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Relationship Dissolution Following Infidelity

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## INTRODUCTION

*Tom and Diane have been dating exclusively for three years. Four months ago, Tom became sexually involved with a female coworker and has continued this relationship without Diane's knowledge. Diane recently overheard a phone conversation between Tom and his coworker and confronted him about it. Tom admitted to the affair, but promised to end it and asked Diane for her forgiveness. He vowed never to stray from their relationship again, pledging his love and commitment to Diane. Diane initially agreed to give Tom another chance, but found that she was unable to put the incident out of her mind and decided to break off the relationship. Tom was upset, but agreed that they should go their separate ways.*

*Rick and Nancy have been married for seven years and have a two-year-old son. Early in their marriage, Rick had a brief affair with a neighbor that he revealed to Nancy and they were able to put behind them. However, several years later Nancy had a one-night stand with an ex-boyfriend, which she immediately regretted. She never told Rick about the affair, but has struggled with guilt and remorse over of the incident. Nancy recently decided to disclose the infidelity to her husband, and he was extremely angered and hurt by this information and the fact that she had kept the affair a secret for so many years. Rick told Nancy that he needed some time to think about their future, but ultimately decided to rebuild their marriage. They went through counseling and over time Rick was able to forgive his wife. The couple regretted that the incident ever occurred, but felt that their relationship was even stronger after working through it.*

How is it that two couples can experience infidelity in such different ways? Why is that infidelity led to relationship dissolution for Tom and Diane, whereas Rick and Nancy were able to reconcile and move forward? Admittedly, Nancy's fleeting indiscretion seems more minor than Tom's four-month affair, but there may also be other factors at play. Dating couples are perceived as being more likely to separate after infidelity than are married couples (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). In addition, couples are more likely to breakup when infidelity is discovered "red-handed" like Tom and Diane, than when it is voluntarily disclosed as it was by Nancy (Afifi, Falato, & Weiner, 2001). In light of these data, the differential effect of infidelity on these two couples seems obvious. However, the picture is not so simple, as there is also evidence to suggest that Rick and Nancy may have been more likely to separate than Tom and Diane. Men are less likely to forgive and more likely to break up with a sexually unfaithful partner than an emotionally unfaithful partner (Hall & Fincham, 2004; Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002). There is also a higher risk of relationship dissolution when both spouses have been unfaithful than there is when only one spouse has had an affair (Glass, 2003). Thus, it is evident that the impact of infidelity on a romantic relationship can be quite complex and multidimensional.

Given the multifaceted association between infidelity and relationship dissolution, it is crucial that researchers and clinicians explore not only the first-order effects of different variables on the likelihood of relationship termination, but also consider how such factors may interact to cause dissolution or reconciliation. In accordance with this important but admittedly lofty vision of contextualizing the decision to terminate a relationship following infidelity, the current chapter will explore the predictors of relationship dissolution following infidelity, as well as evidence of interdependence among these predictors. In this regard we will consider: event-

related factors, such as the type of infidelity and degree of involvement; cognitive factors, such as attributions and attitudes regarding extradyadic involvement, and the other spouses' awareness of the infidelity; and individual/partner characteristics and relationship variables. After exploring the various determinants of relationship dissolution following infidelity, the impact of extradyadic behavior on postmarital adjustment will be considered. In the penultimate section of the chapter we examine the role of couple therapy and forgiveness in the aftermath of infidelity. Finally, future directions for clinical work and research will be explored. However, we begin with a brief review of the infidelity literature to lay the foundation for later sections of the chapter.

#### THE CHEATING HEART: PREVALENCE, CAUSES, AND CONSEQUENCES OF INFIDELITY

According to conservative estimates, infidelity occurs in 20 to 25% of all marriages (Greeley, 1994; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Wiederman, 1997), and can have a number of deleterious effects on a relationship and the individuals involved. Infidelity is the leading cause of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003; Beitzig, 1989; Kitson, Babri, & Roach, 1985), and often results in anger, disappointment, self-doubt (Buunk, 1995), and depression (Cano & O'Leary, 2000) among partners of unfaithful individuals. It has also been causally linked to domestic violence (Buss, 1994; Daly & Wilson, 1988). The scope of infidelity extends beyond the marital realm, with 65% - 75% of college students reporting engagement in some form of extradyadic involvement while in a serious dating relationship (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Further, therapists indicate that infidelity is the third most difficult problem to treat (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997), and that forgiveness is a challenging but necessary part of the healing process (Coop Gordon & Baucom, 1999). Given

the magnitude of this problem, researchers have devoted considerable energy to identifying the causes of infidelity, in hopes of controlling or reversing these predisposing factors in at-risk couples.

However, such research has been plagued with methodological problems. While prospective longitudinal studies are best able to address causality, the majority of infidelity research has focused on hypothetical scenarios or retrospective reports. In the former case, participants speculate about factors that would lead someone to be unfaithful. Unfortunately, it has yet to be established that these studies accurately predict the causes of actual infidelity. In the latter type of study, retrospective designs have been utilized to identify post hoc explanations of real-life infidelity, but these reports are often biased. Yet despite these methodological limitations, this body of research has yielded important information about variables that predict infidelity.

Predictors can be grouped into individual or relationship characteristics and contextual factors, and are fairly consistent across dating and married samples; Roscoe et al. (1988) found that the perceived reasons for extradyadic behavior in dating relationships ran parallel to explanations for extramarital affairs. Individuals with permissive sexual values are more likely to engage in infidelity, and this permissiveness is more common among males, African-Americans, and highly educated individuals (Smith, 1994). In addition, low religiosity is correlated with extramarital sex (Medora & Burton, 1981).

In terms of relationship characteristics, infidelity has been consistently linked to sexual or emotional dissatisfaction in one's primary relationship (e.g. Brown, 1991). However, this association may be moderated by gender or the nature of the infidelity. Evolutionary theory posits that the male desire for sexual variety stems from the basic need to spread their genes

through procreation. Thus, males' affairs tend to be purely sexual in nature, and may be unrelated to marital satisfaction (Atwater, 1982; Buunk, 1980; Glass & Wright, 1985; Pestrak, Martin, & Martin, 1985; Spanier & Margolis, 1983; Thompson, 1984). Women's affairs, however, are more emotionally charged, and women engaged in these affairs are more likely to be dissatisfied with their primary relationship (Atwater, 1982; Buunk, 1980; Glass & Wright, 1977; Glass & Wright, 1985). Length of marriage is also a significant predictor of infidelity, but is confounded with marital satisfaction, which generally declines over time (Glass & Wright, 1977; Spanier & Margolis, 1983). Theoretical models of the relationship-oriented causes of infidelity have also gained empirical support. In accordance with equity theory, dating and married individuals are more likely to engage in infidelity when the relationship is inequitable or when they feel underbenefited than are couples in equitable or inequitable/overbenefited relationships (Walster, Traupmann, & Walster, 1978). Among dating couples, low commitment was predictive of later physical and emotional infidelity, lending support to an investment model of infidelity (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999).

As regards contextual predictors of infidelity, opportunities for extramarital involvement are associated with a higher likelihood of infidelity (e.g. Treas & Giesen, 2000). Opportunities can take the form of a high availability of potential partners (Johnson, 1970), frequent travel (Wellings, Field, Johnson, & Wadsworth, 1994), or living in a large city (Smith, 1994). Finally substance abusing spouses show greater infidelity (Hall, Fals-Stewart & Fincham, 2004) at both situational and global levels (Leigh & Stall, 1993). At the situational level, it is believed that alcohol intoxication may lead an individual to take sexual risks that would not be taken when sober. At the global level, heavy episodic drinkers are more likely to have multiple sexual partners (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995) and alcoholic patients in addition to

having multiple sex partners, show low rates of condom use, and trade sex for drugs or money (Scheidt & Windle, 1995).

The consequences of infidelity extend beyond the individuals involved in the infidelity. With the rapid spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), infidelity has become a significant public health issue. Not only are individuals who engage in unprotected sex outside of a committed relationship at direct risk of exposure to STDs, there is also emerging evidence that the primary partners of these individuals are at indirect risk of exposure to diseases such as HIV (Fals-Stewart, Birchler, Hoebbel, Kashdan, Golden, & Parks, 2003). In the case of the “cheating heart,” the stakes can literally become a matter of life and death.

The associations between the occurrence of infidelity and various “vulnerability” factors raise an interesting issue. Given that infidelity is generally associated with relationship problems, which of these predicaments gives rise to relationship dissolution? Is dissolution truly a consequence of infidelity, or, is relationship termination actually a consequence of relationship distress, of which infidelity is only a symptom? This distinction must be explored before proceeding further.

#### INFIDELITY AS A CAUSE OF RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION?

It is commonly assumed that relationship termination that follows infidelity is due to one or both partners unfaithfulness. However, divorce has also been linked to a number of other factors beyond infidelity (e.g. incompatibility, drinking, or drug use), and many of the variables that are predictive of infidelity are also predictive of marital dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003; Amato & Rogers, 1997; Booth & Edwards, 1985). These data make it difficult to discern whether infidelity is truly a cause of relationship dissolution, or whether it is just symptomatic of existing individual/relationship vulnerabilities that are also associated with divorce. One might

argue that infidelity rarely occurs in the absence of individual/relationship characteristics that might also contribute to divorce. As such, researchers must disentangle the numerous temporal and causal associations between vulnerability factors, infidelity, and divorce, in order to define the unique impact of infidelity on the decision to divorce.

While 25-50% of divorcees report that a spouse's infidelity was the primary cause of their divorce (Kelly & Conley, 1987), individuals who separated or divorced following infidelity tend to attribute their breakups to a number of reasons aside from infidelity (Buunk, 1987). Thus, it is especially important to consider what infidelity may signify to a couple and what meaning the partners attach to it (Petrak et al., 1985; Riessman, 1989). Did the infidelity occur on a whim, or did it stem from one partner's dissatisfaction with his/her marriage? Couples may be quick to attribute a subsequent decision to divorce to infidelity because it saves them from having to face other weaknesses in the relationship or in themselves (Buunk, 1987).

When a couple decides to separate after infidelity, how much of this decision can be attributed to the affair and how much must be attributed to other factors? This question is the precise reason why we must consider relationship dissolution in context, as the impact of infidelity differs according to the conditions under which it occurs. Amato and Rogers (1997) proposed a comprehensive model of the determinants of divorce, in which specific marital problems such as infidelity were proximally associated with divorce and demographic/life course variables were distally related to divorce. Infidelity, along with five other specific marital problems, partially mediated the association between demographic and life course variables and divorce. While these individual and relationship factors were still uniquely related to divorce, infidelity was the strongest and most proximal predictor of relationship dissolution. This

supports the notion that certain individual or relationship vulnerabilities predict the occurrence of infidelity, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of relationship dissolution.

It is evident that the role of infidelity in a couple's decision to terminate a romantic relationship is multidimensional, and depends greatly upon the context of the infidelity. It may moderate or mediate the association between a third variable and divorce, or it may be independently linked to relationship termination. These complexities require us to explore how the strength of the association between infidelity and relationship dissolution varies according to event-specific, cognitive, individual/partner, and relationship variables. However, it is important to bear in mind that the majority of research in this area has been cross-sectional in nature, which limits us to hypothesizing about the causal links among these variables, infidelity, and relationship dissolution.

#### PREDICTORS OF RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION FOLLOWING INFIDELITY

##### *Event-related Variables*

The impact of infidelity on a couple's decision to separate following infidelity depends in large part upon the nature of the infidelity and how it was discovered. There are three distinct forms of infidelity, and each ranges on a continuum of mild involvement to major involvement. Emotional infidelity occurs when one's partner channels resources such as romantic love, time, and attention to someone else, whereas sexual infidelity refers to sexual activity with someone other than one's relationship partner (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000). A third form of infidelity comprises the combination of sexual and emotional indiscretions. While the majority of research on infidelity and relationship dissolution has focused on the most involved form of sexual infidelity, sexual intercourse with an extradyadic partner, there is evidence to suggest that these three forms of infidelity evoke different responses. Sexual infidelity is more likely to result

in hostile/vengeful, shocked, nauseated/repulsed, humiliated, sexually aroused, or homicidal/suicidal feelings than is emotional infidelity (Shackelford et al., 2000). In contrast, emotional infidelity is more likely to result in undesirable/insecure, depressed, helpless/abandoned, blameworthy, tired, or forgiving emotions than is sexual infidelity. Men report that they are more likely to break up with a dating partner who has been sexually unfaithful than one who has been emotionally unfaithful, while women report the opposite pattern (Hall & Fincham, 2004; Shackelford et al., 2002). Yet within dating relationships, combined sexual and emotional infidelity is perceived as most likely to lead to a breakup (Hall & Fincham, 2004). Similarly, among married couples, the risk of relationship dissolution is greatest when a spouse is both sexually and emotionally involved with an extradyadic partner (Glass, 2003).

The degree of extradyadic involvement might also be predictive of relationship dissolution. Shackelford and Buss (1997) presented married couples with six hypothetical infidelity scenarios, and asked each partner to rate the likelihood of ending the marriage in response to the other partner's infidelity. Infidelity behaviors ranged in severity, and included flirting, passionately kissing, going on a romantic date, having a one-night stand, having a brief affair, and having a serious affair. There were no significant gender differences, and likelihoods varied in accordance with the severity of the infidelity behavior. Individuals anticipated being least likely to divorce in response to a partner's flirtation ( $M = 2.5 - 3.8\%$ ), and most likely to divorce because of a partner's serious affair ( $M = 66.6\% - 69.0\%$ ). However, in a methodologically rigorous comparison of married/cohabiting individuals who end their relationship or continue it after infidelity, Buunk (1987) found that the two groups did not differ in terms of the number of extradyadic relationships or degree of involvement (i.e. short term vs.

long term). The risk of divorce is especially high when both spouses have engaged in infidelity and when infidelity continues after a course of marital therapy (Glass, 2003).

While the nature and degree of infidelity are important in terms of predicting relationship dissolution, it is also crucial to consider how the infidelity is discovered. Afifi, Falato, and Weiner (2001) found that the rates of relationship dissolution varied as a function of how a dating partner's infidelity was discovered. Eighty six percent of individuals who discovered their partner's infidelity by confronting the partner about his/her sexual fidelity terminated the relationship. Catching one's partner "red-handed" also led to high rates of relationship dissolution (83%), whereas 68% of those who heard of their partner's infidelity from a third-party then ended the relationship. Unsolicited disclosure by the unfaithful party was least likely to lead to relationship dissolution. This may be because individuals who voluntarily confess their infidelity to a partner are more committed to repairing the relationship and are willing to make amends (Afifi et al., 2001). However, it may also be that these individuals provide more mitigating accounts of their infidelity (Mongeau & Schulz, 1997).

### *Cognitive Variables*

However, even when the objective experience of infidelity is exactly the same for two couples (e.g. same degree of involvement, same method of discovery, etc.), the impact of the infidelity can vary greatly. This variability can stem from how the infidelity is interpreted by one or both partners, and what meaning is ascribed to the affair (Riessman, 1989). Among dating couples, maladaptive attributions regarding a partner's infidelity were associated with a higher risk of relationship dissolution (Hall & Fincham, 2004). Married individuals report that they would be most upset if a spouse's infidelity was the result of marital dissatisfaction, and least upset if the infidelity was done "on a whim", without an obvious reason (Wiederman & Allgeier,

1996). Among married/cohabiting couples who broke up following infidelity, individuals were more likely to report that their own and their partners' infidelity was motivated by aggression (e.g. revenge, anger) and deprivation (e.g., a void in the primary relationship) than were individuals who reconciled following infidelity (Buunk, 1987).

Interestingly, individuals whose relationships break up following infidelity often ignore the role that their own infidelity may have played in the break up (Buunk, 1987). When both partners have been unfaithful, individuals are more likely to attribute the breakup to their partners' infidelity than to their own (Buunk, 1987; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gephard, 1953). This effect is most pronounced among men. However, this is likely due to self-serving biases rather than any empirical difference in the impact of one partner's infidelity compared to another's.

Attitudes regarding the acceptability of extradyadic involvement may also be predictive of relationship dissolution following infidelity. Although married/cohabiting individuals who broke up following infidelity did not differ from those who stayed together in their disapproval of short-term extradyadic involvement, the breakup group was more disapproving of long-term affairs (Buunk, 1987). These findings are difficult to interpret, as the breakup group's attitudes may have changed as a result of the relationship dissolution. Alternatively, those individuals with more permissive attitudes may not have broken up because they did not feel the need to choose between relationships when they could maintain both.

Implicit in our discussion thus far is the assumption that the uninvolved partner is aware of his/her spouse's infidelity, when this is rarely the case (Ellen, Vittinghoff, Bolan, Boyer, & Padian, 1998). Not surprisingly, the ramifications of infidelity are much more severe when the other spouse is aware of it; infidelity usually doesn't disturb the marriage until it is discovered by

the other partner (Kinsey et al., 1948). Spousal awareness is higher among divorced/separated samples (e.g. Spanier & Margolis, 1983), suggesting that divorce is less likely when infidelity is not disclosed (Glass, 2003; Lawson, 1988).

### *Individual and Partner Variables*

Infidelity may also have a differential impact on relationships depending on the characteristics of the individual partners. Gender, attractiveness, and personality have all been shown to moderate the association between infidelity and relationship dissolution. There is some evidence to suggest that divorce is more likely after a wife's infidelity than after a husband's infidelity (Betzig, 1989; Kinsey et al., 1953). However, other researchers have found that the likelihood of divorce following infidelity does not vary according to gender (Vaughn, 2002), and that men and women are equally disapproving of a spouse's infidelity (Spanier & Margolis, 1983). Yet overall, women are more likely to report that their divorce was caused by infidelity, specifically their partners' infidelity, than are men (Amato & Previti, 2003). While the role of gender in the decision to divorce after a partner's infidelity is somewhat unclear, it is evident that men and women react differently to infidelity.

Men are more likely than women to feel content/relieved, homicidal/suicidal, happy, or sexually aroused in reaction to a partner's infidelity (Shackelford et al., 2000). However, women tend to show a more negative overall emotional reaction to infidelity than do men. Women are more likely than men to feel nauseated/repulsed, depressed, undesirable/insecure, helpless/abandoned, or anxious in reaction to a partner's infidelity. Also, when asked to imagine a partner's infidelity, women report more self-doubt and disappointment than men (Buunk, 1995). Self-doubt was especially pronounced among women with lower self-esteem. However, women whose partners had been unfaithful in the past were less distressed by the prospect of

additional infidelity (Buunk, 1995). This suggests that women may adapt to a partner's infidelity if it becomes a repeated pattern.

Mate value and attractiveness have also been considered as predictors of relationship dissolution following infidelity. When one partner is considered more desirable than the other, this discrepancy may contribute to the likelihood of divorce. Shackelford and Buss (1997) found that women who were higher in mate value/attractiveness than their husbands were more likely to predict that they would divorce if their spouse were unfaithful. From an evolutionary perspective, it is posited that these women would divorce after infidelity in order to find a mate with higher quality genes. However, men's predictions of divorce were unrelated to their wives' mate value or attractiveness.

Spousal personality characteristics are also predictive of relationship termination in the face of infidelity. Women who are married to emotionally unstable husbands or husbands lower in openness/intellect are more likely to predict that they would divorce if their spouse were unfaithful (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). This effect was found only for severe forms of infidelity such as brief/serious affairs, and not for more minor infidelity behaviors such as flirting or kissing. Interestingly, these men (i.e. low in emotional stability and openness/intellect) also reported that they would be more likely to divorce if their wife were unfaithful. Shackelford and Buss (1997) argue that the importance of men's personality characteristics is consistent with other literature on marital stability.

Shackelford and Buss (1997) also considered partner attributes and behaviors that were upsetting to the other spouse, and found that these qualities were related to the likelihood of divorce. Husbands who complained of their wives' unfaithfulness and dishonesty were more likely to anticipate divorce if their wife had an affair. Meanwhile, wives' anticipations of

divorcing an unfaithful husband were related to complaints of their husbands' inconsiderateness, abuse of alcohol, and emotional constriction.

Race and ethnicity are two additional variables that may moderate the likelihood of relationship dissolution following infidelity. Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted on this topic. Although rates of infidelity are higher among African Americans and Hispanics than among Caucasians (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Greeley, 1994; Treas & Giesen, 2000; Wiederman, 1997), rates of relationship dissolution following a partner's infidelity are not significantly different among minority and non-minority victims (Hall & Fincham, 2004). However, given the dearth of research in this area, diversity issues remain an important area for future research.

#### *Relationship variables*

The association between infidelity and relationship dissolution may also vary depending on the nature or quality of the relationship. While dating infidelity is considered more acceptable than marital infidelity (Sheppard, Nelson, & Mathie, 1995), relationship termination is considered a more likely consequence of infidelity in dating relationships than in marital relationships, potentially because the relative level of commitment is lower (Roscoe et al., 1988). In addition, the risk of divorce following infidelity appears to decrease with the length of marriage. Couples who experience infidelity in the early years of marriage are more likely to divorce than those who experience infidelity later in marriage (Glass & Wright, 1977; Pittman, 1989).

The likelihood of relationship termination following infidelity may also depend on the level of satisfaction within the primary relationship. Married/cohabiting couples who break up following infidelity recall lower relationship satisfaction than couples who stay together (Buunk,

1987). Similarly, couples who are less committed to each other and to working on their relationship after infidelity are more likely to divorce (Beach, Jouriles, & O'Leary, 1985; Glass, 2003). There is some evidence to suggest that emotional dissatisfaction is especially relevant for women in terms of the likelihood of dissolution, whereas sexual dissatisfaction is more salient for men (Betzig, 1989). In contrast, Shackelford and Buss (1997) found that women's marital satisfaction (general, sexual, and emotional) was unrelated to the anticipated likelihood of divorce after a husband's infidelity. However, men reporting lower emotional and composite marital satisfaction were more likely to indicate that they would seek divorce if their wife were unfaithful.

Additional negative relationship characteristics are also associated with a higher likelihood of divorce following infidelity. Women involved in high-conflict marriages are more likely to indicate that they would divorce a husband who engaged in a one-night stand or brief affair (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Similarly, women whose marriages are less cooperative and agreeable, and more quarrelsome are more likely to report that they would divorce their husband after various infidelity behaviors. Shackelford and Buss (1997) argue that this is consistent with evidence that women are more sensitive to relationship problems than are men.

## THE AFTERMATH OF INFIDELITY

### *Impact of Infidelity on Post-Relationship Adjustment*

The discovery of a husband's infidelity and/or divorce following such infidelity is associated with increased risk of a Major Depressive Episode (Cano & O'Leary, 2000). However, this is unremarkable, given that divorced individuals generally report higher levels of depression, lower life satisfaction, and more health problems than married individuals (Amato,

2000). Thus, it is important to consider how infidelity may contribute to or exacerbate these problems.

While divorce is predictive of depression, it may be that infidelity increases this risk; infidelity-related divorces may be even greater stressors than other divorces, because the heavy emotional and psychological toll associated with adultery is compounded with the distress of divorce. Indeed, individuals who divorce following infidelity are more distressed after the dissolution than those who divorce without infidelity (Kitson, 1992). They are also less well-adjusted to the divorce and more attached to the former spouse than are those whose divorce was not related to infidelity (Amato & Previti, 2003). Adjustment scores are especially low when the infidelity was committed by one's spouse rather than oneself. Similarly, in an analysis of women's long-term adjustment to divorce, Thabes (1997) found that infidelity during the marriage contributed significantly to postdivorce depression. However, this study was restricted to women who had not remarried, and it is unclear whether the findings would generalize to remarried women or to men. There is preliminary evidence to suggest that women are more likely than men to be depressed, disappointed, and self-doubting after a partner's infidelity (Buunk, 1995; Shackelford et al., 2000; Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001).

However, the impact of infidelity on post-divorce depression may not be unidimensional; when examining initiator status (i.e. which spouse initiated the divorce) and spousal infidelity, Sweeney and Horwitz (2001) found little evidence that either of these factors directly affects post-divorce depression. Rather, it appears that initiator status moderates the effect of spousal infidelity on depression, such that individuals who initiate divorce from an unfaithful spouse are less likely to be depressed than those whose partner initiates the divorce. It may be that initiating

divorce from an unfaithful spouse increases one's sense of control over the situation, thus mitigating the negative emotional impact of infidelity.

Infidelity may also be associated with poor adjustment among individuals who commit infidelity. Individuals, especially women, tend to feel extremely guilty after engaging in extradyadic behavior (Spanier & Margolis, 1983). When compared to same-sex spouses who had not engaged in infidelity, those individuals who had been unfaithful reported higher levels of depression and/or lower commitment levels. Thus, mental health issues may actually be a greater concern for the guilty party than for the spouse. It has been suggested that this depression stems from the unfaithful spouse's ambivalence about staying in the marriage, an ambivalence that may be maintained by the same lack of commitment that prompted the infidelity (Beach et al., 1985).

Despite the many negative outcomes associated with infidelity, some argue that it can have positive effects on the primary relationship. Infidelity helps some individuals, males in particular, to recognize that their primary relationships are more valuable and fulfilling than they had previously thought (Kinsey et al., 1948). Couples often feel closer after working through the infidelity (Olson, Russell, Kessler, & Miller, 2002), and many report that their marriages improved following infidelity (Atwater, 1982). However, these findings may be due in part to individuals' efforts to minimize their own guilt if they were the ones who had the affair. In general, the overwhelming majority of evidence suggests that the deleterious effects of infidelity far outweigh evidence to the contrary. Given the distress that is associated with infidelity and with relationship dissolution, it is not surprising that many couples turn to therapy as they consider the future of their relationship.

### *Couple Therapy*

Approximately 25-30% of couples in marital therapy report that infidelity is a concern (Green, Lee, & Lusting, 1974). While many of these couples look to the therapist for guidance as to whether they should terminate the relationship or attempt to salvage it, this is an issue for the couple to decide as they go through therapy (Thompson, 1984). Glass (2002) suggests that a general decision about the future of the relationship be made by the couple early in therapy, as it will guide the course of treatment. Couples are asked to decide whether the therapy should be labeled as marital, reconciliation, separation, or ambivalence therapy. The larger goals of treatment include establishing a safe therapeutic environment, understanding the meaning of the infidelity, creating good will/hope, and deciding whether to stay married or separate (Glass, 2002). Therapy provides an opportunity for clients to express their thoughts and feelings about the affair in a constructive way, with an emphasis on active listening and empathic understanding (Thompson, 1984). It is important that this process not be rushed, so that clients don't make a decision about the future of the relationship without fully exploring the impact of the infidelity.

While infidelity is both a common and a trying issue for therapists, marital interventions for addressing extramarital affairs have gained little empirical support. However, there is emerging evidence to suggest that Gordon and Baucom's (1999) multitheoretical intervention may be effective in promoting recovery from such affairs (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 1998; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, in press). This intervention is consistent with Glass's (2002) approach, in which the impact of infidelity is conceptualized through a trauma framework. Infidelity is traumatic in that it shakes an individual's fundamental assumptions about the self, relationships, and the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This intervention integrates the trauma literature with a growing body of research on forgiveness, and helps couples to move through stages of dealing with the impact of the infidelity, searching for meaning, and recovery or

moving forward. In the first stage (dealing with the impact of infidelity), the goal is to focus on the immediate problems caused by the infidelity, such as emotional dysregulation and the expression of anger and hurt. After exploring the immediate emotional impact of the infidelity, the next stage involves contextualizing the infidelity by identifying the factors that may have contributed to the affair and increasing each partner's empathic understanding of the other's position. The decision of whether to end the relationship or stay together is not faced until the third stage, in which the couple is also encouraged to explore forgiveness, consider what they have learned from the experience, and reexamine their marriage. If they decide to reconcile, the remainder of therapy is devoted to "trouble-shooting", or exploring what issues are still problematic or may arise in the future. Alternatively, a decision to terminate the relationship is followed by efforts to help the couple separate as peacefully as possible, ideally with respect, empathy, and forgiveness.

Gordon and Baucom's (1999) intervention has been reported to reduce depression, PTSD symptomatology, global marital distress, and to increase partner forgiveness (Gordon et al., in press). More general marital interventions have also shown modest effects in promoting recovery from extramarital affairs; couples undergoing traditional behavioral couple therapy or integrative behavioral couple therapy after infidelity were more distressed at the onset of treatment than other couples, but improved at a greater rate (Atkins, 2003). Therapy generally facilitates communication between partners, and research has shown that couples who are able to discuss the infidelity in depth are less likely to separate or divorce (Vaughn, 2002). Therapy also provides a forum for the injured spouse to have his/her questions about the infidelity answered by the unfaithful spouse; when the unfaithful spouse is willing to answer such questions there is a lower risk of divorce (Vaughn, 2002).

Despite the positive relationship outcomes associated with couple therapy, therapy will not necessarily promote or ensure reconciliation. Among couples in marital therapy, those who report infidelity are more likely to separate or divorce (Glass, 2002). Humprey (1985) found that, among couples in therapy following infidelity, 46% of those in which the husband had been unfaithful were separated or divorced at the end of therapy, and 48% of those in which the wife had been unfaithful ended the relationship by the close of treatment. But regardless of a couple's decision to separate or stay together, therapy is an excellent vehicle for closure. Forgiveness is also becoming more prominent in the infidelity-intervention literature, as it has been shown to benefit both couples who reconcile and those who divorce.

#### *Infidelity: A Forgivable Offense?*

Many individuals have misconceptions about what it means to forgive a partner's infidelity. Forgiveness does not require an individual to excuse or condone a partner's extradyadic behavior, nor does it mean that a couple must reconcile. Infidelity is widely considered to be unacceptable in our society, and forgiveness does not ask anyone to believe otherwise. Rather, forgiveness is a process by which an individual replaces destructive responses towards one's partner, such as avoidance or revenge, with constructive behavior (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Forgiveness is an instrumental component of Gordon and Baucom's (1999) intervention for recovery from extramarital affairs. Within this intervention, the goal of forgiveness is for the injured spouse to gain a more balanced view of the offender and the infidelity, while decreasing negative affect toward the offender (including the right to punish him/her) and increasing empathy towards the partner. The cultivation of empathy may be especially important, given its key role in promoting forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997). Indeed, couples recognize that forgiveness is a necessary part of the healing process, and is

equally important for couples who reconcile as it is for those who divorce (Brown, 1991; Olson et al., 2002). Brown (1991) argues that both partners – the one who engaged in infidelity and the one who did not – must seek forgiveness for letting their marriage decline. However, it is important to recognize that forgiveness is a process, and thus may be a long and slow transformation (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003); couples should not expect to forgive one another overnight.

While forgiveness does not require a couple to stay together, it may make reconciliation more likely. In a study of infidelity in dating relationships, Hall and Fincham (2004) found that forgiveness predicted a lower likelihood of relationship dissolution, and fully mediated the association between attributions and breakup. This suggests that for many couples affected by infidelity, forgiveness is the vehicle through which they are able to reconcile. Thus, marital therapists treating infidelity can use forgiveness as a tool to salvage relationships, or at least enable them to end amicably. That is not to say that it is always in the best interest of a couple to remain together after a serious betrayal such as infidelity. Yet despite a couple's decision to break up or remain together, forgiveness can have significant emotional and physical health benefits (McCullough et al., 1997; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). It may be that the poor adjustment shown by individuals whose partners have been unfaithful is due in some part to the anger and resentment that they still hold towards their ex-partner. Perhaps forgiveness would counteract these emotions and act as a buffer against such negative post-relationship adjustment; however, this remains an empirical question. In the next section of the chapter we turn explicitly to other unanswered empirical questions, in an effort to identify directions for future research that might provide a more

complete understanding of the complex association between infidelity and relationship dissolution.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As emphasized throughout this chapter, the decision to terminate a romantic relationship following infidelity must be considered in context. While we identified many variables that may influence the likelihood of relationship dissolution, the absence of a larger theoretical or empirical framework makes it difficult to synthesize and interpret these associations.

#### *The Need for a Contextual Framework*

It is evident that there are many factors which make relationship dissolution more likely following infidelity, and it is fairly easy to interpret these moderators individually. For example, evolutionary theory posits that divorce is more likely following a wife's sexual affair because the husband's paternity is threatened (e.g. Shackelford et al., 2002). However, when one considers a given infidelity-related divorce in full context, with attention to the full range of event-specific, cognitive, individual/partner, and relationship variables, the roles of each of these individual factors in the decision to divorce are much more difficult to disentangle.

Shackelford and Buss (1997) argue that the various theories (e.g. inequity theory, investment theory, evolutionary theory) and predictors of divorce following infidelity can be synthesized in a spousal cost-infliction model, in which individuals weigh the value of being in a given romantic relationship. Thus, infidelity forces the betrayed partner to evaluate the costs and benefits of remaining in the primary relationship, and compare them to those of divorce. According to this model, predictors such as degree of involvement, personality variables, and relationship satisfaction represent different levels of spousal cost-infliction. For example, being married to an emotionally unstable partner is expected to inflict a variety of costs on an

individual, thus making divorce a less costly and more beneficial alternative. This model is based on Lewin's (1951) model, which was later adapted by Buunk (1987), in which there are "push" (i.e. high cost and low benefits of primary relationship) and "pull" factors (i.e. low cost and high benefits of alternative relationship) that may lead to relationship termination. There is evidence that push factors may be more salient than pull factors in the decision to terminate a relationship following infidelity; individuals whose relationships ended following infidelity scored more highly on push factors than did individuals who remained in their primary relationships, while the two groups did not differ significantly on pull factors (Buunk, 1987). While this attempt to synthesize the predictors of relationship dissolution within an overarching framework is commendable, the spousal cost-infliction model is limited in two major ways. First, this model is not specific to infidelity, and could easily be applied in the absence of infidelity. Individuals may consider the costs and benefits of a given relationship under any conditions – not just following infidelity. In addition, this framework does not consider possible interactions between predictors.

The true test of a contextual framework will be in its ability to account for higher order effects among predictors, as there may not be simple linear associations between these variables and the decision to separate/divorce. For example, when one's partner has been mildly unfaithful (e.g. kissing), attributes the infidelity to marital dissatisfaction, and is emotionally unstable, what is the likelihood of divorce? The possibilities for interaction effects are seemingly endless because predictors tend to co-occur. When considering the variables that influence an individual's decision to terminate a relationship following infidelity, it will be critical to explore how certain factors may exacerbate, buffer, or have no effect on the impact of other variables. Undoubtedly, it will be difficult to formulate a contextual model that fully accommodates higher order predictors (interaction effects). The first step towards this goal is to expand current studies

to explore interactions among predictors of relationship dissolution, as there is very little data in this area.

The development of an overall contextual model will also be critical in that it will allow researchers to detect overlap among predictors. When all variables that predict relationship dissolution after infidelity are considered simultaneously, redundancy among such variables will become apparent. For example, negative personality traits (e.g. low emotional stability) are predictive of lower relationship satisfaction and are also related to spousal complaints such as those considered above (Buss, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Shackelford & Buss, 2000). If these variables were evaluated within a single model, it may become evident that they overlap considerably, and have little unique predictive power when considered individually. Factor analysis will be useful in reducing the long list of factors that are predictive of dissolution following infidelity to a smaller, more informative group of independent components.

#### *Further Exploration and Definition of Predictors*

Given the great need to condense the current list of variables that predict relationship dissolution following infidelity, it seems ironic that we would also suggest research to explore additional predictors and to further define existing ones. However, this is an important area of investigation because such predictors have received far less attention than the predictors of infidelity. One issue in particular that requires further consideration is documentation of the full range of behaviors that constitute infidelity, and movement away from focusing only on the stereotypic extramarital intercourse. Emotional infidelity has gained more attention in recent years, as more and more platonic workplace friendships are developing into emotional affairs (e.g. Peterson, 2003). Internet infidelity is also becoming recognized as a legitimate form of emotional betrayal (e.g. Shaw, 1997). It will be critical for future research to explore these forms

of emotional infidelity, and determine how potent they might be in disrupting a relationship. Sexual infidelity is also somewhat of a hodgepodge term, as it constitutes minor indiscretions such as a kiss, as well as major betrayals like intercourse. Thus, it will be essential in future work that researchers make their conceptualization of infidelity explicit, and collect specific information from participants regarding discrete infidelity behaviors. To this end, it may become evident that different cohorts hold different views of what constitutes infidelity. Such efforts will allow for further refinement of the infidelity definition and greater precision in identifying infidelity behaviors that are associated with relationship dissolution.

### *Preventive Variables*

The overwhelming majority of research in this area focuses on the “vulnerability” factors such as relationship dissatisfaction, which make separation or divorce more likely following infidelity. As a result, there is a large gap in the literature as regards variables that protect or act as a buffer against infidelity-related relationship dissolution. We know very little about couples whose affairs do not lead to divorce, and about the individual/relationship qualities or processes that protect against relationship dissolution. It would be a logical error to assume that “buffers” simply reflect the opposite of vulnerability factors. For example, one might conclude that marital satisfaction serves a protective function because marital dissatisfaction predicts divorce. However, it has become increasingly apparent that positive, satisfying marital processes reflect much more than the absence of negative processes (Fincham, 1998). Thus, future research must also explore the characteristics and mechanisms that prevent relationship dissolution following infidelity.

## CONCLUSION

At the opening of the chapter we considered two couples who shared the common experience of infidelity but made drastically different decisions about the future of their relationship. This example highlighted the importance of contextualizing such a decision, and considering the many variables that may determine how infidelity impacts a romantic relationship. We went on to outline how the association between infidelity and relationship dissolution may vary according to event-related, cognitive, individual/partner, and relationship variables. This analysis was followed by an exploration of how individuals and couples deal with infidelity and/or relationship termination. We concluded the chapter by suggesting future directions for research in this area, with the overall goal of working towards a contextual model of the many factors that influence the decision to end a relationship after infidelity.

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