

**The Consequences of Infidelity and the Effects That Ensur Among Betrayed Partners: A  
Qualitative Phenomenological Study**

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## Abstract

Infidelity in marriages or committed relationships often results in significant psychological distress for the betrayed partner (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This distress is frequently regarded as a form of interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). The problem addressed in this study was whether the experience of infidelity impacted the betrayed partners' future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021) resulting in an attachment injury. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research explored the symptoms reported by betrayed partners and examined how these symptoms affected attachment in the betrayed partner's future relationships. Research question 1 (*RQ1*): Did the attachment injury impact the decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful partner? Research question 2 (*RQ2*): Did the attachment injury result in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner? All participants in this research reported responses consistent with attachment injuries. The findings revealed that such injuries significantly impacted the participants' willingness and ability to engage in future romantic relationships. Common manifestations included issues related to fear, abandonment, insecurity, withdraw, betrayal, and trust. Emotional difficulties such as substance use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression were also reported. This research revealed that regardless of whether the betrayed partner chose to remain with their unfaithful partner or dissolve the relationship, significant distress and attachment injuries were present.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

When infidelity occurs in marriages or committed relationships, it often causes the betrayed partner to experience psychological distress (Shrout & Weigel, 2020), and this distress is considered to be a form of interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Interpersonal trauma is described as trauma experienced as a result of the direct actions by others, with this exposure quite often found to be associated with symptoms that are more severe than those found in non-interpersonal trauma exposure (other life-threatening events that are not a result of actions by other people) (Hughesdon et al., 2021). This trauma can result in an infringement on the foundation of the relationship, destruction of relationship security, and can lead to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for the betrayed partner (Lonergan et al., 2021; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Infidelity is considered to be an experience that occurs throughout all cultures, though it may be defined differently culturally, and reasons for the occurrence of infidelity may vary as well (Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019). Infidelity is defined by some as a breach of a partner's trust within the committed relationship, with the occurrence of some form of sexual contact with a third party. This act of sexual contact occurs among all sexual orientations and is accompanied with lies, unfaithfulness, and deception toward an intimate partner (Wroblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Emotional infidelity and engaging in pornography use are also considered to be forms of infidelity (Adam, 2019). Previous research indicates that 80% of participants in research scenarios felt that emotional infidelity did not have to occur in a face-to-face setting to be a form of betrayal or infidelity, rather the act of deception itself resulted in a loss of trust, and in 25% of cases a separation or divorce (Adam, 2019). When pornography is engaged in personally and not in a setting as a couple, it is negatively correlated with trust and relationship satisfaction and

positively correlated with psychological distress (Szymanski et al., 2015). When betrayed partners become aware of the partner's personal pornography use, this can result in feelings of distress and a decreased sense of self-worth (Adam, 2019). Others define infidelity as any breach of the relationship contract of exclusivity among the intimate partners, with the act of outsourcing relationship needs to someone outside of the relationship without the consent of the betrayed partner (Alsaleem, 2017). Although the definition of infidelity varies, it is generally defined as any type of secretive romantic behavior, including emotional, sexual, or digital, infidelity, or a combination of these forms that violates the ground rules that have been established by the couple (Rokach & Chan, 2023). When partners agree on a relationship structure that involves a non-monogamous relationship (allowing for some form of casual or sexual relationship with others), and this is openly communicated with one another as to this decision, this is not considered by most to be a form of infidelity (Levine et al., 2018).

When infidelity occurs in a committed relationship, severe, traumatic psychological distress may result in intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, hyperarousal, numbing, withdrawal/avoidance, hypervigilance, and ongoing preoccupation with the affair and everything related to the affair (Roos et al., 2019) any betrayed partners reported insomnia and nightmares, avoidance, irritability, concentration difficulties, crying spells and ongoing feelings of sadness (Lonergan et al., 2021). Additionally, the act of infidelity can result in severe consequences among both sexes, including the loss of family and friends, damaged reputations, contraction of diseases, unwanted pregnancies, bodily harm upon a partner's discovery of the affair, loss of time, consumed energy, financial loss, and the risk of divorce (Hassannezhad et al., 2022). The consequences of infidelity may be difficult to resolve, and furthermore may result in impacting other roles that the betrayed partner occupies, including professional and parental obligations

(Wroblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Attachment injuries experienced as a result of the emotional damage experienced by the betrayed partner's pain resulting from infidelity is thought to be comparable to the pain experienced when an infant becomes separated from their mother (Rokach & Chan, 2023). This traumatic interpersonal experience of infidelity violates the betrayed partner's internal representation of the individual that they previously saw as trustworthy, reliable, and a source of support and is known as an attachment injury (Rokach & Chan, 2023). These injuries/betrayals result in a detrimental impact to the relationship, and personally for the betrayed partner and the unfaithful partner, which is considered extreme enough to be considered traumatic (Rokach & Chan, 2023). The relationship which is built on security, comfort, and closeness, a means of intense psychological and physical interdependence (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999), becomes injured as a result of this remarkable incident of infidelity, and the desirable, secure relationship becomes impacted from this injury (Holmes, 2014). Research further indicates that marital infidelity can result in domestic violence, substance abuse, boredom within the marriage, abandonment of children, and unemployment (Hassannezhad et al., 2022). The impact that infidelity can have on the betrayed partner results in harm to their ability to have an openness to pursuing romantic encounters due to the long-term effects of experiencing betrayal by their partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023), which represents the attachment injury.

When infidelity occurs within a committed relationship or marriage, numerous consequences including confusion, irrational thoughts, anger, and pessimism often occur (Hassannezhad et al., 2022). Consequently, these strong thoughts can result in the betrayed partner's inability to adapt to the betrayal and breach of trust, the inability to forgive the unfaithful partner, and the relationship ultimately suffers and eventually ends in separation

and/or divorce (Hassannezhad et al., 2022). Research indicates that if the betrayed partner possesses cognitive flexibility, this executive function can result in improvement of the relationship following infidelity (Hassannezhad et al., 2022), and can play a positive role in marriages and heal the wounds of infidelity (Khorshidi & DashtBozorgi, 2019). With this cognitive flexibility, the betrayed partner can adapt to this change in the relationship, and utilize the ability to change cognitive schema, tasks, or strategies to adjust to these changes within the relationship as a result of infidelity, which can result in positive changes for the relationship (Hassannezhad et al., 2022).

The betrayed partner's self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, and future relationships may all be affected as a result of infidelity within the relationship (Rokach & Chan, 2023). The emotional pain that is most often experienced by the betrayed partner as a result of infidelity has been explained to have the same attachment injuries that result when an infant is separated from their mother, which results in a traumatic attachment injury resulting in a traumatic interpersonal experience (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Therefore, the risk of a traumatic reaction caused by infidelity cannot only cause immediate psychological trauma, but may lower the betrayed partner's self-esteem, self-confidence, reduce their trust of others, and consequently result in a strong fear of abandonment in the pursuit of romantic relationships (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

The betrayed partners' reactions to infidelity may vary significantly from person to person based on various perspectives, perceptions of infidelity, and previous trauma or experiences, though research indicates that even the image or idea of one's partner engaging in relations with another outside of the relationship is enough to evoke jealousy and strong, negative emotions for most people in a committed, intimate relationship (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Additionally, research indicates that the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions that occur

following acts of infidelity support that infidelity is considered by many to be a traumatic experience. This experience is comparable to posttraumatic stress (PTSD), with reported experiences indicating ongoing psychological distress, and many times physical symptoms such as insomnia, weight loss, concentration difficulties, and poor appetite all of which result from the traumatic experience of infidelity (Maercker & Lorenz, 2018; Rokach & Chan, 2023). For many betrayed partners, it has been reported that the symptoms that they experience often times mimic the symptoms of PTSD (Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019), according to the DSM 5 diagnostic criteria, the trauma experienced as a result of infidelity is not diagnosable as PTSD, as a result of infidelity not meeting the criteria for death, serious injury, or sexual violence (APA, 2013). Consequently, in response to experiencing infidelity, research indicates that those who experience infidelity of any type within their intimate, committed relationship most often results in a substantial impact on the betrayed partner's life even beyond the intimate relationship in which it occurs (Rokach & Chan, 2023). This psychological distress and emotional responses result in a traumatic reaction for those who experience infidelity (Warach et al., 2021). The emotional dysregulation experienced typically includes feelings of betrayal, intensified anger, rage, shame, jealousy, fear, and increased sadness as a result of the experience of infidelity (Warach et al., 2021). Further research is needed to determine if infidelity results in an attachment injury that will impact the betrayed partner in the future relationships, whether with the unfaithful partner or in subsequent relationships (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this research is that infidelity is an interpersonal trauma that can negatively impact future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This interpersonal trauma often results in long-term psychological damage for the betrayed partner who experiences it, with

lasting, profound emotional consequences (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Previous studies have indicated that when infidelity occurs in a committed relationship, the experience for the betrayed partner is traumatic, and often results in long-term, severe psychological symptoms such as those indicative of PTSD, including intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, hyperarousal, numbing, withdrawal/avoidance, and hypervigilance (Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019). Some betrayed partners describe their experience as trauma that results in a violation of the foundation of the relationship, security, comfort, love, and stability, which has resulted in anxiety, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Lonergan et al., 2021). Rokach and Chan (2023) recognize that if a betrayed partner experiences an attachment injury following infidelity within their intimate relationship, this could result in psychological and emotional dysregulation, ultimately impacting the betrayed partner's life and future relationships. Additionally, Roos et al. (2019) proposed that experiencing infidelity could alter social functioning in one's subsequent relationships, and thus it should be explored in future research. These researchers also stated that if the negative alterations that occur in one's schema following infidelity could be prevented or improved, this would lead to healthier future relationships rather than an altered attachment style or attachment injury (Roos et al., 2019). Warach and Josephs (2021) state that there is a need to address whether betrayal trauma is significant enough to alter the betrayed partner's romantic attachment style in future relationships.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the impact of trauma symptoms experienced by betrayed partners due to their partner's infidelity and explore if this trauma influenced future attachments in the betrayed partner's relationships

(whether with the unfaithful partner or someone else). This research was considered as the next logical step to determine the impact of experiencing infidelity on the betrayed partner's future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This study was conducted utilizing interviews in which a series of interview questions regarding the betrayed partner's experiences were explored. The responses provided in the questionnaires looked at the trauma experienced by the betrayed partners, specifically the emotional effects that resulted and the consequences of the infidelity on their future relationships, whether with the unfaithful partner or in subsequent relationships. The target population included 9 betrayed partners. The collection of data from betrayed partners was discontinued once data saturation was met. The term data saturation was originally devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a broad research method to describe the point in the research process that indicates that enough data has been collected to be able to reach the necessary conclusions, and any further data collection would not provide further understanding or added conclusions. Saturation is reached when the process of interviewing and observing participants no longer results in new themes or insights (Neubauer et al., 2019). In phenomenological, qualitative research, saturation in data collection can be identified early in the process, prior to the formal analysis stage, in which the researchers begin to notice that they are hearing the same information repetitively throughout the interviews (Saunders et al., 2018). The betrayed partners that were included, consisted of those who were or had been in a long-term (minimum of 5-year) relationship. The interviews were conducted online, and the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant has been maintained.

### **Introduction to Theoretical Framework**

An applicable theory that is relevant to the topic of infidelity and the experiences of betrayed partners is the attachment theory. The attachment theory has also been called the theory

of trauma. The attachment theory, which was developed by John Bowlby, explains the various forms of emotional attachment that occur in infancy between the mother and child (secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized) (Bowlby, 1987). When cognitive maturity begins to take place, internalized expectations develop in how the child and caregiver interact and behave, and how the child should be comforted by the caregiver when they experience distress or separation (Bowlby, 1987). Eventually, the child learns how to perceive and resolve events involving their caregiver during periods that cause them distress or during periods of separation. These experiences shape their early attachment and define their adult romantic relationships later in life (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

When one feels emotionally connected to their partner or spouse and they are in a relationship where they feel their emotional needs are met, they are less likely to engage in affairs (Fye & Mims, 2018). We can establish a parallel of this behavior in infant attachment to their mother, to the response experienced when one's partner is unfaithful (Rokach & Chan, 2023). The severe, emotional pain that is experienced by the betrayed partner is comparable to the attachment injuries that occur when an infant is separated from his mother, and this traumatic interpersonal experience violates the betrayed partner's internal representation of their partner, that they previously viewed as a secure, trustworthy, means of support prior to the experience of infidelity, thus resulting in an attachment injury (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The emotional pain that is most often experienced by the betrayed partner as a result of infidelity has been explained to have the same attachment injuries that take place when an infant is separated from their mother (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The trauma that can potentially result in an attachment injury as a result of infidelity cannot only cause severe psychological trauma (Warach & Josephs, 2021), but may negatively impact the betrayed partner's self-esteem, self-confidence, their trust

of others, and consequently result in a lack of desire and an intense fear in the pursuit of romantic relationships (Rokach & Chan, 2023). This proposed research will address whether or not the attachment injury that takes place following the infidelity experienced by the betrayed partner impacts the betrayed partner's decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful partner and/or whether the attachment injury results in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chooses to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner.

### **Introduction to Research Methodology and Design**

This research study explored the lived experiences of betrayed partners who have experienced infidelity within their relationship and the trauma that resulted from the traumatic experiences. More specifically, this research examined whether the experience of infidelity caused an attachment injury that influenced the future relationships of betrayed partners after their relationship with the unfaithful partner ended. The individuals who participated in this study were those who experienced infidelity as a betrayed partner, were over the age of 18, and have been in a relationship with the unfaithful partner for at least five years. This study was qualitative, and utilized an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as it is the methodology that examines the details and analysis of the lived experiences of the participants (Tuffour, 2017), which is the betrayed partners utilized in this research.

In choosing to utilize this integrative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, there were two main goals that took place: to look at the detail of the betrayed partner's responses to their lived experiences, and to provide the detailed interpretation of the betrayed partner's account in attempt to understand what had resulted from their experience (Tuffour, 2017). This approach to the qualitative research provided a detailed comprehensive view of the phenomenon (attachment injury), which was necessary in order to explore the complex manner and the

complex nature of the experiences (Creswell, 2013) of infidelity. Additionally, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was considered a flexible, versatile approach in understanding the experiences of the participants (Tuffour, 2017).

IPA appeared to be the most reasonable approach to gathering information on the lived experiences of betrayed partners, and further assessed whether the attachment injuries had occurred, and whether it had impacted future relationship decisions of the betrayed partner, regardless of whether they stayed with the unfaithful partner or pursued future relationships. Researchers have indicated that the pursuit of research to make this determination as to whether the attachment injury that resulted from infidelity was significant enough to impact future relationships appears to be an area worth exploring (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Traumatic experiences such as those that result from experiencing infidelity as a betrayed partner are considered interpersonal traumas, and are considered to be more severe than non-interpersonal trauma experiences (Hughesdon et al., 2021). Therefore, the research that has been conducted is considered the next logical step recommended in the study of infidelity, attachment injuries, and their effects on betrayed partner's future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

The goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of betrayed partners and determine if the experience of infidelity resulted in an attachment injury, and whether this attachment injury had impacted the betrayed partner's decision to pursue future relationships or if the injury continued to cause distress as the betrayed partner attempted to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner.

#### ***RQ1***

Did the attachment injury impact the decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful partner?

### ***RQ2***

Did the attachment injury result in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner?

### **Significance of the Study**

Research indicates that infidelity is a form of interpersonal trauma (Laaser et al., 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021, Maercker & Lorenz, 2018; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020) which often times results in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions that indicate that infidelity has traumatic outcomes (Laaser et al., 2017). There appears to be a strong association of the victimization experienced as a result of infidelity and the symptoms of trauma that the betrayed partner experiences, however future research is needed to determine if trauma as a result of infidelity is traumatic enough to change the romantic attachment style of the betrayed partner (Warach & Joseph, 2021). Few studies have explored the proportion of betrayed partners that suffer traumatic reactions (Warach & Joseph, 2021). This research explored the experiences of the betrayed participants and what traumatic emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and psychological symptoms were experienced following infidelity, and whether these experiences resulted in attachment injuries affecting the betrayed partner's future relationships. This research aimed to provide a contribution to the research on infidelity, as well as provide intimate information about the experiences of infidelity which should ultimately contribute to future research on treating individuals and couples who encounter this within their intimate relationships.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

***Infidelity***

Infidelity is defined as a type of behavior that is secretive, which may occur through emotional, sexual, or romantic relationships with another person outside of a person's committed, primary relationship. This behavior is not condoned by the partner of the unfaithful individual (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

***Attachment Injury***

A traumatic interpersonal experience that results in a violation of the internal depiction of someone who was significant in their life, whom they previously considered to be trustworthy and a reliable means of support (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

***Sexual Infidelity***

This type of infidelity incorporates the actual act of extramarital sexual relations, phone sex, or sexting (sending nude photos or pictures of body parts) (Kassel, 2022).

***Emotional Infidelity***

This type of infidelity is vague and abstract, and is often known as a form of non-physical cheating, which occurs when someone directs their emotional energy to someone other than their partner, or expresses desire, feelings, or a longing for someone other than one's partner (Kassel, 2022).

***Romantic Infidelity***

This form of infidelity occurs when one engages in flirting, displayed interest in another, and/or the exploration of emotional intimacy with someone other than one's partner (Kassel, 2022).

***Digital Infidelity***

This form of infidelity is also known as cyber cheating, through the use of social media,

texts, emails, phone calls, or other internet forums. This infidelity also features sexual suggestiveness or undertones that are outside of the relationship with one's partner and relationship agreement (Kassel, 2022).

### ***Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)***

A psychiatric disorder that may occur in those who have experienced a traumatic event or witnessed a traumatic event, or series of events or a particular set of circumstances. This experience is seen by the individual as emotionally or physical harmful and/or life-threatening which may affect their physical, mental, social and/or spiritual welfare. This experience is followed by intense, disturbing thoughts, feelings, or images related to the individual's experience that is endured long after the trauma is over. This ongoing trauma may take the form of flashbacks, nightmares, sadness, fear, or anger, which results in feeling of detachment from others (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

### **Summary**

Infidelity can result in devastating effects on a relationship and on the betrayed partner when it occurs in marriages or committed relationships. This often results in the betrayed partner experiencing a great deal of psychological distress (Shrout & Weigel, 2020), also known as an interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This is an intrusion that ultimately impacts the foundation of the relationship, destroys the security one finds in a relationship, and often results in the betrayed partner experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lonergan et al., 2021; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Although infidelity has been found to occur among all sexes, all socioeconomic statuses, and throughout all cultures, what is considered to be infidelity in one culture may differ from another (Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019). The act of sexual contact with

an individual outside of a committed relationship occurs among all sexual orientations and is most often associated with lies, unfaithfulness, and deception toward the betrayed partner (Wroblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Many consider infidelity to be a breach of the commitment of the relationship between the partners, involving contact with another outside of this relationship (Alsaleem, 2017). The act of infidelity is generally defined as any type of secretive romantic behavior which infringes on the commitment that has been ascertained by the partners (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Previous phenomenological studies have indicated that even when one is suspicious that infidelity is occurring regardless of whether infidelity occurred, it is still considered to be one of the most distressing events that can take place in an intimate relationship (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). This research contributed to further understanding the experiences of betrayed partners, identified symptoms that betrayed partners experience as a result of infidelity, identified attachment injuries that resulted, and will most likely impact future studies that aim to find treatments and strategies to address this occurrence within intimate relationships.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the impact of trauma symptoms experienced by betrayed partners due to their partner's infidelity and explore if this trauma influenced future attachments in the betrayed partner's relationships (whether with the unfaithful partner or someone else). This research was the next logical step in exploring the impact that infidelity has on the future relationships of betrayed partners (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The problem addressed in this research is that infidelity is an interpersonal trauma that can negatively impact future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This interpersonal trauma often results in long-term psychological damage for the betrayed partner who experiences it, with lasting, profound emotional consequences (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This trauma has been determined to be a result of the direct behavioral actions of others, with trauma symptoms that are considered to be more severe than those found following incidents that are non-interpersonal, non-traumatic exposure experiences (Hughesdon et al., 2021).

A review of the literature was conducted, and the various types of infidelity were defined and discussed, such as *emotional infidelity*, *sexual infidelity*, *intellectual infidelity*, and *digital/cyber infidelity*. Additionally, this literature explored and discussed *posttraumatic stress disorder* symptoms that often occur because of infidelity. These definitions were mentioned in the literature, and a description was given for each of the terms. The various consequences that resulted following the acts of infidelity were addressed in detail, including sexual consequences, physical consequences, and psychological consequences. It was discussed in some detail, the reasons that one may choose to engage in infidelity. A description of attachment styles and their complexities within the relationship, as well as the damage that is created by the act of infidelity

may all contribute to an attachment injury. The information that was found in this literature was explored using the following databases: ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, SAGE, ProQuest, and PubMed. The journal articles were peer-reviewed, and were from 2019-present, with the exception of those articles chosen to document historical events, which have indicated later dates.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The attachment theory was originally proposed by Bowlby to understand the framework in determining how people develop a sense of emotional security and stability throughout their life (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973). In the infant stages of development, people learn to regulate their emotional arousal based on the proximity and availability of their caregivers (Schore, 2001), and these interactions between them influence and contribute to their working, internal model of relationships with others, and these interactions are continuously sorted and filtered throughout one's life (Bowlby, 1973). Attachment theory identifies how human relationships are based on the need for emotional connection, proximity maintenance, and the need to have a secure base within one's relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

When the individual enters adulthood, romantic partners become the source of attachment, and the one that an individual looks to for support and to provide reciprocal care (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachment style is then determined by one's acceptance/tolerance of proximity (fear of dependence) and distance (fear of abandonment), which results in determining whether the attachment style will result in anxiety and avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998), with high levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance commonly associated with harmful, detrimental relationship outcomes (Mosley et al., 2020). Additionally, there is research supporting that both attachment anxiety and avoidance play a role in relationship issues such as infidelity, divorce,

and domestic violence (Mosley et al., 2020). Romantic partners become the object of our attachment when we enter into adulthood, and these intimate partners become the object of attachment, thus the primary care for one another (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In adulthood, the tolerance that individuals have for proximity and distance is the determining factor for what style of attachment occurs, in the form of anxiety (fear of dependence) or avoidance (fear of abandonment) (Brennan et al., 1998). Although anxiously attached individuals have an intense worry and desire for closeness in their intimate relationships, they tend to have difficulty in responding to the needs of their partner as a result of their own preoccupation with their personal anxiety and worries (Grabill & Kerns, 2000). As a result, individuals with characteristics of anxious attachment often experience adverse occurrences in their relationships, such as those with infidelity, which may be in an attempt to regulate emotional distress (Parker & Campbell, 2017). Additionally, individuals with high avoidance attachment levels are reluctant to disclose as a result of their expectations of outcomes resulting negatively within their intimate relationships (Cameron et al., 2009). Avoidant tendencies that lead to low levels of self-disclosure increase the likelihood of deceiving intimate partners (Ennis et al., 2008), which would explain how infidelity may occur and cause harm to the betrayed partner.

Individuals who are securely attached tend to approach relationships with the belief that others are safe and will offer them a comforting connection (Girard et al., 2020). Furthermore, the attachment theory indicates that “secure attachment is based on a sense that you exist and are prized in the mind of the other, that you can depend on the other when you need him/her and that this other will cherish and protect rather than reject or abandon you” (Johnson, 2005, p. 19). A secure bond is defined by a partner’s availability and responsiveness to their partner’s needs, demonstrated through efforts to meet one another’s expectations. Additionally, it is marked by

dependability, reflected in reliability and consistency, closeness fostered through presence and accessibility, and effective communication expressed through mutual interactions between the partners (Mitchell et al., 2021).

When there is a secure attachment bond between partners, these individuals depict their partners as someone who is supportive, cooperative, sensitive, and available, all of which contribute to the trust, commitment, and satisfaction that is experienced in the relationship (Mitchell et al., 2021). Securely attached individuals are not fearful of being rejected, nor of becoming too close to their partner (Bahнару & Runcan, 2019; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Insecurely attached individuals (anxious, avoidant, or both anxious and avoidant) believe that others are not safe, and they cannot rely on others for security.

Anxiously attached individuals in particular, do not trust that others will be there consistently for them, and they may consequently engage in aggressive actions in order to get attention in times of need or stress (Girard et al., 2020). Such aggressive actions may include an overexpression of negative emotions, and protesting with their partner in attempt to obtain a connection (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Individuals who are avoidantly attached less often express physical or emotional affection, and tend to separate love and sex in their relationships with others (Brennan & Shaver, 1995). The avoidantly attached find that it is difficult to give or receive intimacy in their relationships with others, and they have an increased probability of seeking intimacy outside of their committed relationship (Bahнару & Runcan, 2019). They exhibit an overt fear of dependence and are opposed to proximity of others when they are experiencing distress or anxiety (Mosley et al., 2020).

When one is anxious-ambivalent, they may seek inappropriate closeness, which is characterized by demanding extraordinary expressions of affection within their intimate

relationships in an attempt to lessen the feelings of rejection or abandonment by their partner (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). Additionally, anxious-ambivalent individuals have difficulty with long-term relationships when these extraordinary acts do not take place, therefore they may have difficulty attaining a long-term relationship, and if in a relationship, they may be the individuals who seek out infidelity in attempt to find this extraordinary expression and excitement that an outside affair may bring (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). Research has indicated that we can predict that a relationship will result in a negative outcome when there is anxious attachment present, whereas when secure attachment is present the outcome most often results in a positive relationship between the partners (Mosley et al., 2020).

In examining adult attachment theory, the romantic relationships that we form serve as a parallel to the attachment we had to our mother in infancy (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Both involve eye contact, touching, and a desire for comfort by one's intimate partner when anxious, stressed or angry, and/or sadness when separated from the loved one (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Therefore, when attachment is shaken and potentially shattered by infidelity, the safety and stability that the intimate relationship served can devastate the betrayed partner, resulting a perceived loss of control and feelings of hopelessness (Gordon et al., 2008; Warach & Josephs, 2021). In examining the attachment perspective, the betrayed partner can experience a disruption in trusting others, and becomes fearful, sometimes paranoid of future infidelity (Josephs, 2018; Schade & Sandberg, 2012; Warach & Josephs, 2021). This disruption in attachment can result in the betrayed partner no longer seeing their intimate, romantic partner as a secure base, and the breakdown and potential maladaptive symptomology may begin, due to attachment-related emotional distress (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Consequently, this attachment-related emotional distress results in an attachment injury, which may include feelings of self-blame, anger,

betrayal, and diminished self-worth (Fife et al., 2022). The attachment and security are damaged (Fife et al., 2022), and emotional and cognitive dysregulation often result for the betrayed partners (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

Attachment issues in adulthood are found to be associated with externalizing behaviors, such as physical and verbal aggression, as well as internalizing psychopathology, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and/or dissociative symptoms (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The attachment style that we carry into adulthood and our relationships with others is influenced by how we related to our parents/primary caregiver(s) as a child, and it establishes the blueprint for how we will perceive our relationships as we approach adulthood, also the time in which we begin our intimate relationships (Fraley, 2002; Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). As we encounter these interactions with others, seek relationships outside of our parents, and become romantically involved, we begin to develop our attachment style (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). Individuals enter into relationships with their own attachment style in ways that are predictable, however there are differences among individuals as to how strongly one may identify with each of the attachment styles (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). Though we typically have an attachment style that we enter into relationships with, one may resort to specific attachment styles in various circumstances or situations (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019), such as with the experience of infidelity, in that it often results in significant emotions and responses that are described as attachment-organized survival reactions (Butler et al., 2021; Gossner et al., 2022).

### **Infidelity**

The term “infidelity” varies depending on a multitude of factors, and there is little concurrence among researchers as to how to define infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Although it is agreed to be an understudied phenomenon, the scope as to how infidelity is defined has

continued to be an intriguing phenomenon among social scientists (Alexopoulos & Gamble, 2022). Infidelity is defined as a secretive behavior, which is said to occur as an emotional, sexual, and/or romantic relationship with another person outside of an individual's primary relationship, and this behavior is not agreed upon by the betrayed partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023). In an attempt to operationally define infidelity, Irvine et al., (2022) have proposed an operational description of infidelity, and assert that it is a clandestine emotional/romantic, physical/sexual, or technology-biased connection with someone outside of the exclusivity, and a violation of a trust agreement that has resulted in damage to the relationship and/or created distress for the betrayed partner. Although it is difficult to not cause damage and disappointment at times to one's partner, and there are times when rules and promises are broken in long-term, committed relationships (Grontvedt et al., 2020), the transgressions involving betrayal have significant damaging effects on the relationship (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

Infidelity is considered to be a violation of the relationship commitment when there is an understanding between partners, that the relationship is exclusive, and there are no other relationships of sexual, emotional, or a combination of the two with anyone other than the committed partner (Beltran-Morillas, et al., 2019). In a monogamous relationship, free from infidelity, there is a romantic commitment between two people, in which the committed partners agree through implicit or explicit agreement to love only one another, and to only engage in sex with one another (McKeever, 2020). Research that has been implemented across 160 cultures has indicated that infidelity within marriage is the most common reason that marriages break up or end in divorce (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Infidelity presents as one of the most challenging, complex problems that is encountered in couples therapy (Octaviana & Abraham, 2018).

Nationally, surveys indicate that between 11% and 25% of married Americans have

engaged in some type of infidelity (Warach & Josephs, 2021), and more than half of these marriages resulted in divorce or separation from their spouse (Alexopoulos & Gamble, 2022). Among dating individuals, 69% have reportedly engaged in infidelity (Alexopoulos & Gamble, 2022). When looking at the percentage of men and women who explicitly engaged in sexual intercourse, researchers found that 23% of men and 20% of women had engaged in extra-partner sexual intercourse at some point in their relationship (Walsh et al., 2024). If we expand the definition of infidelity to be inclusive of activities other than sexual intercourse, the rate of infidelity goes up to 69% of individuals who have engaged in infidelity (Walsh et al., 2024).

Infidelity does not have to occur in a face-to-face manner to be described as betrayal or meet the criteria for infidelity, which tends to be agreed upon by most partners in relationships, as was determined by 80% of people who indicated that online infidelity is considered to be betrayal and a form of infidelity (Adam, 2019). Researchers have been able to identify definitions or explanations that indicate when infidelity is taking place (Apostolou & Ioannidou, 2021). This definition of infidelity includes excessive time spent with another, observed changes in a partner's behavior, and avoiding conversations or discussions about the person with whom the unfaithful is having an affair with (Apostolou & Ioannidou, 2021).

Secrecy and deception are considered significant indicators of infidelity, and regardless of the type of infidelity, the violation of the relationship agreement due to secrecy, results in the unfaithful partner being untrustworthy and dishonest (Hughes, 2022). There are numerous reasons that have been found to result in the unfaithful partner choosing to engage in infidelity (Alexopoulos & Gamble, 2022). Some of these reasons are boredom within one's current relationship, dissatisfaction with one's partner, revenge or jealousy, sexual incompatibility with one's partner, insecurity and uncertainty in the relationship, sexual experimenting, immaturity,

geographical distance, poor communication with one's partner, and attraction to another individual with whom the affair occurs with (Alexopoulos & Gamble, 2022). There are individual variables among partners that can be predictive of whether one will engage in infidelity, such as attachment style, sexual attitudes, socio-demographic variables, couple variables (such as length of relationship) (Vowels et al., 2022).

### ***Sexual Infidelity***

Sexual infidelity is considered to be widespread, however little research has been done on this specific type of infidelity, which some believe is due to the notion that it is type of infidelity that is obviously wrong with little room for misinterpretation (McKeever, 2020). This type of infidelity incorporates the actual act of extramarital sexual relations or sexual contact with a third party outside of the committed, primary, intimate relationship, which may be an act defined as physical sexual behaviors or touch, intercourse, phone sex, sexting (sending nude photos or pictures of body parts) (Kassel, 2022), or kissing, fondling, oral sex, vaginal sex, or anal sex (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Infidelity is defined by some researchers as a breach of a partner's trust within the committed relationship, with the occurrence of some form of sexual contact with a third party (Wroblewska-Skrzek, 2021). This act of sexual contact occurs among all sexual orientations and is accompanied with deceit, unfaithfulness, and lies toward an intimate partner with whom one is in a relationship with (Wroblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Sexual infidelity is considered to be the main cause for divorce in the United States, and is a predictor of divorce more than substance abuse, domestic violence, or the loss of intimacy (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Difficulty may arise when sexual infidelity takes place, particularly when there is inequality in the relationship, such as when the partner with the most power is the one who engages in infidelity, particularly when the betrayed partner would have difficulty if they wanted

to leave the relationship (McKeever, 2020). It is also problematic if one of the partners in the committed relationship has more of an opportunity to engage in sexual infidelity in cases such as one in which their partner is at home caring for the children, while the other partner (the unfaithful one) is at a work function (McKeever, 2020). Although sexual infidelity is commonly seen as morally wrong by the partners in a committed relationship, the betrayed partner is also hurt by the humility felt because their partner engaged in sexual relations with another, and they often feel their partner cheated due to the loss of love and the betrayed partner not being enough to satisfy them (McKeever, 2020).

### ***Emotional Infidelity***

Emotional infidelity is more ambiguous and abstract by definition, and is often known as a form of non-physical cheating, which occurs when someone directs their emotional energy to someone other than their partner (Kassel, 2022). The unfaithful partner expresses desire, feelings, or a longing for someone other than their committed partner or spouse (Kassel, 2022). Emotional infidelity has also been defined as the unfaithful partner's development of deep, intimate feelings for the affair partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Other researchers describe emotional infidelity as crossing interpersonal boundaries, falling in love with someone outside of their committed relationship, or establishing an emotional connection with someone that is described as more than a friendship (Morrissey et al., 2019).

Emotional infidelity has also been described as an occurrence where emotional involvement takes place with someone outside of the committed marriage or relationship, in which the ground rules agreed upon by the intimate partners are violated, which may include spending money on someone, being committed to the affair partner in some way, being vulnerable with them, or sharing your deepest secrets and thoughts with them (Rokach & Chan,

2023). Emotional infidelity may also include romantic gestures, that takes place when one engages emotional behaviors, shows an interest in another, and/or considers the idea of emotional intimacy with someone outside of one's intimate relationship's ground rules (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Romantic forms of emotional infidelity may be defined by the things that you do for someone or with them, which may be evident by the feelings you have for someone outside of your marriage or committed relationship, or confiding in detail or intimately with someone outside of your committed relationship, keeping information from one's partner, or having emotional needs met by someone outside of one's committed relationship (Morrissey et al., 2019). In some cases, both emotional and sexual infidelity are engaged in simultaneously (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). When the unfaithful partner chooses to engage in a combination of emotional and sexual infidelity, it is referred to as composite infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

### ***Digital/Cyber Infidelity***

Engaging in cyber cheating activities often results in harming an individual's actual real-life relationships, and often negatively impacts marital satisfaction and decreases intimacy (Octaviana & Abraham, 2018). This may take place through social media, phone, or other internet forums (Kassel, 2022). Social media platforms have provided individuals with an increase in opportunities for infidelity to take place (Adam, 2019). Digital infidelity also features ways that individuals engage in cheating through online means, through various discrete behaviors, such as cybersex (Guadagno & Sagarin, 2010), online pornography and electronically engaging in communication with an affair partner outside of one's intimate, committed relationship (Weiser et al., 2017). The rise in digital infidelity has increased due to the ease of electronic interconnection, and this form of infidelity can be both sexual and emotional in nature (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Research has indicated that flirting and sexual behavior that is

engaged in via social media is perceived by betrayed partners to be similar to engaging in sexual infidelity, as both are deemed hurtful to the relationship (Adam, 2019). The use of matchmaking websites for people who are romantically involved in a committed relationship have also been found to be a source of infidelity (Chohaney & Panozzo, 2018), where the unfaithful partner may engage in sexually explicit phone or webcam interactions, or send sexually explicit pictures back and forth with another person (Warach & Joseph, 2021).

Research indicates that digital infidelity can constitute infidelity and betrayal that is comparable to the psychological consequences that in-person infidelity has on the betrayed individual (Cravens et al., 2013; Vossler, 2016; Warach & Josephs, 2021). With digital/cyber infidelity, this form of cheating raises the issue of sex addictions, and with the growing number of social networking websites, it is easy for individuals to not only access the websites, but to also become addicted sexually through online interactions (Octaviana & Abraham, 2018).

Digital infidelity is primarily carried out through the online/virtual realm (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Although the infidelity may start through online interaction, it may only be the beginning of infidelity, as it often progresses further, potentially to sexual or emotional infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023). In the process of recovery following digital infidelity, the betrayed partner and the unfaithful partner must address their perceptions of how digital infidelity is a violation of relational boundaries, and it may severely harm the relationship (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This raises the critical need to further address appropriate boundaries for future behavior outside of the relationship (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

**Gender Differences in Response to Infidelity.** There are inconsistencies among researchers in regard to gender differences in response to specific types of infidelity. However, Leeker and Carlozzi (2014) indicated that gender was not a significant factor in determining

reactions to emotional or sexual infidelity. Some research has indicated that there are gender differences when assessing responses to infidelity (Walsh et al., 2024). Specifically, emotional infidelity and sexual infidelity result in different amounts of jealousy and different reactions when comparing men and women (Walsh et al., 2024). More specifically, men have reported more jealousy when their partner engaged in sexual infidelity, whereas women had a tendency to display more jealousy in response to emotional infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Walsh et al., 2024). Women and men were found to be similar in their reactions to emotional infidelity, however when they were presented with sexual infidelity, women expressed an angrier response than men (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). With the occurrence of sexual infidelity, women expressed mostly anger and jealousy though had some presence of feelings of humiliation (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Men were found to be considerably less affected by humiliation than anger or jealousy (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014).

There is inconsistency among researchers over time, in that some researchers have reported that both men and women were found to be more disturbed overall by sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity (DeSteno et al., 2006; Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014; Ward & Voracek, 2004); whereas more recently other researchers have found that men are more jealous and distressed over female partners engaging in sexual infidelity, and women have been found to be more jealous and distressed with their partner engaging in emotional infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Walsh et al., 2024). Regardless of gender, conceptualizing the infidelity is unique to each individual as a unique traumatic experience, and may vary in regard to the type of infidelity (sexual or emotional) as well as the injury to the attachment of the individual (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

## **Infidelity as a Traumatic Experience**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5) specifies that external environmental stressors are an etiological factor for numerous mental illnesses, and the diagnostic category included in 2013 in the DSM-5 was “trauma and stressor-related disorders” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5), in order for one to be diagnosable for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the stressor experienced must involve actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (criterion A) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In comparison, in order to meet the diagnostic criteria for adjustment disorder, experiences that one may encounter in everyday life results in a reaction that is out of proportion in relation to a stressor, resulting in significant impairment to an individual’s social, professional, or other areas of life functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When considering the emotional reactions that often take place following infidelity, though adjustment disorder may be a better diagnostic fit based on the DSM-5, with the significant cognitive and behavioral reactions the often take place in response to the event of infidelity, there is reportedly enough evidence among researchers to indicate that it is a traumatic experience with symptoms comparable to those identified with the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (Lonergan et al., 2021; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Roos et al., 2019).

Although both post-traumatic stress disorder and adjustment disorder share some symptoms that are psychophysiological, those particularly found among betrayed partners often include hyperarousal, heightened anxiety, intrusive thoughts/flashbacks, rumination over the event, depressed mood, and emotional dissociation which is a distinction found in those diagnosable with post-traumatic stress disorder (Brunet et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023).

Researchers have found that betrayed partners who experienced infidelity have reportedly met all diagnostic criteria for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder with the exception of criterion A (Laaser et al., 2017; Longergan et al., 2021; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Roos et al., 2019).

When an individual in a marital relationship engages in infidelity, it is considered to be extremely detrimental to the relationship, often destroying the intimacy and impacting the security and emotional bond of the marital relationship (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023). Some of the damage as a result of the infidelity experienced by the betrayed partner may result in irreparable damage to relationships and emotional disturbances in the betrayed partner (Alavi et al., 2018). When infidelity is suspected by a betrayed partner, and the unfaithful partner denies the act, this is known as undisclosed infidelity. This act of infidelity consequently results in more severe traumatic symptoms, and the silence of the unfaithful partner in attempt to avoid being caught result in more traumatic symptoms for the betrayed partner (Curtis et al., 2021).

When someone is betrayed by their partner through an act of infidelity, it is often considered by the betrayed partner to be a trauma due to the violation of the relationship security, foundation, stability, comfort, and love (Brunet et al., 2022). The betrayed partner may experience both physical and emotional health consequences, and infidelity is considered by researchers to be one of the most destructive experiences that may jeopardize the security of a relationship (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Researchers can agree that due to the attachment-based trauma experienced in numerous cases of infidelity, we can label it as a valid, traumatic experience, however we must be aware that it is critically distinct from the diagnostic label of PTSD trauma (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Warach & Josephs, 2021).

### ***Infidelity as an Attachment Injury***

The adult attachment theory describes how our romantic relationships in adulthood are

comparable to the attachment that occurs in a parent-child relationship. When infidelity takes place in a relationship, this results in creating insecurity for the betrayed partner, and the betrayed partner can no longer see their partner as a secure foundation (Warach & Josephs, 2021). When the core beliefs of safety, security, and trust become infringed upon through the act of infidelity, this violation results in an “attachment injury” which results from such betrayal (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This attachment injury that results from infidelity is a form of interpersonal trauma, and it triggers significant emotions and responses that are described as attachment-organized survival reactions (Butler et al., 2021; Gossner et al., 2022).

The construct of attachment injury was formulated from the practice of emotionally focused therapy (EFT), which is an empirically validated approach often implemented in couple’s therapy, and considered to be one of the most effective approaches in working with couples to resolve struggles within their relationship (Makinen & Johnson, 2006). EFT is often utilized in therapy with couples who are experiencing emotional distress, such as often the case with infidelity (Goldman, 2019). EFT attempts to improve the relationship that was damaged by infidelity, through rekindling the physical and emotional bond that is sacrificed by the damage (Goldman, 2019). This supports the attachment theory, regarding the security and safety being damaged (Warach & Josephs, 2021), and EFT directly attempts to re-establish the security, trust and connection in the dysfunction created from the infidelity, and this restoration of emotion enables the couple to once again be open and responsive to one another (Goldman, 2019).

When one experiences an attachment injury, it is accompanied by overpowering levels of emotions, comparable to flashbacks that are indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (Darab & Etemadi, 2020). This traumatic response may include obsessive rumination, high anxiety, depression (Roos et al., 2019; Warach & Josephs, 2021), emotional numbness, and intrusive

images, and this attachment injury often results in chaotic, confused, contradictory, and incoherent behavior toward the unfaithful partner (Warach & Josephs, 2020). This attachment injury may also include intense emotions associated with feelings of betrayal, self-blame, anger, and a diminishing self-worth for the betrayed partner (Butler et al., 2022; Fife et al., 2022). The degree of traumatic response may vary in the impact that occurs for the betrayed partner and is dependent upon a multitude of factors, including age of betrayed partner, the nature of the infidelity, and the length of the relationship (Fife et al., 2022). This attachment injury that takes place in which damages the secure attachment, and injures one's sense of self, therefore affecting the betrayed partner's self-esteem (Josephs, 2018).

The self-image, personal confidence, and sexual confidence following infidelity are all contributing factors to the attachment injury that the betrayed partner experiences, and they consequently begin to doubt their romantic desirability (Warach & Josephs, 2021). There is a further complication that arises when a relationship ends as a result of infidelity, as the emotional issues for the betrayed partner are exacerbated (Fife et al., 2022). The traumatic reaction that is experienced by the betrayed partner emulates the behaviors and feelings that are found among those with a disorganized attachment style (Rokach & Chan, 2023). These behaviors and feelings are composed of immense psychological, emotional and cognitive dysregulation that is experienced by the betrayed partners (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

**Psychological Impact of Infidelity.** Initially, in the early period after disclosure and/or discovery of the affair, there are extreme emotions for the betrayed partner, as well as a profound sense of loss and betrayal (Butler et al., 2021). There are significant emotional and behavioral symptoms that the betrayed partner may experience because of infidelity, and the perpetrator of the infidelity may also experience a multitude of emotional symptoms as well (Gordon &

Mitchell, 2020; Warach & Josephs, 2021). Emotionally, there are a great deal of intense emotions that surface, such as betrayal, anger, shame, and sadness (Butler et al., 2021; Fife et al., 2022; Shrout & Weigel, 2018). The betrayed partner may experience a roller coaster of feelings, ranging from wanting to reclaim the relationship with the affair partner to ongoing, intermittent feelings of diminished self-worth and self-esteem (Fife et al., 2022).

As a result of infidelity, the betrayed partner may encounter various symptoms of anxiety, depression, and symptoms indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (Gordon & Mitchell, 2020). In addition, the experience of infidelity can significantly impact the psychological and physical health of children when they learn of infidelity within their parental relationship (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2021). The betrayed partner may experience a destruction of their core beliefs and an instability with their sense of well-being, followed by a questioning of the dependability of their partner and others (Butler et al., 2021; Fife et al., 2022; Warach et al., 2018). This often results in an inability to trust others and a decreased likelihood of pursuing romantic relationships in the future (Fife et al., 2022).

Behaviorally, the betrayed partner may have emerging difficulties coping, which may result in maladaptive coping strategies and futile attempts to control the unfaithful partner's behavior (Fife et al., 2022; Shrout & Weigel, 2018). Research indicates that when the betrayed partner initiates a divorce, it results in reduced depressive symptoms, however when the unfaithful partner initiates the divorce, there is an increased likelihood that depression will occur (Sweeny & Horwitz, 2001; Warach & Josephs, 2021). This may be a result of regaining of a sense of control when the betrayed partner takes the initiative to make the decision to divorce or separate, but when this is initiated by the unfaithful partner, the betrayed partner becomes re-injured yet again by the unfaithful partner's choice to leave (Warach & Joseph, 2021). The level

of commitment that the betrayed partner had to the relationship prior to the infidelity was a contributing factor in determining the amount of distress and anger that one experienced in response to emotional infidelity in comparison to sexual infidelity where distress and anxiety were more often experienced (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

Jealousy is the primary emotion that is experienced when one is made aware of infidelity by their partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Due to the feelings of anger, insecurity, betrayal, rage, resentment, confusion, and trauma that are experienced (Warach & Josephs, 2021), an intense reaction may be triggered that is expressed aggressively toward one's partner/spouse upon learning of infidelity, which is the leading cause of homicide in the United States (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Researchers have concluded that the act of infidelity may result in dangerous consequences for those who have experienced a betrayal such as infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

Mistrust and suspicion are ongoing difficulties for the betrayed partner, resulting in behaviors of hyper-vigilance of their partner's behaviors, which is often exhibited by means of over-controlling behaviors (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Often the betrayed partner becomes obsessed with the details of the infidelity, becoming persistent in questioning the details of the affair (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The betrayed partner may find themselves monitoring their partner's text messages, emails, phone calls, or implementing tracking devices to be aware of their partner's location (Josephs, 2018). Ongoing feelings of mistrust and suspicion may haunt the betrayed partner, and this may be evident in asking for their partner's schedule and whereabouts daily, with great effort to corroborate the details that they are provided with by their unfaithful partner (Warach et al., 2018). Betrayed partners often ask the unfaithful partner to avoid their affair partner, or the situation in which the infidelity occurred, including the

workplace (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

The betrayed partner may experience a great deal of confusion, whereas the attempts to monitor and control their partner is a form of disorganized attachment (Paetzold et al., 2017). This disorganized attachment results from the confusion, ambivalence, and apprehension about how they feel about the unfaithful partner, and the dilemma as to whether or not they want to remain in a relationship with them (Paetzold et al., 2017). Past studies have found that infidelity is associated with ongoing sleep difficulties, including difficulty falling sleep and/or difficulty staying asleep (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Many of these health-compromising behaviors are representative of disorganized attachment, as the betrayed partner attempts to dissociate from the emotional chaos of the infidelity, and most often takes place when the betrayed partner lacks healthy emotional regulation mechanisms (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The betrayed partner may still feel attachment to the unfaithful partner despite the pain caused by the infidelity, however they still experience a lack of trust in the unfaithful partner and struggle to see them as a secure base (Warach & Joseph, 2021).

**Sexual Consequences Following Infidelity.** Infidelity can result in significant harm to the sexual relationship if the couple chooses to stay together (Timm, 2023). As the couple tries to recover following infidelity, often there is a lack of attention given to the healing of this aspect of the relationship, as there are numerous ways that the sexual relationship may be affected following infidelity (Schnarch, 2009). The absence of a sexual relationship between the betrayed partner and the unfaithful partner, which is often a complete avoidance of sexual activity between the partners, can be a concern for the survival of the relationship (Schnarch, 2009). Although there may often be a decrease in sexual activity, or an absence of sexual activity following infidelity, this may be a result of the trauma experienced, sexual dysfunctions that may

develop, or other shifts in sexual expressions or behaviors (Timm, 2023). When an increase in sexual activity occurs following infidelity, for many, this may be attributed to the betrayed partner's feelings of fear of losing their partner, particularly with those who are anxiously attached individuals (Timm, 2023). The betrayed partner's feelings of desperation and panic becomes evident so the betrayed individual may turn to sex to ease this anxiety and panic, but realizes the feelings of panic and anxiety return after the sexual interaction is over (Timm, 2023).

The betrayed partner may experience a change in their sexual desires and needs from one day to the next, and though it may seem confusing for the unfaithful partner, it should be normalized and understood by them and handled with patience (Timm, 2023). For some couples, the development of a sexual dysfunction, or a significant shift in the way sexual behaviors or expressions are disclosed by the partners may occur, further complicating the current relationship or potential future relationships (Timm, 2023). Sexual dysfunctions as a result of infidelity may include issues such as erectile problems, low sexual desire, pain during intercourse, and an inability for one or both partners to orgasm (Timm, 2023). These issues may have been there prior to the infidelity, worsened as a result of the infidelity, or may have even improved following the infidelity (Timm, 2023). Research has indicated that when forgiveness is fostered by the partner who inflicted the attachment injury, and they initiate attention to the injury that resulted, there are positive results toward healing the sexual relationship and ultimately leading to sexual satisfaction within the damaged relationship (Lafontaine et al., 2022). A new sexual relationship is created as a part of healing, and the excitement and fantasy of being together sexually may create a new connection, or erotic recovery (Timm, 2023). Empathy is achieved through validating one another's feelings and pain, and with the expression of intimacy, eroticism (sexual desire and excitement) may take place that further heals the pain of infidelity

(Timm, 2023).

**Physical Repercussions Following Infidelity.** To date, there have been a limited number of studies done on the physical health consequences that result following trauma experienced by infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023). There has been research implemented that has found significant physical repercussions for the betrayed partner, many of which appear shortly following the shock of discovering that the affair has taken place (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Some research has indicated that betrayed partners have incessant symptoms that are somatic in nature, such as difficulty concentrating, insomnia, weight loss, poor appetite, and a reduced libido immediately upon learning of a partner's infidelity (Lonergan et al., 2021). When infidelity was studied among college students, it was found that among many students who had experienced infidelity within a committed relationship, they reported that they had experienced shaking and body trembling, breathing difficulties, extreme anxiety and nervousness, as well as accelerated heart racing (Roos et al., 2019).

Additional physical repercussions that may emerge from infidelity may be increased risk of developing a poorly functioning immune system because of the related stress (Warach et al., 2018). The elevated stress that is often associated with infidelity lessens the betrayed partner's ability to cope by depleting their self-regulatory ability and taking a toll on the body's allostatic systems (Weigel & Shrout, 2021). Researchers have found that betrayed partners have experienced other physical responses to infidelity, such as reduced eating/loss of appetite, increased alcohol and marijuana use, and excessively exercising (Shrout & Weigel, 2020).

Due to the physical affair, an unwanted pregnancy may occur, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases (Alexopoulos & Gamble, 2022; Warach & Josephs, 2021), and in some cases, physical aggression toward the unfaithful partner or affair partner (Alexopoulos &

Gamble, 2022). The betrayed partner may experience physical repercussions such as overall diminished health, the onset of various diseases, or premature death (due to suicide or exacerbated physical symptoms) (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Therefore, it appears that there is an ongoing need to continue to examine the lasting physical repercussions that result from experiencing infidelity, as well as even further exploration of preventative care for those involved in traumatic experiences as a result of infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

### **Why people engage in infidelity**

Studies have been conducted in attempt to understand the reasons why people have affairs, primarily through looking into their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors to assess the motivation behind this choice (Selterman et al., 2021). Selterman et al. (2021) found that those who chose to engage in infidelity varied in the length of their relationship, specifically from 1 month to 28 years. Furthermore, they found that those who were reportedly motivated by sexual desires, love and/or sexual variety, reported having a greater satisfaction sexually with their affair partner (Selterman et al., 2021). In contrast, in studies that found motivation to have an affair due to situational factors, individuals were reportedly less sexually satisfied with the experience with the affair partner, and the infidelity was shorter in length of time compared to those in more long-term infidelity (Garcia et al., 2018).

Additional motivating factors found when assessing motivation to engage in infidelity included: the desire for more sex from one's partner, feeling angry about a partner's behavior, wanting more autonomy, having a low level of commitment, feeling neglected by one's partner, situational stress contributing to relationship issues, and wanting to increase the number of sexual partners (Selterman et al., 2021). Other researchers indicate that there may be a desire to seek sexual diversity among partners, a lack of love in their relationship, and situational factors

to explain the act of infidelity (Selterman et al., 2021). When one feels that there are emotional issues in their marriage or relationship, they may seek a deeper connection with a partner outside, which is an attempt to compensate for the deficit with the intimacy they feel with their primary partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

Research indicates that some individuals engage in infidelity to deliberately hurt their partner, and these individuals tend to be less committed to the relationship, and reportedly feel a deficiency in the amount of love they received from their relationship with their partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Selterman et al., 2021). Furthermore, when infidelity takes place, it is not necessarily the end of a relationship, though it does significantly increase the likelihood that the relationship will result in separation or divorce (Lewandowski, 2021). When infidelity is initiated as a result of anger, lack of love, neglect by one's partner, or because of low commitment to the relationship, divorce and separation become even more likely (Lewandowski, 2021). Additionally, it was found that only 1 out of 10 (11.1 %) of affair relationships resulted in a committed relationship between the affair partners (Lewandowski, 2021).

When the unfaithful partner chooses to have an affair because of a lack of love, a lack of appreciation, or a lack of sexual desire, they are more likely to leave their marriage/relationship, and start a relationship with their affair partner (Selterman et al., 2021). Though most infidelity involves some form of sexual infidelity, it is rarely just about sex (Lewandowski, 2021). Research has indicated that most people who engage in infidelity report feeling some level of emotional attachment to their affair partner, it was significantly more common among those who indicated a lack of love or feelings of neglect from their partner (Lewandowski, 2021). Additionally, those individuals who felt a lack of love from their partner reported having more intellectually and emotionally satisfying affair relationships (Lewandowski, 2021).

## **After the Affair**

In exploring the aftermath of infidelity, it is agreed upon by researchers that the initial reaction experienced upon learning of a partner's infidelity is intense pain, anger, betrayal and a loss of trust (Fife et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021; Olson et al., 2002). There may be constant uncertainty and confusion as to whether one should remain in the relationship and how to begin to start over (Butler et al., 2021). It is a significant part of healing to manage the challenging, hurtful emotions and understand the cognitive components surrounding the causes and consequences of infidelity (Fife et al., 2022).

After the initial reaction and shock for the betrayed partner, processing takes place, and often the couple may begin to commit to repairing the damage that occurred in the relationship following the infidelity (Butler et al., 2021; Fife et al., 2022). This is typically when therapy is sought, and remorse is expressed by the unfaithful partner (Fife et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021). During this time, the betrayed partner may be able to set aside their trauma and pain in attempt to allow the relationship some period of stability (Fife et al., 2022). Some couples may ultimately begin to understand and find meaning to the infidelity and may become closer through this openness and healing process (Fife et al., 2022; Gossner et al., 2022), and others may continue to struggle with the pain and aftereffects of the infidelity as individuals and/or couples (Baucom et al., 2017; Fife et al., 2022; Gossner et al., 2022).

In addition to the various mental disorders and psychological instability, such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and psychosomatic disorders) that may result from experiencing infidelity, infidelity can also result in harm to the quality of life and the psyche of the betrayed partner as well as the unfaithful partner (Tourki et al., 2022). Some issues that arise for the betrayed partner may include withdraw and emotionally divorcing themselves

from the unfaithful partner which is often accompanied by a loss of affection (Ein-Dor et al., 2015; Tourki et al., 2022). The couple typically experiences numerous themes following infidelity, which includes both psychological and physical reactions: Shock and denial, anger and hatred, anxiety and rumination, depression and frustration, cognitive errors (self-defeating thinking), negative emotions, sleep disorders, and physical symptoms (tremors, increased heart rate) (Tourki et al., 2022). There are feelings of anger, revenge, and hatred that are reportedly experienced by many betrayed partners (Roos et al., 2019).

One factor that determines how the betrayed partner will respond following infidelity is self-esteem (a stable sense of liking oneself, self-worth, and self-acceptance), and it is critical in buffering the difficulties and trauma involved with infidelity (Tourki et al., 2022). The critical component of self-esteem in the healing process is what promotes positive appraisals, and weakens the intensity of one's response to the stress of infidelity (Tourki et al., 2022). After experiencing infidelity, the relationship between the partners can potentially strengthen, and the positive characteristics and traits of both partners may become evident, thus resulting in a positive display of these traits not previously appreciated (Kosheva et al., 2019). The ability to cope with the repercussions of infidelity involves repeated attempts to address the feelings that are excessive and overwhelming, through the use of existing logical and psychological capabilities and resources that already exist both within the individual and their environment (Tourki et al., 2022).

Some research on behavior following infidelity indicates that when women are the betrayed partners, they have a tendency to respond by engaging in selfish behavior, which often involves self-absorption and a focus on what they need and desire (Atapour et al., 2021). One focus is on their need to ensure their own safety and protection through caution and vigilance

when pursuing future relationships, whether with the existing partner or future partners, which is aimed at self-protection (Tourki et al., 2022). When women experience betrayal as a result of infidelity, they experience increased suspicion and avoid being open and forthcoming in conversations pertaining to relationships (Tourki et al., 2022).

### ***Healing/Posttraumatic Growth***

Although the consequences of infidelity are severe and may result in a dissolution of the relationship, many individuals are able to heal to some degree over time, even when a great deal of stress is experienced (O'Connor & Canevello, 2019). The process that individuals progress from initial distress to growth and healing after infidelity has taken place has posed a gap in research (Fife et al., 2022). Post-traumatic growth is described as an increased personal strength or a restored sense of life and meaning, and an improvement in one's interpersonal relationships following a trauma (Jules et al., 2023). Although post-traumatic stress is the opposite of post-traumatic growth, and is characterized by intrusive thoughts and memories of trauma experiences and anxiety and depressive symptoms in response to triggers, post-traumatic growth and post-traumatic stress can occur simultaneously in response to the same stressor (Jules et al., 2023).

Following traumatic events, the intrusive thoughts can become deliberate and purposeful, and the betrayed partner may attempt to rebuild and process their core beliefs that allow them to incorporate the traumatic events (Jules et al., 2023). The betrayed partner may ultimately find meaning in the trauma, and the rumination that takes place as a result of the traumatic event may ultimately promote post-traumatic growth (Jules et al., 2023). Throughout the process of modifying the core beliefs of the betrayed partner that become shaken or potentially shattered by the infidelity, and beginning the process adjusting to the new reality following the infidelity, the revising of core beliefs in response to traumatic events becomes central in determining whether

post-traumatic growth will occur in response to a traumatic event (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

Infidelity is seen as the most difficult problems to address in a therapeutic setting primarily due to both the individual and relationship difficulties and challenges that it presents (Mitchell et al., 2022). The reaction that betrayed partners experience in response to infidelity varies from one person to another, and these reactions may differ based on what one perceives from the infidelity event that took place (Rokach & Chan, 2023). The act of infidelity that is experienced is sometimes referred to as a causal attribution, in that it may be perceived as either a threatening message or a conciliatory message depending on the perception by the betrayed partner (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). How the betrayed partner processes and interprets the affair may also be determined by the level of satisfaction that they reportedly had in their relationship prior to the infidelity engaged in by their partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Betrayed partners who are more dissatisfied in their relationship may see the infidelity as more of a threat to the relationship, which may increase the likelihood of the relationship resulting in a breakup, whereas others may be more capable of forgiving the infidelity and continuing in the marriage/relationship (Grontvedt et al., 2020).

In the process of healing following infidelity, the couples are able to discuss infidelity and contributing factors that resulted from the act of infidelity as the emotional security and safety begin to increase, which may also include the vulnerabilities as a couple as well as individually (Baucom et al., 2017; Butler et al., 2021). The unfaithful partner can increase the trust for the betrayed partner, and it is critical that they express accountability and trustworthy behavior in this process (Gossner et al., 2022). Additionally, the ability to communicate is a significant contributing factor in the healing process following infidelity (Mitchell et al., 2021). Communication would specifically include frequent conversations, and a willingness to talk

about the affair with specific time set aside to have these conversations (Mitchell et al., 2021). This time set aside to address the questions and specifics regarding the act of infidelity are a critical part of the recovery process following the infidelity (Mitchell et al., 2021).

An additional factor that contributes to a healthy recovery and potentially post-traumatic growth is the openness and sharing feelings between partners, which entails checking in with one another throughout the day, in attempt to regain closeness for healing (Mitchell et al., 2022; Timm & Blow, 2018). Attending therapy is an additional step in the healing process, in that there is a level of commitment that is given to the betrayed partner to aid in the healing process (Mitchell et al., 2022). The healing process is typically normalized as a slow recovery by the therapist, and realistic expectations for both partners can be established in the therapeutic setting (Mitchell et al., 2022).

### ***Forgiveness and Intimacy***

Research indicates that these are critical aspects that should be addressed in therapy when working with couples following acts of infidelity (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). Forgiveness is not simple, though it is one of the most significant factors for long-term relationships to be successful (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019; Perel, 2018). Forgiveness entails increasing acceptance and compassion, but it must be earned, and it requires restitution (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019; Perel, 2018). Forgiveness of the unfaithful partner following infidelity aids in dissipating anger, stopping the ruminations, and lessening the betrayed partner's fear of the infidelity reoccurring (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019).

The intimacy of the relationship is also significantly impacted as a result of infidelity (Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). Following acts of infidelity, it is critical to address the intimacy and re-build the damage by making ongoing, open communication a priority (Fife et al., 2022;

Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). The process of re-building the intimacy within the relationship is multi-dimensional, and involves repairing the feelings of safety, and addressing fears of abandonment that the betrayed partner is experiencing (Fife & Weeks, 2010; Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019). It is also critical that there be additional focus on the feelings of losing control, anger, and fear of being rejected, all of which are critical in the healing process (Fife & Weeks, 2010; Bahnaru & Runcan, 2019).

**Therapy to Address Infidelity.** There has been a recent increase in the need for therapy to address affair recovery, and it has become more distressing that there is a lack of competency found among clinicians in treating the issue of infidelity, as well as a growing need for evidence-based treatments to address the issue (Irvine et al., 2023; Irvine & Peluso, 2022). When a couple presents with the trauma of infidelity in therapy, there is a unique set of issues that need to be addressed by a trained therapist, as this is considered to be one of the most challenging issues that is presented to therapists (Irvine et al., 2023; Irvine & Peluso, 2022). Research has indicated that although integrative couples therapy, and emotionally focused therapy have often been implemented in approaching the trauma of infidelity in therapy, there are limitations found in these approaches, and they have not proven to be as effective as the Gottman Method Couple's Therapy (GMCT) (Irvine et al., 2023).

***Gottman Method Couple's Therapy GMCT.*** This is a systematic, therapeutic approach that addresses betrayal, trust, conflict, and the issues involved with infidelity (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Irvine et al., 2023). In working with infidelity, the Trust Revival Method (TRM) was formulated by Gottman and Gottman (2017) in effort to promote healing and recovery after infidelity (Irvine et al., 2023). This approach focuses on PTSD symptoms that are often present, while attempting to lessen the distress and dissatisfaction that is occurring in the relationship

following the act of infidelity (Irvine et al., 2023). The TRM is comprised of three phases to the treatment process, atone, attune, and attach (Irvine et al., 2023). In implementing the atone phase of treatment, the focus is on assisting the betrayed partner with obtaining answers to details of the infidelity, expressing their pain to the unfaithful partner, and hearing remorse and sorrow from the unfaithful partner (Irvine et al., 2023). With the attunement phase, the focus is on problems that were present in the relationship prior to the infidelity, in an attempt to strengthen the relationship (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Irvine et al., 2023). In the final phase of treatment, the attachment phase, the focus is on rebuilding the trust and implementing the re-attachment and strengthening of the relationship, through connecting, deepening, renewing the commitment (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Irvine et al., 2023).

***Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)***. This approach is often used to address damage caused by infidelity with distressed couples (Greenberg et al., 2010; Goldman, 2019). This type of therapy is based on the attachment theory, and it focuses on emotional experiences and reactions, and it targets the emotional alarms that may have been triggered by the betrayed partner's fear of abandonment (Goldman, 2019). The therapist assists the couples with exposing their vulnerability which leads to discovering unmet needs and cravings for closeness, resulting in support of one another through the pain of infidelity (Goldman, 2019; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016).

***The Attachment Injury Resolution Model (AIRM)***. This approach is often used in working with couples who have experienced infidelity (Dehghani et al., 2020). AIRM was adapted from the emotionally focused couples therapy model and is aimed at reducing intrusive thoughts caused by the trauma of infidelity and repairing the damage that resulted from the broken commitment (Dehghani et al., 2020; Irvine et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2021). AIRM

addresses the act of infidelity as an attachment injury, and the goal of treatment is to decrease stress, minimize conflict, increase trust, and facilitate interaction between the couple seeking treatment (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023).

***Integrative Couple's Therapy Approach (ICT).*** The ICT was developed based on the cognitive-behavioral theories, forgiveness, insight theory, and the theory of how one responds to trauma (Baucom et al., 2011). In this approach, infidelity is considered to be a negative, harmful act, which destroys one's fundamental security and beliefs of relationships (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023). This therapeutic process is comprised of 3 steps, which include: recognizing that trauma that has taken place because of the infidelity, recognizing the effects and results of the infidelity, and continuing to live with new mindset and necessary adaptations to the relationship (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023; Stamps, 2021). Research has indicated that ICT is most effective and efficient, and will result in an increase in intimacy among couples, and less distress in the relationship when the treatment has reached completion (Baucom et al., 2017; Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023; Ghochani et al., 2020).

Regardless of the treatment approach chosen by the clinician to address the trauma of infidelity, it is imperative that clinicians feel prepared, effective, and confident in addressing the issue of infidelity (Irvine et al., 2023). due to the frequency and challenge that it brings to therapy and the trauma that is experienced as a result (Irvine & Peluso, 2022; Irvine et al., 2023).

### **Further Research**

Future research recommendations would be suggested to examine the relationship between suicidal behavior and distress as a result of infidelity within one's relationship (Rokach & Chan, 2023). There is only one study found that assessed the relationship between suicidal behavior and distress as a result of infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Stephens, 1985). Research

on the effects of infidelity has indicated gaps in research and a need for clinicians to engage in further training on infidelity, which would be useful and beneficial to enhance competence in approaching and understanding what is involved when working with individuals and couples who have experienced the trauma of infidelity (Irvine & Peluso, 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023). There is limited research that further explores whether therapy is considered to be effective in working with couples or individuals who have experienced infidelity, therefore additional research on therapy and outcomes with couples would be beneficial in working with those who have experienced infidelity (Fife et al., 2022). Although infidelity has occurred at a high prevalence rate, and the distress that occurs on the relationship and individuals involved, there has historically been little research that has been conducted on assessing the experiences and healing process of couples who have experienced infidelity (Fife et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021). The proposed research will explore the effects of trauma symptoms experienced by the betrayed partner as a result of infidelity, and whether or not this trauma has an effect on future attachments in the betrayed partner's relationships (whether with the unfaithful partner or someone else). This research is considered to be the next logical step to determine the impact of experiencing infidelity on the betrayed partner's future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

### **Summary**

Infidelity can pose a great deal of stress within a marriage or intimate relationship, and most often results in devastating effects on a relationship, especially on the betrayed partner (Roos et al., 2019). The betrayed partner often experiences a great deal of psychological distress (Shrout & Weigel, 2020), also known as an interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020), and infidelity is an intrusion that ultimately impacts the foundation of the relationship, destroys the security of the relationship, and often has

consequences for the betrayed partner such anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms for the betrayed partner (Lonergan et al., 2021; Shrout & Weigel, 2020).

Infidelity is defined differently among sexes, socioeconomic statuses, and throughout cultures, and what is considered to be infidelity in one culture may differ from another (Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019).

Infidelity through sexual contact with an individual outside of a committed relationship occurs among all sexual orientations and is most often accompanied with lies, unfaithfulness, and deception toward the betrayed partner (Wroblewska-Skrzek, 2021). Many consider infidelity to be an infringement on the relationship commitment between partners, by involvement with another outside of this relationship (Alsaleem, 2017). Infidelity is described as any type of secretive romantic behavior which infringes on the commitment that has been ascertained by the partners (Rokach & Chan, 2023), and previous phenomenological studies have indicated that even when one is suspicious that infidelity is occurring or when infidelity is actually experienced, this is considered to be one of the most distressing events that can take place in an intimate relationship (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014).

In reviewing and examining the research that has been done to date on infidelity within intimate relationships, numerous areas were explored in detail. Gender differences in response to infidelity were assessed, and some inconsistencies were found. Specifically, sexual, emotional, intellectual, and digital/cyber infidelity and the consequences that these particular types of infidelity have on the betrayed partner were assessed and addressed. There was an examination of the literature as to why people engage in infidelity. The consequences of infidelity were addressed, including psychological, sexual, and physical, repercussions as a result of infidelity.

Attachment styles were explained, defined, and addressed as to how they are formulated

for individuals in relationships. When one experiences an attachment injury, it is accompanied by overpowering levels of emotions, comparable to flashbacks that are indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (Darab et al., 2020). Due to the trauma experienced as a result of infidelity and the attachment injuries that may occur, there is a need to conduct further research in this area (Warach & Josephs, 2021). For some betrayed partners, they may find meaning in the trauma, and the consequences of the traumatic event may result in post-traumatic growth, but there is further research needed in this area as well (Jules et al., 2023).

This research identified symptoms that were experienced by the betrayed partners as a result of infidelity, identified whether attachment injuries had occurred, and contributed to future studies that may aspire to find treatments and strategies to address this occurrence within intimate relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This research was necessary to determine whether trauma from infidelity was severe enough to change the betrayed partner's attachment style and under what circumstances this change occurred (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the impact of trauma symptoms experienced by betrayed partners due to their partner's infidelity and explore if this trauma influenced future attachments in the betrayed partner's relationships (whether with the unfaithful partner or someone else). This research was the next logical step in exploring the impact that infidelity has on the future relationships of betrayed partners (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The problem addressed in this research is that infidelity is an interpersonal trauma that can negatively impact future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This interpersonal trauma often results in long-term psychological damage for the betrayed partner who experiences it, with lasting, profound emotional consequences (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This researcher explained the qualitative method of research being proposed, the sample of participants that were sought after, the data collection process, and the data analysis procedure for the research. The research method and design were explained, as well as the assumptions, limitations, and potential ethical issues that arose.

#### **Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)**

This study implemented a phenomenological method, which is a philosophical approach that utilized paradigms and disciplines (Ayton, 2023; Dowling, 2007) from the viewpoint of the individual, and investigated how their world was constructed through their life and experiences (Ayton, 2023; Creswell et al., 2007). A phenomenological approach was chosen, as it was intended to gain an understanding of the betrayed partner's experiences, as well as gather the interpretations of these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research was intended to explore how the participants describe, interpret, and reflect upon their individual

experiences (Maxwell, 2005), which ultimately enables researchers to collect data that cannot be measured through numerical data such as what is collected through quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

In choosing to utilize this integrative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, there were two main goals with this proposal: to look at the detail of the betrayed partner's response to their lived experiences, and to provide the detailed interpretation of the betrayed partner's account in attempt to understand what had resulted from their experience (Tuffour, 2017). This approach to the proposed qualitative research provided a detailed comprehensive view of the phenomenon (attachment injury), which was necessary to explore the complex manner and the complex nature of the experience (Creswell, 2013) of infidelity. Additionally, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is considered to be a flexible, versatile approach in understanding the experiences of the participants (Tuffour, 2017).

IPA appeared to be the most reasonable approach to gathering information on the lived experiences of betrayed partners, and assessed whether attachment injuries had taken place, and whether the attachment injuries impacted future relationship decisions of the betrayed partner whether they stayed with the unfaithful partner or pursued future relationships. Researchers have indicated that the pursuit of research to make this determination as to whether the attachment injury that resulted from infidelity was significant enough to impact future relationships appears to be an area worth exploring (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Traumatic experiences such as those that result from experiencing infidelity as a betrayed partner are considered interpersonal traumas, and are considered to be more severe than non-interpersonal trauma experiences (Hughesdon et al., 2021). Therefore, this research was considered to be the next logical step recommended in the study of infidelity, attachment injuries, and their effect on betrayed

partner's future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

In contrast to quantitative research that utilizes numerical data collection, qualitative research allows for an in-depth, contextualized data collection that cannot be measured through a numerical data collection approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Through performing qualitative research, the primary goal is to investigate how the participants interpret their individual experiences, which allows us as researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their behavior (Fossey et al., 2002). Qualitative research allows us to implement research through the use of observations, interviews, and focus groups, which enable us to gain insight into the behaviors, beliefs, values, cultures, and the attitudes of the participants (Creswell & Clark Plano, 2011), and to ultimately embody the experiences of the participants using their feedback and to accomplish a “universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Conducting a qualitative study was the most useful in this research, as this research captured the contextualized information, through the collection of lived experiences of the participants, all of which cannot be measured by the numerical data that is collected in quantitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

An additional type of qualitative research method that was considered was the case study which utilizes a specific case as an example in the research as a way of understanding the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). With case studies, they are not focused on individual experiences, rather they focus on an issue within a case, where there may be single or multiple cases that are observed over a period of time (Creswell, 2007). In researching the observed cases, there may be numerous approaches used, such as interviews, audiovisuals, and sometimes empirical observation (Yeh & Inman, 2007). With this particular research, the case study was not determined to be appropriate, as it is not focused on the lived experiences of the betrayed partners.

An additional approach in qualitative research that was considered for this research is the narrative research approach. Although narrative research also focuses on the detailed descriptions provided by the research participants, it differs from phenomenology in that there is a focus on the participants providing their story chronologically (Creswell et al., 2007). Narrative research does not focus on the essence of the experience, even though it does gather detailed information about experiences of the participants, just as phenomenological research does (Creswell et al., 2007). The procedure chosen to conduct this research was a interview/questionnaire approach, as opposed to having the betrayed partners describe their story using a narrative approach.

The grounded theory is an approach in research that goes beyond a phenomenological description or experience and is more aimed at developing a theory grounded in the experience of the participants involved in the research (Creswell et al., 2007). It was determined that the pursuit of exploring the intricacies of the participants lived experiences was the goal, thus we concluded that the grounded theory was not considered to be appropriate for this study. In this study, the participants were involved in questioning that was aimed at finding the commonalities among the betrayed partners, and they participated in interview questioning that attempted to discern the patterns of their experiences from each of their perspectives.

This research aimed to answer two important research questions. The first question assessed if the trauma of the infidelity resulted in an attachment injury that impacted the decision to pursue future relationships if the relationship with the unfaithful partner was ended. The second question assessed whether the attachment injury resulted in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in the relationship with the unfaithful partner. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the betrayed partners in an attempt to understand the distress

caused by experiencing infidelity, assessed if an attachment injury resulted after the experience of infidelity, and determined whether the betrayed partner's decision to pursue future relationships was impacted because of the infidelity.

This research study explored the lived experiences of betrayed partners who have experienced infidelity within their relationship and assessed whether the infidelity experienced resulted in an attachment injury that resulted in an impact on future relationships of betrayed partners. This study was qualitative, and utilize an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as this methodology examines the details and provides an analysis of the lived experiences of the participants (Tuffour, 2017), which is the betrayed partners in this research study.

When conducting a phenomenological research study, the ideal population is one in which the participants are encompassing of individuals who can provide the researcher with access to the phenomenon being studied (Wertz, 2005). This research population is made up of those who have experienced infidelity (sexual, emotional, or digital) within their intimate relationship. The individuals who were recruited to participate in this study were those who experienced infidelity as a betrayed partner, were over the age of 18, and had been in a relationship with the unfaithful partner for at least five years (past or present).

There are between 11-25% of Americans who have reportedly engaged in extra-marital sex at least once in their lives (Warach & Josephs, 2021), with other research indicating that among undergraduate students in North America, approximately 20-40% reported engaging in sexual infidelity (Weiser et al., 2017). In regard to emotional infidelity, the prevalence has not been researched extensively, though the studies that have been conducted have indicated that 18% of participants reported engaging in emotional infidelity without sexual infidelity

(Thompson, 1984). The research conducted was considered to be the next logical step in research on betrayed partner's and their experience with infidelity, particularly in determining the impact on the betrayed partner's future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

In conducting this study, this researcher aimed for a sample size that was a sufficient number of participants for a phenomenological study. Specific to this study, saturation was reached at 9 participants, with a typical number of participants ranging from 6 to 10 according to some researchers (Naeem et al., 2024) and aligning with Creswell's (2007) recommendation that 5 to 25 participants are typically adequate for phenomenological research. Historically, in phenomenological research, the size of the participants must be large enough to be representative and generalizable while producing results that are reliable, which occurs when saturation is reached (Polit & Beck, 2010).

Saturation is reached when the process of interviewing and observing participants no longer results in new themes or insights (Neubauer et al., 2019). In phenomenological, qualitative research, saturation in data collection can be identified early in the process, prior to the formal analysis stage, in which the researchers begin to notice that they are hearing the same information repetitively throughout the interviews (Saunders et al., 2018). In the process of data analysis, saturation is achieved when the process of examining data does not result in producing any new themes (Given, 2016) or codes in the categories that emerge in the data (Urquhart, 2013). Researchers must be aware of the concept of saturation when conducting a qualitative study as this is a critical component in preserving the credibility and the depth of the results that become evident (Neubauer et al, 2019). The term data saturation was originally devised as a broad research process in attempt to describe the objective obtained in the research process which determines that enough data was gathered to allow the research to reach the essential

conclusions, and any further data would not provide any further understanding or added conclusions to the research implemented (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Lincoln and Guba (1986) describe the Four-Dimensions Criteria in qualitative research as: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Enworo, 2023). Credibility in phenomenological research assesses whether the findings and judgements in the research are trustworthy and to what extent the data can be interpreted in a sensible, comprehensive manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Credibility aims to establish a means of confidence resulting from the participation of the research participants (Enworo, 2023). This confidence and credibility are obtained through the engagement process, ongoing observation, triangulation, debriefing among peers, and checks among members (Guba & Lincoln, 1986). Confidence can be further extended when the study is able to be confirmed or corroborated by additional researchers (Forero et al., 2018). Dependability within the research is defined as the extent in which the conditions within the research are equivalent, so that the same results would be achieved if the study were to be repeated (Morse, 2015). Confirmability illustrates that the findings and interpretation of the research are clearly linked to the findings within the data and not the idea of the researchers themselves (Enworo, 2023). Furthermore, among the Four-Dimensions Criteria, the transferability is the degree that the results of the qualitative research can be generalizable or transferable to other situations or settings (Forero et al., 2018).

### **Population and Sample**

The participants were obtained through a social media post. As specified by the National University institutional review board (IRB), the post took place via Facebook through a closed and moderated group. Permission to implement the post was obtained from the IRB through the National University IRB application process. Each of the participants met the following criteria:

- Identified as a betrayed partner who was at least 18 years of age, and had experienced infidelity that was sexual (intercourse, phone sex, or sexting) emotional (expressed desire or feelings for another person), digital/internet (texts, emails, phone calls or other internet forums), and/or intellectual (conversations about hopes, dreams, or other encouragement excluding their intimate partner) by their partner.
- The relationship with the unfaithful partner was long-term (for at least 5 years). The relationship could have ended or intact at the time of the interview.
- Participants had to be willing to participate in an interview that involved intimate questions about the infidelity and consequences that resulted from the infidelity. The interviews were conducted in a confidential, online format for approximately one hour in length.
- All participants were allowed to withdraw at any time during the process if they felt uncomfortable for any reason.
- A \$50 Amazon gift card was provided to all participants. Resources and referrals were provided for all participants when needed.

### **Materials or Instrumentation**

The participants participated in interviews that were conducted in an online semi-structured interview format. Historically, cognitive interviewing incorporates elements of interventions, measures, or policies, while offering the elements as stimuli to be responded to, followed by an investigation of the participant's narrative that reveals the nature of the responses while evaluating intention of the element being presented (Kvale, 2007). The process of interviewing in qualitative research operates as an enhancing and a confirmatory role, particularly when it is meant to be iterative and improved with each step (Kvale, 2007). Even

though new delivery modalities continue to be developed, the information that is studied, such as content, flow, instructional sets, functionality, and intent, have all remained the same (Kvale, 2007). The interviews in this research were confidential, and the identity of the participants were changed to keep the participant's identity confidential. With confidentiality, the researcher takes every measure possible to protect the identity of the participants, however there are limitations (Surmiak, 2019). If a participant had disclosed that they planned to hurt themselves or someone else, the confidentiality would have no longer been protected and the confidentiality of the participant could not have been maintained (Surmiak, 2019), and this information would have been disclosed to the IRB. However, privacy was implemented in the consent to treatment, in the storage of the research materials, and the name/identity of the participant. After 3 years post research, the records of the participants will be disposed of through a confidential shredding process.

This phenomenological research utilized semi-structured interviews, which were comprised of carefully chosen questions (see Appendix B) that explored the experiences of the betrayed partners. The questions were comprised of the betrayed partners lived experiences, with specific questions that were aimed at gathering data on their experiences with infidelity, the type of infidelity, the psychological symptoms experienced, and the attachment injuries that may have resulted. These questions were comprised by the researchers of this study, (see Appendix B) and were presented to the participants in the zoom interviews, and the data was recorded and analyzed. By implementing the use of semi-structured interviews, this researcher was able to probe into topics, while also modifying the questions depending on the responses of the betrayed partners (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The use of semi-structured interviews has been used in past research studies, as their data is an accurate reflection of the individual experiences of

participants with outcomes that have been considered reliable and valid in the research process (Lambert et al., 2018).

### **Study Procedures**

Following the approval by the National Institutional Review Board, participant recruitment commenced. The gathering of participants was obtained through social media posts, specifically by Facebook platforms (see Appendix A). As specified by the National University institutional review board (IRB), the post took place via Facebook through a closed and moderated group. Permission to implement the post was obtained from the IRB through the National University IRB application process as well as from the moderated group contact person.

When participants were recruited, the objectives of the research were provided, as well as the eligibility requirements of the participants, the contact information of the researcher conducting the study, and the incentive that was provided to the participants (\$50 Amazon gift card). The individuals that expressed interest for involvement in the study received an emailed consent letter (Appendix C) which included their rights, the procedures of the study, and the schedule of interview options. The interviews took place on a private Zoom interview with a platform that was only accessible by the participant and interviewer that were provided with it. The interviews were kept on a platform in which there was an interview of 60 minutes or less. The questions that were asked of the participants were open-ended and semi-structured, which allowed for the betrayed partners to share their lived experiences following the infidelity that occurred in their relationship.

The researcher provided the participants with a greeting, introduction, thanks for participating, and answered any questions that the participant had following the interview. Participants were allowed to stop the participation at any point throughout the research and

interview process, though none of the participants chose to withdraw. Throughout the interview process, anonymity was maintained among all participants. There were no repercussions for withdraw regardless of the time the withdraw took place in the research process, or the reason for withdrawing.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began at the time the participants agreed to participate and sign the consent for treatment. Data was collected for the research through the betrayed partners' participation in semi-structured interviews. Throughout these interviews, the participants answered questions about their lived experiences of infidelity and attachment injuries. This research included predetermined questions; however, the duration of each interview varied somewhat for each participant (Groenewald, 2004). Additionally, the number of questions answered by each participant varied as well, depending on what details were provided, which resulted in follow-up, probing, and minimal variation in some cases (Groenewald, 2004).

The process of data analysis in qualitative studies is a constant process that involves reading and reassessing the gathered data, with the goal of recognizing common themes in the data collected from the participants (Heppner et al., 1999). Analysis by software was utilized to store, annotate and retrieve texts, to locate phrases and portions of data, to name and label the data, to sort and organize, and to identify theme in the data (Guthrie, 2025). As a researcher, the analytical work took place by looking at what information was in the data, and making decisions by assigning codes, and identifying categories, concepts and patterns (Guthrie, 2025). The computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS), specifically NVIVO was utilized. This software program was designed for qualitative research that offers flexibility, allowing researchers to carry out their analysis according to their preferences and direction of their chosen

data. NVivo does not include routines that are pre-determined, and it does not automatically generate results for use in reports, rather the data is broken down into smaller organized pieces according to the attached codes (Mortelmans, 2025). The researcher must bring together the coded material and look at the regularities and irregularities in the data (Mortelmans, 2025). NVivo is a software designed to enable researchers to link the codes found in their data effortlessly and offers the possibility to expand the results of the search to a broader context than just what is coded (Mortelmans, 2025).

### **Assumptions**

There are numerous assumptions that must be made when doing research with human participants. One assumption in approaching this research was that the participants answered the interview questions honestly and truthfully, and this research assumed that the betrayed partners had experienced and lived through the infidelity that was disclosed. As researchers, we assumed that the participants provided us with accurate insight into the experiences that they disclosed in the interviews. The confidentiality of each participant was always maintained, and the participants were allowed to withdraw their participation at any time throughout the process. We assume that this resulted in the participants being open and honest with their responses through knowing that their identity was not revealed, and their confidentiality was protected.

Another assumption that took place in conducting this research was the belief that was held by the researcher regarding infidelity being a negative, traumatic experience for all betrayed partners. To maintain objectivity, this research utilized bracketing as a means of setting aside any personal beliefs, emotions, and perceptions (Thomas & Sohn, 2023) This enabled the researcher to set aside her own preconceptions and biases about infidelity and the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Bracketing allowed for the objectivity and trustworthiness to be

upheld throughout the research process, despite the preconceived ideas and assumptions that the researcher may have held prior to the start of the research process (Creswell, 2007; Thomas & Sohn, 2023).

### **Limitations**

One limitation with this research was the possibility that the participants did not accurately depict their experiences in their responses, due to embarrassment, shame, fear, or anxiety regarding the details of their relationship or due to not wanting to portray the unfaithful partner in a negative manner. Infidelity is a sensitive topic in nature, and though a great deal of effort was made to provide safety and comfort for the participants to be open regarding their experiences, there was a limitation of sensitivity regarding this topic. Another limitation was the size of the research sample. Although the participants were interviewed until saturation was achieved, the total sample size was relatively small, which is typical with qualitative research (Groenewald, 2004).

Another limitation was the recollection process, which occurred when participants made attempts to accurately recall past experiences. This research assumed that the participants were able to accurately recall their experience with infidelity. However, the limitation with this research was the ability for accurate recollection of traumatic memories. All memories are prone to some level of distortion, however traumatic memories carry the risk of being remembered as more traumatic than was actually experienced at the time of the event (Strange & Takarangi, 2015). The re-experiencing of the traumatic event is associated with the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Strange & Takarangi, 2015), which has been found to be a risk for the betrayed partners that experience infidelity, as infidelity has been defined as an interpersonal trauma by numerous researchers (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al.,

2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020).

### **Delimitations**

A delimitation of this research was the research method that was selected and the population of interest. Particularly, the data that was gathered for the research was comprised solely from the betrayed partners. This research did not include any data from the unfaithful partners, additional family members, or from clinicians that may have worked with the betrayed partner. An additional delimitation would be the exclusion of trauma that may have been experienced because of infidelity in a shorter-term relationship. Participants who had experienced infidelity in a relationship that was less than five years in length were excluded. Though the delimitations were somewhat limiting and exclusive, they allowed for a more targeted, in-depth examination of betrayed partners who had been involved in long-term relationships. In this case, the delimitation of this research may have resulted in research findings that were not generalizable to the rest of the population.

In regard to the existing literature, interpersonal trauma has been described as trauma experienced as a result of the direct actions by others, with this exposure quite often found to be associated with symptoms that are more severe than those found in non-interpersonal trauma exposure (other life-threatening events that are not a result of actions by other people) (Hughesdon et al., 2021). By specifically focusing on betrayed partners in long-term relationships, we were able to look at experiences specific to this population. Infidelity is considered to be an experience that occurs throughout all cultures, though it may be defined differently culturally, and reasons for the occurrence of infidelity may vary as well (Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019). The process of conducting research with specific populations, such as this one, allowed us to develop more targeted approaches in working with such populations in

therapy.

### **Ethical Assurances**

Prior to conducting this study, this research received granted approval from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each of the participants were provided with an informed consent, which indicated specific information on the research being conducted. The participants were provided with the purpose of the study, benefits of the research, risk of involvement, ethical considerations/issues, and the requirements for participation. Due to infidelity being a topic that is sensitive in nature, the participants were made aware of what would be involved in the interview and research process, and the process was presented as voluntary and one in which they could withdraw from at any point in the research process.

The confidentiality of the participants was upheld throughout the research process, and the participants were assured that the data that was gathered would be kept confidential throughout the research process and thereafter. Additionally, participants were notified that there could be times that the interview questions would involve topics that were sensitive and difficult in nature, though they had been deemed necessary for the research process. The research process made every effort to ensure that each participant was provided a safe, comfortable environment and was treated with respect throughout the research process. If determined necessary, the participants were provided breaks and referrals to necessary professionals for support when they appeared to be in distress over the participation.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the specific methodology involved in this qualitative research, with a focus on exploring the lived experiences of the betrayed partners following infidelity, and the attachment injuries that resulted from their experiences. This study was conducted utilizing

interviews in which a series of interview questions regarding the betrayed partner's experiences were explored. The responses provided in the questionnaires focused on the trauma experienced by the betrayed partners, specifically the emotional effects that resulted and the consequences of the infidelity on future relationships, whether with the unfaithful partner or in subsequent relationships. The collection of data from betrayed partners ceased once saturation was obtained. The term data saturation was originally devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a broad research method to describe the point in the research process that indicates that enough data has been collected to be able to reach the necessary conclusions, and any further data collection would not provide further understanding or added conclusions (Data Saturation in Qualitative Research, 2022). The betrayed partners that were included, consisted of those who were or had been in a long-term (minimum of 5 year) relationship. The interviews were conducted online, and the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant was maintained.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the impact of trauma symptoms experienced by betrayed partners due to their partner's infidelity and explore if this trauma influenced future attachments in the betrayed partner's relationships (whether with the unfaithful partner or someone else). This research was the next logical step in exploring the impact that infidelity has on the future relationships of betrayed partners (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The problem addressed in this research is that infidelity is an interpersonal trauma that can negatively impact future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This interpersonal trauma often results in long-term psychological damage for the betrayed partner who experiences it, with lasting, profound emotional consequences (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This study was conducted through the utilization of interviews in which a series of interview questions regarding the betrayed partner's experiences were collected. The responses provided in the interviews assessed the trauma experienced by the betrayed partners, specifically the emotional effects that resulted and the consequences of the infidelity on future relationships, whether with the unfaithful partner or in subsequent relationships.

The target population of this research study included nine betrayed partners who experienced infidelity within their relationship of at least 5 years. The collection of data from betrayed partners ceased once data saturation was met. In phenomenological, qualitative research, saturation in data collection can be identified early in the process, prior to the formal analysis stage, in which the researchers begin to detect that they are hearing the same information repetitively throughout the interviews (Saunders et al., 2018). The interviews were conducted online, and the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant was maintained throughout the process. The research questions explored in this research were as follows:

**RQ1**

Did the attachment injury impact the decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful partner?

**RQ2**

Did the attachment injury result in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner?

National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the application for this study on January 29, 2025. Recruitment and data collection were conducted from February 8, 2025, to April 10, 2025. When recruitment began, 68 people responded to the post and 9 participants were utilized in the research based upon those who met the inclusion criteria. This chapter includes an exhibition of the findings gathered in this study based on the research questions. Additionally, it includes a discussion of the trustworthiness of the data, the results, and the interpretation of the findings. Finally, a brief evaluation of the findings was/ provided based on the literature that was investigated.

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

Trustworthiness is the systematic rigorousness of the research design, and the credibility of the research findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Additionally, trustworthiness is pertinent when referring to the researcher as well, and whether the methods utilized in the research process are applicable beyond the scope of the research (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Trustworthiness is seen as being inclusive of the total impact that was created by the research effort (Rose & Johnson, 2020). When conducting qualitative research, validity and reliability are critical components to

ensuring the trustworthiness of the research being conducted (White et al., 2012). The findings of the qualitative research are further enriched through the principles that are implanted in the realm of qualitative research, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Given & Saumure, 2008).

### ***Credibility***

Credibility stems from the truthfulness of the study and plays a vital role in establishing reliability, security, and trust among readers (Shufutinsky, 2020). It is a key factor in determining the trustworthiness of research, particularly when exploring a specific phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance the credibility of this phenomenological study, transcribed Zoom interviews were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy. This process helped confirm that participants lived experiences were accurately depicted in the findings. Themes were identified and developed using the participants' own words as expressed throughout the interviews.

Bracketing was applied throughout the data collection process, including during the interview process, to ensure that my personal beliefs did not influence the interpretation of the phenomenon of infidelity being discussed. This technique promotes trustworthiness and objectivity by helping researchers set aside their assumptions (Cresell, 2007). Bracketing was maintained throughout the research process, as researchers often bring their own assumptions and preconceived ideas into the research process (Thomas & Sohn, 2023).

### ***Transferability***

Transferability is the measure in which the results of the qualitative research that is being conducted is generalizable or transferable to other settings or situations outside of the current research (Forero et al., 2018). When transferability is ensured, we can apply the findings to other

periods of time or individuals outside of the research that has taken place (Schloemer & Schroder-Back, 2018). This phenomenological research was based on a small sample size to include the detailed lived experiences of the participants, which limits the transferability of the research findings. To ensure the transferability of this research, descriptions of the participants' backgrounds, relationship history, and experiences with infidelity were obtained. There was a detailed context provided regarding the selection criteria, and the nature of their long-term relationship, specifically ensuring that they were 5 years or more. This allows future research to assess the extent in which the findings may apply to other situations and/or populations with similar criteria. This research was inclusive of both men and women, all of whom had been in or were still in a long-term relationship of at least 5 years in length, and who had all experienced infidelity within their relationship.

### ***Dependability***

To establish dependability in a research study, the research must be reproducible in future qualitative studies using the same procedural methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1986). Throughout the process, and especially at the conclusion of the interviews, efforts were made to clarify participants' statements to ensure that the study could be reliably replicated. To satisfy the requirements that are set forth by the university dissertation process, direct quotes from participants were used and documented to demonstrate that the research questions were thoroughly addressed. Additionally, the information was verified by allowing the participants to evaluate the transcriptions for accuracy.

### ***Confirmability***

To ensure confirmability, the level of confidence in the objectivity of the findings, this study relied on participants' specific responses to minimize the risk of interviewer bias (Elo et al., 2014). All identifiable information was kept confidential throughout the transcription process. Transcripts from the Zoom interviews were entered into NVivo 14 software and were then uploaded and securely stored with password protection throughout the process. Themes were discovered during the research process, that were relevant to the research questions (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Results**

Participants for this research were recruited from two Facebook groups with their focus being on infidelity, both of which were inclusive of members located within the United States. A total of 68 individuals expressed interest in participating in the study, and 9 were eventually selected for inclusion, due to arrival at saturation. Saturation was reached after interviewing these 9 participants. Specific to this study, saturation was reached at 9 participants, with a typical number of participants ranging from 6 to 10 according to some researchers (Naeem et al., 2024) and aligning with Creswell's (2007) recommendation that 5 to 25 participants are typically adequate for phenomenological research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) also indicated that data saturation occurs when no new insights or outcome is produced by continuing the research. Once the request for participation was complete, the participants were emailed further information on the study as well as the consent form. Consent forms were signed and returned from each participant prior to the scheduling and onset of the interview process

Individual semi-structured interviews were scheduled and conducted for all 9 participants, after confirming that they met the eligibility requirements to be included in the study. All participants identified as betrayed partners, were at least 18 years old, and had

experienced infidelity from their partner. The infidelity experienced by the betrayed partner could be sexual (intercourse, phone sex, or sexting), emotional (expressed desire or feelings for another person), digital/internet (texts, emails, phone calls, or other internet forums), or intellectual (conversations about hopes, dreams, or other encouragement excluding their intimate partner) by their partner. All participants had been in long-term relationships that were at least 5 years in length. Some participants continued the relationship with the unfaithful partner, while others did not. The participants included in this research were informed of their right to withdraw at any time during the research process, and for any reason, however none of the participants chose to do so. The participants were all compensated with a \$50 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview process. Additionally, all participants were offered resources and referrals upon completion of the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcriptions were generated verbatim from the video-recorded interviews and uploaded into NVivo 14 software for analysis. This study implemented a phenomenological research approach, which followed the procedure that has been historically outlined by Creswell (2007). These steps were used to identify phenomena, gather data, and constructing detailed descriptions of the experiences reported by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The following section of this research will outline the research questions being explored, and the various themes that emerged from the participants' responses, particularly those of the betrayed partners.

This section includes a presentation of the results of the research. The research questions were used to navigate the research process and to explore the lived experiences of the betrayed partners. The results of RQ1 and RQ2 are included. RQ1: Did the attachment injury impact the decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful

partner? Additionally, RQ2: Did the attachment injury result in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner? All 9 participants reported experiencing symptoms consistent with an attachment injury. The participants' responses revealed two primary themes: Attachment injury/relationship issues and attachment injury emotional health/well-being. Within these themes, participants described how the attachment injury shaped their willingness or reluctance to pursue new relationships or distress while remaining in the damaged one.

***RQ1: Did the attachment injury impact the decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful partner?***

Particularly, among the 4 participants who reported that their relationship ended upon learning of the affair, the attachment injury that resulted for them indisputably diminished their desire to pursue future romantic relationships. Although all 9 participants indicated that an attachment injury had taken place, 4 of the 9 participants indicated that the relationship dissolved following the infidelity and described the attachment injury that they experienced.

Participant Number	Participant Age	Gender	Married or Dating Relationship/Length of relationship	Stayed with partner after infidelity took place?	Currently with partner at the time of interview?
1	33	M	Married 7 years	No	No longer together. Participant stated she cheated because he was unable to get her pregnant.
4	38	M	Dating 5 years	No She doesn't want to be together	No

6	32	M	Dating/Engaged	No	Relationship ended 3 years ago. I could no longer trust her.
8	25	F	Dating 5 years	No We broke up for 1.5 years. We had no contact.	Yes. We recently got back together.

***RQ1 Theme 1: Attachment Injury/Relationship Issues.*** During the interview process, participant number 1 stated “Basically, I can never trust anyone again. Ever.” He further disclosed that he decided not to give his partner another chance, dissolved the relationship, and is unsure as to whether he will pursue any relationship in the future. He stated the following:

When she got back to her senses, she called and she texted. I was like, just let me be, I told you this wasn't my fault. She chose to abandon me for someone else who was better than me. So, I didn't, um, really appreciate what she did. Now she's being emotional, but I don't wanna go into that. I will just say that I can't get back together with her again. I am in pain, and I can never trust her again. I don't wanna be strong. Then I may do that again, like take her back. I don't want to take her back.

Participant number 4 disclosed:

I mean it damages you when you go through that with someone. When they cheat I mean it sucks. I reached out to a couple of my friends and they tried to make me feel a little bit better and talk me out of getting myself messed up, but they just tried to make me understand that it's part of life and I should just try and figure out how to move on and everything that instead of trying to kill myself emotionally, I should just buckle up and

then move on with everything. You know, I am with a new friend now. When I got into this new one, I, I have, I have had lots of trust issues. Okay. Lemme say I still do have the trust issue, but I'm just trying to give it God, you know, you never can tell what the outcome might be if you don't at least leave it a trial and like try something else. So, I'm just trying to see how this might actually work out and anyhow see how it goes. I guess it's part of life but at least let's just try something and then see how it goes. It damages you a little bit, right? I mean it damages you when you go through that before. Yeah, but I guess I need to try, you know, we can't, it's a part of life where we have to try again, yes.

Participant 6 disclosed that he was so distraught he became ill. He had to end the relationship to regain strength to move on once he learned of the affair. He disclosed the following:

When I confirmed that she was seeing someone else I waited until she got back. I asked her what was going on. She at first was trying to deny it. I begged her to open up and tell me what was going on and everything. What is going on. She said she didn't feel the same for me. I felt so bad and hurt. How could you do that to me after 6 years. I couldn't trust her anymore. I couldn't keep up with her anymore. I had to let her go.

Participant 8 disclosed a traumatic situation that she is experiencing with her unfaithful partner that she went back to. She ended the relationship immediately after the infidelity took place. They were apart for a year and a half. Recently they got back together, but she is still experiencing severe traumatic responses. Since they recently re-united she described her feelings as follows:

I continue to struggle with trust issues. I have a hard time trusting him when he is around female colleagues or friends. I can't be around any of his female colleagues or friends.

He did show remorse for cheating but it's still really hard for me. He supports me financially now. When he was having the affair, he threatened me physically. He tried beating me while he was having the affair. I wasn't close to him. I am still fearful he will cheat again. I am scared of him physically too. I am not sure if I am going to stay with him this time either. He withholds attention. I no longer check his phone. I don't trust him though.

Additionally, there were ongoing relationship issues and distress that occurred for participant 8 as evidenced by her disclosure. Additionally, participant 8 cried during the entire interview, and had difficulty maintaining composure throughout. She stated at the time of the incident in which she learned of the infidelity:

He tried to apologize, and it ended up that both of our parents got involved. I forgave him after a long period. Then we got back together. I have continued to struggle with trust issues. I have a hard` time trusting him when he is around female colleagues or friends. I can't be around any of his female colleagues or friends. He did show remorse for cheating but it's still really hard for me. He supports me financially now, but when he was having the affair, he didn't and he threatened me physically. He tried beating me while he was having an affair. I wasn't close to him. I am still fearful he will cheat again. I am scared of him physically too. I am not sure if I am going to stay with him. He withholds attention. I no longer check his phone. I don't trust him though. I don't think I will ever be able to.

***RQ1 Theme 2: Attachment Injury/Emotional Health and Well-Being.*** In addition to the attachment injury resulting in an impact on future relationships, the attachment injury also resulted in a theme of severe emotional traumatic reactions. The identified theme for emotional

trauma included: alcohol/drug use, distractibility/lack of concentration, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. All 9 of the participants displayed symptoms in all or most of these categories. For example, participant 1 stated:

Being in love with somebody for such a long time and you call her, you text her, you check up on the person but realizing that something is not normal. Then you realize she's having an affair. Well, it's something that gives someone emotionally some kind of traumas. So, to be honest, I'm always depressed, and I really can't eat or sleep. I'm not always able to go to work and I, sometimes when I do, I can't even work, I just cry because it's something that is hurting, you know, loving somebody.

Furthermore, participant 4 indicated an impact on his emotional well-being after learning that his partner of 5 years cheated on him. He stated:

I am usually depressed every day. I stayed indoors for like three weeks. It was really, really, really, hurtful, like a very, very, very, bad experience. It was like a bad illness took over my body and I couldn't get it out.

Participant 8 stated:

I have struggled with depression since the affair. I have trouble sleeping. I don't have an appetite at all and rarely eat complete meals. I can't concentrate. My grades aren't very good. I don't think I will get in another relationship if I end it with him. I don't trust people at all. I don't feel good enough.

To further describe the emotional symptoms of the attachment injury, it was evident with participant 6, as he stated:

I wasn't doing well at work. I felt so bad and hurt. I couldn't sleep well at all. I was depressed for a while. I couldn't focus most times. How could you do that to me after 6

years. Slowly trying to get myself back together. I didn't try to reach out or get back in touch with her. The only thing I did was I think I stalked her Instagram like 2 weeks ago. There was nothing really. The first few weeks I couldn't sleep well at all. I was used to her being around me mostly at night. In terms of how she could do this to me without being remorseful or anything just kept taunting me. I think I was depressed for a while. I tried to bury myself in work to get distracted and everything.

Though the participants chose to dissolve the relationship in these cases, the effects of the trauma associated with the infidelity are long-lasting and impactful on their relationship expectations, most likely resulting in long-term, lasting consequences with associated psychological distress, also known as interpersonal trauma (Shrout & Weigel, 2020).

Some of the participants continued to remain in the relationship with their unfaithful partner, though continued to express fear and a lack of trust. There were some participants who initially remained in the relationship and attempted to make it work, but ultimately either chose to leave their partner, or the unfaithful partner chose to leave the betrayed partner in some cases.

**RQ2. Did the attachment injury result in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner?**

Among the participants who chose to remain in the relationship with the unfaithful partner after learning of their infidelity, there was evidence that the betrayed partner still experienced ongoing distress because of the attachment injury. Among those participants who chose to remain in their relationship with the unfaithful partner, their responses also indicated two primary themes: Attachment injury/relationship issues and attachment injury emotional health/well-being. Within these themes, participants described how the attachment injury shaped their willingness or reluctance to pursue new relationships or distress while remaining in the

damaged one. The following participants initially chose to stay in their relationships, with some still in the relationship at the time of the interview, while others eventually ended the relationship with the unfaithful partner, though it was not always by their own choice. Despite their desire to remain with the unfaithful in some cases, it further contributed to the insecurity and sense of powerlessness when the unfaithful partner ultimately decided to not remain with the betrayed partner. Details are indicated below:

Participant Number	Participant Age	Gender	Married or Dating Relationship/ Length of relationship	Stayed with partner after infidelity took place?	Currently with partner at the time of interview?
2	28	M	Dating 6 years	Yes Stayed in relationship for 6 months after infidelity. He fought for the relationship, but ultimately his partner did not want to stay together.	No longer together. Relationship ended 1.5 years ago.
3	34	F	Married 7 years	Yes Stayed for 1 year. He (unfaithful partner left).	Yes
5	42	F	Married 9 years	Yes Stayed for 1 year following infidelity	No. Recently separated 10 months ago (currently live separately but not divorced).
7	55	M	Married 10 years	Yes Stayed for 11 months following infidelity	No. Currently divorced.

9	33	M	Dating 6 years	Yes Stayed together for 4 months in the same house. Separated now.	No. Living separately for the past 10 months. I want to get back together, but she doesn't know yet.
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***RQ2 Theme 1: Attachment Injury/Relationship Issues.*** One example was exhibited with participant 7. He chose to stay in the relationship with his unfaithful partner; however, it was only sustainable for 11 months following the infidelity. He eventually had to leave due to the lack of trust. He disclosed that the lack of trust prevented him from remaining in the relationship long-term. He eventually ended it because of her dishonesty. He indicated:

I tried for a while, but nothing was working out. You know, it just wasn't working out. It was because of the trust or the lack of trust. I discovered that um, she still wasn't honest with me. So, the possibilities of her going back to this was quite high and um, you know, she obviously occasionally talked to them on the phone also, so I knew that, um, our communication wasn't there, so I just had to, um, let it, let it go.

Participant number 2 disclosed relationship issues following his experience with infidelity in his relationship. He stayed with her for 6 months but was unable to cope with the relationship issues. He stated: "So I'm having issues of trust, and I can't believe some of the stuff she said to me. I ended it and I'm not going to see anyone else." Another example was given by participant number three, who indicated "I don't think I will get in another relationship if I end it with him. I don't trust people at all. I don't feel good enough."

Participant 5 indicated:

I don't think I can really heal. You know, no amount of time or I'm sorry or whatever can actually heal it. So, at this point I just, I just feel, I'm just going to take a step back. Take

care of my kids and try to heal a little day by day. I'm taking day by day baby steps trying to heal. That's the best thing right now. As of right now, I don't really feel that I could open up to someone.

Participant 3 is still in the relationship with her unfaithful partner by choice, however indicated that the relationship is damaged and painful. Her response is as follows:

I am trying to find the person I fell in love with. Where did I go wrong? What did I not do? I feel crushed. He still lives with me but is rarely around. He mostly ghosts me. We have brief conversations, but no more long talks. I want to continue to fight, but he's making it hard.

Participant 9 experienced an attachment injury as well. Although he tried to salvage the relationship and agreed to stay with his partner despite the infidelity, she did not want to stay together. He stated:

I was trying to encourage her, telling her, she could have me back, I could get past it, but she started giving some attitude. I don't know why, and I really felt very bad and depressed. I told her she can make things up to me, fix us, but she just won't give anything. Not getting any positive response to that. I'm definitely not doing relationships again. I'm not really strong to go into a new relationship now because it's not gonna be really easy. I'm afraid somebody will do the same shit to me again.

**RQ2 Theme 2: Attachment Injury/Emotional Health and Well-Being.** Participant 2 met the criteria for emotional trauma, with symptoms indicative of an attachment injury. He stated "It was stressful learning that she cheated. I was broke down. I was really down. Still I'm

drinking all day right now. I'm out of work. Don't think they will take me back. I got sent home." Participant 5 further indicated evidence of an attachment injury when she stated:

I have nightmares and wake up a lot of nights. Truthfully, I have panic attacks when I drop the kids off to him. They were so bad at first, I couldn't breathe when I pulled up to his apartment. They are better now, but I still have them. I try not to drink too much but when the kids go to his house I drink and drink.

Participant 7 recollected:

I was depressed at the time. My attitude to work and in every other thing was messed up. I had to reduce a lot of work hours. I admit I turned to alcohol sometimes. You know alcohol helped cope with the pain at the time. I really had serious insomnia. I couldn't sleep, and a lot of times my hands were literally shaking.

Another example of the emotional trauma experienced from the attachment injury is evidenced by the responses of participant 8 who stated:

I have struggled with depression and like I have trouble sleeping every night. I don't have any appetite at all. I rarely eat complete meals. I can't concentrate on things and I don't know what is going to happen with my job.

In the case with participant 9, the participant fought to keep the relationship for several months with the unfaithful partner despite their unfaithfulness, however the unfaithful partner eventually chose to end the relationship. Participant 9 expressed a traumatic reaction as well:

I got anxious and started to panic, and she started giving some shitty attitude to me and was defensive and really bad toward me. Definitely I got depressed. I thought I was traumatized. I wanted to die. Like she started giving me some attitude, I don't know why, and I really felt very bad and depressed. I panic every day. I wait for nothing. Like

nothing. What the hell. I feel so anxious. It's the issue of her giving me some pain and depression, some attitude, and being hurtful to me. I could not concentrate again, definitely, uh, hated going to work. It was like when you just walk in you collapse to the ground, like don't want to be there.

Participant 3 struggles with emotional health and well-being on a daily basis, though she chooses to remain with her unfaithful partner:

I dread nights. I can't sleep. I have a hard time being in our house. I cry a lot. I drink a lot. I have panic attacks. When I am sober, I think about it a lot. I turn to friends, and they sometimes come and cheer me up. I have heart break and pain at the highest level.

### **Evaluation of the Findings**

As previously discussed, infidelity can have devastating effects on a relationship often resulting in significant psychological distress for the betrayed partner (Shrout & Weigel, 2020), The experience of infidelity often leads to interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019). The consequences of infidelity ultimately undermine the foundation of the relationship, most often damaging the sense of security that once existing between partners (Lonergan et al., 2021). Betrayed partners frequently exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This study was implemented with the understanding that infidelity compromises the commitment that previously sustained the romantic relationship (Rokach & Chan, 2023), consequently it has been described by many as the most distressing experiences that can occur in an intimate partnership (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). In evaluating the research findings of this study, it became apparent that attachment injuries had taken place regardless of whether the betrayed partner remained with their unfaithful partner, chose to be alone, or chose to pursue other relationships.

**RQ1: Did the attachment injury impact the decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful partner?**

The focus of this research was to further contribute to the understanding of the experiences of betrayed partners, identify the symptoms experienced following infidelity, and determine whether an attachment injury took place among the betrayed partners. The findings suggest that all participants experienced an attachment injury, regardless of whether they remained with their unfaithful partner. The findings of this research align with previous studies, which indicate that infidelity in an intimate relationship affects emotional attachment and security and is considered extremely detrimental to the relationship (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023), often resulting in irreparable damage and emotional instability for the betrayed partner (Alavi et al., 2018).

Specifically, with the participants who had a relationship that ended upon learning that their partner was unfaithful, they experienced a great deal of ambivalence and insecurity when contemplating the pursuit of future relationships. The impact for the participants primarily included self-doubt, anxiety, lack of trust, and fear. This has been noted in previous research, which indicates that an attachment injury that results from the interpersonal trauma of infidelity evokes significant emotional responses. The resulting insecurity and the compromise of safety, security, and trust, often result in an attachment injury for the betrayed partner (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The betrayal of infidelity mirrors the emotional response and distress that an infant may feel when separated from their primary caregiver (Rokach & Chan, 2023). A traumatic experience such as infidelity disrupts the betrayed partner's internal image of their partner as a secure and trustworthy source of emotional support, leading to an attachment injury (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Thus, this trauma results in an attachment injury that negatively

impacts the betrayed partner's self-esteem, self-confidence, and destroys their trust in others, which often results in a lack of desire and intense fear of pursuing future romantic relationships (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

### **Subtheme 1: Attachment Injury as Evidenced by Relationship Issues**

In evaluating the attachment injuries experienced by the betrayed partners, significant relationship issues emerged, indicating difficulty in the relationship beliefs or experiences of the participants. These symptoms included issues of fear, abandonment, insecurity, withdraw, betrayal, and trust.

<b>Symptom</b>	<b># of participants who experienced response</b>
Fear	4
Abandonment	4
Insecurity	4
Withdraw	4
Betrayal	4
Trust	4

### **Subtheme 2: Attachment Injury as Evidenced by Betrayed Partner's Emotional Health**

In evaluating the attachment injuries experienced by the betrayed partners who had a relationship that ended following the infidelity, significant trauma symptoms emerged, indicating

emotional distress among the participants. These symptoms included issues such as alcohol and drug use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression.

Symptom	# of participants who experienced response
Alcohol and/or drug use	2
Distractibility	3
Anxiety	4
Sleep disturbances	4
Depression	4

**RQ2: Did the attachment injury result in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in the relationship with the unfaithful partner?**

In evaluating the second research question, in each of the cases where the betrayed partner chose to remain in the relationship with the unfaithful partner, there was evidence of an attachment injury among each of them. This was evident through their relationship issues such as lack of trust, withdrawal, fear, feelings of abandonment, and insecurity with their partner. Additionally, it was evident through their responses which indicated issues such as alcohol/drug use, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and distractibility/lack of focus at work or school. While some participants chose to stay longer than others, the attachment injury was present regardless of the length of time they remained with the unfaithful partner. This research aligns with the previous studies indicating that there are cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences that result in traumatic outcomes when one experiences infidelity in their intimate

relationship (Laaser et al., 2017). The attachment theory emphasizes how human relationships are driven by the need for emotional connection, maintaining closeness, and the desire for a secure foundation in relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Bowlby's framework provides a foundation for understanding how individuals develop emotional security and stability throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973). These early experiences shape how interact and develop relationships with others, and when one enters adulthood, romantic partners become this source of attachment and means of support and providers of reciprocal care (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). When the betrayed partners chose to remain in the relationship with the unfaithful partner, this emotional security and stability was destroyed, and emotional distress was evident in their interview responses.

### **Subtheme 1: Attachment Injury as Evidenced by Relationship Issues**

In evaluating the attachment injuries experienced by the betrayed partners, significant relationship issues emerged, indicating difficulty in the relationship beliefs or experiences of the participants. These symptoms included issues of fear, abandonment, insecurity, withdraw, betrayal, and trust.

<b>Symptom</b>	<b># of participants who experienced response</b>
Fear	5
Abandonment	5
Insecurity	5
Withdraw	4
Betrayal	5

Trust	5
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### **Subtheme 2: Attachment Injury as Evidenced by Betrayed Partner's Emotional Health**

In evaluating the attachment injuries experienced by the betrayed partners, significant trauma symptoms emerged, indicating emotional distress among the participants. These symptoms included issues such as alcohol and drug use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression.

Symptom	# of participants who experienced response
Alcohol and/or drug use	2
Distractibility	4
Anxiety	5
Sleep disturbances	4
Depression	5

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of a qualitative phenomenological study that explored whether attachment injuries influenced betrayed partners' decisions to pursue future relationships after ending a relationship with an unfaithful partner or choosing to stay with an unfaithful partner. To address this research question, participants who had experienced betrayal were recruited and interviewed in attempt to gather deeper insights into the interpersonal trauma

resulting from infidelity. The findings revealed that the attachment injuries experienced by these individuals significantly influenced their willingness and ability to engage in and/or pursue future romantic relationships. Among these betrayed partners, they experienced issues of fear, abandonment, insecurity, withdraw, betrayal, and trust. There was evidence of these issues among those who experienced a relationship that dissolved and those who chose to stay in the relationship.

This research also indicated that regardless of whether the betrayed partners chose to remain with the unfaithful partner or dissolved the relationship, the findings showed. that the betrayed partners experienced significant distress and displayed evidence of an attachment injury. This was evident by their emotional struggles, including their issues with alcohol and drug use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression. When secure attachment is not present following infidelity, the betrayed partner is no longer able to see their partner as supportive, cooperative, sensitive, and available, all of which contribute to commitment, trust, and satisfaction that is experienced in secure relationships (Mitchell et al., 2021). The final chapter will further explore the study's implications, offer recommendations, and present the concluding remarks.

## Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

When infidelity occurs in marriages or committed relationships, it frequently results in significant emotional distress for the betrayed partner (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This distress is often viewed as a type of interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). An interpersonal trauma is trauma that is caused by the direct action of another person, and one that is often linked to symptoms that are more intense than those stemming from a non-interpersonal trauma, or one not caused by another person (Hughesdon et al., 2021). When one experiences an interpersonal trauma, it can undermine the core foundation of the relationship, damaging the sense of security that once existed between the partners, and consequently result in anxiety, depression and symptoms indicative of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for the betrayed partner who experienced it (Lonergan et al., 2021; Shrout & Weigel, 2020).

Infidelity is generally defined as a violation of a partner's trust, often involving a sexual or emotional connection with a third party, and the betrayal is not limited by sexual orientation, and most often involves dishonesty, unfaithfulness, and deception toward a committed partner (Wroblewska-Skrzek, 2021). The act of infidelity can result in severe, long-term consequences for the betrayed individual, including the loss of family and friends, damaged reputations, diseases, unwanted pregnancies, bodily harm to another following discovery of the affair, financial loss, and the risk of divorce (Hassannezhad et al., 2022). Following infidelity there may be attachment injuries that occur for the betrayed partner as a result of the pain stemming from experiencing the betrayal of their partner's infidelity, and it is thought to be comparable to the pain experienced when an infant becomes separated from their mother (Rokach & Chan, 2023). This interpersonal trauma violates the betrayed partner's internal representation of how they

previously saw their partner, who was once a trustworthy, reliable, sense of support, and because of this betrayal, an attachment injury often results (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study aimed to examine the impact of trauma symptoms that are experienced by betrayed partners due to infidelity in their intimate relationship. The problem addressed in this research is that infidelity is an interpersonal trauma that can negatively impact future relationships (Warach & Josephs, 2021). This interpersonal trauma often results in long-term psychological damage for the betrayed partner who experiences it, with lasting, profound emotional consequences (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel, 2020). This research sought to understand whether the trauma resulted in attachment injuries in the betrayed partner's relationships, regardless of whether they remained with the unfaithful partner or entered a relationship with someone new. Past research indicates that the experience of infidelity often results in devastating psychological, sexual, and physical effects to the betrayed partner, and is often labeled as an interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021). This study engages in the next most logical step in the exploration of how infidelity affects the future romantic relationships of betrayed partners (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

This research implemented a phenomenological research method with the intention of gaining an understanding of the betrayed partner's experiences, and to gather their interpretation of their responses to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The population of this research study consisted of nine participants who had experienced infidelity in a committed relationship lasting at least 5 years. The collection of data from betrayed partners was considered complete once data saturation was reached. The concept of data saturation was originally introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and it is referred to as the point in the research process

where enough data has been collected to draw meaningful conclusions, and any further data collection would not provide any further insight or understanding. Saturation was reached in this research, when the process of interviewing and observing participants did not result in uncovering any new perspectives or themes (Neubauer et al., 2019). The interviews for this research were conducted online, and the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant was upheld throughout the entire interview, data collection, and research process.

The participants that were chosen to participate in this research, included those who: (1) Identified as a betrayed partner who was at least 18 years of age, (2) had experienced infidelity that was sexual, emotional, digital, or intellectual by their partner, (3) had a relationship with the unfaithful partner that was considered long-term, it lasted at least 5 years prior to the infidelity, that could be currently intact or terminated, and (4) the participant was willing to participate in an online interview that involved questions that were intimate in nature, and specific to the infidelity that took place in their relationship. Additionally, the interviews were conducted in a confidential, online format and were approximately one hour in length.

A phenomenological qualitative research design was implemented to collect data on the experiences of the participants/betrayed partners and how they interpreted the act of infidelity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) through the process of conducting semi-structured interviews in an online, confidential format. Specifically, an integrative hermeneutic phenomenological approach was taken to pursue the 2 main goals of the research: to look at the detail of the betrayed partner's response to their lived experiences as a result of the infidelity of their partner, and furthermore, to provide the detailed interpretation of the betrayed partner's experience as to what occurred following this experience (Tuffour, 2017). After completing interviews with 9 participants, the data was analyzed and organized, and themes that emerged through the

interview process were identified. Within this chapter, the researcher will examine the findings of the study, provide recommendations for application of the results to experiences in real-world relationship scenarios, and make suggestions for future researchers to expand on, and finally this research will conclude with a summary of what took place in the research process.

### **Implications**

Several factors are of significance when evaluating the results of this research study. This phenomenological study provided deeper insight into how betrayed partners emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, and psychologically experienced a traumatic response to the infidelity of their unfaithful partner. It further explored whether the betrayed partners experienced attachment injuries that affected their future relationships. The attachment theory as originally proposed by Bowlby, assists with understanding the framework in determining how people develop a sense of emotional security and stability in their life, which begins in the infant stages of development (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973).

As an infant, we learn to regulate the emotional arousal based on proximity and availability of our caregivers (Schore, 2001), and these interactions continue to be sorted and filtered throughout one's life (Bowlby, 1973). When attachment is associated with harmful, detrimental outcomes at any point in one's life, emotional distress can result in an attachment injury (Fife et al., 2022). This research provided a contribution to the research on infidelity by providing intimate, detailed information about the experiences of betrayed partners, and further emphasized that trauma experienced by betrayed partners present with attachment injuries following infidelity in a committed relationship, similar to the attachment injury that an infant experiences when separated from their primary caregiver (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

***RQ1: Did the attachment injury impact the decision to pursue future relationships upon dissolving the relationship with the unfaithful partner?***

The implications of this research contributed to the understanding of the experiences of betrayed partners, identified the responses of the betrayed partners following infidelity, and determined whether an attachment injury took place among the betrayed partners. The findings suggested that all participants experienced an attachment injury, regardless of whether the participants remained with their unfaithful partner. This research was supportive of previous research, which indicates that infidelity in an intimate relationship affects emotional attachment and security and is considered extremely detrimental to the foundation of the relationship (Dehghani & Dehghani, 2023), often resulting in irreparable damage and emotional instability for the betrayed partner (Alavi et al., 2018). This attachment injury that results in insecurity, fear, and abandonment that was experienced by the betrayed partners mirrors the fear that an infant experiences when separated from their primary caregiver (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

Among the participants who had a relationship that ended upon learning that their partner was unfaithful, there was a great deal of ambivalence and insecurity when contemplating the pursuit of future relationships. The impact for the participants primarily included self-doubt, anxiety, lack of trust, and fear. This has been noted in previous research, which indicates that an attachment injury that results from the interpersonal trauma of infidelity evokes significant emotional responses, thus compromising the safety, security, and trust, often resulting in an attachment injury for the betrayed partner (Warach & Josephs, 2021). In evaluating the attachment injuries experienced by the betrayed partners, significant relationship issues emerged, indicating difficulty in the relationship beliefs and/or experiences of the participants. The implications derived from *subtheme 1*, indicated that the attachment injury was present, as

evidenced by relationship issues. Just as the attachment theory indicates that attachment injuries may occur when the interpersonal experience is violated by experiencing trauma as an infant, the impact that infidelity can have on a betrayed partner parallels this behavior (Rokach & Chan, 2023), and the security, trust, and support are no longer represented by the unfaithful partner (Warach & Josephs, 2021). These relationship issues were evident among the betrayed partners who reported symptoms of psychological distress, which included issues of fear, abandonment, insecurity, withdrawal, betrayal, and lack of trust.

Further implications were derived from *subtheme 2*, which indicated that an attachment injury was present, which was evidenced by the betrayed partner's emotional health. Among the betrayed partners who had a relationship that ended following the infidelity, significant trauma symptoms emerged, indicating emotional distress among the participants. These symptoms included issues such as alcohol and drug use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression. These findings provide the information that was sought after through conducting this research, specifically that attachment injuries are likely to result following experiences with infidelity. This was previously reported in research by Warach & Josephs (2021), who reported that when infidelity occurs within a committed relationship, it compromises the betrayed partner's sense of security, leading them to no longer perceive their partner as a stable and trustworthy foundation. Additionally, other researchers indicated that this attachment injury is a type of interpersonal trauma and often triggers significant emotional responses that are often described as survival reactions structured by attachment dynamics (Butler et al., 2021; Gossner et al., 2022). There was evidence of attachment injuries among all 9 of the betrayed partners who had their relationship end following their experience with infidelity.

***RQ2: Did the attachment injury result in ongoing distress if the betrayed partner chose to remain in a relationship with the unfaithful partner?***

The implications derived from this research further contributed to the understanding that attachment injuries can still be present even in cases where a betrayed partner chooses to remain in the relationship with the unfaithful partner. The findings suggested that even in cases where the betrayed partner chose to remain in the relationship with the unfaithful partner, there was evidence of an attachment injury among each of the betrayed partners. This was evident through their relationship issues such as lack of trust, withdrawal, fear, feelings of abandonment, and insecurity with their partner. Additionally, it was evident through their responses which indicated issues such as alcohol/drug use, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and distractibility/lack of focus at work or school. While some participants chose to stay longer than others, the attachment injury was present regardless of the length of time they remained with the unfaithful partner. This research aligns with the previous studies indicating that there are cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences that result in traumatic outcomes when one experiences infidelity in their intimate relationship (Laaser et al., 2017).

The implications derived from subtheme 1, indicated that the attachment injury was evidenced by relationship issues. These issues included some or all of the following relationship issues: fear, abandonment, insecurity, withdrawal, betrayal, and lack of trust. In evaluating the attachment injuries experienced by the betrayed partners, significant relationship issues emerged, indicating difficulty in the relationship beliefs or experiences of the participants. In previous research on attachment theory, when attachment injuries resulting from the trauma of infidelity occur, this often results in a lack of desire and an intense fear of pursuing future romantic relationships (Rokach & Chan, 2023).

Further implications were derived from subtheme 2, which indicated that an attachment injury was present as evidenced by the significant trauma symptoms that emerged, indicating emotional distress among the participants. These symptoms included issues such as alcohol and drug use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression. There was evidence of attachment injuries among all betrayed partners, even when they chose to stay in the relationship with their unfaithful partner following their experience with infidelity. Research on attachment theory has previously indicated that this emotional distress that one experiences can result in attachment injuries, and may include feelings of self-blame, anger, betrayal, and diminished self-worth (Fife et al., 2022).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations that can be made for practice and theory moving forward. When evaluating the attachment injuries experienced by the betrayed partners, significant relationship issues emerged, indicating difficulty in the relationship beliefs or experiences of the participants. With *subtheme 1*, there was indication that the attachment injury was present, as evidenced by relationship issues. There has already been research that has concluded that when an attachment injury occurs in adulthood, such as through the experience of infidelity as a betrayed partner, the adult unfaithful partner can no longer be utilized as a secure base (Warach & Josephs, 2021). The attachment injury occurs following the violation of the core beliefs of safety, security, and interpersonal trust, as a result of the trauma experience of romantic betrayal through the experience of infidelity by one's partner (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

In working with those who have experienced the trauma of infidelity, it is considered by many couple's therapist as one of the most difficult interpersonal clinical issues to treat in the

therapeutic setting (Geiss & O’Leary, 1981; Whisman et al, 1997). Therefore, clinicians must continuously remain cognizant of the numerous interpersonal, behavioral, psychological, and physical health consequences that are often found among those who present with the issue of infidelity in treatment (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) has proven to be successful in working with couples who have experienced attachment injuries because of infidelity (Greenberg et al., 2010; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). This is thought to be a result of the treatment modality focusing on assisting the couple in becoming more emotionally engaged and more attuned to strengthening the attachment security of the relationship (Warach & Josephs, 2021), following the damage of infidelity.

Regarding *subtheme 2* that indicated that an attachment injury was present as evidenced by the betrayed partner’s emotional health, multiple trauma symptoms were reportedly experienced by the betrayed partners. The emotional distress among the participants included reported issues such as alcohol and drug use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression. Researchers who have previously explored the trauma and emotional distress experienced by betrayed partners, state that clinicians should focus on identifying, exploring and evaluating the core beliefs of their client to identify the treatment strategies that may be key in the recovery of those who have been betrayed by their partner’s infidelity (Laaser et al., 2017).

Self-esteem has been found to be an attribute that serves as a protective mechanism in assisting betrayed partners with reducing the severity of emotional distress in response to infidelity (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Therefore, knowing these results, the higher the self-esteem of the betrayed partner, the less emotional distress one will experience following the infidelity. This helps to illustrate the direct and indirect links between cognitive evaluations, mental health, and the emotional well-being of the betrayed partner (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). These may be

helpful for clinicians in assisting betrayed partners with the therapeutic process.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research could assess the relationship between suicidal behavior and emotional distress following the experience of infidelity as a betrayed partner (Rokach & Chan, 2023). There has only been one study found to date that has assessed the relationship between emotional distress and suicidal behavior following the experience of infidelity (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Stephens, 1985). Additionally, there is a limited amount of research on the effectiveness of therapy in working with couples vs. individuals among those who have experienced infidelity within their relationship (Fife et al., 2023). Future research would be beneficial on identifying the effects of infidelity on betrayed partners specifically in examining the occurrence and severity of the emotional reaction (Warach & Josephs, 2021). An additional area for future research would be further exploration on cross-cultural research, specifically on moderators of the severity of betrayal trauma which could contribute to more therapeutic techniques specific to various cultures (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Finally, there have only been a small number of research studies that have explored the efficacy of treatments that are meant for treating those betrayed partners or couples presenting for help with the issue of infidelity (Gordon et al., 2004).

### **Conclusion**

Sexual and emotional infidelities are most often detrimental to the well-being of betrayed partners and the romantic relationship between the partners (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Infidelity can result in a great deal of stress within an intimate relationship or marriage, and the effects on the betrayed partner are often devastating and traumatic (Roos et al., 2019). The betrayed partner experiences psychological distress (Shrout & Weigel, 2020), which is considered to be an interpersonal trauma (Laaser, 2017; Lonergan et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2019; Shrout & Weigel,

2020). Many people can agree that infidelity is an infringement on the commitment of the relationship between partners when they are involved with another outside of the committed relationship (Alsalem, 2017), and it is said to be an infringement on the commitment ascertained by the partners (Rokach & Chan, 2023). The trauma that one experiences because of infidelity, and the attachment injuries that often occur, warrants continued research in this area (Warach & Josephs, 2021).

All betrayed partners interviewed in this research reported behaviors and reactions indicative of an attachment injury. The findings revealed that the attachment injuries experienced by these individuals significantly influenced their willingness and ability to engage in and/or pursue future romantic relationships. Among these betrayed partners, they experienced issues of fear, abandonment, insecurity, withdraw, betrayal, and trust. There was evidence of these issues among those who experienced a relationship that dissolved and those who chose to stay in the relationship. This research further indicated that regardless of whether the betrayed partners chose to remain with the unfaithful partner or dissolved the relationship, the betrayed partners experienced significant distress and displayed evidence of an attachment injury. This was evident by their emotional struggles, including their issues with alcohol and drug use, distractibility, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression. This research was informative in contributing to research that indicates that infidelity is severe enough to impact the attachment and security of the betrayed partner, thus resulting in trauma and attachment injuries.

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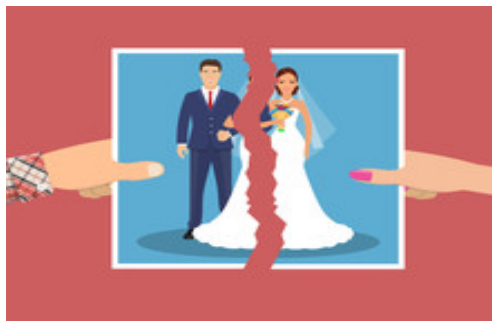
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## Appendix A:

## Flyer



## YOU ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE

**OUR PURPOSE:** The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to increase our insight into the beliefs and experiences of those individuals who have experienced infidelity in their relationship with their partner, as well as examine the emotional and psychological consequences that resulted because of the infidelity.

### To Be Eligible:

- Identify as a betrayed partner who is at least 18 years of age, and has experienced infidelity that was sexual (intercourse, phone sex, or sexting) emotional (expressed desire or feelings for another person), digital/internet (texts, emails, phone calls or other internet forums), intellectual (conversations about hopes, dreams, or other encouragement excluding their intimate partner) by their partner.
- The relationship with the unfaithful partner was long-term (for at least 5 years). Can be ended or still intact currently.
- Participants must be willing to participate in an interview that involves intimate questions about the infidelity and consequences that resulted from the infidelity. The interview will be conducted in a confidential, online format for approximately one hour in length.
- All participants can withdraw at any time during the process if they feel uncomfortable for any reason.
- A \$50 Amazon gift card will be provided to all participants. Resources and referrals will be provided for all participants if needed.

*Brenda Kopech Leiber*

*National University Doctoral Student*

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview as part of our research process. Our goal is to gain insight into your experiences and beliefs about infidelity, trauma, and the consequences that you may have experienced as a result of your partner's infidelity. Please know that any information that you share with us throughout this interview process will remain confidential. Your identity, experiences, and personal information will not be disclosed or shared with others at any time. If at any time you experience emotional distress, you can end the interview at any time throughout this process. Do you need any clarity or have any further questions regarding this interview before we begin? Would it be okay to start the recording of the interview process at this time?

- How long have you been/were you in a relationship with your unfaithful partner?
- With whom are you in a relationship with now?
- What is your experience with infidelity in your relationship? Can you provide a description of this occurrence?
- How did you learn of your partner's infidelity?
- How has your experience with infidelity affected you emotionally and physically?
- How has the infidelity changed your relationship expectations?
- How did your unfaithful partner responded to your pain and needs during the time that you learned of the infidelity?

## **Appendix C**

### **Consent Letter**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Brenda Kopech Leiber. I am a doctoral student at National University, and I am conducting a research study on people who have experienced infidelity as a betrayed partner. To further clarify, this research will include participants who have had a partner who has been unfaithful while in a committed relationship with you. The name of this research is “The Consequences of Infidelity.” I am seeking your consent to participate in this research.

Throughout this process, your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw from participation at any point in the research interview. I will address and questions or concerns at any time throughout the research process.

#### **Eligibility**

You are eligible to be a participant in this research if you:

- Are over the age of 18.
- Have experienced infidelity (sexual intercourse, sexual acts, emotional, digital/internet, and/or intellectual) as a betrayed partner.
- Have been in a long-term relationship with your partner for a minimum of 5 years (regardless of whether you are still in the relationship).
- Are willing to participate in an interview that will be conducted online.

#### **Activities**

For this research, participants (betrayed partners) will:

- Participate in a private Zoom interview in a 1 on 1 setting, for approximately 60 minutes.
- Answer interview questions about experiences with infidelity and the consequences that resulted from the infidelity.

### **Risks**

- The possible risks associated with this research may include: feeling uncomfortable discussing intimate details of your relationship, symptoms, injuries, and trauma that may be associated with the infidelity experienced.
- If you feel that you are in distress at any time during this research interview process, you can skip any question or completely stop participation at any time throughout the process.
- You will be provided with referrals for therapy services if you need them or desire to seek therapy following the participation in this research.

### **Benefits**

While there are no direct benefits from participation in this research study, your participation may increase the overall knowledge in the subject of infidelity and attachment injuries as a result of your participation.

### **Privacy and Data Protection**

Your private, personal information that will be provided will be collected, recorded and stored through an electronic password protection process. The interview will be conducted using an audio/video approach, and the data that is collected will be stored in a locked, confidential environment. Only those who are approved research members will have access to the data gathered. All data collected will be stored in a computer and will be protected with a password to be accessed. Your name will be coded to protect your identity and maintain your confidentiality.

Any data and research collected in this process will be destroyed after three years. If your data is to be used for any future research or studies, you will be notified and asked to consent to such use.

### **How Will the Results Be Used**

The research and data collected for this study may be published in journals or other publications, or used in scholarly presentations. If utilized in any of these ways, the data will be provided in a group format in attempt to represent common experiences among betrayed partners. The individual participants involved in this study will not be identifiable in any of the data publications or presentations to be used for this research.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research, please contact us at:

[bleiber@southwesttherapyassociation.com](mailto:bleiber@southwesttherapyassociation.com) or via phone at 281-381-0136.

If you have questions regarding your rights or any other part of this research, or if you feel there is a problem or injury that has occurred during your participation, please contact the NU Institutional Review Board at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu).

### **Audio/Video Recording**

We will be using a video camera to record the interviews, which will include your verbal and nonverbal responses to the questions asked by the researcher.

### **Compensation/Incentives**

As an act of appreciation for your participation in this interview process, you will receive a \$50 Amazon card which will be emailed to you following the completion of the interview process.

**Mandated Reporting**

As students and professionals at National University, we are required to report any abuse, suspicion of abuse, or possible harm to a participant or others in the participants contact to the appropriate authorities, specifically in cases where child or elderly abuse has taken place.

**Dual Role**

This research is being conducted by students/professionals at National University. The researchers also hold licenses as Licensed Professional Counselors and Licensed Psychological Associates, therefore there will be no current clients of the researchers who will also participate in the research being conducted through the university.

**Voluntary Participation**

As a participant in this research study, you may decide to stop or end participation at any time for any reason. You will not lose any benefit, nor will you be penalized for withdrawing participation in any way.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions or concerns that I presented with. I am consenting to participation in this research, and I am aware that I can withdraw my participation at any time.

Participant Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_