationship that you would have when you're nineteen or twenty. It was only the fun. Those feelings, when they're not based on a serious relationship, are teenage feelings...It's a really nice thing to be completely irresponsible and not have to deal with any life issues within that bubble.

Like Dan, Dev also experienced a quality of liberation from adult responsibilities through his affair:

It was about, some type of freedom, excitement, something that I didn't have. Something at 38 that I never knew that I needed... but it felt liberating.

Further, some unfaithful partners justified the affair by reasoning that it was enhancing their primary relationship. Dev imagined that a degree of "joy" could be reinfused into his relationship with Urmi:

I thought that [my affair partner] Cynthia was going to help our relationship, help me become a better husband, help her become a better wife, and bring some joy into this.

Of the three women in this study who had been unfaithful, all three of them spoke to a sense of relationship enhancement as a result of their affair. Just as Laura had described that she's, "a

better person when I'm happy," Rivka, too, described bringing a different energy and levity into her home life:

We have four kids, we had been together 12 years. Things were so mundane, I felt like I was dying. Having [my affair partner] Stan was making things less heavy, giving me energy, making me feel excited.

Marcy put the benefit of the affair to the relationship concisely:

Sex with other people enhances my libido! That's a good thing for us!

Loss of Control

While each partner that had been unfaithful spoke to a degree of entitlement to experience their affair and pleasure from the affair, most of them spoke to the affair becoming an experience that made them feel more and more out of control. James described that he had initially wanted to keep a distance from his affair partner, as even at the beginning he had a conscious awareness that there was a transgressive element in his connection to her:

I just wanted to see what would happen, I wanted to stay away from it. I consciously didn't want to have a conversation [with her] because I wasn't sure what was going on with this girl, and I felt a little out of control but I didn't really know it. And I was trying to find ways to get control...But [after we spoke] I walked away thinking what the hell did I just do? Why did I just say that? There's something more going on here. I acted in a completely uncontrollable manner. Because I never, I just don't do that. Looking back I think that I was in a situation where I was out of control, and I was living a lie and it made me feel on a fundamental level very uncomfortable. And I couldn't hear my voice anymore.

As the loss of control intensified, unfaithful partners felt increasingly guilty about the hurt their actions would cause their partners. Tim painted a picture of feeling trapped in his double life as the affair progressed, to the degree that he hoped Caitlin would confront him so that he'd no longer be able to maintain his compartmentalization:

I was able to compartmentalize it...And yes I would have pangs of guilt...maybe when I got emotional about hypocrisy in America, maybe I was waiting for you to ask. In some way, I can't completely access that, but maybe I was. And my therapist says it becomes harder and harder to live a double life, and I think that's where I was. It was getting

harder...and it could be me trying to get caught. Because I left a paper trail. I was not smart about it, spent money, until the very end when the girl was telling me that I should try to cover my tracks, I wasn't doing anything like that.

Rivka described an even deeper effort to compartmentalize, knowing that dissociation from the consequences of her actions was the only way to tolerate the hurt she'd be causing Dovid:

I just never wanted him to find out, because I knew it would be the absolute worst thing. I didn't have a plan, I really just didn't want to think about it. I never wanted to hurt him, I wanted it to end without him ever finding out. But I really didn't think about how to end it. It's hard to remember what I was thinking really. I guess I just thought he'd never find out.

During this retrospective exploration, some unfaithful partners were able to reconnect with their former worries of hurting their partners, and others were more preoccupied with how their loss of control hurt not only their partners but themselves as well. As Matteo puts it:

The fact remains that I was wanting to get out of this thing forever and I wasn't able to, so there was a certain element of control. And after all this digging, all of that complexity helped me to understand how I got into it. The inability to get out, I'm getting some sense of it, but there's still a huge – I have a lot of shame associated with that still.

While Matteo linked his inability to end his affair to feelings of shame, Dan connected the same predicament with anger both towards himself and his affair partner. In hindsight, he expressed frustration with his former self for needing “closure” to end his affair:

You know, at a certain point, at the very beginning, I wanted to say to her “It's over,” I wanted to be able to end it...I didn't want to tell her to go fuck herself, the way I do now, but I wanted to end it, I wanted to end it. It was to get closure. To have that last conversation and say it was the wrong thing to do, and I'm going back to do exactly what I wanted to do in the first place, and I didn't, and good luck with your life.

Impact of the Affair on the Couple

Each couple that presented to treatment described a similar trajectory with regard to the impact that the affair had on the couple. The five subcategories that best capture this trajectory are confirmed suspicions, emotional intensity, partners' roles post-affair, sex post-affair, and a fall from grace. The first subcategory, confirmed suspicions, refers to the betrayed partners'

mounting suspicion towards the unfaithful partner and the discovery of the affair. The second, emotional intensity, refers to heightened emotions in the relationship post-revelation. The third, partners' roles post-affair, elaborates on shifts in identity, mistrust from the betrayed partner, guilt and shame in the unfaithful partner, and the unfaithful partners' focus on external factors to justify their actions. The fourth subcategory, sex post-affair, focuses on changes to the quality of the sex and the honesty of conversations about sex. The final subcategory, fall from grace, encompasses the betrayed partners' experience of a loss of innocence within the couple, and the couples' shared experience letting down their broader ecosystem of children, friends and family.

Confirmed Suspicions

Prior to the revelation of each affair, several of the betrayed partners spoke to a feeling that something was “off” between themselves and their partners. They described their partners as behaving in different and unusual ways. Rosalia described a marked shift in James' availability after his move to New York for his job. She recalled that, as they were in the midst of coordinating when she'd move to New York to join him, he became unavailable:

He's always very busy busy busy, he can't talk or make other plans, he has a very unpredictable schedule, lots of dinners and functions, he can't talk ever...very distant and very unavailable. And I started confronting him, but he started avoiding me. Because on the phone, I would call him and say, what did you mean exactly by don't come? And he would avoid and say oh, I'll think about it, I have a meeting I'll talk to you later. I came to New York because I was feeling suspicious, I knew something was up. And I confronted him right away. I looked at him and I noticed this wooden expression in his eyes, and I've never seen him look that way before. And I said, give me the real reason that you don't want me to move [to New York with you]. And he says, the real reason is, hmm, things are going really well for me in New York. I love it there. And I'm afraid that if you move, you're going to jinx it for me. I thought I was going to faint. My heart went to my feet, I became pale and silent, thinking oh my God, something really bad is happening with my husband. Something is up. And I look him in the eye and I say, do you have someone? He says, no of course not! And I said to him, if you don't have someone, don't you see that you are creating room for someone? He says, no I don't see that at all! And I said okay, because that's how it feels to me. And he says no, you're imagining things. I said okay, and I couldn't speak to him for the rest of the trip. Because I knew he was involved with someone...

Matt described a similar experience with Laura, particularly in feeling that she was less available:

...we had a date to meet at the bar, and I was waiting there and she was texting me and saying she was running late, she was sorry, it was important. And I was unsure, but I believed her, because of the nature of her job, it's not terribly surprising, sometimes it's upsetting but I can manage it. And I later found out that she was late because she went to meet him two blocks away and have a drink with him, before seeing me... It really surprises me how segregated they were in her mind. It really hurt me.

Like Rosalia and Matt, the vast majority of partners who had been betrayed were initially told by their partner that their suspicious feelings were misguided. However, in some cases the betrayed partners chose to believe their unfaithful partners. In hindsight, those partners reflected on their mixed feelings about truly knowing of their partners' actions. They acknowledged that there was a degree of motivation to give their partner the benefit of the doubt and remain in a state of denial. Brooke described being told a particular narrative about George's relationship with his affair partner, who had also been a coworker of his, and choosing to believe it despite growing doubt and mistrust towards him:

He integrated her into the whole family. At one point he sent her to his mother to bake pies. But she didn't like it. Anyway, I was told originally that she's a lesbian. then it becomes more integrated. Her kids get more involved...that's when I started looking through emails. Somewhere around the fourth year, I started thinking this doesn't make sense. Then I learned she's bisexual, likes men and women. And I find this letter where he writes about how much he appreciates her. And we're at his mom's beach house at Christmas when I find the letter, and my first thought is just to go get a lawyer. But I can't do that to my mother-in-law, so I don't...So, your life is in so much chaos, you don't want to stir up more. And he always denied that he was having a sexual relationship with her.

Caitlin too identified a feeling of "something there" prior to the revelation of the affair. She recalled how there were instances where Tim invoked examples of women who were comfortable with sharing their men with other partners. Still, despite her mounting suspicion and

her tendency to be “on top” of things, she chose to turn away from the signs that an affair was taking place, citing “protection” as her reasoning:

...he said I don't have this conversation right now, so I knew there was something there. It was late at night and we have to get up early the next day, so I said okay, I let it go. I don't know why, knowing me I'm usually on top of these things, but maybe the protection, from something I don't want to hear. Because now I look back over the four years and there were comments that I think are obnoxious now, because I know everything that was happening. He'd say things like, you'd be a great first wife, don't you think you'd be a great first wife? Because we used to watch that show big love. Or like you know in the Sopranos, the wives used to talk about how they didn't mind if their husbands had a mistress because they got a break from the pressure of sex all the time. [He'd ask] you sure you wouldn't feel that way? I was very clear, no. Never.

Priya described a similar denial despite suspicion, and in hindsight, named her motivation to start a family as her rationale for turning a blind eye. This was particularly meaningful because Akash had had an affair with this same person in the past:

And then I had suspicions here and there, and I asked him are you seeing her again? And he would say no and he seemed very genuine that he was not seeing her again. And because we started IVF and we were trying to have a baby, I finally had to come to peace with it.

Just as Priya relied on their shared goal of starting a family as a protective measure against Akash having an affair, Dovid spoke similarly about his and Rivka's shared moral compass.

Dovid linked his giving “her the benefit of the doubt” with his standard of morality:

I always had strange suspicions that she wasn't always telling me the truth. The kind of friends that she had, I felt like she wasn't always fully honest about where she was and what she was doing. But I gave her the benefit of the doubt, but I never imagined she'd actually do this! This is morally completely off, I never ever thought she could do something like this. This is not what a husband and wife should ever do to one another.

Discovery

For all of these couples, the discovery of the affair was brought about in one of the following two ways; either the betrayed partners' suspicions led them to confront the unfaithful partner, or the betrayed partner discovered something implicating on their partner's digital

device. Tim, who had wondered if he had unconsciously wished for Caitlin to discover the affair by leaving an increasingly conspicuous digital paper trail, was ultimately confronted by her:

And the next day we had a long car ride and I was going to bring it up. We were without the kids, and he just came right out with it, he said he started four years ago. And we were up all night sobbing, crying, arguing and fighting. And then he left for Europe the next day. So I caught him off guard, he never thought I would ask, or was that his cry for me to ask? I don't know! We can't figure it out.

Tim explained that for him, withholding this information from Caitlin if she were to ask directly would qualify as “lying,” which was a line he had imagined he hadn’t yet crossed:

I could do what I was doing, continue my affair and stay married with Caitlin, but I couldn't lie directly to her. Isn't that the craziest thing? I couldn't look her in the eye and say that. She's such an honest person, and she wants to know.

Tim’s action of only professing when confronted can be understood in part as a desire to preserve the status quo of the relationship, and in this way, is not so different from Dovid who stated he’d only believe an affair was taking place if confronted with undeniable proof:

I found out through text messages from [my wife’s affair partner], at first I didn’t believe it at all. Then this person sent me pictures, and I still thought they were pictures from before we were married. Like her kissing a former boyfriend. But then he sent the picture of her in the bathrobe and I just lost it. I was completely shocked, it just seemed impossible. I saw the dates, and... it added up. I can’t unsee what I had seen.

Priya was also contacted by her partner’s affair partner. She described being doubly “in shock” not only by discovering that Akash was having an affair, but that like her, the other woman was also pregnant with his child:

I felt really devastated and sad. And I was pregnant, I felt incredibly betrayed. And very exposed, like, why did *she* tell me? Why couldn't he have told me? I was falling apart, I'm pregnant and trying to take care of everything, and she's emailing me and threatening my family and it was all fucked up. I felt completely in shock. Like completely shell shocked...the bottom fell out when I found out. I had no fucking idea... You got her pregnant six-month before and now you got me pregnant. Like I had absolutely no idea. And then *she* told me. Like he didn't even have the guts to tell me.

Tina described discovering Matteo's affair through three different digital devices, and the "trauma" of uncovering the couple's disparate "realities." She described a state of vigilance as an immediate means of preserving her newly integrated story:

I found it three different ways, three different devices, three different times. So that repeat of thinking I've got it all right and then there's new information... going through that three times for me was traumatic. And so I think it's contributed to this pathological desire to stay on top of those things cause if you take your eyes off of them all kinds of things come crawling out and it's not logical... So if I relax from being hypervigilant about you now, I now know that what I thought was reality wasn't reality and we were in huge danger, there was this other thing going on, and so I'm processing all this stuff and I'm trying to put together my view of the world and if I take my eyes off of you for a second that the whole situation will be gone.

Emotional Intensity

As the couples retraced their steps in their suspicion and discovery of an affair, the betrayed partner expressed intense up and down emotions that followed the revelation. Caitlin puts it as being in "extreme love-hate" with Tim. She described a volatility in their day to day interactions:

Sometimes it can be difficult to just deal with the gamut of those emotions, because everything could be like a volcano, we could be having a normal day and, with our children, coming home to bed, brushing my teeth, and then it could be the next six hours.

Jason described a similar "love-hate," along with unanticipated "caveman emotions" of possession. As he put it:

Part of me wants to be as far away from her as possible, and the other part of me wants to be close to her... I was threatened by it. And I discovered I had these emotions of jealousy that I didn't even know I had. I knew I was possessive, but the caveman emotions felt new and strong.

After discovering Dev's affair, Urmi described being in so much distress that she was unable to sleep:

It's been tough, every day is a nightmare. Last night I didn't sleep much because some of the things he said, they were hurtful. But at the same time I'm trying to be there for him, during this process, and to heal myself.

Several of the betrayed partners described experiencing unpredictable painful triggers and flashbacks. Matt, like Urmi, described an inability to sleep when preoccupied with fears of a repeated betrayal from Laura:

...if she's out with men and there's alcohol, that's a trigger. Recently you texted me saying that you got drawn into a 29-year-old's birthday party, and my mind started going. And I can't shake it, so I don't sleep. It's not that I don't trust you in those moments, it's that I'm reliving some very dramatic moments that drive me crazy.

Priya described experiencing flashbacks particularly when the couple attempts to have sex:

Whenever we tried to be intimate, I had flashbacks of him with other women, I can't get over that. I see the idea of him being with her and sexual with her, I just picture him doing all these things for her to, trying to be manly with her, going down on her. He just did this with *her*, and we have a baby, it's just fucked up. I really just can't get over that part.

Dovid stated that there are “triggers everywhere” after discovering Rivka’s affair. He, too, described an unpredictability to his feelings from one moment to the next:

We'll have our better moments, but then without warning, I'm in a theater with a movie of them doing what they did with my eyes pried open. There are triggers everywhere... We're orthodox Jews, so the women cover their hair. And I know that she took her wig off when she was with him, so when I see her wig I'm transported to another place. I have *no* control over when I'm triggered, I can be happy and then I'm in total hell.

Several of the betrayed partners also experienced vengeful and angry feelings, and they explored their own histories or fantasies of occupying the unfaithful position. Caitlin described a fantasy for Tim to experience her exact same pain:

...if I did that shit, I swear to God you'd be off your rocker insane! That's what I say to him! *I* want to do that, I'd love an escape, to go away on the weekend, to see an old boyfriend. How much fun was that? All those times I was home feeling so lonely and isolated and doing the mom thing and doing laundry, God if I had a guy I could've ran away to and jumped into his arms, I would have loved to choose that.

She then speaks to his entitlement in having acted on his impulses by adding:

Now I'm resentful and angry that you got to do that for four years, four years! On a whim! Whenever you wanted sex, I'm just going to do it. Cause I need it. I *deserve* it. What do I deserve, nothing? I feel like I've denied myself my own desires for a long time, for him! For the marriage! And I think, what a fool I've been!...I think I'm just so angry at him that he chose to have that fun, and I chose to pass on the fun, part of me wants to have that fun now.

Like Caitlin, Priya described “flashes of anger” as a key component in her ambivalent feelings stemming from Akash’s betrayal:

I get angry that my daughter is going to have to deal with this, and feel betrayed by her father too [now that she’ll have a half sibling]. And then I have moments where I'm like, I don't want to do it. I don't want to be in this. But then like, I still have to deal with him...I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. He's a good guy. But then I think about him fucking her, and I get a flash of anger. But then it dissipates.

Priya also contrasted her own actions with Akash’s, and reflected on her history with infidelity and attitudes towards affairs in general. She linked the act of infidelity with being “unhappy” by saying:

It's not like, oh he would never cheat [again]. He has, so he would. I mean everybody would cheat. I don't think there's any guy or woman that would never cheat. Everybody probably has it in them to cheat. Maybe they haven't had the right person or the right opportunity or the right circumstance... But he's already proven that he'll do it. And I've cheated, like I get it. But I'm not cheating now, I haven't cheated for like 10 years, 15 years. I don't think I'd do it again because if I were really that unhappy, I think at this point I would leave.

Jason, too, became introspective about affairs that he’s had, in his case while with his current partner Marcy. He explored his hypocrisy in wanting from her what he hasn’t always offered her himself, and he identified a tendency to respond acerbically towards her now that she’s put him in the opposite position:

...So then I asked, am I upset with myself about something which Marcy's conduct reminds me of? There's a touch of that... In the past, she would ask me if I had slept with anyone else and I would say no. So I would lie about it. And now I expect her to give me an answer and she's not giving me one, so maybe that's something...I felt like I was saying things sarcastically to Marcy, and then I would right and say to myself, stop it! Why are you attacking and hurting her? That's not what you want to do. And then [later] what I'd try to do is have the kindness come out. To say positive things.

Partners' Roles Post-Affair

Each couple identified that, post-affair, the relationship was undergoing changes. Betrayed partners spoke to shifts in their identity as well as mistrust towards their partner. Unfaithful partners increasingly connected with feelings of guilt and shame, and several were inclined to factor into their actions the broader context in which the affair took place.

Betrayed Partner's Shift in Identity

As the couples began to find their footing post-revelation, several of the betrayed partners expressed the feeling of suddenly taking on a new identity. They struggled with maintaining a positive self-image in the wake of their discovery. Urmi expressed a shift in her identity as a woman in “a strong marriage” to a victim of Dev’s affair:

It's an identity shift for me, cheating, affairs, I never thought I'd have to overcome something like this. I understand the complexity of that and why it happened, but I'll never completely get over it, because my identity has completely changed, from that woman who had a strong marriage to the person who has been cheated on.

In the aftermath of Dan’s affair, Amy struggled with preserving her value to him:

I don't believe that it's possible [that he'll never meet his former affair partner again]. I don't think I can compete with what he went out and found....I can't fight hard enough to compete against that.

Dovid echoed this shift in his sense of self:

No matter what, I'm going to go through life permanently altered from this experience. My ability to trust anyone is shattered. I'm forever changed because of what she did to me...My entire life has been thrown upside down, I'm a broken person.

Tina wrestled with the impulse to continue to check Matteo’s devices and the desire to shed

“vigilant” behaviors:

I don't want to be hypervigilant, it makes me feel terrible and makes me hate myself. When I want to look at your e-mails and everything else it feels beneath you, it feels beneath me. I want to let go of that.

In her reflection, Urmi recognized that her identity began shifting well before the affair, as she went from an “independent” woman to a “prisoner” of Dev’s family dynamics. She identified in hindsight that the sacrifices she made to her identity ultimately made space for an affair to take place:

I also feel that living so close to family has not allowed him to grow up in a certain way. If he was just with me, I could have helped him to grow up in a way where he could've felt more free. But here, I myself am in prison, so I can't imagine for him. Of course, he didn't grow up, he sees this other side of that this person brought out in him, that I wasn't able to give him myself, because I too became tied down. And I'm that person, my upbringing was, do whatever you like, be responsible, but be independent. Go out and see the world. Here, it's all about family family family. Religion, culture, family get-togethers, what I should and shouldn't do, perceived notions of how we should live, where we should go... all this impacts me in such a huge way and it's made me lost to who I am. Because all of this is not me...I've felt entrapped and have had trouble finding myself again. I say, let's do something else, let's travel, so we can do something else. So we can focus on *our* family, what *our* wants are, we don't even know who we are.

Betrayed Partner's Broken Trust

Several betrayed partners painted a picture of having “shattered” trust after discovering their partner had been unfaithful. Brooke described a long history of trust in George’s generosity and eccentricity that was ruptured by George’s infidelity:

When someone sets a pattern of 20 years of honesty, and they've always had some odd person in their life, and he's always given people cars and places to live, he had a guy live in our house for two years he didn't do anything for him, it wasn't as weird as it sounds. Then...[George’s ex-lover’s new husband] comes back and tells me, I want you to know that Monica was George’s girlfriend. And I want you to know that your husband had an affair with my wife. I just never thought [George] would do that.

Rosalia had a similar story of blindly trusting James, and linked this with his ability to hide his affair from her:

... because I never snooped. We had this relationship where I was, you know he would pay the credit card bills or whatever, I never snooped, I never had that need. So he felt safe [to have his affair].

In the aftermath of their partners' affairs, several betrayed partners spoke to the dilemma of either needing to surveil their partner or risk trusting again. As Matt explored his ambivalence in remaining in his relationship, he asked himself:

That's my biggest fear in staying together is, am I just signing up for more?

Tina described feeling optimistic about the future and then "panic" that she's again being naïve by allowing Matteo autonomy:

I...had some pleasant thoughts about us in the future and about us both being connected but very vital and energized by what we're doing individually. And then I had this little panic, this moment of absolute panic, that was like "but I'm not watching, and it's not going to happen" ... I'm not being the police person, I'm not being the surveillance person and I'm going to look back and [my dream future is] going to be gone.

Priya described momentary trust stemming from her belief that Akash is presently trying to repair with her, and she observes this in his presence as a father to their daughter. She then elaborated that, despite this, she maintains a deeper level of mistrust towards him:

Like right now I feel like he's in Dad mode, so he's not projecting the sexy man side of him. But if you turn that on I have no doubt that there would be plenty of women who are totally up for it...I think that's part of why I don't trust him...Yeah but [my mistrust is] definitely informed by the fact that he [already] cheated...[But] I can tell you if he ever did it [again], I would slaughter him.

Several unfaithful partners validated their partners' mistrust. In response to Priya, Akash described feeling pressure, but recognized having made "mistakes":

When she says it like that [slaughter him] it's threatening. I mean it feels threatening, but I don't feel threatened. I don't feel scared. I mean I've got nothing to hide, first of all...I want her to trust me. I know it's something that's earned. I'm not going to repeat my mistakes.

Dev referred to deepening Urmi's mistrust by having erred post-revelation. He described struggling with both wanting to rebuild her trust and the reality that he is having difficulty letting his affair partner go:

Urmi's been through a lot of trust issues, she never worried I would do this...She did find out that, even after she found out about this [affair], that [my affair partner and I] were still communicating. So that hurt her too, that even after I told her that we were not, we were actually still communicating.

Like Dev, Dan struggled with knowing his true desire for his life post-affair, which posed an obstacle to rebuilding trust with his partner Amy. Early in the post-revelation phase, she perceived his ambivalence about recommitting to the marriage. At the time of the session, Dan described being more sure of what he wanted while Amy remained suspicious that Dan had ulterior motives:

D: I'm fighting for you. I'm fighting for us.

A: But I don't trust you. So (chuckles) without trusting you, you could be fighting for anything as far as I'm concerned. Maybe you're fighting to make this life quick and easy, so you can get back to her...You wanted to live with no regret. What better way to live without regret than to get back together and set your family off comfortably so you could once again fulfill your greatest passions? I don't know. You were madly in love, you had nicknames, you had plans... and now this [marriage to me] is enough? It doesn't make sense.

Dan dismissed his earlier reactions post-revelation as being how "teenagers" feel, to which Amy responded that she is unconvinced that Dan has processed the deeper meaning of his actions:

It's a struggle for me because the first four weeks, when I was coming to the table saying, "we're going to make this work and we're going to be forever, and we're going to make it through this..." and you were saying, "I don't promise anyone forever" and you're telling me you like her, and how much she meant to you, and then all of a sudden you threw it away. I'm so confused, because you went from being discovered as having an affair and telling me you liked her to now telling me she didn't mean that much to you and you were acting like a teenager. So what am I supposed to believe? I'm trying to determine, whether or not something is still happening. I'm trying to figure out do you really accept what she meant to you so you can walk away from it because you want to have it with me? And you keep belittling it, that it was two teenagers. I don't believe that...You really were invested in this. When you blow it off, like you're telling me you just did, it shows me you're not dealing with the whole deck.

Unfaithful Partner's Focus on Context

As partners who had been unfaithful attempt to respond to their partners' mistrust, they gravitated towards explaining their actions through a lens of external variables. They referred to

the broader context of the affair to justify how they were able to violate their partners' trust.

James became visibly angry when his partner described her interpretation of his actions. When asked about this, he responded:

I feel [I'm being] misrepresented. I think that's not what happened... I guess somehow it's tied to my rationale of how the affair happened in the first place. That to be honest with you...[is] the reason for the anger.

Matteo had a similar impulse to slow Tina down as she recounted his affair. As he, too, felt misrepresented, he clarified the significance of the "context" of his behavior:

I would like this affair, for as long as it was, to be seen in a context. Because if it's taken in absolute terms then I'm just a dick. But it's not, it exists within circumstances, and so it's still wrong but at least it's not crazy or at least it's not capricious, that I just ran to the first person that wanted to sleep with me which is really not true.

When Tina described a specific incidence of finding an email correspondence that she believed Matteo didn't want her to see, Matteo again moved to correct her. She felt stifled by his correction, and stated:

T: Why can't you just honor the feelings that I have and that's kind of it?

M: Because there's a lot of other implications of what you said. The implication is that I hid things from you. The implication is that I lied, that there was this turd on my computer and I hid it from you because I knew it was a turd, when instead it was not.... I did not lie to you about that email... If I didn't show you that it's because I didn't think it was questionable, not because I'm a liar.

When Amy spoke about Dan's actions, Dan too reminded Amy that there's an element of "objectivity" in her assessment of him. He made an effort to distance himself from a negative characterization by saying:

What you're feeling and what you saw and what you read, I think whatever you're feeling is objective. I don't think it is irrational. I don't think it is a story, I think it is a realistic interpretation of what happened based off of what you know. You were left isolated, please, there's no doubt about it. But it's objective.

Like other betrayed partners, Caitlin became frustrated with her inability to express herself fully without being derailed by her partner when he feels mischaracterized:

[I'll be talking about my pain and] he'll say, I'm not a monster. And I'll say, I've never once use the word monster. But it's obvious that he feels that way, like a monster, and he says I'm not a horrible person, I'm not monster, and I say that's fine! I never called you that.

Tim highlighted being a “horrible person” or a “monster” as a characterization he rejects, much in the way that James rejected being characterized as “wrong” and worthy of judgement. James explains his anger at listening to Rosalia’s misrepresentation of him in the following way:

There's something about...being wrong with being judged, I know I don't like being judged. I don't like being wrong. ...right when she started the conversation, I could feel my tension rising. It's been rising through this whole conversation really, but that hit a nerve. And for some reason, it's just so in conflict with how my experience of everything happened is.

Rosalia then summed a shared frustration among betrayed partners to this emphasis on context, by responding:

But James, you never owned it. You never said I wasn't available to you. Instead you say, oh you exaggerate, I'm not wrong. And I just hit a wall.

Unfaithful Partner's Shame and Guilt

In exchanges where unfaithful partners focused on broader context to justify their actions and betrayed partners remained in pain and maintained their mistrust, unfaithful partners would periodically yield to feelings of shame and guilt from their actions. Matteo described having an easier time tolerating and distancing himself from Tina’s “rawness,” but his guilt is triggered when she spoke of mistrust:

When she talks about issues of trust, I don't trust you, it's a very powerful statement...there's a nugget of truth in that statement even if you take away all the rawness, and that's a big one. I am terrified of the notion that I will spend whatever years I have left feeling guilty. That my persona will be modified. By Tina. By myself.

He then described a pronounced change in the quality of their relationship that concerned him.

He described that happier moments felt like the “parentheses” between moment of pain and guilt.

As he put it:

It feels like an escape from the pain of every day, we go out and have a good time and for three or four hours we're not shoveling stuff. So it feels like an escape.... It just feels like we're taking a break. It validates a lot of positive things, but it's just the parentheses in the crisis to catch a breather for both of us... We need a break so let's go out, instead of it being, this is how it should be. This is how it could be, this is how it will be. It feels like little capsules or breaks. And that may be how it's going to have to be, that's fine. But to me they feel like a fairly conscious effort to just take a break.

Laura described her guilt as stemming from her awareness of Matt's pain. While she, too, believes there to be a broader context to her actions, she nonetheless validated "the results and the impact" of her actions on Matt:

It's not the person I saw myself to be, or want to be. The guilt, or the remorse, is causing Matt pain. It's not necessarily about what I did, it's about the results and the impact on Matt.

Dan located his guilt in Amy's experience of triggers and moments where she "relives" the affair:

I don't want Amy to have to do that, cause I don't want her to relive it, or relive it more than she has to. It's difficult enough as it is.

Rivka described her guilt as helping her to have clarity about what she wanted for their future:

I see this very differently now, I know I fucked up and hurt him badly. I know I love him and want him.

Sex Post-Affair

As the couples navigated sex in the post-affair relationship, they responded in disparate ways. Some found the affair to bring them closer together sexually, while others experienced it as driving a wedge between them. In addition, for some couples the event of the affair engendered honest and insightful conversations about sex and sexuality. In the wake of the affair, Matteo and Tina described experiencing sex as a place of "intense connection":

M: The reason our sex life has been so wonderful especially in the past few months is because we've had a connection that is so intense.

T: For me it's been enormously important to see the life and the vitality that can be fully repaired, that exists, that's very real, that's what those things are to me. That even when

there are difficult conversations, difficult days, we can't help but, I don't think of it as an effort, I think we can't help wanting to make love.

Tina described that the marriage was “broken on the ground” in the aftermath of the affair, however, the crisis made room for a level of honesty and vulnerability between partners that had not existed in the pre-affair marriage. She described Matteo opening up about sex in the following way:

That first week [after the affair] you were in Italy and everything was via e-mail and broken on the ground so why not. And one of the e-mails said frankly I think our sex life could be more interesting. It had become much more frequent but it is stuck in a routine and it was one of the things you said early on, yes it could be. So in addition to love and vulnerability, jealousy and anger, that all makes for a pretty good cocktail. So the sex has been more creative, much more frequent, much more fun.

In some instances, the unfaithful partners found that sex outside of the relationship improved sex within their relationship, while the betrayed partner experienced the act as deeply threatening and unacceptable. Laura, who had had an affair, describes:

For me, I felt more invigorated sexually [because of the affair] and frankly, I think that improved our sex life.

She went on to explain that the affair has helped her in honing an erotic fantasy space, both with her affair partner and as an individual. Matt, her partner, responded that he supports her fantasy life, but not the act of sex outside of the relationship:

I love that you have a fantasy life, it's private, and you don't need to share it, unless you want to, in case I'm all ears. I'd love it. That's exciting and thrilling...But just to be clear, I'd rather have less good sex and have you not be in an affair.

For Jason, Marcy's affair triggered feelings of sexual inadequacy. As a result, he requested sex from Marcy daily. This dynamic was becoming taxing on the couple, as Jason's needs coupled with Marcy's guilt resulted in clashes between partners. Marcy offered conjecture that specific changes to the quality and frequency of the sex are rooted in Jason's need for reassurance. When

asked, Jason agreed that there was a compulsive quality to his need for sex post-affair. He described his desire for connection to be driving this compulsion:

J: It is odd that I need to do it every night. She'll say, let's give it a break and not make love tonight, and I'll say that's fine. But something inside of me is not fine.

M: And I apologized like seven times even though we had sex the day before, I was wiped out! I just wanted to go to sleep! But I feel like he's so fragile, I need to make sure I don't do things that set him off...Maybe...being inside of me is giving you some kind of feelings of reassurance...somehow somewhere that have nothing to do with orgasm. But in the past he never needed to come each time, and also he didn't need to have sex every day. So it's not even being inside of me, it's also the release that he needs.

J: Well, I need to feel connected to you, Marcy.

In Priya's case, the affair resulted in her exploring messages that she received about sex from her family that led to her present-day attitudes about sex:

My sister and I didn't talk about [sex]. My parents *definitely* didn't talk about stuff like that. I didn't have that kind of influence in my life...I do remember when I was little reading that same Judy Blume book that everybody read when I was a teenager, and my mom caught me and I got a whipping. I got in big trouble! My parents are not into sexual anything.

Akash, coming from a similar family culture, echoed Priya's experience of being discouraged from thinking about and talking about sex. She and Akash explored how their lack of sexual vocabulary makes it challenging to discuss sexuality with increasingly curious three-year-old daughter:

P: ...like last night you were telling me that Dia [our daughter] was putting her hands down her pants. She's three and a half, that's what they do. And she's doing it for a while, and I'll say, "Dia, what's going on?"...Like I'm trying to figure out what the right words are to like not have her feel ashamed of it, but also not have her walking around with her hands in her pants, like in school or whatever. And I don't want other people to tell her like 'that's private!' or Indian people will say 'that's shame shame!' Like, what's so shameful about her having her hand down her pants? Like it's inappropriate, but it's not *shameful!*

Fall from Grace

As each couple found their footing post-affair, betrayed and unfaithful partners alike experienced feelings of loss. Betrayed partners often spoke to the feeling of a loss of innocence or specialness, and the couple together often mourned the impact that the affair would have on the broader network of their children, friends and family. Brooke grieved the “loss” of her ability to blindly trust George as she always had. Through tears, she described:

Well you're sad, because there's a sense of loss. For the innocence. Because there was never any reason for 20 years to question anything. He did what he said he was going to do. For 20 years, he didn't have any inappropriate relationships, so you never second-guess what he's doing. So there's a sense of loss.

Amy described a similar experience of loss in terms of what was “sacred” between Dan and herself, and no longer seeing herself as the “ultimate love” of his life:

From where I sit, you gave this woman everything. You totally left nothing. Everything! Even the things you gave to me that were sacred to me, you gave to her... From where I sit, as a person who promised to pursue this path with you and who believed you will not have feelings like that towards someone else outside of our relationship, to know the extent to which you committed yourself to her... the degree to which you gave yourself to this woman further threw me away. Go and have an affair, go and have sex, go and fall in love. But it's like you have to make her the ultimate love of your life. That's how you had to make her feel, like she was the one. And it's what happened in that bubble [of the affair] that makes me so devastated... because it's so sacred what happens between a husband and a wife.. And in this darkness now, where do I find hope?

After Rivka's affair, Dovid struggled with believing that he was ever “special” to her:

When I think about what this affair means... I was substandard to her. I'm just one of two. Sex, closeness with her, it was just a commodity, not special between us. I have no idea where I stand.

Matteo identified a history of not wanting to let his family down which has since translated to his relationships with friends. He lamented that his and Tina's friends would no longer view them as a “role model couple”:

It seems the relationship seems clear, I did not want to disappoint my dad or mom so why would I want to disappoint my friends now... I feel that I would be letting [our friends]

down, they have expectations, they see Tina and I as a role model couple, as a beacon, as a reference point. So to say to those friend it's not as good as you thought, it would be letting them down.

Caitlin, too, bemoaned the “divide” that would emerge once their friends learned of Tim’s affair:

You know that very night I found out, I told him all of your friends are going to side with me, and my friends will hate you, and you see the divide that’s now going to happen?

Like Matteo, Rivka has a similar reaction of “letting down” her family and Orthodox Jewish community once they discovered her affair:

When I think about how I let everyone down and hurt them when they never saw that coming from me, I feel so bad and sad. I never wanted that. I never even wanted Dovid to know, I definitely didn’t want them to know. But I told my parents, I told some friends, people talk. And now I’m like this person that everyone knows did this. It’s a lot. My brother gave me a lecture when we had dinner recently, just judging me. My parents just want me to fix things with Dovid, that’s all they’re focused on.

Dev described the complexity of his family becoming informed of his affair. He described his family’s “shock” at his actions, and the support they’ve offered to preserve the marital couple:

I can't even believe my parents know something like this, they were in shock. Her mom still doesn't believe it, her dad still doesn't believe it because I've always been this kind of perfect goody two shoes person. My parents still don't believe it. They said even if God told them they wouldn't believe it. They wouldn't believe that I had this affair. But they've been supportive, they want us together... So in the long run, everybody knowing is better. But they did gang up on me last weekend and basically say they are going to disown me unless Cynthia [my affair partner] leaves the [medical] practice [where I work].

Several of the couples also spoke about the ways in which the affair had impacted their children or themselves as parents. Dovid described frustration stemming from Rivka being both the person who hurt him and also his children’s mother:

But on top of everything, I have to suppress *all* my feelings of anger cause she’s the mother of my kids. So we only have pockets of time to even discuss these things, cause we don’t want them exposed to any of it.

After discovering Marcy’s affair, Jason’s initial reaction was the impulse to tell their children that their parents are separating. Marcy recalled his urgency in their post-revelation

communications, and Jason recalled his children feeling “shook up” by his decision to keep a distance:

M: There are so many emails about telling the children and separating and literally him leaving me.

J: I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to break up, but I wanted to take a break and separate. Take a few days in separate and sort things out. And that night Marcy slept with one of the kids in their room and they were all shook up about me staying somewhere else.

While Dovid prioritized discretion around his children and Jason prioritized his self-preservation despite his children becoming alerted to changes between their parents, Tina took an existential approach to the impact of the affair on her role as a mother. As the parent of a teenage daughter, she describes a newfound focus on “living fully” that she wants to pass down to her daughter:

Now we are here [after the affair], we have each other, we don't have to be distracted every day with a young kid that needs things, and I have every intention of living a long time further, and I want to do it very fully...And how intimidating it is, the profound impact of being a mother. Because I sit here in my head and I was wondering about what little un-gifts I've given Fionna, just as our mothers gave us. I don't want to give her more from this affair.

The Couple's Efforts to Move Beyond the Affair

As each couple made efforts to unearth the deeper meaning behind their affair, they navigated obstacles in their ability to dialogue through the affair, including betrayed partners exploring the parameters of what information is helpful in their healing and what level of detail exacerbates their pain, and unfaithful partners struggling with what and how much to say. Embedded in this effort was an unpacking of reactions from both partners towards the affair partner. These conversations helped the couple to achieve post-affair clarity during which the unfaithful partner acknowledged the depth of pain that they caused, and the couple cultivated an attitude of acceptance for mistakes made. They then strategized ways to reaffirm their bond, exploring coping methods on the level of the individual, the couple, and the broader social

community, which sparked a degree of hope and optimism for a brighter future together and an understanding of the affair as an integrated experience that ultimately served to strengthen the relationship. Hence, the couples' efforts to move beyond the affair can be understood in five major subcategories; communication about the affair, reactions towards the affair partner, post-affair clarity, strategies for healing, and hope for the future.

Communication About the Affair

In the aftermath of the affair, couples struggled with finding a productive way to discuss their experience of the affair. Among these couples, nearly all betrayed partners described a feeling of wanting to know as much as possible about the affair. They allude to the idea that knowing everything will help them to mitigate their pain, but they often encounter the opposite to be true. Caitlin described “pushing” for conversations in order to “get it all out,” and be in a different “place” sooner:

I push for these conversations for hours, sometimes we'll be up till three in the morning crying and hugging, I really want to get it all out, but it's probably just my anxiety to just get through all of this because I don't like the place that I'm in, how it feels for me... I have a need for the truth and what happened, all the details, maybe too much, I'll give you that, but I'd rather know and understand it all then say no, I don't want to know.

Tim, like many partners who had been unfaithful, described his own dilemma of both wanting to meet Caitlin's need and recognizing that these conversations can be a “minefield” for the couple.

As he put it:

Sometimes I said, Caitlin, please let's not talk tonight, and she'll say oh I was fine, or just answer me this question, and now it's almost a learned helplessness, because I'll say okay because she'll be very rational and she'll ask a question, and then I'll answer it [and she'll be hurt]... she can ask a very innocuous question about [my affair partner] Nina, I'll answer and then she'll hit me with a clothes hanger. Yesterday we were in the airport, and she got an upgrade to first-class, because there was no way that she was sitting next to me during that flight because she asked me some questions about Nina and I answered and she stormed off. So I'm used to that now, but I'm sensitive that it's a minefield that I'm walking through when I talk about her.

James and Rosalia struggled similarly with where to focus their attention when discussing James' affair. James described a similar predicament to Tim when Rosalia asks for details, and he interpreted her mining for information as "punishment" for his having had the affair. In the session, he says to her:

Stop talking about the details because we are destroying our relationship. We should figure out a way to fix ourselves rather than further painting the picture of what the pain was. And you're doing this to punish me... I feel like I'm getting beaten, or like in some ways I think she likes the pain. And if she's poking me on the details on the relationship, I feel like she's trying to create more pain... And when I feel like I'm getting attacked, then I get angry.

Matteo described "vehemence" in Tina's statements when she "goes dark" during these conversations:

We go from very lucid moments of discussion where the context is acknowledged, very objectively... But then when she goes dark it's like all of that didn't exist, and it's just pure pain and it's just pure betrayal, and pure all those things unmitigated by the context that we were discussing half an hour ago... which [version of her] is more truthful is hard for me to distinguish. The vehemence of some statements, while I know it should be mitigated by the pain and the primordial reaction she's having, it's there.

Akash took a different approach in that he focused more on Priya's need to be angry with him and heal at her own pace. He explored how pressuring her with an ultimatum would run the risk of "blowing up" the relationship:

To be clear, I have no interest in leaving. I have every interest in making this go. I mean sometimes I do think about what it be more effective to, I mean not put ultimatums out there, but say, we got to move this along, let's go... I don't think it would be effective. If my end goal is to have a healthy sexual relationship with my wife, I want her to get there. I want us to get there. I don't want to fuck it up, blow it up by trying to force it. Does that make sense?

He described that he remained in "penance" for his actions, and took on the strategy of being a good listener:

It's not that I don't want to talk about [moving on from my affair], I just know what the limitations are on my feeling bad. Does that make sense? I don't know how long my penance is. I feel like I put us in this situation, I don't think I can be the one to say

enough's enough...if Priya is expressing anger at me or something, frustration or sadness or sense of betrayal, I can understand where it comes from. And so I don't want to mute it by being like yeah I am this terrible person, but now when I hear it I sort of just listen to it. I just tried to hear what she's saying. I don't know what the limitations are. I'm just hopeful that we'll move past it. Not like "why haven't we moved past it?" kind of thing.

Like Akash, Dan also recognized where Amy's pain "comes from." As he reflected on the distress that he's already caused her, he asked in earnest about how best to manage his own emotions:

What should I do to deal with [my shame and guilt]? Should I deal with that with her?

Anger and Resentment from Betrayed Partners

In response to unfaithful partners' growing impatient with betrayed partners' pain and needs for information, several betrayed partners responded with resentment and anger. Amy resented the bind that she found herself in, of either rushing her hurt feelings or losing her partner over continuing to feel them. She asked:

How much time do I get to feel defeated and angry and hopeless [before he just goes]?

Priya developed this thinking further by describing that she "can't force" herself to move on from her pain:

I mean I can't just force it. It's not like I'm holding out...And I think I would just be like well if that's what you need, then I can't give that to you. Like I don't know how to do that, so then leave. I mean I'm not trying to force him out, I'm not doing it on purpose. I'm not consciously punishing him...I mean there's a big part of me that doesn't feel a big impetus to get past that until it's okay for me.

When George grows impatient with Brooke, claiming that his affair was nothing more than a "sexual release," Brooke asserted that he doesn't grasp the depth of her pain. She described feeling "hurt" that she was "in competition" with George's affair partner. She experienced George as being insensitive for describing himself at his happiest when she's at her "worst":

It really hurts my feelings that he says the happiest years of our marriage for him were the last five, because the last five for me were the worst. I know why they were the

happiest for you, because you had two women trying to please you. It was like a competition, when I look back. Because he'd come home and say, Monica did this or didn't do this, she was either wonderful or a bad person. And I think, well I'm better than that!

Tim described that Caitlin's anger emerges most when they're in their "cycles of rage." He stated that it's in those moments that she wants him to hurt as she's hurting:

When she brings up the revenge fantasy ... she's quite angry and we are going through one of those cycles of rage, and she says you need to stay in the marriage while I do what I want to do, you need to be in the exact same place that I was in.

In the hopes of safeguarding themselves from future affairs, some betrayed partners implement ultimatums. In his effort to preserve "respect," for himself, Matt offered this compromise to

Laura:

I acknowledge that we can have a sexual component to ourselves that is private, I acknowledge that Laura can have that too, but not with other men if we're going to be married. That's an absolute for me, and that hasn't changed. And if you can't abide by that, we can't stay together...out of respect for me and respect for our family, I think I need you to be sure you can promise me that you will not step outside of those bounds, and if you choose to, you will end it beforehand. Because that's something that I think I deserve. And that's what I think I'm asking for.

Priya presented Akash with this bottom line:

[If he had another affair] I would want absolutely nothing to do with him ever again. Like, he would have whatever relationship he'd have with our daughter but I would never be able to look him in the eye again.

Reactions Towards the Affair Partner

At the time of their therapy sessions, the couples were in the early stages of navigating their impulses towards the person who had been the affair partner to the unfaithful partner.

Often, unfaithful partners were in the place of wanting to honor the needs of the partner who had been betrayed. However, several unfaithful partners carried with them a degree of guilt and pain about having to leave their affair partner behind. When asked if he ever loved his affair partner

Nina, Tim described that he didn't love her, but that had "emotion" for her, and presently has "concern" that her hurt her:

Caitlin asked me not to have any contact with her so, sometimes I do feel bad, concern for her because she was much younger. And this upsets Caitlin...I brought it up in my own therapy, that I was being unfair to this woman, and I thought, she's in her early 30s, our relationship is going to end, she needs to find somebody long-term and she's not even pursuing or going out and looking to start down that path. And am I hurting her in a way? If this relationship keeps going on? So no, I didn't fall in love, but there was emotion there.

In his reflection, he identified a wish for the relationship to have meant more to Nina than it ultimately seemed to have meant, gauging from her dispassionate response when he told her it was over. In hindsight, he wondered if he had misperceived the true nature of the relationship:

I think we had always anticipated that the relationship would end, and candidly the fact that she was not more hurt or distraught [when I told her it was over], I think for me it was, okay well this is over. I think it was more important to me to find out, did this relationship have meaning for her?... I miss the friendship... We became intimate, I think it's hard for [Caitlin] to hear that, because she'll say, Nina would just tell you what you wanted to hear. And that's not the way I experienced our relationship. It might've been a fantasy relationship, but the friendship seemed genuine.

Matteo described wanting to end his affair relationship "correctly," so that there was no remaining uncertainty on his affair partner's part:

[After sharing seven years] I'm not just going to be an ass and walk out. I think it's important to finish it correctly. Because otherwise there may be a comeback, the doubt stays on the other end, and I don't want her to wonder why I was behaving a certain way and be thinking that there was a way to go back in. This way just closes completely. There's no contact. She's not sitting there thinking, what the hell is going on? Can I resuscitate this somehow? I also didn't want her to waste her time and energy on this, because I know her. So this way it's finished, it's done, she can move on herself.

In some instances, unfaithful partners remained in a state of uncertainty and depression about truly moving on from their affair partner. Dev struggled similarly to Tim and Matteo in that he grappled with guilt, in his case, for having made "promises" to his affair partner that his wife Urmi would not allow him to keep. However, he differed from other unfaithful partners in that

his focus was on the bind of simultaneously grieving the loss of his affair partner and not wanting to exacerbate Urmi's pain:

I promised to this person, just like I promised you, that I would take care of her. That she would be in our lives somehow someday. I shouldn't have made that promise, but I did. What's so hard is that [Urmi's] been with me, she still cares about me and hasn't left me, and I've been in this confused state. I feel so selfish because I'm trying to help her but I can't even help her because I can't even help myself sometimes. So I feel depressed sometimes, but even when I'm strong, I feel like I can't help her. So were both trying to help each other, and ourselves. Because if we can't help ourselves, how can we help the other? It's a very confusing time for us.

Partners who had been betrayed had varied reactions towards dynamics with the affair partner.

Urmi experienced Dev as remaining "focused" on his affair partner in a way that was counterproductive to their healing. She described:

He's always so focused on her, I miss her, I had a horrible week, how am I supposed to survive, I need to talk to her, is it okay if I talk to her? He keeps asking me and is raising the same questions... To get the focus away from her and back on us has been the toughest part. And it feels like daggers every day that he brings her up... I feel like I'm just constantly trying to help him over and over again, so I forget about myself. And I feel like what he does to himself is, he talks himself into things that aren't necessarily real. For him to say, I love her, I love her I love her, and say it every day, I feel like it's and incantation, like he's almost driving himself to love her. But it's not true love. So he's talking himself into certain things, that makes it much more painful, obviously to hear him say that he loves another woman. Instead of seeing what she represents and getting into the underlying problem, he just has these superficial feelings of, I love her, which may not even be the true story. But he's deepening the hole that I can't get him out of.

Despite Matteo ending his affair, Tina continued to fear his affair partner's power and persuasion over him:

[I read a recent email that she sent him and] I was feeling enormously threatened and thinking, my god she's confident. He's had no repartee with her for months and she still comes up with this stuff. I better not take my eye off her. The minute they're at a trade show and they're at a bar and they're partying, this woman's going to make a play for my husband. This woman is determined, she's relentless, she has a big ego and she doesn't hear no... I have had, and will continue to have, profound anxiety when it comes to this woman. And I will continue to feel this way until I understand why you could not pull away.

In some cases, betrayed partners grew sympathetic towards their partner's affair partner. They recognized that ultimately, they were the ones who would continue on with the unfaithful partner while the affair partner would experience an abrupt loss, particularly of any support that was being provided by the unfaithful partner. In learning more about George's affair partner Monica, Brooke felt that George hadn't been "fair" to her as he had all along held the power in their relationship. She described:

Monica was poor, married a few times, lost her parental rights to her three children, had a tough history. When he met her, she couldn't make her rent, was selling prescription drugs and was on welfare. And he said, do you want to get on my boat and be my assistant and fix my penis? And she said, you're great, you're wonderful, I don't know anyone as smart as you. And I think, that wasn't even fair to her. Why don't you just let her work a real job for you?... I thought, there's going to be no more Monica, you need to fire her. But then I couldn't do that, because I felt sorry for her. She didn't have a life, nothing to fall back on. No education, no family. And her lifestyle had went up a lot [because of George].

Non-monogamy

As couples explored their reactions to sex outside of the couple, the topic of non-monogamy would periodically arise. For some couples, it was the partner who had been unfaithful that felt opened up to the idea. Tim recognized that Caitlin had been deprived of an "erotic" pleasure that he had experienced in his affair:

[Having had my affair] I can even see myself saying from a place of love, Caitlin do you want an erotic weekend?...If that's what you want [then] I want you to have that.

After his affair, Dev described a sudden interest in having new sexual arrangements, both together and apart from Urmi:

... There are other things I want to be open to, that we might be open to [experiencing] together. I think once I present [the idea of opening up] to her, yes. But right now we can't come up with that concept of freedom.

Other times, it was partners who had been betrayed that had a more lenient attitude about sex outside of the relationship. Brooke located this feeling in her "independent" personality:

I've always been someone that said, if you want to have an affair you can have one, he can have an assistant. Or if you want to move on [from the relationship] it's fine, we've always been independent people.

Jason, who had been betrayed by Marcy's affair, spoke to the issue being rooted not in the sex, but in feeling uninformed about her interactions with her affair partner:

...I wondered if she was sleeping with that guy, so I asked her and she said we'll talk about it later. So that really bothered me... So she didn't answer me, and one of the few things that I asked her to do was answer me if I asked her.

Post-Affair Clarity

After the affair, several unfaithful partners experienced clarity about the extent to which their actions hurt their partners, and thus, their own relationship. The couple was then able to cultivate an attitude of acceptance for mistakes made.

Acknowledgement of the Betrayed Partner's Pain

Rivka regarded the affair as an experience that helped her achieve clarity by learning about herself and what she truly wants:

I feel like I've learned a lot about myself since all this happened. I want to do what I need to do to make him feel better and make our marriage work. I know I really hurt him, I want to fix that.

Tim attempted to reassure Caitlin that, since his affair came to light, he is no longer "blinded":

...what I've told you is, I was blinded before to my actions. Having another mistress, there's no way that I'm going to make that choice and hurt you again like this. I mean, that is just not something I'm going to do... I think it's harder for her to understand but I can say confidently that the mistress fantasy is over. I never want to do this to her again, and to live through this, I've caused suffering for everyone. So I'm at peace with the idea of no longer seeing my mistress.

Dan experienced his affair shifting from a "beautiful thing" to one that is "reprehensible" after recognizing the "harm" he had caused Amy:

It wasn't anything I wanted to remember. [It] created a lot of collateral damage, hurt a lot of people... I disagree with [your suspicion that I still wish to return to my affair] because either way I would be looking at an affair that either ended the relationship or caused

irreparable harm in the relationship between you and me. When I look at what happened and how it affected us, it no longer is a beautiful thing. It is disgusting, it is horrible, it is reprehensible behavior. That's what it represents. So whether you reacted in a way to kick me out of the house or in a way to be understanding and listen to what's going on, in neither case it is no longer a beautiful thing.

Acceptance of Mistakes

Some couples gravitated towards framing the affair as a “mistake” made. Laura describes feeling more “accepted” by Matt when her affair was seen in this light:

I think it's this feeling of acceptance. Accepting that I'm going to make mistakes... it's the acceptance that I'm seeking [from him], in spite of my myriad flaws. I think that's it, just withholding judgment. When he does that, I feel better.

Matteo stated that he finds it helpful when he and Tina don't belabor his mistake, but recognize it as something not to repeat and to move forward from:

I think it's important to talk, not just about what happened, but also discussing and planning what we want to work towards. As much as we talk endlessly about what happened, at some point we have to also talk about how we're not going to repeat the same mistakes again.

Rivka echoed these interpretations of her actions when she says:

I know I made a mistake. I feel really bad about it. I want him to forgive me for what I've done, but I know that takes time.

Strategies for Healing

As couples explored what had been helpful to them in their effort to move forward, they identified several strategies towards healing. The strategies encompassed individual partners identifying a resilience within themselves, the couple working together to cope, and support from the broader network of family and friends.

Resilience of Self

Some betrayed partners identified a quality of self-resilience that they've connected with through the pain of their affair, and has been instrumental in their forward movement. Caitlin reflected on

the limited family support available to her, citing ultimately that her “source of strength” was herself:

[My mother] is 78. Her short-term memory is gone...her intellectual capacities are, so you know, this whole process has been very alone and isolating for me. My dad’s dead, I can’t talk to my mom, if I tell my brothers they’re going to kill him. So my source of strength was myself, and digging like I always do, I dig and I’ll get through it, I’m a fighter. I come from a military family when you go deep. And [you have] to carry-on.

Tina noticed her ability to choose not to “melt down” has helped her to not be “overtaken”:

I don’t know if [Matteo] noticed it but a couple of times I was absolutely flooded. And although I was very upset, at some points I was able to keep myself from crying...other times I couldn’t, but I did stop from melting down because melting down isn’t very helpful or inspiring to anybody. So that was good. Personally I have been more productive. I have not been quite as overtaken by this every single minute of the day. Less obsessive.

Jason described that he feels more in command of his pain when he wrote out his reactions:

I try to get it all out of me and say everything that’s bothering me. I would write about all the times that this reminds me of. So I go in my own head and I remember, when did I last feel this? And I list them. And [then] I acknowledge that what she did, it hurt but she could’ve done infinitely worse.

Coping Within the Couple

As the couples navigated the aftermath of their affair, they landed on different ways that they could help each other cope with the impact. Dovid described that particular gestures from Rivka spoke to his significance to her and helped him to feel better:

For a while she was writing letters, I liked the letters because I felt like she was being authentic in them, and then she stopped writing them...I’d like her to write letters because it shows me her mind when I’m not there. It’s proactive, not reactive or responsive. I want to know where I stand with her even when I’m not there.

He elaborated that he feels closest to her when she offers physical affirmation through touch:

It’s the simplest thing. All she needs to do is touch me. She just needs to show me affection. When she does that, my energy can come back, I’ll be less shut down.

Tina spoke to feeling more trusting of Matteo in his commitment to sharing his digital devices with her. She described feeling safer when Matteo would come forward with information about his affair partner, so that she would no longer be in the position to “discover” anything:

You're good about leaving your devices around the house if I want to take a look. But it's been a whole week since I've bothered to look at anything, which was an obsessive habit that I wanted to try and start to leave behind...when I would feel the urge to [check devices] I would think about how we're feeling right now and I would remind myself that this is a process and it's a throwback for me when I do that, so that's the pulse check from me. But you showing me anything about [your affair partner] Amanda, no matter how innocuous, is really good. I want him to show them to me. I want to not discover anything ever again. Discovering things for me is like a minefield. I always discovered the stuff and I don't want to ever do that again, that blows me up inside. That initiates panic.

Support from Family and Friends

As the couples explored all facets of coping, they grappled with what and how much to tell family and friends. Caitlin described needing support but experiencing it as a “mixed bag” that could backfire:

...the whole thing about sharing, it's a mixed bag because the angry side of me wants to tell everyone and be like you know what he did to me? And get my friends to rally and be angry and hate him too, but then because I want to work on it, I feel like that I'm going to have to defend him after I tell them, I have to defend him as to why I'm staying with him and working on it. It's a mixed thing – the narrative is not black and white. Like everyone thinks he cheated on you, boot him, it's like, you know there are a lot of factors...So I wrestle with, well do I say something or do I not? I get resentful that I want to share it but it's so complicated to share and then I'll have to defend him if I do, so the whole thing brings up mixed feelings in me. Who do I disclose it to and do I want to get into how long the story really is? Is it good for me to say to people I'm mad, but I don't really want you to be mad too? I don't know.

She then spoke about the two friends of hers with whom she did disclose the affair, and what's been helpful about that choice:

...And those two friends got me through it. They didn't choose sides, they said this is more complicated, think about [what you'll do], supporting me and my emotions and helping me think about what to ask him, that's what's got me through it.

Like Caitlin, Tim also took solace in a friend's compassion:

One of my Harvard roommates [was] the first call I made after [Caitlin and I] stayed up for 16 hours in this disclosure. I called him from the parking lot...and the first sentence he told me was, I know why you did this. Life has been hard for you, it's been unfair. And I started tearing up when he said that, because he's someone that's known me since I was 17.

Urmi described initially feeling “worried” about telling her mother, but was ultimately comforted by her mother’s “strength” and belief that there’s a “lesson to be learned” from the affair:

I was so worried...that she wouldn't allow me to live with him for another day. That she would tell me to pack up my bags and let's go, we're leaving. And to some extent, she did. He and her actually talked, and he told her that he loves another girl, I mean what kind of mother in law could stand to hear something like that? She and my dad were very upset that night. But in the end...they looked at my kids and they're the most important factor there. So she realized that she needs to be strong for me and my kids, because the kids mean the most to both of them, both sides of the family. So she found that inner strength. She said, I'll be a changed person and he'll be a changed person and it's good that it's small enough right now, so that we can learn from it. And improve our marriage. She was very strong, to keep us strong...she worries but she says, God has these things happen for a reason and when we look back years from now we'll be happy it happened. She feels like there's a lesson to be learned from all this.

Dev described informing his and Urmi’s families as being helpful in keeping him accountable.

He identified an unhelpful impulse to keep his affair partner working in close proximity to him and his brother not allowing it:

It’s really hard for me, I still care about her. I feel bad, I thought I’d be taking care of her. But I know that’s not good for me and Urmi, so I can’t do that. So my brother, who is our COO, has been working on a contract to get her out.

Hope for the Future

Each of these couples came into their therapy session with the hope of identifying ways to mend and strengthen their marriage. In their discussions, they spoke to the affair sparking important awareness for the couple regarding changes that have been, or will be, helpful.

New Horizons

Some of them explored bold changes that they wished to make in order to disrupt old patterns that had indirectly contributed to the occurrence of an affair. Urmi and Dev described sweeping changes to their plans to wed, or to continue to live close to family:

Urmi: Yeah, I've always thought about [getting married without family influence], but we could just go [get married] our own way. And be free, have a proposal and start again.

Dev: ...for the first time, I don't mind moving the hell away. Tomorrow? No, we have too many responsibilities here, but I am eventually okay with that.

Matteo noticed broad changes in Tina in the aftermath of his affair. He commented:

She's in better shape, she decided at some point to take control over fitness, she exercises regularly, she loves it, she looks different now from then but to me it was no [issue in the first place]. But I can tell she's feeling better, more herself.

Laura spoke of a change in "roles" in her relationship with Matt that she's enjoyed:

It's been nice to change the scope of my role in our relationship, and to give more to you. Our roles shouldn't be so fucking simple that I take and you give!

Matt described becoming more "open-minded," as he discovered his capacity to "forgive" and "accept" Laura's actions:

I'm much more open-minded than I was before...I think the experience has taught me a lot about myself. It was scary as hell. But last week we were talking about forgiveness and acceptance, that made an impression on me.

Tim also spoke to a desire to "better" himself:

I want to be a better man, a better person. I don't always want to be looking up at you, who's so together and self-actualized and I'm just being dragged along.

Caitlin spoke to insight and compassion that she experienced for Tim as he elaborated on his long held feelings inadequacy in her presence:

...for so long, you haven't been able to love who you are when you're with me, because I've come to represent stress and responsibilities, and you feeling like a failure all the time. I'm ready for that to change!

Transcendence

Several the couples identified a broad desire to experience the pain of the affair as ultimately serving to reinforce the couple's bond. Tina expressed her "commitment" to this effort:

The entire reason I'm going through this process is, I am really committed to the idea that there is no reason for people who are as loving and as committed as we are, and as good with words as we are, to not figure out how to do this right...I want to get to a better place with you...I'm passionately committed, this is the reason for getting through the damn affair shit. Because then we can finally get to the real plans, we can start to cultivate the stuff that's worth it.

Dovid echoed Tina's resolve when he says:

This has been the hardest thing I've ever lived through, but if there's a way to not let her affair define our entire 12 years of marriage, then that's what I want. I want to transcend this.

Tim described that moving forward from the affair has felt like a "full-time job," but recognized that the effort has been fruitful:

Since my disclosure, candidly that's been hard. Because this process, and I understand that I'm the catalyst for it, but this is now a full-time job, we talk for hours, we both see therapists, I see a psychiatrist, that's a lot. But do I feel we have a deeper understanding of each other than we ever had? Yes. And I want us to heal.

Dev identified the poles of "tragedy" and "strength" in his summation of his affair:

Now this is our big tragedy. But we know we're going to be stronger through this.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate common themes communicated by partners of couples where an infidelity has occurred, and explore how these couples navigated the experience of their affair. As such, 10 transcriptions of post-infidelity couple therapy sessions were analyzed so that dynamics around relationship history, family, sex, trust, communication

and healing for a couple in the aftermath of an affair could be more deeply understood. This in-depth investigation of the life of a post-affair couple may shed light on the constructs that are most salient in repairing from the rupture of an affair, and may offer direction to existing infidelity treatments across couple therapies as to where they may benefit from refining their current interventions.

Retrospective Conceptions of The Pre-Affair Relationship

In their effort to make meaning of the event of the affair, most couples referenced dynamics of their pre-affair relationship, and the roles in which they found themselves, as having played a part. The couples also discussed broad issues regarding sex in their pre-affair relationship.

The Roles of Each Partner in The Pre-Affair Relationship

As the couples pieced together their relationship history, they spoke to subtle changes that went unnoticed as their relationship deepened. They spoke to feelings of stagnation, “We’ve known each other for so long, we’ve been friends and best friends for so long, so it’s hard to get out of that” (Priya) and distance, “We kind of each put up the red light to each other” (Tim), “[Tina] absolutely cut herself off from the relationship...I’m sure it’s not entirely isolated and I did something to make her feel that way” (Matteo). Several unfaithful partners identified this stagnation and distancing to be rooted in their own inadequacy in the relationship. They experienced themselves as insufficient in their partners’ eyes, “nothing I do is going to be okay...I just remember the feeling of, I can’t do anything right” (Laura), “...you were hammering me, saying "be more like this, stop being in your rut" and I just wanted to be okay with who I was” (Tim). Feeling inferior to their partner would result in resistance, “Caitlin would say, Tim I need this this and this from you, and I’d be putting up a wall” (Tim) or resignation, “It

has just been the feeling of futility” (Laura), “I felt like I needed to take care of him, watch him, mother him, make sure he’s making friends...It just seemed like he didn’t care” (Rivka) within them. In some cases, unfaithful partners identified a relinquishing of their own needs in order to provide what they believed their partner wanted from them, “I did things for you with the thought to make you happy but...in doing that, I gave up things that I wanted or didn't express what I wanted” (Dan).

Some couples stated that professional endeavors had an indirect negative impact on the relationship, “Our lives have been so regimented. Undergrad, med school, residency, this is the way it is” (Dev), “the only person whose approval I had was hers, and I lost that over the financial crisis. We had the worst fights of our marriage as I was gathering that cash” (George). In hindsight, they connected that professional distractions or failures hurt the relationship and paved the way for an affair to take place, “My career, which I put so much stock into, has not worked out. I lost prestige and power in my profession...I still love and appreciate my wife, but...I'm not good at a lot of things. And yeah, seducing a woman feels good” (Tim).

Unfaithful partners spoke of finding themselves in roles that cast them in a negative light to themselves and to their partners. As Laura puts it, “I basically describe it as, he's good and I'm bad.” This role-rigidity can be understood through an object relational paradigm. As the term *object relations* refers not only to present day relationships, but also to the internal representations of others and, relatedly, to internalized images of oneself (Klein, 1944; Klein, 1946; Klein, 1952; Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1955; Winnicott, 1975; Ogden, 1977), we can understand these individuals to be unconsciously participating in mutual projection and the perception of each spouse as a previously internalized object. Hence, an important therapeutic aim for Laura and all unfaithful partners grappling with feelings of inadequacy in their

relationship would be to illuminate instances of splitting, projective identification, and repressed, painful object relational issues that play out in present day (Scharff, 1989). Object Relational Couple Therapy (ORCT) would approach this through an examination of these defenses to explore the meanings of the events through the lens of each partners' object relations, and the core of the work would be in the interpretation and reintegration of split-off aspects of the relationship. In Laura's case, were she to continue with ORCT she may deepen her associations regarding her feelings of being the "bad" one in her present-day relationship with her history of longing for her older brother and repeatedly experiencing his rejection.

The Quality of the Sex Pre-Affair

The second subcategory, the quality of the sex pre-affair, speaks to the couples' sexual connection, including their attitudes about sex, their mismatched interest in sex, their sexual health, and their respective relationships to their own sexuality. Of the partners who had been unfaithful, men in particular described a shutting down of sex in the relationship prior to their affair, "Long before the affair, 2004, 2005, she shut herself off. Physically for sure, sexually for sure" (Matteo). Several of these men understood this "shutting off" to be due to mismatched interest, which led to feelings of physical and emotional insecurity, "When we got married...she started shutting down sexually. And I started feeling pushed away. If we would have sex, it would be quick and easy, which is not the biggest turn on for a guy who's already got insecurities about the sexual aspect of his life" (James), "I feel like in our relationship more often than not it would be me initiating sex. And normally she'd be like no, I don't feel like it. So after a while you don't want to go down that road again and again. And now I feel like if I initiate, I most certainly will be shot down" (Akash), "Sometimes Caitlin would say things like does sex tonight have to be the whole experience?...I was crestfallen, because not only was sex something that I

wanted and that regulated my brain, I think I looked for that connection” (Tim). Of note, the participants in this study who spoke to a feeling of sexual deprivation within the relationship leading to an affair were consistently male. This could be understood through the paradigm of men holding a different meaning for sex, as for males in particular, sexual desire tends to be linked with attributes of pleasantness, warmth/love, emotional connection and intimacy more so than for women (Nguyen et al., 1975). This investigation corroborated this difference, as males expressly linked sexuality to emotional intimacy.

At the time of their therapy sessions, both betrayed and unfaithful partners spoke to a lack of novelty in their pre-affair sex, “It became routine and unimaginative. It felt forced” (Matteo), “I want to do things that are adventurous, unexpected. Not the same thing all the time. We could try different things, we haven't tried anything” (Urmi), suggesting that post-affair clarity led them to be differently critical of the quality of the sex in their pre-affair relationship. In their efforts to make sense of why their sex had become more routine, betrayed partners who were women were most likely to contribute. They cited an amalgam of physical limitations and psychological disillusionment regarding sex. Brooke spoke of pain, “I was dry, I could not have sex, it was painful when we tried. And different doctors would tell me I needed an ultrasound or a scan...And [finally] I asked him, does this need to be resolved tomorrow?” Her question carries a similar exasperated quality to Tim’s quoting of his wife Caitlin when she asks, “Does sex tonight need to be the whole experience?” Their questions revealed their experience of sex at this stage in their relationship as being effortful and emotionally taxing.

Priya’s relationship to her sexuality was hampered by identity shifts in her becoming a wife and mother, “Getting married turned off something sexual for me...My gaining weight and covering up, like I can’t be the person I was when we were dating now that I’m married and a

mother and being responsible. ...There's just something that just doesn't feel...sexy, it feels like a little inappropriate." Rosalia spoke about contracting HPV through a previous affair of her own, "This sex business is scary! I thought it was guilt and shame from the previous infidelities, you know that kind of squashed my erotic juices, because I felt guilty and ashamed when I did that during my first marriage." While Priya and Rosalia had weight gain and STI issues, respectively, affecting their physicality, they also understood their reduced proclivity towards sex as being rooted in feelings of inappropriateness and shame, as they associated appropriate wife and/or mother behavior with acting more sexually conservative. This combination of women becoming more sexually unavailable and men citing sex as a space that offers them physical and emotional security resulted in sex within the relationship becoming fraught, and resulted in sex outside of the relationship ultimately holding different appeal.

In this domain, an understanding of roles through an object relational paradigm may again be helpful. While it can be taken at face value that women became sexually unavailable and men experienced more sexual rejection, it may also be the case that these partners are unconsciously projecting particular expectations onto one another. For example, when Priya interrupted Akash as he described needing to "drag" her into an erotica store, she commented, "Why are you saying "drag" like that? He makes me feel like I'm an uptight cold fish! That characterization, like 'I have to drag her in there.'...That disconnect of feeling like, I *can't* then be that person because his assessment of me is that I'm so *not* that person." Here, she may be speaking to her experience of projective identification, in that her partner's expectation that she'll be "uptight" makes it more difficult for her to occupy a sexually liberated role. Her comment invites a richer conversation regarding these men's unintended contributions to these women's experiences of sexually shutting down.

It's important to note that this trend of women shutting down and men feeling rejected was not applicable to all the participants of this study. Of the three couples in which the woman had been unfaithful and the man had been betrayed, there was less emphasis on sexual dynamics pre-affair in the session transcription, resulting in less text on this topic for analysis. There was a greater sense of immediacy within this group, and less of an exploration on aspects of the pre-affair relationship, sex being among them. The conversation tended to be more heavily focused on the pain of the betrayed man. This may be meaningful with regard to what men who have been betrayed may prioritize in their healing. A recent study by Ellis and Kleinplatz (2018) investigated contingencies of self-worth as it pertained to the experience of infidelity, and their findings revealed that greater distress associated with sexual infidelity was found in men who conform to stereotypical gender roles (Doyle, 1983; Helgeson, 2016). For these individuals, self-worth was contingent upon competition, hence they experienced greater threat at their perception of their rival's power over them. Moreover, male jealousy is known to be influenced by the perception of a rival's dominance, but this trend is not reflected in women (Dijkstra & Buunk, 1998). This finding sheds light on why, for the couples in which the women had been the unfaithful partners, particular nuances regarding pre-affair sex were of less urgency to discuss than the addressing of men's jealousy, possessiveness, and experience of betrayal.

Origins of the Affair

In mapping the origins of their affair, four subcategories emerged; feelings of disillusionment, family history and infidelity, an improved sense of self in the affair, and a loss of control.

Feelings of Disillusionment

Unfaithful partners described feelings of disillusionment as laying the groundwork for their affair, “Everything I understand or was taught about sexuality, I can't believe I was taught by these people [at the Catholic church who turned out to be pedophiles]...*that's* who taught me. Clearly I'm reaching middle age, no one knows anything... I got to that very deeply cynical point where I thought everything was a sham” (Tim), “I liked doing something different than everyone else. I liked knowing that I wasn't like my sister...Going grocery shopping and having the same conversations every day like she does was making me feel like dead inside. And I met [my affair partner] at that job” (Rivka). Their disillusionment regarding life's expectations led unfaithful partners to become differently attuned to a lack of pleasure their own lives, and make concessions with regard to infidelity, “[I thought] this is just what men do...I convinced myself with all of my international travels, and everywhere around the world it happens. Only in America, we were so puritanical and we put up the heavy curtain...this was a hidden rule, no one ever talked about in society and the hidden rule is that men can do this” (Tim), “I saw another way of life. At that job, everyone was having affairs, like it was normal. They were like, ‘yeah, we all do this.’ So I thought, maybe this is how things are” (Rivka).

Several partners spoke to their transforming sense of destiny, “this is my anthropological destiny. I'm doing something that every generation of human beings, you know, males have done forever” (Tim), “she walked out of the bar and passed me, trying to get a cab. And I saw that as a sign of the universe. And I just read the Chopra book that talks about how you look for coincidences...So it all made sense” (James). To manage dissonance around hurting their partners or acting outside of themselves, they began to make rationalizations and grant themselves permission, “Caitlin [said] if we [women] come out and acknowledge that [men have needs] than all of you have a free pass. And I left feeling like, okay I get the biological pass.

Caitlin understands” (Tim), “[When Brooke almost discovered the affair] I started reading about, should I be coming clean at this juncture? And everything that I read was, the only reason you would come clean is for yourself” (George), “I was getting the feeling that she didn't want to move to New York [to be with me]...I interpreted that as disinterest [in our relationship, and breaking up was inevitable]” (James).

The feelings of disillusionment held by these unfaithful partners, along with their sudden sense of destiny lying outside of their present life path, has been outlined in object relational couple therapy (ORCT). In this treatment, affairs are understood as arising from deficits in holding relationships, and they represent issues that have been split off and placed outside the boundary of the couple relationship. An early aim in ORCT treatment is to identify patterns of unconscious cooperation that enabled these excited, feared, or denied aspects to be projected away from the primary relationship and into the affair (Scharff & Scharff, 2000). Tim’s understanding that all men have affairs, along with his belief that Caitlin was giving him the “biological pass,” resulted in his unconscious collusion with the belief that, were he to have an affair, he wouldn’t cause any harm. Rivka, George and James each made a similar case with regard to the notion of harm, in that if none was caused, there may not actually be a transgressive element to their actions.

Family History and Infidelity

Many unfaithful partners made associations to their own family history in their understanding of their actions, and the cultivation of their attitudes towards sex outside of the marriage. They referenced messages they had received about infidelity as having contributed to their choices, “My father who is 80 years old has been a bitch of a cheater. He honestly believed that men required more sex than women, so he felt entitled to get all the sex he could wherever

he could...And he explained that's just how the world worked" (George), "[Tim] knows his father is and has been having an affair with a woman at work for 15, 16 years...So to me, that insidious silent permission, says this is acceptable to me because it's not discussed...look what [your father's behavior] has done to you and your perception of how men and women relate," (Caitlin). For these couples, the betrayed partners spoke to unanticipated and unjust hardship that their partner's mothers experienced, revealing that as the betrayed party they were just as concerned with their partners' family history of betrayed partners as they were with the trends of the unfaithful partners. Caitlin and Brooke had a sense that there was peril in their own marriages as a result of their partners' family histories with infidelity, concerns that are sustained by research on internalized family of origin dynamics that supports that children do indeed internalize their parents' relationship to one another as well as the family's beliefs and conflicts (Scharff and Scharff, 1987; Shapiro et al., 1977, Zinner and Shapiro, 1972, 1975).

In some cases, unfaithful partners spoke about their family's messages regarding their own desirability as having an effect on their decision to have an affair, "My being drawn to [my affair partner] has a lot to do with my [attractive and charismatic] brother...it was never my dad's attention I was trying to get, it was my brother's. I wanted to be special to him, and I wasn't, and it sucked...I spent my whole life kind of chasing after him" (Laura), "I had a lot of insecurities about women...And I think some of it came from my mother, because my mother told me not to do things so I had less confidence around women and that was a barrier for me, a fear that drove a lot of my insecurities in approaching women" (James). Laura and James both referenced past dynamics within early familial relationships in which they felt similarly insecure and unwanted, and these internalized dynamics led to the eliciting of particular responses between the partners that ultimately caused these past issues to become perpetuated in the present-day relationship.

This dynamic was addressed by Dicks (1963), who noted a trend in marital spouses to be unconsciously testing each other against their original love objects with whom they had ambivalent relationships. His suggestion that marital discord is the result of mutual projection and the perception of each spouse as a previously internalized object is consistent with Laura's sense of inadequacy in both her brother and her husband Matt's eyes, much like James feels castrated by both his mother and his wife, as both in their own way discouraged his sexual expression.

Improved Sense of Self in the Affair

Unfaithful partners tended to describe their affair as a space where they were able to again feel positively about themselves, in contrast to their experience of inadequacy in their primary relationship, "...it's just that I was so unhappy for so long and this is something that makes me happy. And I'm a better person when I'm happy. So it's very hard to leave it, because it was like my antidepressant at the time" (Laura), "I think when I came out of what I would call a severe depression [after losing my job], at that point it can be hard to just get through the day...but it was like contemplating suicide as an option, and then coming through with that and saying now I'm going to enjoy my life" (Tim).

While no formal diagnostic assessment was conducted on any participant in this study, several unfaithful partners referenced feelings of depression as indirectly catalyzing their decision to stray from the relationship. Laura and Tim both identified stretches of low mood, loss of pleasure, feelings of worthlessness and impaired functioning as hallmarks of their emotional state prior to their affairs (APA, 2013). Like Laura, Rivka too experienced her affair as respite from a state of unhappiness, "it felt like a drug, I just couldn't get enough of it. I knew what I was doing was wrong but I just couldn't stop." Both women likened the experience of their

affairs to the use of drugs, which can be understood as having associations to feeling “high” from the sex, but also from the transgression of the affair itself. Particularly so for Rivka, who had the experience of waiting for marriage in order to be able to have sex and for whom sex was legally only permitted within the marriage, the act of sex outside the marriage posed great potential consequence.

The paradox of risk taking being linked with greater feelings of happiness for these women can be illuminated by Freud’s (1912b) assertion that oedipal splitting in women appears to distinguish between permitted but undesirable lovers, in this case the husbands of both women, and forbidden but desirable lovers, in this case both women’s affair partners. As “civilized women do not usually transgress the prohibition on sexual activity in the period during which they have to wait,” they thus “acquire the intimate connection between prohibition and sexuality” (p.187). Hence, creating, or at least mentally evoking, the condition of prohibition is fundamental to women’s desire. As a result, the permitted lovers of these unfaithful women, their spouses, no longer conjured an equivalent sense of prohibition and became less sexually appealing.

Along the lines of sex differences, many unfaithful men described that something had been “missing” from their primary relationship that they were able to fulfill in their affair, “Tina, I had an affair because there was a lot of stuff missing. I think it was because you closed yourself off from me...I don’t know if I did something to make you feel that way” (Matteo), “[My mistress] never dated anybody like me, so I would feel different. Special...And maybe I felt that was missing in our relationship” (Tim), “Everything felt heavy at home, and I wanted life to be more light. Life had gotten so dull.” (Rivka).

Research on attachment style reveals that the unfaithful partners within this study may be avoidantly attached, as individuals with an avoidant attachment style often have more permissive attitudes about sex in general, are more likely to have sex outside of a committed relationship, and are more accepting of infidelity (Feldman and Cauffman, 1999; Hazan, Campa & Gur-Yaish, 2006). Allen and Baucom (2004) found that individuals with a dismissive style report reasons for cheating consistent with wanting autonomy from the primary relationship, a finding of particular significance for the unfaithful women in this study as each of them spoke to a longing to break free of what had become a mundane relationship where they felt either inadequate or resentful in their partners' presence. In the case of the male participants, while some men in this study exhibited more avoidant attachment tendencies, others reported feelings of neglect or rejection from their primary partner and a desire for closeness. The feeling of something "missing" expressed by these men have been found to be reported by individuals with fearful and preoccupied styles in their explanations for seeking an extra-dyadic relationship. While it's unclear which partner in each couple initiated the therapy session, there may have been a trend in the partners with fearful and preoccupied attachment styles being the driving force behind seeking this intervention.

Some unfaithful partners spoke to being drawn to their affair due to its adolescent quality, given their lack of a real shared adult life, "It was a very new relationship that you would have when you're nineteen or twenty... Those feelings, when they're not based on a serious relationship, are teenage feelings... It's a really nice thing to be completely irresponsible and not have to deal with any life issues within that bubble," (Dan), "Compared to you, Nina only knew one tenth of me," (Tim), "It was about some type of freedom, excitement, something that I didn't have. Something at 38 that I never knew that I needed" (Dev). They also imagined that their

reconnection with these gratifying feelings could enhance their primary relationship, “I thought that [my affair partner] Cynthia was going to help our relationship, help me become a better husband, help her become a better wife, and bring some joy into this,” (Dev).

In explaining what drew them to their affair partner, several of the men contrasted their feelings with the level of seriousness that they felt with their primary partner. Freud (1912) understood this through men possessing two currents, one of ‘affection’ and one of ‘sensuality,’ that needed fusion:

There are only a very few educated people in whom the two currents of affection and sensuality have become properly fused; the man almost always feels his respect for the woman acting as a restriction on his sexual activity, and only develops full potency when he is with a debased sexual object; and this in its turn is partly caused by the entrance of perverse components into his sexual aims, which he does not venture to satisfy with a woman he respects. He is assured of complete sexual pleasure only when he can devote himself unreservedly to obtaining satisfaction, which with his well-brought-up wife, for instance, he does not dare to do. This is the source of his need for a debased sexual object, a woman who is ethically inferior, to whom he need attribute no aesthetic scruples, who does not know him in his other social relations and cannot judge him in them. It is to such a woman that he prefers to devote his sexual potency, even when the whole of his affection belongs to a woman of a higher kind (p.185).

Dev’s assertion that his affair was about “freedom,” or Dan’s sense that being “irresponsible” drew him to his affair space, or Tim’s comment that he was less known to his mistress, can each be interpreted as at the heart of what was “missing”; a connection with a version of themselves from which they could safely “debase.”

Loss of Control

While each unfaithful partner spoke to feelings of entitlement to the pleasure of their affair, they also felt increasingly out of control of themselves, “I felt a little out of control but I didn't really know it. And I was trying to find ways to get control...But [after my affair partner and I spoke] I walked away thinking what the hell did I just do?...I acted in a completely uncontrollable manner. Because I never, I just don't do that...And I couldn't hear my voice

anymore” (James), “I was able to compartmentalize it...maybe I was waiting for you to ask. In some way, I can't completely access that, but maybe I was. And my therapist says it becomes harder and harder to live a double life, and I think that's where I was. It was getting harder,” (Tim), “I just never wanted him to find out, because I knew it would be the absolute worst thing. I didn't have a plan, I really just didn't want to think about it. I never wanted to hurt him, I wanted it to end without him ever finding out,” (Rivka), “The fact remains that I was wanting to get out of this thing forever and I wasn't able to, so there was a certain element of control...The inability to get out, I'm getting some sense of it, but there's still a huge – I have a lot of shame associated with that still” (Matteo), “You know, at a certain point, at the very beginning, I wanted to say to her “It's over,” I wanted to be able to end it...To have that last conversation and say it was the wrong thing to do, and I'm going back to do exactly what I wanted to do in the first place” (Dan).

It was when unfaithful partners began to lose their grasp on the affair that the betrayed partners reemerged in their minds. Hence, regardless of the myriad rationalizations that led unfaithful partners to transgress, their feelings of entitlement to their affair began to fade into more anxious and fearful feelings of their partner's pain at the potential discovery of their actions.

Impact of the Affair on the Couple

In the exploration of the impact of the affair on the couple, four subcategories emerged; confirmed suspicions, emotional intensity, partners' roles post-affair, sex post-affair, and a fall from grace.

Confirmed Suspicions

As unfaithful partners began to experience a loss of control, betrayed partners started feeling that something was “off” in their relationship. They experienced their partners becoming more unavailable and distant, “He's always very busy busy busy, he can't talk or make other plans, he has a very unpredictable schedule, lots of dinners and functions, he can't talk ever,” (Rosalia), “...we had a date to meet at the bar, and I was waiting there and she was texting me and saying she was running late, she was sorry, it was important. And I was unsure, but I believed her” (Matt).

In hindsight, many of them reflected on the reasons why they didn't prod further when they first became suspicious. These betrayed partners had in common the experience of themselves in a vulnerable position. Because of the destabilizing experience of something being “off” with a person whom they deeply trust, betrayed partners unconsciously turned a blind eye to their suspicions and pointed to evidence that their partner would never betray them. Ultimately, they privileged their need to feel safe in their relationship over an acknowledgment of their fears within it, “Somewhere around the fourth year, I started thinking this doesn't make sense...And I find this letter where he writes about how much he appreciates her. And we're at his mom's beach house at Christmas when I find the letter...So, your life is in so much chaos, you don't want to stir up more,” (Brooke), “...I knew there was something there. It was late at night and we have to get up early the next day, so I said okay, I let it go. I don't know why, knowing me I'm usually on top of these things, but maybe the protection, from something I don't want to hear,” (Caitlin), “And then I had suspicions here and there, and I asked him are you seeing her again? And he would say no and he seemed very genuine that he was not seeing her again. And because we started IVF and we were trying to have a baby, I finally had to come to

peace with it,” (Priya), “...I felt like she wasn’t always fully honest...This is morally completely off, I never ever thought she could do something like this” (Dovid).

After discovering their partner’s affair, either through a confrontation or by encountering something implicating on their partner’s digital device, they each recalled a painful moment where the illusion of normalcy could no longer be preserved, and shock and sudden vigilance took its place, “I just lost it. I was completely shocked, it just seemed impossible. I saw the dates, and... it added up. I can’t unsee what I had seen” (Dovid), “I felt completely in shock. Like completely shell shocked...the bottom fell out when I found out. I had no fucking idea,” (Priya), “[finding it on three devices] was traumatic. And so I think it’s contributed to this pathological desire to stay on top of those things...So if I relax from being hypervigilant about you now...and if I take my eyes off of you for a second that the whole situation will be gone” (Tina).

Emotional Intensity

Post discovery, betrayed partners reported feeling acute emotional volatility, “I’m in extreme love-hate with him...it can be difficult to just deal with the gamut of those emotions, because everything could be like a volcano,” (Caitlin), “I was threatened by it. And I discovered I had these emotions of jealousy that I didn’t even know I had...the caveman emotions felt new and strong” (Jason), “It’s been tough, every day is a nightmare” (Urmi). Several betrayed partners spoke to the experience of flashbacks, “Recently you texted me saying that you got drawn into a 29-year-old’s birthday party, and my mind started going...I’m reliving some very dramatic moments that drive me crazy,” (Matt), “Whenever we tried to be intimate, I had flashbacks of him with other women, I can’t get over that,” (Priya), “without warning, I’m in a theater with a movie of them doing what they did with my eyes pried open” (Dovid).

The experience of betrayed partners can be interpreted through the lens of a traumatic event, in that they uniformly paint a picture of the trauma-related symptomology of intrusive disturbing thoughts and feelings, physiological reactions, difficulty concentrating, behavioral avoidance and hyperarousal symptoms (APA, 2013). It is widely proposed that both humans and animals react with three instinctual physiological responses when faced with trauma and extreme stress; they react with the impulse to either flee, fight, or freeze (Cozolino, 2014; Levine, 2010). Unlike animals, humans have a propensity to resist remaining rooted in their biological impulses, and instead attempt the cognitive maneuver of “overemphasizing adjustment and control” (Levine, 1997, p. 37). Thus, the trauma is understood as being born not out of the traumatic event, but rather out of the ineffective coping strategy of attempting to intercept one’s movement through the freeze state (Levine, 1997), or in the case of the participants in the study, to instantly process the threat of the infidelity and, as the betrayed partner Caitlin described it, “just get past all of this because I don't like the place that I'm in it how it feels for me.” This highlights the important role of emotional intensity in a couple’s effort to heal from an affair, both in the betrayed partner’s expression of it and in the unfaithful partner’s acknowledging of it.

However, the couples begin to distinguish themselves in their tone at this juncture. While some were primarily concerned with being there for one another and finding a way forward through the volatility of their emotions, “...at the same time I'm trying to be there for him, during this process, and to heal myself” (Urmi), others had betrayed partners that were more concerned with their own wellbeing over the healing of the relationship, “there's a big part of me that doesn't feel a big impetus to get past [the affair] until it's okay for me” (Priya).

Several of the latter variety of betrayed partners spoke of a desire for vengeance against their partner, “...if I did that shit, I swear to God you’d be off your rocker insane! That's what I

say to him! *I want to do that, I'd love an escape, to go away on the weekend, to see an old boyfriend...what do I deserve, nothing?*" (Caitlin), or a feeling of extreme disillusionment or mistrust towards their partner, "I have moments where I'm like, I don't want to do it. I don't want to be in this [relationship anymore]...I think about him fucking her, and I get a flash of anger...I mean everybody would cheat. I don't think there's any guy or woman that would never cheat...he's already proven that he'll do it" (Priya), "You were madly in love, you had nicknames, you had plans... and now this [marriage to me] is enough? It doesn't make sense...what am I supposed to believe?" (Amy).

In contrast, other couples were more attentive towards healing the rupture to the relationship. However, this group spanned a continuum. While some unfaithful partners emphasized taking accountability for their actions and remorse towards their primary partner, others gravitated towards the defensive stance of explaining their actions through a lens of external variables. Beyond this, some demonstrated greater difficulty in moving away, physically and psychologically, from their affair partner. Some betrayed partners explicated more anger and pain towards their partner for being unfaithful, while others emphasized acceptance, meaning making, and forgiveness.

In the emerging of these two distinct groups in the post-affair period- one of betrayed partners focused on themselves and one of betrayed partners focused on the couple- the latter group was comprised of couples who pulled for stability and focused on the positive while the former group, defined by a greater degree of anger and mistrust, remained in a state of unhappiness and destabilization. The Gottman and Gottman (2013) classification system of 'masters' and 'disasters' of relationships may shed light on the future of these couples. Among the major correlates to couple unhappiness outlined in their findings (Gottman, 1999; Gottman &

Gottman, 2013; Gottman & Gottman, 2015), they determined ‘more negativity than positivity’ predicts ongoing couple dissatisfaction. However, while positive affect has the important function of reducing physiological arousal, they suggest that negative affect also provides value in that allows for the addressing and eliminating of ineffectual relational patterns. Further, their research reflects that the bridging of emotional distance is a necessary process in the renewal of the couple’s connection.

In its emphasis on ratios of positive and negative interactions as instrumental in determining the survival of a couple, the Gottman method would suggest that the participants in this study- couples afflicted by an affair- are arriving to their therapy session at a critical moment in their relationship. While justifiably they’re inclined towards negative affect, they can either respond to their affair by maintaining the long-held unhelpful relationship dynamics that ultimately led the unfaithful partner to stray, or by approaching it as the catalyst towards a meaningful and necessary overhauling of problematic patterns, thus bridging their emotional distance and reinforcing their bond more intensely than ever before.

Partners’ Roles Post-Affair

Post-affair, several betrayed partners expressed the feeling of suddenly taking on a new identity. They had difficulty maintaining a positive self-image after their discovery of their partner’s affair. “my identity has completely changed, from that woman who had a strong marriage to the person who has been cheated on” (Urmi), “I don’t think I can compete with what he went out and found....I can’t fight hard enough to compete against that” (Amy), “No matter what, I’m going to go through life permanently altered from this experience...I’m a broken person” (Dovid).

As they grappled with the painful awareness that their partners, within whom they had placed their deepest trust, had betrayed them, these individuals' sense of themselves became thrust into question, introducing broad feelings of doubt and new personal insecurities. Having lost their bearing on their value to their partner, they grappled with the issue of trust, "When someone sets a pattern of 20 years of honesty, and they've always had some odd person in their life...I just never thought [George] would do that" (Brooke). Some felt compelled to surveil their partners after never having done so prior to the affair, "because I never snooped...I never had that need. So he felt safe [to have his affair]" (Rosalia), "I don't want to be hypervigilant, it makes me feel terrible and makes me hate myself. When I want to look at your e-mails and everything else it feels beneath you, it feels beneath me" (Tina). Others wondered if by choosing not to surveil, they were "signing up for more" (Matt).

Those most disillusioned chose to remain intentionally in a state of mistrust, like Priya who maintained, "I have no doubt that there would be plenty of women who are totally up for it...I think that's part of why I don't trust him... [my mistrust is] definitely informed by the fact that he [already] cheated," or Amy when her partner Dan said "I'm fighting for you. I'm fighting for us," and she responded, "But I don't trust you. So (chuckles) without trusting you, you could be fighting for anything as far as I'm concerned."

In reaction to betrayed partners experiencing a shattering of their trust, unfaithful partners often urged them to consider the contextual factors that led them to engage in their affair, in the hopes of mitigating the impression of them as untrustworthy people who had truly betrayed their partners, "I would like this affair, for as long as it was, to be seen in a context. Because if it's taken in absolute terms then I'm just a dick. But it's not, it exists within circumstances, and so it's still wrong but at least it's not crazy or at least it's not capricious" (Matteo), "I feel [I'm

being] misrepresented. I think that's not what happened... There's something about... being wrong with being judged, I know I don't like being judged. I don't like being wrong... it's just so in conflict with how my experience of everything happened is” (James), “What you're feeling and what you saw and what you read, I think whatever you're feeling is objective” (Dan).

Betrayed partners at times became frustrated with their inability to fully express themselves without being derailed by their partners when they felt mischaracterized, “Why can't you just honor the feelings that I have and that's kind of it?” (Tina), “...he'll say, I'm not a monster. And I'll say, I've never once use the word monster. But it's obvious that he feels that way, like a monster, and he says I'm not a horrible person, I'm not monster, and I say that's fine! I never called you that” (Caitlin), “But James, you never owned it. You never said I wasn't available to you. Instead you say, oh you exaggerate, I'm not wrong” (Rosalia).

Of note, among the participants in this study, it was consistently men who had been unfaithful that felt compelled to point to the broader circumstances of their actions. Research on gender differences in defensive style across work and intimate relationships (Bullitt & Farber, 2002) identified that men report significantly more use of intermediate defenses over defenses that are more primitive or mature than women, including repression, intellectualization, displacement and reaction formation, in the context of love relationships. Within this study, the pointing to the broader circumstances of the affair was an intellectualization effort often employed by unfaithful male partners. In the absence of adequate consideration of the context of the affair, unfaithful male partners experienced an assault on their character. This particular defensive strategy may have been masking a more immature defense, projection, in their processing of their actions. In their accusations of being seen as “a dick” or “a monster,” by their betrayed partner, they may be unconsciously attributing their own disavowed feeling states to the

other. In truth, it may be that they themselves are contending with their previously held notions that the kind of partner that could have an affair would undoubtedly be “a monster.”

At its most extreme, this effort to distance themselves from a negative characterization may be rooted in character pathology, as men are diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder at a higher rate than women (Stinson, 2008). Given the overlapping trends in an absence of empathy, a sense of entitlement, an emphasis on self-importance, and arrogant or haughty behaviors in both people who meet criteria for narcissistic personality disorder as well as those who have chosen to have an affair, some unfaithful partners’ impulse to look outward instead of inward to make meaning of their decision to stray may reveal deeper limitations in the realm of personality.

Despite universal efforts among unfaithful partners to reassure their partners and themselves of their fidelity by contextualizing their transgressions through a lens of external variables, unfaithful partners who were less defended were able to acknowledge feelings of shame, guilt and remorse for having deeply hurt their partners, “I am terrified of the notion that I will spend whatever years I have left feeling guilty” (Matteo), “It's not the person I saw myself to be, or want to be. The guilt, or the remorse, is causing Matt pain. It's not necessarily about what I did, it's about the results and the impact on Matt” (Laura), “I don’t want Amy to have to do that, cause I don’t want her to relive it, or relive it more than she has to. It’s difficult enough as it is” (Dan), “I see this very differently now, I know I fucked up and hurt him badly. I know I love him and want him” (Rivka).

Sex Post-Affair

The couples in this study had a broad array of responses to sex in the post-affair relationship. Matteo and Tina were among the couples who found that the affair brought them

sexually closer together, “The reason our sex life has been so wonderful especially in the past few months is because we've had a connection that is so intense” (Matteo), “For me it’s been enormously important to see the life and the vitality that can be fully repaired, that exists...even when there are difficult conversations...we can’t help wanting to make love” (Tina). However, for most of the couples, there was an imbalance in the sex post-affair. Some unfaithful partners, like Laura, found that sex outside of the relationship improved sex within their relationship, “For me, I felt more invigorated sexually [because of the affair] and frankly, I think that improved our sex life” whereas her partner Matt held the opposite opinion, “[your affair having an eroticizing affect is] exciting and thrilling...But just to be clear, I'd rather have less good sex and have you not be in an affair.”

Jason and Marcy struggled in a similar capacity, where Marcy’s affair created a compulsive need for sex for Jason. While she initially asserted, “[my enhanced libido is] a good thing for us!” she later elaborated on the toll the revelation of her affair had been taking. She recounted a particular night of feeling overwhelmed by Jason’s endless need, “And I apologized like seven times even though we had sex the day before, I was wiped out! I just wanted to go to sleep! But I feel like he's so fragile, I need to make sure I don't do things that set him off...Maybe...being inside of me is giving you some kind of feelings of reassurance.”

Jason, Dovid and Matt, the three betrayed men in this study, had similar reactions of feeling demoted, “Sex, closeness with her, it was just a commodity, not special between us. I have no idea where I stand” (Dovid), or deeply threatened, “She'll say, let's give [sex] a break and not make love tonight, and I'll say that's fine. But something inside of me is not fine” (Jason) by their partner’s sex outside of the marriage.

Jason's powerful need for sex post-revelation of his partner's affair can be linked with the "caveman emotions" he spoke to earlier on. As male jealousy is known to be influenced by the illusory dominance of their rival (Dijkstra & Buunk, 1998), Jason revealed intense threat at being outdone by an interloper. His fear could be interpreted through the Freudian paradigm of an oedipal triangle (Freud, 1910), in that his humiliation in the role of the injured third party drives his need for a sexual reclaiming (Josephs, 2010). Parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972), which speaks to sex differences with regard to the rearing of offspring, highlights that men are more prone to sexual jealousy than women. This literature also offers insight on the link between these sex differences and attachment style, in that research reflects that men more often possess an avoidant style (Feeney, 1999; Levy et al., 2006). This more dismissive attachment style, among both men and women, was linked with greater sensitivity to sexual infidelity relative to emotional infidelity.

Of note, all three of the couples where the women had been unfaithful explored post-affair sexual dynamics at length, whereas the couples in which the men had been unfaithful spent less if any time addressing this aspect of their relationship. Among the seven betrayed women, Tina, Caitlin and Urmi spoke to sex as having a reparative function in the relationship, Priya and Amy wanted sexual distance, and Brooke and Rosalia didn't comment in any direction regarding attitudes towards the sex post-affair. Parental investment theory elucidates the potential biological motives within the group of women that viewed sex as restoring the bond, in that all three of them have children with their unfaithful partner, and the theory purports women to be more prone to emotional jealousy linked with concern about maintaining long-term male support in the raising of their children (Trivers, 1972; Buss et al., 1992; Buss, 2000). Whereas men are more often avoidantly attached, women are more likely to possess preoccupied or

fearful attachment styles, resulting in more imagined consequences at the loss of their partner (Feeney, 1999; Levy et al., 2006). However, while emotional jealousy is evident in the narratives of all seven betrayed women, only some of them responded to these feelings with the impulse to be sexual with their partner.

Fall from Grace

After the revelation of the affair, betrayed and unfaithful partners alike experienced feelings of loss. Betrayed partners voiced a loss of innocence or specialness, and the couple together often mourned the impact that the affair would have on the broader network of their children, friends and family. Brooke lamented, “there's a sense of loss. For the innocence. Because there was never any reason for 20 years to question anything.” Amy and Dovid both experienced pain at not being held in a special place in their partners’ mind, “From where I sit, you gave this woman everything... Even the things you gave to me that were sacred to me, you gave to her... the degree to which you gave yourself to this woman further threw me away... Go and have an affair... But it's like you have to make her the ultimate love of your life... And in this darkness now, where do I find hope?” (Amy), “When I think about what this affair means... I was substandard to her. I'm just one of two” (Dovid).

The traumatic violation of betrayed partners’ trust brought the nature of the entire relationship into question, resulting in what the emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT) literature describes as an “attachment injury” (Johnson, 2005, p.19). Brooke, Amy, Dovid, and other betrayed partners in this study experienced the discovery of their partner’s affair as the moment in which their most basic assumptions about their partner, and thus their relationship and their own role within it, shattered. As Esther Perel describes it in *The State of Affairs* (2017), “Infidelity is a direct attack on one of our most important psychic structures: our memory of the

past. It not only hijacks a couple's hopes and plans; it also draws a question mark over their history. If we can't look back with any certainty, and we can't know what will happen tomorrow, where does that leave us?...We are willing to concede that the future is unpredictable, but we expect the past to be dependable. Betrayed by our beloved, we suffer the loss of a coherent narrative" (p. 71).

Makinen and Johnson (2006) addressed this rupturing in their *attachment injury resolution model*. They highlight the importance of the injured partner shifting from expressions of anger to expressions of hurt, helplessness and shame rooted in the impact and attachment significance of the affair as they see it. Hearing the vulnerability in the betrayed partner allows the unfaithful partner to recognize the underlying significance of the injurious incident, from where they can more deeply take responsibility for the infidelity through the expression of empathy, regret, and remorse.

The Couple's Efforts to Move Beyond the Affair

The couple's efforts to move beyond the affair was captured within five major subcategories; communication about the affair, reactions towards the affair partner, post-affair clarity, strategies for healing, and hope for the future.

Communication About the Affair

The couples struggled with finding a productive way to discuss their experience of the affair. Betrayed partners grappled with the dilemma of imagining that learning more will help them quell their pain and the reality that often times the very opposite was true. "I push for these conversations for hours, sometimes we'll be up till three in the morning crying and hugging, I really want to get it all out...I don't like the place that I'm in...I have a need for the truth and what happened, all the details, maybe too much, I'll give you that, but I'd rather know and

understand it all then say no, I don't want to know” (Caitlin). When encountering resistance or impatience from their unfaithful partners in this effort, they felt anger and resentment. Amy resented the bind of either rushing her own hurt feelings or losing her partner over continuing to feel them, “How much time do I get to feel defeated and angry and hopeless [before he just goes]?” Priya developed this thinking further by describing that she “can’t force” herself to move on from her pain, “It's not like I'm holding out...And I think I would just be like well if [me no longer feeling angry and hurt is] what you need, then I can’t give that to you...so then leave.”

Unfaithful partners struggled with what and how much to say, experiencing the quandary of wanting to comfort their partners without unintentionally exacerbating their pain, “Caitlin can ask a very innocuous question about [my affair partner] Nina, I'll answer and then she'll hit me with a clothes hanger...I'm sensitive that it's a minefield that I'm walking through when I talk about her” (Tim), “We go from very lucid moments of discussion where the context is acknowledged, very objectively...But then when she goes dark it's like all of that didn't exist” (Matteo), “I mean sometimes I do think about what it be more effective to, I mean not put ultimatums out there, but say, we got to move this along, let's go...I don't think it would be effective... I don't want to fuck it up, blow it up by trying to force it” (Akash).

James grows frustrated with Rosalia’s inquiries, “Stop talking about the details because we are destroying our relationship. We should figure out a way to fix ourselves rather than further painting the picture of what the pain was. And you're doing this to punish me...I feel like I'm getting beaten...and when I feel like I'm getting attacked, then I get angry.” George minimizes Brooke’s need for information, “I was never unhappy with Brooke [so she can stop worrying about that]. I reluctantly call it an affair... for me, it was pretty much just a sexual release thing...I didn't take [either woman] for granted the last five years, because it became

obvious to me that I married the right person. The more time I spent with Monica, the more satisfied I was with the choice I made 25 years ago to marry Brooke...I always communicated [to Monica] that I'm happily married.”

As the couples embark upon the effort to integrate their stories, they encounter obstacles. Some approached this effort with rigidity, as in Priya’s unwavering mistrust towards Akash and her assertion that she simply can’t “force herself” to move on, or in George’s insistence that his affair was nothing more than a “sexual release.” Others, like Caitlin, Urmi, Matteo and Rivka, demonstrated greater receptiveness in setting aside their pain, or suspending their own perspective, in order to take on that of their partners.

Reactions Towards the Affair Partner

When they presented to their therapy sessions, unfaithful partners were generally in the place of wanting to honor the needs of the partner who had been betrayed. However, regardless of their readiness to fully end their relationship with their affair partner, most unfaithful partners carried with them a degree of guilt and pain about having to leave their affair partner behind. Tim explained, “Caitlin asked me not to have any contact with her so, sometimes I do feel bad, concern for her because she was much younger...I was being unfair to this woman, and I thought, she's in her early 30s, our relationship is going to end, she needs to find somebody long-term and she's not even pursuing or going out and looking to start down that path. And am I hurting her in a way?...I didn't fall in love, but there was emotion there.” Tim had previously described feeling inadequate in his primary relationship, however, as the affair came to an end he experienced a fracturing of his fantasy that he was substantially more desirable to his affair partner, “candidly the fact that she was not more hurt or distraught [when I told her it was over], I think for me it was, okay well this is over. I think it was more important to me to find out, did

this relationship have meaning for her?...It might've been a fantasy relationship, but the friendship seemed genuine.”

Dev echoed a similar predicament, “I promised to this person, just like I promised you, that I would take care of her. That she would be in our lives somehow someday. I shouldn't have made that promise, but I did. What's so hard is that [Urmi's] been with me, she still cares about me and hasn't left me, and I've been in this confused state. I feel so selfish because I'm trying to help her but I can't even help her because I can't even help myself sometimes.”

Matteo, too, was preoccupied with how his affair partner would view him after the affair's end. He believed the noble action was to have formal closure, “[After sharing seven years] I'm not just going to be an ass and walk out. I think it's important to finish it correctly...I don't want her to wonder why I was behaving a certain way and be thinking that there was a way to go back in. This way just closes completely...She's not sitting there thinking, what the hell is going on? Can I resuscitate this somehow?...this way it's finished, it's done, she can move on herself.”

These men have in common the experience of a feeling of duty towards the wellbeing of their affair partners, in part because they had become relevant to their affair partners by offering financial support. Much like this group of unfaithful men struggled with negative characterizations held by their primary partner, here too they may have had a similar difficulty. The fact that they'd be withdrawing from their affair partner after encouraging their affair partners' dependence on them may again have triggered fears of character assault in lieu of a more nuanced interpretation of the contextual factors that led them to make their decision.

Non-monogamy

As couples explored their reactions to sex outside of the relationship, the topic of non-monogamy would periodically arise. For some couples, it was the partner who had been unfaithful that felt opened up to the idea, like Tim as he recognized that Caitlin had been deprived of an “erotic” pleasure that he had experienced in his affair, or Dev when he described a sudden interest in having new sexual arrangements. Other times, it was partners who had been betrayed that revealed themselves to hold lenient attitudes about sex outside of the relationship, like Brooke who responded to George’s affair by explicating that she, too, has an “independent” personality and would’ve been more receptive to George having an affair had it not been withheld from her, or Jason, who spoke to the issue of Marcy’s affair as being rooted not in sex outside of the relationship but in the feeling of being uninformed. Betrayed partners highlighted that, had more transparency existed within their relationship, and had their particular emotional needs had been met prior to their partners’ infidelity, they may not actually have felt betrayed by their partner’s actions.

Post-Affair Clarity

As the couples worked to integrate their disparate understandings, some unfaithful partners took the important step, outlined in all existing couple therapy infidelity treatments, of deeply acknowledging their partner’s pain. They spoke to a humbling clarity they had achieved and remorse they felt, “I feel like I’ve learned a lot about myself since all this happened. I want to do what I need to do to make him feel better and make our marriage work. I know I really hurt him, I want to fix that” (Rivka), “[The affair] was just very separate. It wasn't a rejection of Matt at all...the hardest part is knowing that I hurt Matt” (Laura), “I was blinded before to my actions. Having another mistress, there's no way that I'm going to make that choice and hurt you again

like this...I've caused suffering for everyone” (Tim), “It wasn't anything I wanted to remember. [It] created a lot of collateral damage, hurt a lot of people... I disagree with [your suspicion that I still wish to return to my affair] because either way I would be looking at an affair that either ended the relationship or caused irreparable harm in the relationship between you and me. When I look at what happened and how it affected us, it no longer is a beautiful thing. It is disgusting, it is horrible, it is reprehensible behavior” (Dan).

Some couples felt comforted in framing the affair as a “mistake” that was made, hence an experience that can help the couple to grow, “Accepting that I’m going to make mistakes... it's the acceptance that I'm seeking [from him], in spite of my myriad flaws” (Laura), “I know I made a mistake. I feel really bad about it. I want him to forgive me for what I’ve done, but I know that takes time” (Rivka). This post-affair clarity, coupled with locating the affair as a mistake, tended to be linked with future thinking about how to safeguard the couple from another affair, “As much as we talk endlessly about what happened, at some point we have to also talk about how we’re not going to repeat the same mistakes again” (Matteo).

These partners spoke to an important element in repairing from the rupture of the affair, as developing an understanding within the betrayed partner of how the unfaithful partner was able to stray and evoking clarity and remorse from the unfaithful partner regarding how they hurt the betrayed partner is foundational to all couple therapy infidelity treatments. In emotionally focused couple therapy (EFT), this is anchored in the process of interpreting the affair through the lens of an attachment injury in the bond between partners (Schade & Sandberg, 2012; Makinen and Johnson, 2006). In the Gottman method (2017) this repair is born out of developing ways to build trust, commitment and loyalty within a marriage. In Cognitive Behavioral Couple Therapy (CBCT), restoring the relationship comes from conceptualizing the affair as an

interpersonal trauma of violated assumptions (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; McCann, Sakheim, & Abrahamson, 1988; Resick & Calhoun, 2000) and utilizing forgiveness as a process whereby partners minimize the impact of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Gordon & Baucom, 1998). In Structural Couple Therapy (SCT), healing from infidelity lies in the re-stabilizing of functional boundaries that safeguard the relational subsystem from fractures (Winek, 2010). In Object Relational Couple Therapy (ORCT), the rupture is understood to be repaired by addressing deficits in holding relationships, and identifying issues that have been split off and placed outside the boundary of the couple relationship (Scharff & Scharff, 2000).

As clarity and remorse were arrived at by their unfaithful counterparts, betrayed partners also experienced a degree of post-affair clarity. In Urmi's case, the affair resulted in her identifying the insidious impact of Dev's family dynamic, "I also feel that living so close to family has not allowed him to grow up in a certain way. If he was just with me, I could have helped him to grow up in a way where he could've felt more free. But here, I myself am in prison, so I can't imagine for him. Of course, he didn't grow up, he sees this other side of that this person brought out in him, that I wasn't able to give him myself, because I too became tied down....Here, it's all about family family family. Religion, culture, family get-togethers, what I should and shouldn't do, perceived notions of how we should live, where we should go... all this impacts me in such a huge way and it's made me lost to who I am. Because all of this is not me." Caitlin, too, spoke to insight and compassion that she experienced for Tim as he elaborated on his long held feelings inadequacy in her presence, "...for so long, you haven't been able to love who you are when you're with me, because I've come to represent stress and responsibilities, and you feeling like a failure all the time. I'm ready for that to change!"

In some cases, this opportunity for reflection illuminated the ways in which the partners continued to be a poor match for one another. While Brooke expressed pain at discovering George's affair and the "loss of innocence" she navigated in her post-affair relationship, George responded, "Well, I think my problem is that I think I know what's best for everyone else, including myself. I think I should be in charge of everybody's life...I don't think Brooke would be a happier person if she left me. I think she go find another guy who may or may not be monogamous and faithful to her sexually, I don't think that she'd have as much fun, she'd sacrifice all the family history and everything that we built together."

James and Rosalia experienced a similar dynamic, in that Rosalia struggled to get James to "own" that he had caused her pain. Like George, James was resistant to seeing himself as having done something "wrong," resulting in an impasse in their therapy session. A similar impasse was arrived at by betrayed partners Priya and Amy, whose mistrust towards their partners was unyielding despite their partners' offers of post-affair clarity and remorse.

Strategies for Healing

In their effort to move forward, the couples identified strategies for healing that encompassed the betrayed partner identifying a resilience within themselves, the couple working together to cope, and support from the broader network of family and friends. Caitlin spoke to her self-resilience being instrumental in her forward movement, "[I have very little family support so] my source of strength was myself, and digging like I always do, I dig and I'll get through it, I'm a fighter. I come from a military family when you go deep. And [you have] to carry-on, (Caitlin) "...although I was very upset, at some points I was able to keep myself from crying...other times I couldn't, but I did stop from melting down because melting down isn't very helpful or inspiring to anybody...I have not been quite as overtaken by this every single

minute of the day” (Tina), “I would write about all the times [I’ve been hurt]. So I go in my own head and I remember, when did I last feel this? And I list them. And [then] I acknowledge that what she did, it hurt but she could've done infinitely worse” (Jason).

Couples also explored different strategies to support one another in managing the impact of the affair like sharing reactions through writing or offering touch, “For a while she was writing letters, I liked the letters because I felt like she was being authentic in them... I’d like her to write letters because it shows me her mind when I’m not there... All she needs to do is touch me. She just needs to show me [physical] affection” (Dovid), or allowing access to digital devices, “You’re good about leaving your devices around the house if I want to take a look... you showing me anything about [your affair partner] Amanda, no matter how innocuous, is really good. I want him to show them to me. I want to not discover anything ever again” (Tina).

Each couple then grappled with what and how much to tell family and friends. Caitlin explained, “...the whole thing about sharing, it's a mixed bag because the angry side of me wants to tell everyone and be like you know what he did to me? And get my friends to rally and be angry and hate him too, but then because I want to work on it, I feel like that I'm going to have to defend him after I tell them,” adding that it was ultimately helpful to disclose to two close friends who remained neutral, “[they] me through it. They didn't choose sides, they said this is more complicated, think about [what you’ll do], supporting me and my emotions and helping me think about what to ask him, that's what's got me through it.” Tim, too, described a friend’s compassion as having a healing quality, “I called him from the parking lot...and the first sentence he told me was, I know why you did this. Life has been hard for you, it's been unfair. And I started tearing up when he said that, because he's someone that's known me since I was 17.”

Dev and Urmi were among the couples who came in having already spoken with family. In the session, Urmi reflected on mother's support, "I was so worried...that she wouldn't allow me to live with him for another day...she realized that she needs to be strong for me and my kids...So she found that inner strength. She said, I'll be a changed person and he'll be a changed person and it's good that it's small enough right now, so that we can learn from it. And improve our marriage. She was very strong, to keep us strong." Dev reflected on family involvement as a measure of accountability, "I feel bad, I thought I'd be taking care of [my affair partner]. But I know that's not good for me and Urmi, so I can't do that. So my brother, who is our COO, has been working on a contract to get her out [of our practice]."

Hope for the Future

These couples came into their therapy session with the hope of identifying ways to mend and strengthen their marriage. In their discussions, they spoke to the affair sparking important awareness for the couple, including bold changes that they wished to make. After years of Dev's family placing the couple under duress, the pair recognized a shared wish to break free from this dynamic and move further away. Matteo admired Tina's improved self-care, "She's in better shape, she decided at some point to take control over fitness...I can tell she's feeling better, more herself." Laura and Matt arrived at clarity regarding an unhelpful dynamic in the relationship, in which Laura has historically been the one to "take" and Matt the one to "give." Similarly, Tim spoke to a desire to "be a better man" who's not always "looking up" to his wife.

For couples whose focus in their therapy session was on post-affair clarity and strategies for healing, some spoke to the fantasy of transcending their affair by experiencing it as an event that ultimately served to reinforced the couple's bond. Tina expressed that she is "passionately committed" to "figuring out how to do this right...because then we can finally get to the real

plans.” Dovid expressed a similar sentiment in not wanting to “let her affair define our entire 12 years of marriage.” Tim described the process of healing from the affair as “a full-time job,” adding that it’s been a worthwhile endeavor as “we have a deeper understanding of each other than we ever had...and I want us to heal.” Dev sums his affair as, “...our big tragedy. But we know we're going to be stronger through this.”

Limitations of the Study

The reason for this study was to explore common themes communicated by partners of couples where an infidelity has occurred, and more deeply understand how these couples navigated and healed from the experience of their affair. The data set was a group of 10 therapy session transcriptions of couples who were recovering from an affair, as this was an intimate window into the phenomenology of infidelity. However, the small sample size of the participants of this study is among its limitations, in that the experiences of this particular group may not be comprehensively representative of the experience of all couples navigating an affair, whether or not they seek treatment. Within this limitation, having only three betrayed men and three unfaithful women among the participants further curtails the study’s findings for this population. Given the trend that men are more likely to deal with distress privately and less inclined to bring themselves to therapy (Brooks, G. R., 2010), there is likely a correlation between the higher prevalence of women who presented to therapy due to having been betrayed than men. Ultimately, the themes presented cannot be generalized beyond the group represented in this study. As the intention behind this research was to arrive at a broad understanding of a couples healing in the aftermath of an affair, this was an exploratory effort that yielded hypothetical theories to be further investigated in future studies.

With regard to sample, another limitation was in the demographic population of the participants. While not all information was available, it could be gleaned from each therapy session transcription that all couples identified as higher educated and upper middle class. Further, all couples were a partnership of one man and one woman. This demographic leaves out the important and likely distinct vantage point of couples of lower socioeconomic standing, and same sex couples, who are navigating the experience of an affair. There was also a small representation of ethnic minorities within this study, resulting in limited findings regarding racial and ethnic diversity in responding to infidelity.

Another limitation to the study was in the attempt at identifying truly effective coping and healing strategies, as all of these couples attended a therapy session within weeks or months of the experience of their infidelity and were still in acute distress. Herein lies another limitation, in that each of these couples attended one or two therapy sessions, and the variable of the therapist was unaccounted for in this study. From one couple to the next, for numerous reasons, the therapist may have responded with some degree of inconsistency, resulting in couples being differently prompted and contributing a wide array of responses quite distinct from one another.

As some couple therapies reference the significance of the physiological or non-verbal realm between partners, another drawback to this study is in the data set being of transcriptions only, with no audio or video of the sessions to offer feedback regarding potential inconsistencies between words and tone or body language. Had this information been available and included in the analysis of the data, the findings may have revealed more nuanced dynamics between partners within couples.

A drawback can also be found in the analyzing methodology of the text. In coding and categorizing the data and fracturing it into small units from a phrase, “uptight cold fish,” or a

sentence, “What do I get, nothing?” or a few longer sentences, the parsing process resulted in the original context becoming lost to the process of constant comparison and clustering of similar ideas supported by this methodology.

Finally, as each of these couples attended a therapy session after the revelation of their affair, their narratives are retrospective accounts pieced together in hindsight, and may not accurately reflect the thoughts, feelings and events linked with the story of their infidelity. It is assumed that their recall is accurate, though the intention behind the research was not to arrive at objective realities per se, but rather to build theory by honing in on the broad relevant themes that emerged in an exploration of these couples’ subjective experiences.

Implications for Clinical Practice

An essential recommendation that I would make for clinicians working with couples coping from an affair is in examining their own personal attitudes and assumptions regarding infidelity. As infidelity is a pervasive cultural reality, it is the likely scenario that each clinician has some personal affiliation with the experience of an affair, and a mindful approach and attitude of openness would benefit anyone intending to function in a helping capacity for this population.

Each couple seeking help in the aftermath of their affair longs for stabilization. These partners hope to again establish their bearings on their partner, themselves, and their relationship. While these couples all have this aspect in common, they vary broadly in their distinctive and highly personalized interpretations of their affair experience. Infidelity is a form of trauma that stands alone in that it is a relational injury that uniquely calls into question the self. Betrayal itself hurts, but to be betrayed by someone to whom you chose to commit, or with whom you engaged in the seemingly safeguarding act of marriage, is to suddenly doubt your own capacity to

think clearly, make good decisions, and keep yourself safe. It is in a category of its own in its ability to suddenly make you wonder who you yourself are. This is why my most important recommendation in helping these couples to mend the gap between them is to listen intently to the specific meaning the betrayed partner is making out of the unfaithful partner's decision to stray.

Refrains such as, "I'm not special," "our innocence was lost," "nothing was sacred" reflect the betrayed partner's pain in their searing and sudden awareness they aren't who they thought they were to their partner. It can be interpreted that betrayed partners have in common a period of unconscious denial in an effort to preserve the thinking that they're in a relationship with a trustworthy person to whom they are precious. To allow into conscious awareness that their partner is not operating on this same principle is to be left with the experience of not being special, significant, valued or worth protecting. It is at this level that a clinician can most meaningfully intervene. Encouraging unfaithful partners to respond to what precisely is special and meaningful about this particular relationship with this particular partner is fundamental to restoring faith in the betrayed partner that the couple's bond is incomparable to any other and is worth being salvaged. With regard to existing treatments of infidelity, the emphasis tends to lie in unfaithful partners witnessing, validating, and showing contrition towards the pain of the betrayed partner, the betrayed partner understanding how the unfaithful partner was able to have their affair, and the forming an integrated understanding of the affair. However, therapies across the board would benefit from a stage in the treatment during which the unfaithful partner expounds upon the unrivaled value that the betrayed partner holds for them.

I encourage clinicians to familiarize themselves with the vast infidelity literature, clinical and otherwise, to be forewarned about the polarizing nature of the phenomenon and develop a

more nuanced and multifaceted understanding. Embedded in this task is an appreciation for cultural nuances operating for couples across social class, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, as these distinctions may weigh heavily on a couple's needs and options.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study provided information about the ways in which post-affair couples attempt to process and cope from their experience. Throughout the investigation, areas that would benefit from additional exploration emerged.

This study's participant pool was retroactively gathered based on couple therapy transcriptions that were available for analysis. As such, there was no intention behind the demographic studied. As the results and discussion show, there ultimately was broad overlap in each of these couples being heterosexual and existing within an upper middle social class. Further, while there were some individuals that identified as racial and ethnic minorities, the absence of this information for many participants indicated either that the phenomenon of infidelity has little to do with racial and ethnic divides, or that many in the subject pool were white and American-born, and thus less preoccupied regarding issues of race and ethnicity. Therefore, an important area for future research would be in investigating post-affair dynamics specifically for couples who identify as racial, ethnic, socioeconomic or sexual minorities.

In this study, there was a higher prevalence of couples comprised of an unfaithful man and a betrayed woman presenting to treatment. While the gap between infidelity rates is steadily closing, with the rate of women having affairs rising more rapidly than that of men, an important direction for future research is in more deeply understanding the experience of the betrayed man. With men presenting to all forms of therapy at a lower rate than women, their unique experience

is minimally represented in infidelity research and would shed light on important aspects to infidelity treatment.

Finally, an area for investigation raised by this study was in sex differences in defensive styles for the post-affair couple. The existing literature on defenses indicates that men and women are differently defensive depending on the context. Given defenses present themselves in all couples navigating the revelation of an affair, from both unfaithful and betrayed partners, an examination of defenses, and sex differences among them, in the particular context of a post-affair relationship may offer insights that can further refine therapeutic intervention and help couples to heal.

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