

Together After Infidelity:
A Relational Story of Moving Forward

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2018



Vrije Universiteit Brussel

The TAOS Institute

Faculty of Psychology and
Educational Sciences

PhD Program

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Psychology at de Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Together After Infidelity: A Relational Story of Moving Forward

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2018**

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ABSTRACT

Infidelity is a frequently occurring and painful problem for couples and while many couples stay together and enjoy a positive relationship, their stories are largely absent from the professional research-based literature. The focus of this inquiry is, *what do couples say about how they are moving forward together after infidelity?* The framework of Research As Daily Practice (Wulff & St. George, 2014, 2016) was used to guide this inquiry and I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 couples. These couples are in committed living apart, cohabitating, and married relationships spanning a few years to over 30 years and partners range in age from early 20s to early 60s. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes associated with moving forward and the IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b), a systemic clinical practice tool that foregrounds relational dynamics was used to describe the particular interpersonal patterns that contributed to moving forward together. The findings of this inquiry highlight that moving forward after infidelity is a relational experience and offer practitioners conversational resources in their work with individuals and couples dealing with infidelity.

Key words: infidelity, couples, staying together, conjoint interviews, Research As Daily Practice, thematic analysis, IPscope, relational practice

Acknowledgements

I considered pursuing doctoral study for a long time and it only made sense when I was introduced to The Taos Institute PhD program. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of a community of practitioners who want to find more generative and collaborative ways of engaging with the problems in people's lives.

To my Taos advisor, Dr. Sally St. George: thank you for sharing your experience and expertise in both research and therapeutic practice. I hear your words in my therapy sessions and in my dissertation. I have appreciated our conversations over the past several years and left each one feeling inspired and encouraged. That we live in the same city was serendipitous and I appreciate how available, responsive and generous you have been with your time, direction and editing. To my VUB promotor, Prof. dr. Katrien De Koster: thank you for your guidance and support. Your kind words cheered me on and your generative questions helped shape this dissertation. To my committee members, Prof. dr. Gerrit Loots, Dr. Jasmina Sermijn, Prof. dr. Imke Baetens and Dr. Karl Tomm: thank you for sharing your time and expertise and for your deep review of my work. To my Taos colleagues, Kim, Richard, Sam and Clarice: I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to learn about your communities of practice and am touched by your passion for your work. Going through this learning process with you has been one of the best parts of this program. To the participant couples: thank you for including me in your stories of moving forward together after infidelity. This dissertation has been made possible because of you and your willingness to share your stories with me.

To my mentor, practice partner, and friend, Dr. Michele Nanchoff: your influence is widely apparent in both my professional and personal life. Thank you for your endless support and especially for advising me to "stay the course". To my conversational partner and friend Shelagh Gutsche: you were central in my early grounding of relational work, and essential in the completion of this project. It has been such a pleasure to connect with you regarding how this work might be useful for practitioners. To Glorie: thank you for your careful reading, encouragement and interest in my project. You are gifted at what you do and contributed much more than what was asked.

To special friends and esteemed colleagues who have provided considerable emotional and instrumental support throughout this PhD program: these amazing individuals include Cheri, Serri, Brenda, Rich, Sheila, Elaine & Don, Katheryne, Patrick, Sherry, Diane, Sharon, Ken, Miss Patricia, Peter & Gina, Mary Louise, Christine & Peter, and Tena. Thank you for your many contributions over these past years. I relied on you for yoga classes, pseudonyms for the participants (yes, my friend who helped name the participants watches *The Walking Dead*), recruitment of participants, delicious meals, and on your curiosity about what I was doing. I appreciate how much you emphasized the value of this work and your tireless encouragement and belief in me. I know for some of you that it feels like you've been going through this with me and you have. I am truly fortunate to have such talented, generous and caring people in my life.

My family has been a part of this project from the envisioning that started long ago through the various stages of the work over the past years. To Beryl and Jim Coburn, my parents: you encouraged me in my education and modelled working hard devoted to something meaningful. I have understood the value of persistence from how my mum lives her life and I developed a love of stories and of storytelling from my dad. Thank you both for always doing whatever you could for me. And to Dave, my husband: your love and support contributed to every aspect of this dissertation, and there are no limits to your technical expertise, patience and kindness. Thank you for making space for this in our life together.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Infidelity is often a story of personal and relationship devastation.

I had to sit back and wait for him. He ultimately was the one to make the decision whether we were going to split up or continue on with the couple. I was waiting to exhale. It was a risk for me to take to reveal the affair, I knew he might just walk out the door and not want anything more to do with me. (Robin, February 14, 2016)

I think for a day or two I was in a state of disbelief. I wasn't angry. I wasn't anything. Then of course the full impact seeps in. You think everything is crashing. It was well into the marriage that she was willing to toss it. It didn't make sense. The blow to your ego that you've been replaced. I wanted to strike back. I wanted to know how to hurt her the same way. I guess it made me feel stupid. Embarrassed. I didn't want [anyone] to know. Nothing worse for a guy than his wife to be screwing around on him. It's like a death. I prepared to end it and I started proceedings. (Cal, February 14, 2016)

But this is not the only story about infidelity.

You come away with a better appreciation for life. We feel that after some of this and having explored everything that's going on, there's not much that we're ever afraid of as a couple. There is the honesty that we always wanted [there] to be. This is an achievement for both of us, because we did it. I think there's a special uniqueness and closeness that other people will never know. The importance [for] the general society is [to] no longer think of this as something that cannot be dealt with. (Cal, February 14, 2016)

It brought us a lot closer. It's opened him up to communication, which he was not open to. Our relationship is much better; it's that much stronger. More open, genuine, loving. We have true love and respect. There's nothing we hide from each other anymore. Four years ago I felt like I had to tell him what he wanted to hear or else he'd get upset. Now I feel through this process, I can be really honest with him and whether he likes it or not. He makes me feel I can be more honest with him because of his changes. (Robin, February 14, 2016)

Infidelity can also be a story of healing, identifying and living one's values, and generating new and preferred relational practices. How did Cal shift from feeling devastated and initiating divorce proceedings to staying together with his wife, healing the relational harm caused by the infidelity and proudly appreciating how he and Robin responded to this devastating relational breach? What did Robin do that contributed to the

healing and relational improvements? And what do other couples do to sustain their relationships and retain positive views of their relationships after infidelity? These are the infidelity stories that I am interested in, as told by the couples with these experiences, and while hard to find, these stories are powerful and informative. In this dissertation, you will hear parts of these powerful and informative stories from 12 couples whom I studied about their experience of sustaining their relationship after infidelity. This study is a response to my work with Cal and Robin and other couples who face the painful aftermath of infidelity and wish to sustain and improve their relationship.

In this chapter, I introduce you to my clinical experience with clients dealing with infidelity and to some of the challenges I encounter in working with this complex problem. I highlight some of the dominant narratives that shape therapist and client understandings of infidelity and note how we might notice and interrogate these discourses. I discuss my philosophical grounding and the importance of language when we talk about this problem. I discuss briefly the impact of infidelity and the importance of researching this topic, specifically with couples who have sustained their relationships after infidelity. I then outline my inquiry and provide an overview of the chapters.

Generally, I think of infidelity as a relational harm that occurs when one or both partners in a committed relationship acted in a way that is not emotionally, financially, and or sexually exclusive to their partner, contrary to what was previously understood as agreed upon or assumed by the partners (Gottman, 2011). A decision was unilaterally made that greatly affected the other partner and the relationship. Committed relationships may include couples being married, common-law, or dating. In my work with clients, I do not define or interpret which particular behaviors constitute infidelity; agreement on

what particular behaviors are of concern to the individuals involved is constructed in the therapeutic conversation. Of course, I come into these conversations with my previous understanding of what constitutes infidelity. Following a collaborative therapy approach (Anderson, 1997, 2012; Anderson & Gehart, 2007), I acknowledge my understanding and experience as conversational resources (McNamee, 2017), but I do not impose my understandings on clients. I engage with clients to coordinate our understanding of the particular concerning behaviors. A definition is only useful if we agree that it is useful and if it helps us to coordinate our relational activities (Gergen, 2009).

Though I believe infidelity is a common experience for couples, and it is in my practice, it is difficult to determine rates of occurrence. In line with the definition of infidelity as any non-exclusive emotional and or sexual behavior contrary to the relationship understandings (Gottman, 2011), the rate of occurrence of infidelity ranges from what is considered to be a low estimate of 20-25% (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a) to a higher estimate of 40% (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004; Vaughan, 2003). While infidelity does not occur in all or most committed relationships, the rate of occurrence is significant and given the devastating personal and relational impact, increasing our capacity for helping clients deal with this problem is necessary.

My Counselling Practice

In my counselling practice, I meet a number of clients who have experienced infidelity. This includes individuals involved in infidelity, trying to decide whether or not to disclose this relationship to their primary partners, and individuals engaged in decision-making about whether or not to continue in their infidelity or primary relationships. I meet with individuals whose primary relationships are at risk because of

infidelity or whose primary relationships did not continue after infidelity, and I meet with individuals who have had or are currently involved with someone in a committed relationship. Family members occasionally consult regarding the infidelity of a loved one, and, at times, I meet with friends who are concerned about a friend's infidelity. The couples I meet after infidelity experiences are typically trying to heal their relationships and to a much lesser extent, I meet with couples who are in the process of dissolving their relationships after infidelity.

In all of these circumstances, I have found the experience of infidelity to be extremely complex and challenging for the individuals involved. I, along with other marriage and family therapists, identify our work with couples who are trying to heal their relationships after infidelity as one of the most difficult clinical situations we face (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). And for me, it is also one of the most surprising and inspiring. While some couples I meet do not stay together even after trying to sustain their relationships, and some couples stay together but do not have a positive view of their relationships, other couples like Cal and Robin heal the harm caused by infidelity and make significant relational changes. I am touched and encouraged by these couples. Though I believe couples can recover from infidelity, I support individuals and couples in making whatever decisions about sustaining or ending their relationships that best fits for them, and I do not impose any one particular way of responding.

As a result of individuals' experiences with infidelity, considerable research has been conducted on the following topics: the relationship between trust and infidelity (Gottman, 2011), prediction of who will engage in infidelity behaviors (Hackathorn, Mattingly, Clark, & Mattingly, 2011), the relationship between power and infidelity

(Lammers, Stoker, Jordan, Pollmann, & Stapel, 2011), reasons for infidelity (Treas & Giesen, 2000), the impact of infidelity and concurrent depression (Gorman & Blow, 2008), and recovery from infidelity (Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan, & Schofield, 2012). Based on my clinical work, I have focused my inquiry on couples who stay together after infidelity and have positive views of their relationships.

A while back I was meeting with a number of couples for whom infidelity was an issue and I noticed emerging themes involving feelings of shame, judgment, stigma, and isolation. The effects of such experiences seemed to strengthen or intensify the problems related to infidelity (i.e., mistrust). I also noticed some of the ways that these couples tried to reduce the effects of these feelings. One initiative was to connect with other couples who have stayed together after infidelity, and some couples asked me about such couples. Couples want to know how many other couples successfully sustain their relationships after infidelity and how they do it. Couples also want to know if others really “get over this,” and what they can look forward to if they stay together. In these questions, I hear “What are our chances?” and if couples are hopeful, they can take steps toward moving forward together. To respond to these questions, I share stories of my experience with other couples along with additional understandings I have garnered from colleagues and professional and practice-based literature. Some couples want to read about other couples recovering from infidelity, and some couples do this via online forums or blogs. In my experience, it is the exclusive partner who seeks this form of support, and from my review of these resources, they tend to be more oriented toward exclusive partners.

Stories about couples who have experienced infidelity.

Most of the couples I meet with do not personally know couples who stay together after infidelity and describe their relationship in positive terms. If they do know a couple who stayed together after infidelity, the relationship is not seen as positive; consequently, it is not a subject that is openly talked about. Yet most of these same couples know at least one couple whose relationship ended after infidelity and some of the details about the experience, and these stories seem to be more widely talked about. So I wondered about this. Relationship endings are visible, partners sometimes share the reason for the breakup, and infidelity is a frequently cited reason for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003; Kitson, Babri, & Roach as cited in Hall & Fincham, 2006a). From my review, there seems to be more books written about individual experiences of dealing with infidelity than about couples who have dealt with infidelity. I am interested in the experience of couples who sustain their relationship after an infidelity experience and hold a positive view of their relationship after infidelity.

While many couples who have experienced infidelity decide to end their relationships, couples do stay together and heal their relationships (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Allen & Atkins, 2005, 2012; Bischoff, 2003; Case, 2005; Heintzleman, Murdock, Krycak, & Seay, 2014). So what about these stories? What might be learned from these couples? What might change for couples who are dealing with the aftermath of infidelity if the stories they hear also include stories of healing and of positive relational outcomes?

It is difficult to know how many couples stay together after infidelity, and based on his clinical experience and review of the literature about affairs, Haltzman (2013) “estimate[s] that half or more of [committed] couples who have experienced an affair will not” (p. 231) end their relationships. Snyder, Baucom, and Gordon (2007) say “most—

about 70%—choose to rebuild their relationship” (p. 19). Vaughan (2003) asserts that couples within our own social networks have experienced infidelity and stayed together, but we do not know this as they have decided to keep the experiences private.

Concealment enables infidelity to happen in the first place and to continue, and seems to play a part in couples’ responses when it becomes known by the primary partner.

While I appreciate and respect couples’ privacy, I am curious about the lack of success stories about moving forward together after infidelity. Even when a couple stays together after infidelity and enjoys their relationship, this is not typically celebrated or shared with close friends or family. Does successfully moving forward together counteract the feelings of shame and judgment? Does shame linger? Or have couples simply moved past that experience, not wanting to give it any more attention and therefore, we do not hear about it? This dissertation is neither about what couples openly talk about, nor whose interests are served when something is not talked about, yet these variables are important for couples and therapists/researchers. One question I encourage couples to consider when they ask me if they should tell others about their infidelity experience is whether talking or not talking about the infidelity experience might be a resource for the couple. It is my experience that individuals may want to talk to a close friend or family member but feel constrained due to fear of judgment, and for some couples, not sharing is a positive relational act. For other couples, not sharing is linked to shame or pressure from one partner to keep the experience a secret.

Infidelity Discourses

In my work with couples dealing with infidelity experiences, I notice the presence of dominant discourses or grand narratives in the therapy conversations and in couples’

attempts to respond to the infidelity experiences. Dominant discourses are “key ideas that societies hold as to what persons in that society should believe and how they should behave” (St. George & Wulff, 2014, p. 124). For example, I frequently hear from couples that they believe most relationships do not survive infidelity and that there must have been relationship issues if infidelity occurred. I also hear that infidelity happens because of character/moral flaws, so “once a cheater always a cheater.” Couples also express the idea that infidelity is the worst kind of betrayal, the worst thing to happen in a relationship. These influential discourses can be persuasive in how an individual thinks about and responds to infidelity (Hare-Mustin, 1994), and they are often so taken for granted that they are taken up as “the truth.”

Consider for a moment what these discourses might mean for couples trying to decide to stay together or move forward together after infidelity. Exclusive partners in my practice struggle with the idea of “once a cheater, always a cheater” as they try to rebuild or establish a new trust with their partners. How does one count on a partner again if one only sees him/her as a cheater? Shame and fear of judgment are linked to the notion that something must be wrong individually or relationally if infidelity happens, and something must certainly be wrong with the exclusive partner if she/he stays in the relationship after it happens. Esther Perel (2016b) writes in her blog, “In the past, it was divorce that carried the stigma. Today, choosing to stay after an affair when you can leave is the new shame.” Shame and fear of judgment are factors in whether couples disclose infidelity or not and can result in isolation. Such silence does not offer any opportunity for a couple to interrogate the dominant discourses and they may miss much needed support. Couples I work with are typically selective about whom they disclose their infidelity story to, or

they do not disclose to anyone other than a professional (i.e., therapist, family physician, lawyer). In the situations in which the infidelity is more widely known, it is often others, not the couple, who reveal the infidelity and this can lead to problems for the couple.

The experience of infidelity disrupts personal and relational narratives and negatively influences the view one holds of her/his partner and the relationship. It can become the dominant story, the single story, of the partner and the relationship, and the idea is emphasized that “something must be individually or relationally wrong” if infidelity happened. Indeed, there may be particular reasons for the infidelity, including individual and or relational problems, but rarely do these accounts tell a complete story of the relationship or of the partners. Relationally-oriented therapists focus on the space between partners as the place/space where relationship and partner identity is shaped and is continually developing and changing (Carlson & Haire, 2014; Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2017). How might viewing relationships as multi-storied and stabilized over time through many repeated interactions (McNamee, 2017) offer hope for developing alternate and preferred stories that challenge the dominant narrative of relational devastation? What patterns of interactions—after infidelity—do couples enact that contribute to the development of alternate and healing stories? Could these patterns be identified, and how might they be conversational resources for therapists in our work with couples dealing with infidelity? Which particular “sequence of actions” (Gergen & Gergen, 2012a, p. 133) opens up options for couples who want to stay together after infidelity?

The “something must be wrong” discourse, part of the dominant narrative, also invites a lot of searching for answers/reasons. For many partners dealing with infidelity,

asking the same question over and over again is often important and can contribute to healing. And yet sometimes, despite repeatedly searching to find the answers/reasons coupled with respectfully engaging in providing answers/reasons, this process does not produce fully satisfying answers. Despite lingering dissatisfaction with the explanations to the questions, “What was wrong?” and “Why did this happen?” I notice that couples can engage in healing and move forward together. How do couples do this? If we consider that “the very sources of conflict in a relationship are also the wellsprings of its strength” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 24), we are encouraged to look within the relationship for how healing is performed.

Responses to infidelity can be limited by the discourses that both the couple and practitioner bring to the therapy room and these discourses need to be identified in order to interrogate their usefulness for a particular couple in a particular situation at a particular time (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Dominant discourses or grand narratives are neither good nor bad but must be assessed regarding the utility for relational well-being, and when the ideas or practices associated with a particular discourse or narrative are not preferred (i.e., relationship dissolution after infidelity) (St. George, Wulff, & Tomm, 2015c) it is imperative to search beyond them for alternative ideas or ways of being that are more pluralistic and offer wider choices (Hare-Mustin, 1994). For many of the couples I meet with about infidelity, this means seeking alternative ideas to relationship dissolution. I have frequently heard an exclusive partner struggle against a previous prediction or promise that he/she would leave if infidelity happened and wish for a role model or social support for an alternate decision.

While most couples I meet with do not usually know other couples who have successfully dealt with infidelity, they are aware of the infidelity stories of famous people including athletes, politicians, business leaders, actors, and musicians. But how relevant and relatable are these stories? While experiences of infidelity are clearly visible in our popular culture (i.e., media and entertainment), to what extent, if any, are these “mediated” stories useful to couples in crisis or engaged in healing after infidelity. In her blog, Perel (2016a) observed that these stories appear to be told, “with a mixture of condemnation and titillation” (Perel, 2016a).

The dominant discourse that infidelity is the worst thing to happen in a relationship impacts couples’ experiences of infidelity and my work with them. This discourse is linked to the view that infidelity is an interpersonal trauma (Glass, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Gottman & Gottman, 2017). This stance fits for some couples, while in my experience, it does not fit for all couples. If couples are only aware of the trauma discourse, how does this discourse shape the meaning of this experience for them? Scheinkman (2005) acknowledges that the trauma lens legitimizes the pain of the experience for the exclusive partner but proposes that the trauma lens limits possibilities for relational healing. I am continually challenged with how to hold multiple ideas about infidelity such as what it meant/means to each partner and the relationship, and how to acknowledge the harm and devastation experienced, as well as open a space for healing. Furthermore, what about the couples for whom infidelity is not *the* worst thing that can happen in a relationship? What approach might we use with these couples? What does it mean for clinical work if therapists primarily take a trauma-informed approach? Scheinkman (2005) suggests that this approach invites a focus on transparency and truth-

telling and that a rigid adherence to these values might inadvertently “promote the very trauma that we are trying to heal” (p. 228). Scheinkman (2005) does not dispute that for some, the trauma focus makes sense and is a useful framework. Rather, she encourages widening the focus to consider cultural, historical, and contextual issues that might be useful for a couple making meaning of their infidelity experience. In order for therapists to make space for this examination, we need to be aware of the discourses that impact our vision.

What Do *Couples* Say About How They Are Moving Forward Together After Infidelity?

Over a period of a few months I was working with a number of couples dealing with infidelity, so I researched recent professional practice literature and read, “What helps couples rebuild their relationship after infidelity”? (Abrahamson et al., 2012). This article is about qualitative research conducted with seven individuals who sustained their primary relationships after an infidelity experience. I thought this article was extremely thorough and offered ideas to be considered for use in therapy with couples facing the aftermath of infidelity. As I read this study, I wondered what *couples* might say when similarly asked about their experiences of staying together after infidelity. Infidelity is a relational experience, and it made sense to me that practitioners should be learning from the couples who have successfully navigated this experience. When I researched further about couples with infidelity experiences, I noticed the stories of couples staying together after infidelity are largely absent from the literature (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Hall & Fincham, 2006b; Heintzleman et al., 2014). And these are the stories I am interested in, so we can better understand how couples move forward together after infidelity. Such

stories could reveal competences, resourcefulness, and successes that we could draw on in our therapy practices as we work with other couples who are navigating infidelity experiences.

Despite my experience with a wide range of clinical situations related to infidelity, I have questions about how couples move forward together after infidelity. In her *Psychotherapy Networker* article, “After the Storm,” Esther Perel (2010) wrote about the importance of helping couples in the immediate crisis of infidelity and how therapists really do not know how couples do “ever after” (p. 36). This is largely true for me. I know more about the initial aftermath than I do about what couples do as they move forward together after infidelity. Referring to her decision to follow up with former client couples to explore what worked in the previously completed therapy and why, Perel (2010) said, “I’m intrigued by what we might learn from looking back” (p. 36). In her May 2015 TedTalk, Perel observed that “while infidelity is extremely common, it is also poorly understood” (time 0.52). How might therapy practices around infidelity shift if we had greater appreciation for the backstory of moving forward after infidelity?

Philosophical Grounding and Shifts in Noticing

Reading about relational constructionist ideas (McNamee, 2017; McNamee & Hosking, 2012) has reminded me not to outright discount or rule out any therapeutic ideas, nor to search for a “master conversation useful to all” (Gergen & Gergen, 2012b, p. 80). Instead of privileging tools, techniques, or models, I privilege relational processes, which are “our means of generating a sense of how and who to be in our world” (McNamee, 2012, p. 152). I engage in collaborative practices that respect and consider

alternate worldviews in order to coordinate relational interactions, and I orient from a reflexive stance of uncertainty (Gergen & Gergen, 2012b; McNamee, 2012).

The philosophical grounding of relational construction shows up in my work in various ways. This includes how I understand problems, how I appraise and make decisions about utilizing various therapeutic practices in particular situations and in the continuous conversations I have with myself about “how else might this be” (McNamee, 2012, p. 155). It also includes what I pay attention to in the therapy conversation; one example of this is that I privilege noticing the “patterns of complementarity and most especially, pairs of actions that mutually invite, warrant, or support each other” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 37) that occur between partners. Orienting from a relational constructionist framework I focus on “what people do together” (McNamee, 2012, p. 153) and I am concerned with “a change in the relationship of those engaging in the process” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 27). I am concerned with the moment-to-moment construction of meaning and reality that occurs between people and not a single reality of couple dynamics. I hold a general philosophy of valuing locally- and relationally-generated knowledge and collaborative practices (McNamee, 2012).

As I started to construct this inquiry, which included reading about relational construction (McNamee, 2017; McNamee & Hosking, 2012), I began to read differently. Previously, I would privilege the sections of the literature that offer ideas for practice in clinical situations. More recently, I was paying greater attention to the process of therapy in relation to the use of language, to the coordination of interpersonal actions, and also to the philosophical underpinnings or assumptions of the research. Through my deeper understanding of relational constructionism, I engage more intentionally in a reflexive

practice of exploring the implications of therapeutic choices. For example, as mentioned above, a significant amount of the professional literature on infidelity is grounded in an interpersonal trauma approach (Glass, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Gottman & Gottman, 2017). This model offers a number of practices as resources for clinicians including ideas for responding to the emotional distress of the exclusive partner and suggests a path for achieving forgiveness. While I continue to view this approach as useful, I wonder what it might mean if the therapist introduces the idea of trauma into the therapy conversation and only uses this lens to view the infidelity experience. Might viewing the experience as a trauma make it more or less recoverable and for whom? Is this model relational in its understandings or is it applying individual ideas to couple work? What other possibilities are there for viewing this problem? How does privileging one therapy model over other models impact how we engage with this problem? Does this open or close down possibilities for generative conversations through which clients can make the changes they wish to make? Parker, Tennyson Berger, and Campbell (2010) warn that when therapists approach their work with infidelity from a single stance, they “may impose a prescribed script related to infidelity [and that] prescribed scripts imposed by therapists result in the silencing of clients’ voices and their experiences” (p. 67). Orientating from a relational constructionist approach rather than a single therapeutic modality opens space for considering any or all therapy practices as potential conversational resources based on their utility in a particular historical and social context, with individuals at a particular time.

As I developed this inquiry, I struggled with the term relational responsibility and using it when talking about the problem of infidelity. To me, relational responsibility is a

philosophical and ethical positioning that acknowledges that stories of self and other are continually being constructed in and through our interactions with others (Weingarten, 1991) and that the shaping effects of our actions are only relevant if the individuals involved deem the actions as meaningful. As Gergen (2009) said,

relational responsibility must itself issue from coordinated action. Practices of relational responsibility are made intelligible within relationships. The individual person may activate scenarios of caring [or harm] for the relationship, but unless coordinated with others, the actions do not count. (p. 365)

Thinking about how the idea of relational responsibility relates to infidelity, I want to clarify that I am not suggesting or endorsing shared or co-responsibility for a partner's choice to participate in infidelity. Relational responsibility is different than mutual responsibility, and it "is not solely about blame and credit but it is moreover about entirely different ways of engaging with others and thus of creating our worlds" (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. xii). Again, individual or personal responsibility has meaning only when coordinated within relationships (Gergen, 2009).

Taking responsibility for one's own actions is a common discourse in therapy and specifically with the problem of infidelity. Relational responsibility adds to what we typically think of as personal responsibility and extends this concept to consider that what constitutes "personal responsibility" is determined in the context of a relationship. Relational responsibility is not incompatible with the non-exclusive partner taking responsibility for her/his infidelity behavior, for taking responsibility is a relational act, and therapy conversations can support the construction of relational responsibility. In my work with couples, one's taking responsibly for infidelity behaviors typically means

becoming aware of the effects of one's behavior on the partner and on the couple and evaluating whether or not the consequences of these actions are preferred (Tomm, 1999). It involves accountability, responsiveness to the outcomes, and commitments to the other involved (Tomm, 1999). These forms of action (Gergen, 2009) are relational.

The Importance of Language

The clients who consult with me use various words to refer to their infidelity experience including affair, infidelity, cheating, screwing around, messing around, stepping out, straying, betraying, and being unfaithful. When participating in therapeutic conversations with clients, I adopt their words for describing the problem because some of the ways of referring to infidelity are more “experience-near” (White, 2007, p. 40) for clients than others. This term is taken from Michael White (2007) who writes about the importance of

negotiating a particular, experience-near definition of the problem. . .that uses the parlance of the people seeking therapy and that is based on their understanding of life (developed in the culture of their family or community and influenced by their immediate history) (p. 40).

Utilizing clients' language honors people's experiences as individual and unique (White, 2007) and acknowledges that how experiences get talked about shapes the meaning of the experience (Gergen, 2009).

For the purpose of this study, I decided to use the term infidelity to talk about the phenomenon of interest because it is a widely used term in our social world, as well as in the professional practice and research-based literature (Weiser, Lalasz, Weigel, & Evans, 2014). I acknowledge that there are additional terms used in popular, professional

practice and research-based literature to refer to this problem: extramarital affairs (McCarthy & Wald, 2013), adultery (Vaughan, 2010), non-monogamy (Vaughan, 2003), extramarital relationships and extramarital involvement (Glass & Wright, 1992), extra-relational affair (Case, 2005), relational transgression (Morse & Metts, 2011), extra-dyadic involvement (Balderrama-Durbin, Allen, & Rhoades, 2012), and philandering, (Pittman, 1990).

As I progressed with this research project I considered my biases and typical practices of how I speak about this problem and I continually asked myself questions such as who speaks about this problem, how is this problem viewed, and what is the utility of these particular practices? In keeping with a relational constructionist stance, I did not seek to establish one real or true way of speaking about the problem of infidelity but rather to consider how we might talk about this problem in ways in which particular situations may offer the most generative options for our clients (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009). How do we continue to engage in talking about this problem with clients and colleagues while considering different ways of conceptualizing this experience? When we accept one way of defining this problem, we automatically exclude other ways, and both what we include and exclude have shaping effects for how this problem is experienced (Gergen, 2009).

Throughout this chapter I have stressed the importance of language, and systemic and collaborative therapists will be familiar with the assumption that dialog, knowledge, and language are inherently transforming and that we cannot not be influenced in dialog (Anderson, 2012). This applies to both therapists and couples and creates both a responsibility and an opportunity for our work with infidelity. From a “Wittgensteinian

(Wittgenstein, 1953) stance on language use and conversational practices as the primary means by which relational life is enabled and coordinated” (Ness & Strong, 2014, p. 82), I wanted to acknowledge the multiple ways that infidelity might be referred to in therapeutic conversations. These words are in our social and cultural worlds and carry with them different connotations. Both therapist and couple bring to the therapy conversation their ways of talking about the problem, and through engaging in conversational practices about the problem, “language and meanings are talked into significance” (Ness & Strong, 2014, p. 82).

Just as I outlined that there are various ways to refer to the experience of infidelity, there are also multiple options for referring to the individuals involved: participating and non-participating partner (Dean, 2011); involved partner (Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007); adulterer, home wrecker, cheat, infidel, philanderer, deceiver, (Linquist & Negy, 2005); betrayed and betrayer (Rider, 2011); offender and victim (Feeney, 2004, 2005); injured partner and participating partner (Baucom, Gordon, Snyder, Atkins, & Christensen, 2006); offending party (Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, & Miller, 2002); deceived partner and unfaithful partner (Kröger, Reißner, Vasterling, Schütz, & Kliem, 2012); offended partner (Zola, 2007); non-offending partner (Bischoff, 2003); exclusive and non-exclusive spouse (Abrahamson et al., 2012); victim and victimizer (Hargrave, 2008); and uninvolved and straying partners (Estroff Marano, 2012). The above terms are also used in multiple combinations.

While I have not encountered some of the above terms in therapy conversations that I have participated in with couples, I mention them here as they are used in the wider social world: in media, in popular sources such as websites and blogs, and in professional

sources. These terms, therefore, potentially hold influence for couples and practitioners. In my experience, many of these terms have a moral connotation and seem to polarize partners. What are the implications of these terms? What are the options for healing if the partners are viewed so differently? What distinctions can therapists draw that acknowledge the partners' lived experiences and create conditions for healing to occur (Tomm, 1999)? What story are we therapists shaping if we use certain terms such as victim and offender? Understanding that language is relational (Ness & Strong, 2014) and "that language and relationships are negotiated simultaneously (cf. Strong, 2007; Strong & Tomm, 2007)" (Ness & Strong, 2014, p. 84), therapists need to be aware that terms may "take on relational significance when informing interactions *between* partners" (Ness & Strong, 2014, p. 85) and between clients and practitioners. I think about what terms elicit conversational and relational possibilities and which terms sustain problematic and unwanted ways of "going on together" (Wittgenstein as quoted in Ness & Strong, 2014, p. 100). How might these terms shape a couple's experience of infidelity? What could it mean to be in a relationship with an "offender"? In my work with couples who stay together after infidelity, the infidelity is not the only story of the relationship and the identity of the person who was involved in the infidelity behavior is based on more than the infidelity behavior.

Sometimes when I meet with clients, the pain and suffering in response to the infidelity experience is so intense, and I can feel the pull of the despair to focus only on the infidelity story. At these times, I remind myself about how dangerous it is to construct only one story of the partners and their relationship. The danger of a single story is that this is what the partners and the relationship become (Adichie, 2009). This

understanding encourages me to ask about an alternate history of the relationship (Carlson, 2017) as a way to construct more than the infidelity story of the couple: “Distress the couple may be experiencing will serve to minimize positive attributes of the relationship from awareness” (Parker et al., 2010, p. 70) and can lead to viewing relationship dissolution as the only option. As I have mentioned, an ongoing challenge in my work with infidelity is how to both honor the pain and suffering and open space for other possibilities. I think it is one of our responsibilities as therapists to hope for change while respecting clients’ rights to determine what is best for them. What can the couples who stay together after infidelity and who have a positive view of the relationship tell therapists and other couples about how to respond to the pain and suffering while maintaining hope for the relationship?

I wanted to use terms to refer to the individuals involved in this inquiry that were as nonjudgmental and as experience-near as possible. Influenced by Abrahamson et al. (2012), I use the terms “non-exclusive partner” for the individual engaged in the infidelity behaviors and “exclusive partner” for the individual who did not engage in infidelity behaviors. The key word for me is exclusivity, and I use it in reference to emotional, financial, and sexual exclusivity. It is also my experience that “exclusivity” is assumed unless otherwise negotiated in most committed relationships. I acknowledge that these terms are binary and occupy individualist positions. Reflecting on what Gergen and Gergen (2012a) “borrow from Wittgenstein, the range of our psychological vocabulary is the limit of what we can do together” (p. 129). I am limited by the language practices known to me, and these terms I employ do not describe the individuals involved in this study in any way other than in reference to the infidelity behaviors. To use terms meant

only in relation to specific behaviors as totalizing descriptors of an individual can serve to shift the relationship in particular directions, and often toward more conflict (Gergen & Gergen, 2012a).

The Impact of Infidelity

Though my study does not focus on the effects of infidelity, in my experience, infidelity cannot be talked about without talking about the pain and suffering involved: “Not everyone who has discovered (relational) unfaithfulness is equally wounded, nor is every person whose infidelity is discovered equally affected. However, . . . chances are . . . the discovery [w]as very traumatic” (Lusterman, 1998, p.13). Emotional and psychological experiences described by individuals in response to their partners’ infidelity include disbelief and shock, despair, anger, sadness, alone, unsafe, hurt, anxiety, shame, guilt, depression, feelings of abandonment, emotional numbing, or emotional flooding, and are understood by some practitioners as occurring severely and as warranting a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (Glass, 2003; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Snyder et al., 2007). The partners who participated in the infidelity behaviors may also experience many of the same kinds of emotional and psychological symptoms (Dean, 2011; Perel, 2015), often to a lesser extent. In my experience, hurt is always a part of infidelity for the individuals involved and harm is always felt in the relationship. For many relationships, “the discovery of infidelity is a serious relationship crisis that shatters much of the stability and security that is assumed in committed relationships” (Fife, Weeks, & Gambescia, 2008, p. 322).

And as I have previously mentioned, in response to infidelity, some couples end their relationship. According to Amato and Previti; Beitzig; and Kitson, Babri, and Roach

(as cited in Hall & Fincham, 2006a), affairs are one of the leading reasons given by couples who divorce. And for many of those couples who decide to end their relationships, infidelity is linked to poorer adjustment post break-up (Amato & Previti, 2003). There can be other far-reaching effects of infidelity, as well. Infidelity can be a significant source of parental conflict, and while there is little research on the direct effects of infidelity on children (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004; Ford Sori, 2007), there is a significant body of research on the effects of parental conflict and divorce on children (Amato, 2000, 2010; Amato & Booth, 2001). There are economic costs such as reduced income earning during the infidelity experience, the diversion of household resources to the infidelity partner, as well as the economic consequences related to divorce (Crouch & Dickes, 2016). There can be negative effects on relationships with friends (Harrison, 2004) and other family members for either or both partners depending on whether or not the primary relationship continues. Considering how extensive the effects of infidelity might be, Vaughan (2003) views infidelity as a societal problem, as well as a relational problem.

Researching Infidelity

While infidelity is a serious relational problem that demands research, Bischoff (2003) explains that “infidelity is a notoriously difficult problem to study” (p. 73), especially accessing individuals with direct infidelity experience. Shame, fear of judgment, and the pain and suffering involved pose difficulties for accessing participants for infidelity related studies (Bermudez & Parker, 2010; Bird, Butler, & Fife, 2007; Bischoff, 2003; Reibstein & Richards, 1993). In view of the difficulty researching infidelity, it is not surprising that there is limited research about couples who have

experienced infidelity and the efficacy of couples' counselling with this problem (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Heintzelman et al., 2014). Despite understanding the difficulties, I was optimistic about recruiting couples for my study as I am a part of a wide community of legal, therapeutic, and medical practitioners who could be enlisted to help recruit participant couples.

During recruitment, I encountered some of the dominant discourses associated with infidelity such as "don't talk about it." Though I will say more about recruitment in Chapter Three, I think shame, judgment, stigma, and perhaps even fear were factors in my lack of success in accessing participants through my wide-reaching community of practice. I did not want to limit my study to couples in my practice nor to couples who had participated in therapy, so I recruited couples from a range of referral sources. I am so grateful to those colleagues, acquaintances, family members, and friends who helped me recruit. Despite the efforts of so many, after actively recruiting for 6 months, I had only 2 participant couples, and they were couples I had met through my therapy practice. Ironically, while recruitment for my study was not going well, referrals to my practice for the problem of infidelity were increasing. At the same time I was trying to research infidelity, I was having more opportunities to understand this problem through my daily practice.

When I talked to potential participant referral sources, most people were curious about the study and asked questions, and many people told me the study was important. Some people told me stories of others they knew with infidelity experiences and their theories about why infidelity happens (i.e., relationship issues). Others, including colleagues, told me that asking couples to participate in my study would be "re-

traumatizing” for them, and that if I wanted the “real story,” I should be interviewing both partners, but apart, not together, as I was planning. I thought about what this might mean for therapy conversations if we start from the position that it is harmful to ask a couple to talk together about a very important shared experience. I acknowledge there is a possibility of risk in any conversation, and this understanding was foregrounded as I constructed my inquiry. Some people predicted I would never get any couples to agree to my inquiry and hinted that I should not be doing this work, as it was a bit “voyeuristic.” Some colleagues told me they were not comfortable bringing up my study with clients, and I understand that there were thoughtful and sound reasons for not wanting to ask couples to participate in my study. In a number of the responses, I noticed themes of judgment and shame about the overall experience of infidelity, the people with this lived experience and my study. The judgment and shame was expressed by potential participant couples and by some possible referral sources, and these responses influenced me. I felt stuck, filled with self-doubt, and discouraged. In an attempt to utilize these feelings in the work of my research, I asked myself how my recruitment experience could help me to better understand couples’ experience with infidelity.

In conversations with my Taos advisor, Dr. Sally St. George, I was encouraged to revisit what lead me to conduct this study, specifically feeling inspired by couples like Robin and Cal and feeling compelled to respond to the pain and suffering experienced due to infidelity. I changed my recruitment strategy and moved forward. This dissertation is not about why I was unsuccessful in recruiting with my initial strategy, but it does add to my appreciation about how difficult it is to research this problem and of the impact of shame and judgment that shapes couples’ experience of this problem.

My Inquiry

There are a number of researchers/practitioners who are calling for more research focused on couples with the lived experience of infidelity. Abrahamson et al. (2012) did a comprehensive review of the existing literature on infidelity and highlighted the lack of qualitative research with individuals with actual infidelity experiences and argued that further qualitative research is needed. Hall and Fincham (2006a) emphasize that “we know very little about couples whose affairs do not lead to [dissolution of their relationship], and about the individual or relationship qualities or processes that protect against” (p. 165) breaking up. Heintzelman et al. (2014) who conducted a questionnaire-based study of 587 individuals with direct infidelity experience also attest that “there are few empirical studies of couples who stay together” (p. 13).

The purpose of this inquiry is to better understand how couples who have experienced infidelity are moving forward together. In addition to making space for the voices of couples with this lived experience, I add my practitioner voice to the couples’ voices throughout the inquiry through the decisions, practices, and methods I utilize. The focus will be on identifying and understanding the particular ways couples sustain their relationships and looking at how these ways might be “conversational resources” (McNamee, 2017) for therapy practitioners.

As a result of this study, I hope to contribute to professional practices with couples dealing with infidelity and to the options couples might consider as they deal with this issue. I also hope that in addition to couples’ honoring the pain of the experience while orienting toward healing that perhaps couples might feel some pride or sense of accomplishment for staying together if that is their decision. This goal was

articulated by one of the study participants, Cal, an exclusive partner, who said, “this is an achievement for both of us, because we did it (meaning staying together and doing well) [and] for the general society to no longer think of this (infidelity) as something that cannot be dealt with.” This inquiry may also help accomplish what some couples with an infidelity experience wish for, to connect with others with shared experiences. Inviting people with actual experience of infidelity to talk about it “allows people to both contribute to and partake of a growing body of insider knowledge” (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1035).

My Inquiry Question

I understand that each couple is different and that their relationship has developed over time through enacting patterns of behaviors that have become stabilized.

All couple relationships are a unique culture with particularized ways of relating.

The culture of the relationship is developed through behaving in certain and ongoing ways, establishing patterns and rituals and generating standards and expectations to use in assessing oneself and one’s partner. (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, p. 41)

If the particularities of the patterns that have helped couples sustain their relationships after infidelity can be identified, perhaps these patterns can be considered for utility with other couples in the aftermath of infidelity.

My research question is *What do couples say about how they are moving forward together after infidelity?*

Research As Daily Practice

As the impetus for this inquiry stemmed from my therapeutic practice with couples dealing with infidelity, and my personal goal for this inquiry was to enhance

capabilities in working with this problem, I wanted to and felt ethically compelled to bring the research process into line with my therapeutic practice. I am drawn to collaborative (Anderson, 1997, 2001), systemic (Chard, 2014; Strong, Sutherland, Couture, Godard, & Hope, 2008; Tomm, 1991, 2014b), solution-focused (De Jong & Berg, 2002; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989) and narrative models of practice (Combs & Freedman, 2012; White, 2007). Strong (1997) points out that ideas from these particular models "are not necessarily compatible, (but) they are generally collaborative, meaning that there is a general focus on client's preferences, uniqueness, and resources" (p. 69). These models are alike also in their "orientation to the use of language" (Ness & Strong, 2014) and are informed by relational constructionism (Levin & Carleton, 2011). This inquiry is in keeping with a strengths-based approach because I am selectively attending to ideas associated with hope, coping, and competency as I seek to better understand what helps couples move forward together. For most couples, dealing with infidelity is difficult, so what do those couples like Cal and Robin do together in response to this challenge that helps them sustain and heal their relationship?

I also wanted to engage in an inquiry that would result in practical and more immediately operational knowledge for therapists. I work and plan to continue in independent practice, and when I read Wulff and St. George's (2014, 2016) *Research As Daily Practice*, I knew this framework would be a good fit to guide my research process because it allowed me to do what I needed to with respect to my work and my independent setting. St. George, Wulff, and Strong (2014) wrote "as conversationally-oriented therapists, we believe that our inquiry practices should be coordinated and consonant with what we do in everyday practice and within the structures of our work

context” (p. 213). St. George and Wulff (2015) take the position that therapy practitioners are researchers because of the work we do, which is engaging in inquiry with clients. I think about my work with couples and infidelity and how I approach this work. I invite couples to identify their understanding of the problem, I use clinical tools and theory to guide my questions and organize the details provided, I think about the focus of our work, and I intentionally develop interventions based on the focus. These are research activities, just described differently. St. George and Wulff (2015) suggest a framework for inquiry based on a social constructionist positioning that takes similar processes engaged in by practitioners and researchers and re-imagines these processes in terms that are more inclusive and generative. This “pragmatic process does not provide definitive or simple answers—but it does provide a coherent path to pursue” (Wulff & St. George, 2016, p. 31). This framework helped me align the inquiry process with my therapy practice and draw from the familiar skills and expertise I already had to extend these practices in new and generative ways.

My inquiry is a qualitative research study with couples who are sustaining their relationship after an experience of infidelity. A qualitative study was necessary because of my desire to deeply understand and describe couples’ experiences moving forward together after infidelity. Drawing from practices I already engage in with clients, I conducted in-depth interviews with couples and examined these interviews using methods that were similar to my relationally- and collaboratively-oriented therapeutic practice. In therapy conversations, I am listening for what is talked about and how, the meaning of the experience, and I am attempting to identify themes and interactional patterns. I used thematic analysis to categorize the couples’ responses in the interviews,

and thematic analysis will be more fully discussed in the methodology chapter. Here I want to introduce one particular practice resource that I used for analyzing the data, the IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b). The IPscope is a heuristic, a clinical tool, for “drawing distinctions about relational patterns” (Chenail, 2014, p. XX). In my work with couples, I use this tool to remain systemic in my viewing and understanding of the problems. By systemic, I mean “how client problems are understood in relational context, as products and processes of patterns of relational interactions” (Strong et al., 2008, p. 183). I understand problems as originating in relationships and interactions, and not as residing in individual pathology. The IPscope helps me to avoid individualist notions in terms of problems, and I wonder if perhaps other practitioners might find the IPscope to be a useful tool in their work with couples dealing with infidelity.

I recently attended a 3-day training on Treating Affairs and Trauma with Drs. John and Julie Gottman in Berkeley, California, and one of the aspects of this training that I appreciated was the time allotted for questions asked by practitioner/participants. Many of the “Q & A” opportunities followed powerful video segments that demonstrated the Gottman method for interventions in couples therapy, and it seemed to me that the therapist/participants’ questions were about clarifying how to enact these interventions in our own work with couples, particularly about how to remain relational in the work while honoring the experience of both partners. I heard Dr. Julie Gottman encourage a participant/therapist to notice and track the response of the partner to the intervention recommended and I found myself thinking about how the IPscope might be helpful in doing this. In some of the questions I heard puzzling over each partner’s responsibility or “part” in the success of the interventions, and again I wondered if the IPscope might be

one tool for noticing how the responses of the partners connect and the effects of these couplings. Another piece that stood out for me from this training was Dr. John Gottman's (2017) review of eight current treatment approaches for infidelity. While acknowledging that this literature review was incomplete, he shared his finding that only one of these eight approaches was supported by research data. And all the others, including the Gottman approach, do not yet have research data to support their interventions (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). Dr. John Gottman indicated that the Gottman Institute is currently involved in a research study on the effectiveness of the Gottman model for treating affairs and I am eager to learn of the findings. There is a significant need for further research with the couples who have had this frequently occurring and painful experience.

Overview of the Chapters

In Chapter Two, the literature review, the problem of infidelity is situated both historically and currently in terms of the social context in which this problem occurs. I examine the current trends and expectations associated with committed relationships. In the literature review, I will focus on the practice- and research-based literature that pertains directly to infidelity experiences. I look at the current research on the efficacy of the therapy models currently available. I appraise the research in terms of utility for clinical practice rather than from the stance of which models are true or correct. In Chapter Three, I detail the research design. I conducted a qualitative study using in-depth interviews and the methodology is Research As Daily Practice (St. George & Wulff, 2014). I discuss the relational construction orienting assumptions of the inquiry, the steps taken to engage participants, and the methods used to gather and analyze data. Ethical considerations are reflexively woven throughout the steps. In Chapter Four, I provide a

narrative account of the couples' experiences of staying together after infidelity.

Listening to the couples, I identify themes and interpersonal patterns. Categorizing what the couples talked about incorporates their voices (England, 1994), and by directly quoting the participants, I hoped to lessen the possibility of appropriating their voices (England, 1994). The themes will be explained using exemplars from research interviews and discussed narratively, and the interpersonal patterns will be depicted diagrammatically. In Chapter Five, I discuss possible practice ideas that will be interrogated for their meaning and usefulness for therapists working with couples dealing with infidelity. I will describe what was not considered and what else might be done (Gergen & Gergen, 2012a; McNamee, 2012).

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on infidelity that pertains to individuals with this actual lived experience. The purpose is to situate my research within the wider context of the extant research and scholarship on infidelity and demonstrate the need for my research (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). In this literature review, I include “work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners” (Fink as cited in Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012, p. 7) as this collection reflects the literature that currently shapes understandings of infidelity. Blow and Hartnett (2005a), who conducted one of the most inclusive and rigorous methodological reviews on infidelity in committed relationships, concluded that “most of the major works on infidelity (although excellent sources) are based largely on opinion, clinical experience, or limited research of the authors” (p. 184). Thus, as a practitioner using an approach that aligns with clinical practice, I am ethically and practically compelled to include practitioners’ works in this literature review.

In order to appreciate individuals’ experiences with infidelity, understanding the societal context in which infidelity occurs is essential (Parker et al., 2010). Therefore, I begin this literature review with the socio-history of infidelity in which I examine the attitudes and beliefs about infidelity, and I discuss the current culture of primary relationships. I then discuss the definitions, prevalence, and impact of infidelity to substantiate the importance of studying this phenomenon. Next, I summarize what has been studied about infidelity such as the correlates of who is most likely to participate in infidelity and the reasons for participating in infidelity. I conclude this chapter with an examination of the literature specifically related to couples sustaining their relationships

after infidelity. This includes examining the current clinical practice literature for working with couples facing infidelity and the empirical research with couples staying together after infidelity.

The literature search included a number of activities. First, I reviewed my collection of professional articles and books related to infidelity and generated a list of terms used and topics covered. I examined the reference sections of each source for additional resources to obtain and review. I then more broadly scanned the literature using various databases and search engines including Google Scholar, JSTOR, PsycINFO, EBSCO, Academic Search Complete, and SocINDEX. I used a number of different search terms including infidelity, affair, adultery, extra-dyadic sex, extra-marital relationships, cheating, unfaithfulness, and other terms as I came across them in the literature. These broad search terms resulted in numerous articles and books, and I narrowed the search by adding the terms couples, committed relationships, and marriage. To further refine my search, I included terms pertaining to couples staying together after infidelity including healing, recovering, surviving, and rebuilding. I limited my review of the literature to articles and books published between 1980-2017. This range was determined by considering the significance of social context and culture for the study of infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). I also looked at “grey literature” (Shaw, 2012, p. 10), as some specific details about infidelity such as statistics were hard to obtain.

Regardless of the prevalence of infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Fisher, 2016) and the interest in understanding it, researching infidelity has been and continues to be difficult (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Bischoff, 2003; Reibstein & Richards, 1993). Researchers have responded to the barriers to investigating infidelity in methodologically

creative ways such as using study designs with hypothetical infidelity-related scenarios to explore attitudes, beliefs, and projected responses to infidelity. While useful information has emerged from these studies, I have specifically excluded this literature from this review. I made this decision considering the doubt Harris (2002) cast “on the validity of the hypothetical measures used in previous infidelity research and on Walters and Burger’s (2013) claim that “there is no evidence to suggest that responses to hypothetical scenarios are completely aligned with responses to experiencing actual infidelity” (p. 23). Lastly, the literature I reviewed pertains to heterosexual couples in committed relationships, married or not married, and mostly involves individuals living in the United States of America and Canada.

Societal Context

Socio-history of infidelity. Infidelity “has a history as long as marriage and as old as love” (Lawson & Samson, 1988, pp. 409-410) and until recently in our history, was mostly the story of a married man at some level of economic privilege and/or status involved with an unmarried female (Lawson & Samson, 1988). Presently, it is suggested that women are participating in infidelity almost as much as men, and that the double standard related to infidelity is eroding (Fisher, 2016; Harrison & Allan, 2000; Morgan, 2004). While women under the age of 40 are almost as likely to participate in infidelity as men of the same age (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Wiederman, 1997), the gendered double standard related to infidelity continues to operate in several ways: first, the number of women participating in infidelity declines with age for women but not for men (Wiederman, 1997). And second, infidelity in Western societies continues to be more tolerated for men than for women (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004). This double

standard has been reinforced by “social convention and common practices” (Jankowiak, Nell, & Buckmaster, 2002, p. 85), and one such practice is that women have generally been subjected to more severe legal consequences for participating in infidelity than have men (Perel, 2017b; Rhode, 2016). Infidelity has been criminalized in many societies, and adultery is the legal term for “sexual relations between a married person and someone who is not his or her spouse” (Rhode, 2016, p. 3). Admittedly, as societal conventions and practices have shifted with respect to love and marriage (Cossman, 2006; Finkel, 2017; Finn, 2012), so has the application of adultery laws in Western cultures (Rhode, 2016). Coinciding with the separation of church and state powers in The United States of America (USA) in the 19th century, the enforcement of adultery laws declined, but the laws remained in place. Toward the end of the 19th century, the legal implications of infidelity pertained to family matters and in particular, to fault-based divorces with adultery laws being used in decisions related to financial settlements and custody of children (Rhode, 2016).

Overlapping with the move toward a no-fault divorce system in the USA, and the American government’s decreased involvement in individuals’ private lives, adultery laws are not enforced much anymore, but there continues to be a range of social, relational, and personal consequences for infidelity (Druckerman, 2007; Rhode, 2016), which are “now produced more culturally than legally” (Cossman, 2006, p. 276). Again, the gendered double standard related to infidelity persists because women tend to experience harsher social, relational, and personal consequences than men if they participate in infidelity (Blow, 2008; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004; Fisher, 2016). Such consequences can include negative judgment (Thompson as cited in Buunk & Dijkstra,

2004); being held to a higher standard of personal responsibility than men for infidelity behaviours (Mongeau, Hale, & Alles as cited in Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004), higher threat of divorce or relationship dissolution (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Lawson & Samson, 1988), and domestic violence (Daly & Wilson as cited in VanderVoort & Duck, 2004; Goetz & Shackelford, 2009). Gendered cultural scripts for male and female behaviour support the idea that infidelity is normative for men and monogamy is expected of women (Bowleg, Lucas, & Tschann, 2004; Hare-Mustin, 1994). One such gendered cultural script “encourage[s] women to establish and maintain intimate relationships at the expense of their own needs” (Bowleg et al., 2004, p. 70) including limiting women’s choices for responding to a male partner’s infidelity. Another cultural script concerns the male sex drive that suggests that men’s biological urges and needs make them less responsible for infidelity behaviours than women who participate in infidelity (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004; Hare-Mustin, 1994).

Attitudes and beliefs about infidelity. In addition to the gendered double standard that shapes beliefs and attitudes toward infidelity, there are other interesting and seemingly contradictory attitudes and beliefs that influence views on infidelity. The dominant discourse around infidelity is that it is a “moral transgression” (Fisher, 2016, p. 68), yet it occurs with “avid regularity” (Fisher, 2016, p. 68). There appears to be incongruity between what individuals say they believe, what they expect in committed relationships, and what they do. Specifically, most Americans say infidelity is wrong, and they expect fidelity in relationships, yet a substantial number of people participate in infidelity (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Campbell & Wright, 2010; Duncombe & Marsden, 2004; Lawson & Sampson, 1988). According to Cossman (2006), infidelity is “reaching

epidemic proportions” (p. 284), yet the prevailing attitude toward infidelity is increasingly one of disapproval (Nelson, 2010). Despite contemporary sexually permissive ideas such as the approval of sex before marriage, there is greater disapproval of infidelity than in the past (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2004; Perel, 2006). This disapproval fuels the belief that individuals who participate in infidelity have character flaws, and that these flaws potentially impact an individual’s ability to enact professional and political roles (Druckerman, 2007; Rhode, 2016; VanderVoort & Duck, 2004). While this belief has not been proven to be true, it influences how individuals who participate in infidelity are perceived. Druckerman (2007) observed that infidelity is viewed as a “social crime” (p. 128) in America that provokes a sense of outrage, and this disapproving attitude leads to stigma, social isolation, and feelings of guilt and shame for those individuals who participate in infidelity (Druckerman, 2007; Fisher, 2016; Vaughan, 2003).

Another contradiction in attitudes toward infidelity is the considerable curiosity about it. Munsch (2012) claims, “Americans are obsessed with infidelity” (p. 46). Despite “societal disapproval” (Daines, 2006, p. 45), it is often a topic in literature and popular media (Cossman, 2006; Druckerman, 2007; Harrison & Marsden, 2004; Lawson & Samson, 1988; Rhode, 2016; Rosewarne, 2009). Perel (2017a) blogged, “stories of affairs have consumed, captivated, terrified and titillated us throughout history” and remarkably, the most preferred stories about infidelity seem to be those with disaster scenarios rather than happy endings (Cossman, 2006; Druckerman, 2007; Rosewarne, 2009). The stories that circulate in society about infidelity influence the rules/possibilities for how, why, and

when to participate in infidelity and how to respond when it happens (Druckerman, 2007; Rosewarne, 2009; VanderVoort & Duck, 2004).

Current culture of primary relationships. I acknowledge that “the reality of marriage [and other primary relationships] varies drastically across cultural and historical context” (Finkel, 2017, p. 6), so this discussion is limited to Canadian and American cultures. Historically, a primary long-term relationship was defined as a marital relationship that was possibly arranged by someone other than the partners involved, and the purpose was for economic, political, or social survival or gain (Campbell & Wright, 2010; Finn, 2012; Perel 2017b). Following the industrial revolution, marriage was entered into by choice motivated by love (Aniciete & Soloski, 2011; Campbell & Wright, 2010). “Love is shaped by and exists within a changing social context” (Morgan, 2004, p. 26), and one of the other recent societal changes influencing primary relationships is the “primacy of the individual, the self and self-realization” (Morgan, 2004, p. 27). After the sexual and cultural revolution of the 1960s, primary relationships evolved to include cohabitating or committed and living apart relationships (Campbell & Wright, 2010; Finn, 2012) again motivated by love and increasingly, by personal fulfillment and self-actualization.

Lawson and Samson (1988) call this emphasis on personal growth the “myth of me, a powerful belief in the need to develop the self” (p. 409). Prioritizing and valuing individual identity and gratification, along with the accessibility of divorce and the cultural acceptance of serial relationships can create instability for primary relationships as the needs of the individual may conflict with the stability of the couple (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2004; Morgan, 2004). “Relationships tend to be maintained as long as

the reward/cost ratio remains favourable” (Hurlbert as cited in Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2004, p. 80). Perel (2015) observes that people leave primary relationships not because they are unhappy but because they believe that they could be happier. Several scholars suggest that the tension between the ideals of romantic love and the individualized “myth of me” contributes to the vulnerability of contemporary relationships to infidelity (Jamieson, 2004; Lawson & Samson, 1988).

Notions of romantic love are culturally constructed (Beall & Sternberg, 1995; Morgan, 2004; Swidler, 2003) and include discourses of commitment, individual needs, togetherness, intimacy, specialness, privacy, happiness, choice, trust, soul mates, communication, honesty, personal growth, uniqueness, and love as enduring, powerful, and capable of “conquering all” (Beall & Sternberg, 1995; Finn, 2012; Jamieson, 2004; Swidler, 2003). Contemporary primary relationships are built mostly on the expectation of romantic love, sexual fidelity, and emotional exclusivity. They are privileged over other kinds of relationships with family or friends, and they are more recently entered into with an expectation of self-discovery and growth (Finkel, 2017; Finn, 2012). Clearly, expectations associated with contemporary primary relationships are significant (Finkel, 2017; Finn, 2012; Reibstein & Richards, 1993). This is important to highlight when understanding the context of infidelity as the extent to which expectations are unmet and relational agreements have been broken contributes to the experience of infidelity for the individuals involved.

In addition to the changing norms and practices related to establishing and sustaining relationships another change in society that impacts how primary relationships are constructed is the longevity factor in Western societies (Campbell & Wright, 2010).

At no other time in history were relationships expected to last as long as is currently possible, and this adds another dimension to the expectations and experiences of contemporary primary relationships.

Finally, another development regarding the context of primary relationships is the Internet. Dating practices have changed dramatically due to the accessibility of the Internet and dating sites. Individuals can contact and meet others outside their immediate social networks, and while this offers greater choice and variety in potential relationship partners, these online resources also impact the ease and immediacy of meeting potential infidelity partners (Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). While ease and access are positive aspects of the Internet, lack of privacy and the potential publicizing of personal conduct are negative aspects of the online world (Cravens et al., 2013; Perel, 2015; Rhode, 2016). Due to the Internet and other social media options, infidelity is an experience that is frequently publicized, mostly without the consent of the individuals involved.

It is important to understand the dominant or contextual influences that shape how individuals experience infidelity. Context relates to the socio-history of infidelity. Examining the history of infidelity reveals both changes in some features of infidelity such as who participates and the stability of other features such as the enduring societal influences of the gendered double standard. Context includes the attitudes and beliefs about infidelity that appear contradictory and perhaps hypocritical because while most people say infidelity is wrong, many, nevertheless, participate in these behaviours. There is considerable social interest in infidelity, yet there are negative repercussions such as judgment and relationship dissolution for those involved. Context also takes into account

the changing culture of primary relationships. Marriage is still valued, yet there are many more forms of primary relationships, and the commonality of these relationships is choice based on love and personal fulfillment. Context also includes contemporary opportunities and challenges to relationships such as the rise of individualism, the increase in life expectancy, and the varied implications of the Internet.

Definitions, Prevalence, and Impact of Infidelity

Defining infidelity. As the culture of love and primary relationships changes, so does the definition of infidelity (Finn, 2012; Perel, 2017b; Weiser, Lalasz, Weigel, & Evans, 2014). There has been a shift from the limited definition of infidelity as sexual behaviour outside marriage (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Charney & Parnass, 1995; Feeney, 2004, 2005) to include emotional aspects of a relationship (Atkins, Eldridge, Baucom, & Christensen, 2005; Glass & Wright, 1992) to multiple socially constructed (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Moller & Vossler, 2015) understandings of what constitutes infidelity that extend beyond marriage and heterosexual relationships (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Crossman, 2006; Daines, 2006; Rhode, 2016). While Weiser, Lalasz, Weigel, and Evans (2014) highlight the lack of consistency in definitions of infidelity, there is a broad definition of infidelity that is repeated in both clinical and research-based literature that includes a wide range of behaviours and is

a sexual and/or emotional act engaged in by one person within a committed relationship, where such an act occurs outside of the primary relationship and constitutes a breach of trust and/or violation of agreed-upon norms (overt and covert) by one or both individuals in that relationship in relation to romantic/emotional or sexual exclusivity. (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a, pp.191-192)

These behaviours can take place in person or via the Internet (Cravens et al., 2013; Hertlein & Piercy, 2012), and the duration of the infidelity behaviours can range from a one-time occurrence to a long-term relationship (Atwood & Schwartz, 2002; Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004). The scope of behaviours that constitute infidelity is wide. Women tend to identify a greater number of behaviours they associate with infidelity than men do, and laypeople, compared to researchers, include more behaviours that they believe constitute infidelity (Thornton & Nagurney, 2011; Weiser et al., 2014).

Some scholars have attempted to classify infidelity into types and patterns, and these include sexual, emotional, and combined sexual and emotional (Glass & Wright, 1992; Hall & Fincham, 2006b): conflict-avoidant (not dealing with relationship issues) and intimacy-avoidant (related to fear of intimacy), split-self (linked to mid-life crisis), sexual addiction, exit affairs (a way to leave a dissatisfying relationship) (Brown as cited in Winek & Craven, 2003; Brown, 2005), Internet (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006, 2008, 2012; Vossler, 2016), ambiguous (talking, having a drink), deceptive (involving lies), or explicit (sexual intercourse) (Hackathorn et al., 2011; Wilson et al. as cited in Cravens et al., 2013). The value in defining a type or pattern of infidelity may relate to clarity and focus for researchers, understanding the meaning of the involvement for those involved in infidelity, and identifying potential treatment issues. According to Blow and Hartnett (2005a), researchers have not yet utilized these categories to any great extent, and other practitioners doubt the utility of these classifications, as infidelity behaviours do not always fit discretely into categories. By far, the classifications of infidelity used in both

professional practice and research-based literature are sexual, emotional, and combined types of infidelity.

Prevalence. Obtaining reliable statistics regarding the prevalence of infidelity is difficult, in part, because of how infidelity is defined and, in part, because of the difficulty in researching this topic (Bermudez & Parker, 2010; Bischoff, 2003; Charney & Parnass, 1995; Munsch, 2012; Reibstein & Richards, 1993). “In recent studies with large representative samples, approximately 22% to 25% of men and 11% to 15% of women indicate that they have engaged in extramarital sex (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon, & Glass, 2005, p. 101). This statistic is frequently repeated in the literature on infidelity and is based on the work of Laumann et al., (1994) and Wiederman (1997). Expanding the definition of infidelity beyond sexual behaviours increases the rate of occurrence to 40% (Gordon et al., 2004). Some scholars view these numbers as conservative and estimate the incidence of infidelity to be as high as 50% for men and 25% for women (Glass & Wright, 1985) and “between 50 per cent and 75 per cent of men and an only slightly smaller proportion of women” (Reibstein & Richards, 1993, p. 4). There is a higher incidence of infidelity in dating and cohabitating relationships than in marital relationships (Adamopoulou, 2013; Hertlein & Weeks, 2011) and “currently American dating couples report a 70% incidence of infidelity (Allen & Baucom as cited in Tsapelas, Fisher, & Aron, 2010, p. 2).

Some of what is written about prevalence and gender, at first glance, appears confusing and adds weight to the importance of particularizing the details of the rates being cited. Harrison and Allan (2000), Treas and Giesen (2000), and Adamopoulou (2013) write that the gender gap is closing, and that women are as likely as men to

participate in infidelity, while Allen and Baucom (2004), and Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson (2001) contend that men are more likely to participate in infidelity than women. Wiederman (1997) offered clarity about whether or not the gender gap is closing and explained that men are more likely to engage in extramarital sex than women over the course of their lifetime (22.7% versus 11.6%), but that when looking at individuals under the age of 40, the percentages are very similar for men and women.

Helen Fisher, noted anthropologist and human behavior researcher, asserts that due to the discrepancy between what we believe and what we do and the negative social judgment related to infidelity, “no one knows the extent of adulterous sex in the United States—either today or in yesteryear” (2016, p. 69). Regardless of the exact numbers, infidelity happens, and it has a significant impact on the individuals involved.

Impact of infidelity. The impact of infidelity is shaped by the meaning of this experience for those involved, which is linked to the “social group and . . . the scripts that are a part of the . . . [individual’s] worldview” (Atwood & Seifer, 1997, p. 65). Given the current Western worldview of a primary relationship as the ideal, an entitlement, and the source of happiness and fulfillment, it follows that the impact of infidelity will have changing and possibly even greater impact than in the past for the individuals involved (Druckerman, 2007; Finn, 2012; Perel, 2015; Reibstein & Richards, 1993).

There has been significant research on the impact of infidelity, and in the past 20 years, examining the impact of infidelity has also included online infidelity (Atwood & Schwartz, 2002; Cravens et al., 2013; Whitty & Quigley, 2008). It is well substantiated that infidelity, both online and offline, negatively impacts the psychological health of exclusive partners, and their experiences include grief and loss, shock and disbelief,

anger, shame, despair, depression, hurt, unsafe, alone, embarrassment, feelings of rejection and abandonment, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and PTSD (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Cravens et al., 2013; Dean, 2011; Glass, 2003; DeGroot, 2014; Gorman & Blow, 2008; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Vossler, 2016). Infidelity also negatively impacts financial and physical health (Fife et al., 2008).

Though there has been less focus on the impact of infidelity on the non-exclusive partners who participated in the infidelity behaviors (Foster & Misra, 2013), these individuals also experience many of the same emotional and psychological symptoms. In addition, they fear losing their primary relationship, as well as guilt, remorse, and perhaps public embarrassment (Baucom, Snyder, & Gordon, 2009; Dean, 2011; Foster & Misra, 2013; Hall & Fincham, 2009; Perel, 2015).

Through the use of hypothetical and forced response studies, scholars have attempted to draw gendered distinctions in response to infidelity with the hypothesis being that women would react more strongly to a partner’s emotional infidelity, and men would react more strongly to a partner’s sexual infidelity (Berman & Frazier, 2005; Harris, 2003). For individuals with an actual infidelity experience, there has been no significant difference in men’s responses to a partner’s infidelity compared to women’s responses to a partner’s infidelity (Berman & Frazier, 2005; Jenkins, 2015; Vaughan, 2002).

The relational impact of infidelity is considerable (Hertlein, Wetchler, & Piercy, 2005). Johnson, Makinen, and Milliken (2001) describe the impact as a “relationship trauma” (p. 150) that damages or destroys a sense of attachment and trust in the relationship and results in a high level of relationship distress. According to Fife et al.,

(2008), “the discovery of infidelity is a serious relationship crisis that shatters much of the stability and security that is assumed in committed relationships” (p. 322). In response to this experience, some couples end their relationships. According to Amato and Previti (2003), infidelity is the most commonly cited reason given by couples who divorce. And for many of those couples who decide to end their relationships, infidelity is linked to poorer adjustment post break-up (Amato & Previti, 2003). While infidelity may be the most common reason given by couples divorcing, it is difficult to identify the exact number of couples who end their relationships following infidelity and the number who sustain their relationships. Allen and Atkins (2012) conducted a study of the rates of marital divorce or separation linked to infidelity using the General Social Survey (GSS), and they found that more than “half of men and women who engage in EMS [extramarital sex] also separate or divorce from their spouse” (p. 1477). They focused only on extramarital sex and speculated that a more broad-based definition of infidelity may have resulted in even higher numbers of couples divorcing after infidelity. Allen and Atkins (2012) reviewed nine other studies on the relationship between infidelity and divorce, and in these studies, the rates of divorce ranged from 0% to 53%. They noted that these studies suggest that most couples do not divorce after infidelity, which challenged the generalizability of the findings as the participants involved in the studies were from clinical populations. Allen and Atkins (2012) acknowledge that it is hard to distill from their findings whether or not infidelity caused marital problems or whether marital problems were the cause of infidelity as both are linked to higher rates of divorce.

While the link between divorce and infidelity is significant, not all couples end their relationships after infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Allen & Atkins, 2012;

Buunk, 1987). And little is known about couples who stay together after infidelity compared to those who do not. Buunk (1987) conducted a study with men and women who participated in infidelity who stayed in their relationships and with men and women who ended their relationships after infidelity. He identified factors that contributed to the decision to end a relationship after infidelity: a high level of relationship dissatisfaction, attributions of motives of deprivation and aggression related to the infidelity, and a high level of conflict in response to the infidelity behavior (Buunk, 1987). While relationship dissolution or divorce is a common consequence following infidelity, it was an interesting and unexpected finding that individuals who experienced destructive or serious problems in their relationships were “no more or less likely to believe the marriage can be saved or to have interest in a reconciliation service than those experiencing less severe problems” (Hawkins, Willoughby, & Doherty, 2012, p. 462). These findings are useful for treatment planning if couples seek therapy for infidelity.

In addition to the consequences for the individuals and their primary relationships, infidelity can have negatives effects on children (Amato, 2000, 2010; Amato & Booth, 2001), on relationships with friends (Harrison, 2004) and with other family members, as well as economic costs (Crouch & Dickes, 2016).

Correlates of Who Is Most Likely to Participate in Infidelity and the Reasons

Individual characteristics and demographics. Adamopoulou (2013) used data from the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the USA to identify predictors of infidelity. He reports that infidelity behaviors are related to seasonality, (specifically summer), past history of infidelity, and number of previous short-term relationships. He confirms previous findings (Wiederman, 1997) that among young Americans, males and

females are as likely to participate in infidelity and that for the age group of under 34, socioeconomic status is unrelated to infidelity.

Allen and Baucom (2004) studied the relationship between infidelity and adult attachment, and they found that individuals with anxious or preoccupied attachment styles were more likely to participate in infidelity. Russell, Baker, and McNulty (2013) also studied the relationship between attachment insecurity and infidelity in marriage with a participant population of young newlywed couples whom they followed six times over 3.5-4.5 years. Russell et al. (2013) found that for both males and females, individuals with anxious attachment styles were more likely to participate in infidelity.

Substance misuse, sexually permissive attitudes, number of sexual partners, and psychological stress are all associated with infidelity (Jackman, 2015; Thompson, 1983; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Personality features are linked to infidelity with gendered patterns; males who admitted infidelity were manipulative, extroverted, and low on neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness, while women who participated in infidelity were low on social desirability, high on neuroticism, and low on conscientiousness and agreeableness (Egan & Angus, 2004). Ciarocco, Echevarria, and Lewandowski (2012) were the first to explore the connection between self-regulation and infidelity and found support for their hypothesis that if levels of self-control were temporarily depleted, individuals were more likely to participate in infidelity.

Higher levels of education and income have been linked to infidelity by some researchers (Atkins et al., 2001; Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011) and not linked by other researchers (Allen et al., 2005; Fincham & May, 2017). Lammers et al., (2011) suggest that higher levels of education correlate with openness and attitudes that might

support the chance of participating in infidelity. Religion is linked to lower levels of infidelity, and there are different explanations for this. Treas and Giesen (2000) contend that for individuals who attend religious services, it is the communal support rather than internalized religious beliefs that reduces the threat of infidelity. Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, and Gore (2007) and Tuttle and Davis (2015) claim that both church attendance and biblical beliefs reduce the risk of infidelity. Power is associated with increased participation in infidelity for both men and women and may be due to increased confidence in one's ability to attract an infidelity partner (Lammers et al., 2011). Mark et al., (2011) synthesized the above variables and discerned that "for both men and women, sexual personality characteristics and, for women, relationship factors are more relevant to the prediction of sexual infidelity than demographic variables such as marital status and religiosity" (p. 971).

Relationship characteristics. Relationship dissatisfaction, particularly women's perception of inequality in the marriage, is related to infidelity (Prins, Buunk, & Van Yperen as cited in Treas & Giesen, 2000, p. 48; Thompson, 1983), but for both women and men, risk of infidelity is mediated by level of commitment to the relationship (Drigotas & Barta, 2001; Tsapelas et al., 2010). Infidelity is also linked to higher levels of marital conflict (Munch as cited in Munch, 2012), less than satisfying marital sex, and unmet needs for support (Allen et al., 2005). Previti and Amato (2004) found that marital dissatisfaction is both a cause and a consequence of infidelity, and this is important to note because "many people who have engaged in EMI [extra marital involvement] do not cite marital problems" (Allen et al., 2005). Married individuals are less likely than cohabitating or dating individuals to participate in infidelity (Treas & Giesen, 2000;

Tsapelas et al., 2010), and partners with similar education, income levels, age, and social networks are less likely to participate in infidelity (Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Munsch as cited in Munsch, 2012; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Allen et al. (2008) found that couples who engage in less positive communication practices are at higher risk for infidelity at some point in their relationships, and keeping secrets or avoiding talking about relationship issues is also linked to infidelity (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004).

Context/situation. Opportunity also contributes to the likelihood of participating in infidelity (Allen et al., 2005). Frequent work travel, couples with only one partner employed outside the home, and close contact with co-workers of the opposite sex are all factors linked to participating in infidelity (Atkins et al., 2001; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Social networks that are accepting of infidelity and living in an urban center contribute to the likelihood of participating in infidelity (Allen et al., 2005; DeMaris, 2009; Jackman, 2015). Internet use is associated with infidelity in two ways (Fincham & May, 2017): first, in terms of access to sites promoting infidelity such as AshelyMadison.com and second, the frequent use of the Internet for sexual or relationship purposes or both (Fincham & May, 2017; Wysocki & Childers, 2011).

Some combination of incentive, characteristics of the individual, vulnerability of the relationship, circumstances that support infidelity, and opportunity contribute to understanding who is at risk for participating in infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; DeMaris, 2009; Fisher, 2016; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004).

Reasons for participating in infidelity.

Relational motivations. Women tend to engage in infidelity when they are dissatisfied with their primary relationships to seek attention, to feel cared for, to increase self-esteem and sense of desirability, and possibly to find a new partner, and are more likely to develop deeper emotional connections to their infidelity partners (Allan, 2004; Allen & Baucom, 2004; Fisher, 2016; Glass & Wright, 1992; Jeanfreau, Jurich, & Mong, 2014). When they participate in infidelity, men are most often seeking sexual variety or sexual satisfaction or adding to their experiences in relationships rather than replacing a partner (Allan, 2004; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004; Glass & Wright, 1992; Omarzu, Miller, Schultz, & Timmerman, 2012; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). Both men and women with avoidant attachment styles may be motivated to seek freedom and space through participation in infidelity (Allen & Baucom, 2004).

Interestingly and perhaps confusingly, both men and women and in particular, men who are not dissatisfied with their primary relationships participate in infidelity (Allen et al., 2005; Glass & Wright as cited in Touesnard, 2009; Nelson, 2010; Perel, 2015; Treas & Giesen, 2000). According to Snyder et al., (2007), “about half of the men and a third of the women who have an affair report that they were happily married at the time” (p. 236). Therefore, reasons in addition to and separate from the primary relationships are important to consider.

Individual motivations. Multiple scholars have explored the complex, interlocking reasons for infidelity, which include wanting to alleviate boredom or psychological distress, enacting expectations for personal happiness, discovering a way to leave a relationship, enacting revenge, falling in love, seeking new activities or sensation seeking, attempting to feel better about themselves, and seeking self-enhancement or the

freedom to enact one's own desire (Allan, 2004; Allen et al., 2005; Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Hall & Fincham, 2009; Fisher, 2016; Linquist & Negy, 2005; Omarzu et al., 2012; Perel, 2015; Weil, 2003).

Blow and Hartnett (2005b) who conducted one of the most comprehensive methodological and substantive reviews of the research on infidelity summarize their work by highlighting how complex infidelity is. They caution practitioners against "using this information as they work with couples and individuals, as these research findings are not absolute truths; rather, they are tentative ideas about what might be going on in the lives of clients" (p. 217).

At this point, I move from looking more broadly at the literature that defines, predicts, and describes reasons for participating in infidelity to focusing on the literature on couples' experiences with infidelity, and specifically, with couples who sustain their relationships after infidelity. Though I chose to include literature pertaining to individuals who had not participated in therapy related to infidelity, the overwhelming majority of the literature is related to individuals who have participated in therapy because they have been a convenient sample for researchers, and much of the literature on couples staying together after infidelity is written by clinical practitioners about their clinical work.

Examination of the Literature Specifically Related to Couples Who Sustain Their Relationships after Infidelity

Professional practice-based literature relating to couples sustaining their relationships after infidelity. Practitioners write about infidelity because it is a frequently occurring problem for clients with estimates that as many as half of therapy clients have past or current experiences with infidelity (Fife, Weeks, & Stellberg-Filbert,

2011). It is one of the most serious problems for couples to experience and is difficult to treat. As well, often therapists do not receive specific training in treating infidelity (Blow, 2008; Charney & Parnass, 1995; Wilkinson, Littlebear, & Reed, 2012; Whisman et al., 1997; Vossler & Moller, 2014).

To assist in this difficult clinical work, practitioners have developed clinical practice models, treatment guidelines, and interventive strategies for working with couples dealing with infidelity. There have been a number of books on infidelity written by practitioners for other practitioners (Abrahamson, 2013; Baucom et al., 2009; Perel, 2017a; Vaughan, 2002), scholars have produced edited handbooks and practitioner guides for working with the problem of infidelity (Carlson & Sperry, 2010; Peluso, 2007), entire issues of journals have been devoted to this topic (see *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 2005, 4, (2/3), and numerous journal articles covering a wide range of topics related to infidelity have been written. Editors have included chapters on infidelity in their books devoted to more varied clinical issues in couple therapy (Gottman, 2004; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Hertlein & Weeks, 2011; Knudson-Martin, Wells, & Samman, 2015; Wetchler, 2011), and couples therapy experts have included discussions on infidelity in books specifically on trust, making love last, and other topics related to sustaining satisfying primary relationships (Gottman, 2011; Gottman & Silver, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Perel, 2006).

Also, there have been a number of books written by practitioners specifically for individuals who have experienced infidelity (Abrahms Spring & Spring, 2012; Glass, 2003; Lusterman, 1998; Ortman, 2009; Stosny, 2013; Weiner-Davis, 2017b). The literature written by experienced practitioners aimed at individuals dealing with infidelity

offers readers opportunities to better understand their experiences, some strategies for managing the aftermath of infidelity, and possibly a map for how to navigate staying together if that is their preference and hope.

These works are based on clinical impressions and knowledge from professional practice experience based on theory and some limited empirical research, and there are a number of useful practice guidelines that have been developed from this significant body of work. The most frequently cited treatment model is the integrated approach of Gordon et al. (2004), and this model is based on trauma-informed practices, the authors' forgiveness model, insight-oriented strategies, and cognitive behavioral strategies. Other frequently cited models include Fife et al. (2008) who use an integrative intersystems approach and emotion-focused therapy (Johnson, 2005). While reviewing each of these treatment models is beyond the scope of this chapter, for a review of these major clinical models/approaches with infidelity, see Bell (2009); Kessel, Moon, and Atkins (2007); Peluso (2007); Piercy, Hertlein, and Wetchler (2011); and Staples (2012).

There is a substantial body of literature on the Gottman Method for Couples Therapy, and while this model is grounded in empirical research, the Gottman Method developed specifically for addressing infidelity, the Gottman Trust Revival Method (Gottman & Gottman, 2017), a three-phase model of recovery including atonement, attunement, and attachment has not yet been empirically studied. At the time of writing, the Gottman Institute is partnering with Dr. Paul Peluso of Florida Atlantic University to conduct randomized controlled clinical trials with couples recovering from an affair. This is much anticipated research.

Esther Perel is another practitioner who appears to have growing influence on the field of infidelity for both individuals with this experience and practitioners who work with this clinical problem. She has just released a book, *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity* (2017a), that focuses on infidelity and has given a TedTalk (2015) on infidelity as well. She actively blogs about infidelity and conducts numerous professional training events on infidelity. Perel (2017b) “divide[s] post-affair recovery into three phases: crisis, meaning making, and visioning” (p. 58). While her work is based on practice-based evidence and she describes her approach to research as that of an anthropologist (Perel, 2017a), her critics frequently cite her lack of empirical rigor to interrogate and even discredit her claims (Simon & Dockett, 2017). Perel’s contributions to this topic are important to explore as she is becoming more widely known, and I hear her name and ideas repeatedly referenced in my professional networks and from my clients. Simon and Dockett (2017) observe that she “is becoming therapy’s most visible presence” (p. 25).

Next I summarize key areas for clinical practice from across the above-mentioned practice-based literature related to working with couples dealing with infidelity after disclosure or discovery. Here I highlight “broad principles of treatment and goals . . . [that] can be adapted to different theoretical approaches” (Baucom et al., 2009, p. xii). This decision is in line with the trend in couple therapy toward adopting a common factors and common principles approach to couple therapy versus a model driven approach (Davis, Lebow, & Sprenkle, 2012; Benson, McGinn, & Christensen, 2012). Common factors are those “pantheoretical variables” (Davis et al., 2012, p. 36) or key principles of couple therapy that account for how couple therapy works (Davis et al., 2012; Benson, et al., 2012). A common factors approach allows for greater flexibility in

responding to the variable and complex nature of client situations through focusing on specific client needs and context rather than fitting clients into a particular model (Davis et al., 2012). I categorize these areas into assessment, interventive focus, and strategies related to the infidelity experience in particular and the relationship more generally, and therapist stance regarding infidelity. These are general guidelines, and utility for practitioners will be influenced by how they specifically define infidelity, their attitudes and beliefs about infidelity, their preferred models and orientations to therapy practice, their training and knowledge of systemic work, and their clinical experience working with infidelity. All of these dimensions overlap with cultural and ethical factors typically considered in practice. Like Hertlein and Weeks (2011), I “emphasize the need for therapists to tailor the treatment to the specific context in which the client system is embedded” (p. 156).

General areas for assessment when working with couples when infidelity is known include particularizing the couple’s definition of infidelity (Parker et al., 2010; Whisman & Wagers, 2005); assessing the impact of infidelity for each partner, including checking for trauma responses (Glass, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Gottman, 2004); exploring the extent of infidelity activities including online and offline (Baucom et al., 2006; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008); understanding the relationship with the infidelity partner (i.e., ongoing, perceived attractiveness) (Fife et al., 2008; Weiner-Davis, 2017a); determining previous experience with infidelity (Scuka, 2015); ascertaining commitment to the relationship (Baucom et al., 2006; Gottman, 2004); offering support for each partner and the couple, and understanding who else is aware of the infidelity (Baucom et al., 2009). These infidelity-focused topics are the priority and are in addition to any and

all other areas of couple therapy assessment typically conducted. Overwhelmingly, the practice-based literature emphasizes that ideally the infidelity experience should be dealt with directly, explicitly, and before any other areas of relationship distress are addressed (Blow, 2005; Gottman, 2004; Gottman & Gottman, 2015, 2017; Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2008).

Following assessment, most of the practice guidelines pertain to dealing with the impact of the infidelity. For many couples, infidelity is a crisis, and intense emotional experiences are common for both the exclusive and non-exclusive partners (Fife et al., 2011; Perel, 2017b). Many practitioners recommend educating the partners about the typical emotional experiences that may be expected and offering ways to manage these responses including self-care and support (Baucom et al., 2006; Gordon et al., 2004). Glass (2003) and Gordon et al. (2004) note the presence of flashbacks for the exclusive partner and recommend trauma-informed interventions. There are a number of practitioners who strongly support using the trauma model for working with infidelity because of the intense emotional experiences following discovery or disclosure of infidelity (Glass, 2003; Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Gordon et al., 2004; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Makinen & Ediger, 2011), but others are concerned about the effects of this labeling on both partners and the potential for a non-systemic or blaming stance with this approach (Reibstein, 2013; Zola, 2007). Gorman and Blow (2008) contend that depression is a common response to the experience of infidelity and recommend both individual and relational interventions. Couples also frequently need assistance with managing their daily lives as they sort out their infidelity experiences (Baucom et al., 2009) and deal with sexual intimacy (Scuka, 2015; Weeks & Fife, 2009).

Some useful practices for dealing with the relational impact of infidelity include acts of atonement (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, 2017), apology, and forgiveness (Aalgaard, Bolen, & Nugent, 2016; Blow, 2005; Case, 2005); healing rituals (Winek & Craven, 2003); letter writing by partners to each other to promote coherence and meaning making regarding what happened, as well as promoting disclosure, understanding, empathy, and enhancing sense of attachment (Snyder, Gordon, & Baucom, 2004); open and honest communication regarding details of the infidelity and possibly setting boundaries regarding how much the infidelity is discussed and how (Allen & Atkins, 2005; Gordon et al., 2004); expressions of empathy, responsibility, accountability, and understanding (Fife, Weeks, & Stellberg-Filbert, 2011; Makinen & Ediger, 2011; Perel, 2017a; Schade & Sandberg, 2012); rebuilding trust (Abrahms Spring & Spring, 2012; Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Scuka, 2015; Weeks & Fife, 2009); and if there is an ongoing infidelity relationship, making plans for dealing with the infidelity partner, including continuing and/or ending contact (Baucom et al., 2009; Hertlein & Piercy, 2012; Weiner-Davis, 2017a).

Many practitioner scholars do not advise conducting couples therapy until the infidelity relationship has ended (Fife et al., 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 2015, 2017; Whisman & Wagers, 2005), but some take a more flexible approach depending on the couple's circumstances and preferences and may still work with the primary couple if the infidelity relationship is continuing (Baucom et al., 2009; Weiner-Davis, 2017a).

In addition to dealing with the emotional and relational impact of the infidelity, couples also need to make sense of their experience, and the meaning of the infidelity for each partner will likely be different (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Gordon et al., 2004; Parker

et al., 2010; Perel, 2010; Reibstein, 2013; Scheinkman, 2010; Squires, 2014; Walters & Burger, 2013). This includes examining individual, relational, and contextual factors that contributed to the decisions that lead to participating in the infidelity (Baucom et al., 2009; Glass, 2003; Lusteran, 1998; Perel, 2015). This is a complex process and at times, requires a delicate balance between generating understanding and avoiding blaming the exclusive partner. Meaning making, even if negative, is important for moving forward together and appears linked to forgiveness (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005; Heintzelman et al., 2014).

After the infidelity experience has been dealt with to the satisfaction of the exclusive partner, and both partners have developed some understanding of why it happened and what it meant, the next set of practice guidelines pertains to dealing with the relationship more generally and addressing other relational issues such as communication and conflict management styles (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2012; Gottman & Gottman, 2015), patterns of emotional responsiveness and engagement (Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Johnson, 2005, 2008, 2013; Makinen & Ediger, 2011), needs of each partner (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2012), negotiation of power (Scheinkman, 2005; Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013), and construction of the couples' preferred relationship (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Bermudez & Parker, 2010; Fife et al., 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 2015) which for some couples includes re-negotiating their agreement on monogamy (Nelson, 2010).

The decision to sustain or end the primary relationship may be dealt with at any point with couples, and some practitioners recommend couples make this decision after some healing has occurred or at least wait until after the initial crisis (Fife et al., 2008;

Perel, 2017b). Forgiveness is considered important for couples dealing with infidelity and can be pursued and achieved regardless of whether or not the couple sustains their relationship (Fife et al., 2008, 2011; Gordon et al., 2005). Forgiveness can be sought and achieved at various points along the couple's journey of healing, and some practitioners appear to promote forgiveness as an outcome to be worked toward, over time, linked to processing the infidelity after some healing has occurred, and view forgiveness as a powerful healing opportunity, both individually and relationally (DiBlasio, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2008; Olmstead, Blick, & Mills, 2009).

While the emphasis on the infidelity as the clinical priority dominates the professional practice literature, and many practitioners present a phased approach to recovery (Abrahms Spring, & Spring, 2012; Baucom et al., 2009; Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Perel 2017b), the treatment of infidelity is complicated, and practitioners need to respond to the moment-by-moment concerns of couples and address them accordingly. A collaborative approach that promotes safety, trust, and therapeutic alliance is required for working with the problem of infidelity (Baucom et al., 2009; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Perel, 2017b). A significant number of practitioners who write about working with couples dealing with infidelity stress the importance of a therapist adopting a non-judgmental stance toward the problem of infidelity and of supporting both partners in the therapy process (Bermudez & Parker, 2010; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Hertlein & Piercy, 2006, 2008; Perel, 2017b; Solomon & Teagno, 2010). One particular ethical dilemma that is repeatedly mentioned in the practice literature related to infidelity is whether or not to keep secrets. The general impression is that keeping secrets is harmful, so it is important for the therapist to discuss explicitly her/his practice related to

confidentiality and secret keeping with couples (Dupree & White, 2010; Dupree, White, Olsen, & Lafleur, 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2012), but some practitioners are reconsidering or altering the practice of encouraging disclosure in the couple and the practice of the therapist *not* keeping a secret from one partner (Perel, 2017a; Scheinkman, 2005; Snyder & Doss, 2005; Weiner-Davis, 2017a). Another role for therapists working with infidelity is to provide and hold hope for the relationship (Baucom et al., 2009; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Weiner-Davis, 2017a).

This body of literature provides much needed guidance and support to both practitioners and individuals with this lived experience. These important works sensitize practitioners to the complexities of working with infidelity and offer practical wisdom to understand and respond in clinical situations. This summary of practice guidelines is not exhaustive, and practitioners are urged “to be flexible and collaborative with couples in order to tailor treatment to their specific needs to make a successful outcome more likely” (Fife et al., 2011, p. 364).

Despite the prevalence of infidelity, there are a limited number of research articles about couples sustaining their relationships. The following 15 articles pertain to couples staying together after infidelity, and I have chosen to elaborate on this research in more detail to better situate my own work within the current research. I believe the more comprehensive discussion of the following research articles will help readers understand the rationale for my research and how it might contribute to the provision of practice resources for clinicians working with couples who sustain their relationships after infidelity in a way that other research has not.

Empirical research with couples who sustain their relationships after

infidelity. There have been several important studies conducted with exclusive partners only regarding healing and recovery from infidelity, and I include these studies in this section as the focus and findings are relevant for couples staying together after infidelity. Miller (2009) conducted a secondary analysis of data archived from 212 participants who completed a web-based survey regarding recovery from a partner's affair. At the end of the questionnaire, there was an open-ended question: "What's been helpful in your recovery process or what's been difficult or anything else that you would like to share or think we should know?" (Miller, 2009, p. 13), and 126 individuals completed this question. Of these participants, 84% were continuing in their primary relationship after infidelity. Miller's work focused on what has been helpful in recovering from infidelity and sought to compare these individuals' experiences with Gordon and Baucom's (1998) stage model of forgiveness. Miller used a 25-item measure of forgiveness of marital betrayal, The Forgiveness Inventory (Coop & Baucom as cited in Miller, 2009), as the basis of the online questionnaire, and results were statistically analyzed with Cronbach's alpha, and then raw scores were converted to z -scores to control for socially desirable responses. Miller used principles of grounded theory to analyze the responses to the open-ended question, and two coders developed a list of categories that emerged from the themes in the responses. Frequencies of codes were calculated, and factor analysis was completed in order to discern patterns among codes, which were then compared to Gordon and Baucom's (1998) model of forgiveness.

Miller's (2009) findings lend support to Gordon and Baucom's 3-stage model, which is (a) dealing with the impact, (b) making meaning, and (c) experiencing recovery and moving forward. But based on findings that were different from the Gordon and

Baucom (1998) model of forgiveness, Miller (2009) cautions that a linear stage model might not best fit every individual's experience with recovery and proposes recovery is represented by more of a continuum than distinct stages. The most significant limitation in this research was the absence of the *couples'* experiences of recovery.

Clark's (2013) questionnaire-based study conducted online with 155 exclusive partners healing from infidelity was designed to identify the specific factors that contribute to healing and relationship satisfaction for married individuals continuing in their primary relationships after infidelity at least 6 months after the discovery/disclosure of infidelity. Clark (2013) reviewed the clinical practice literature on infidelity and identified 11 factors linked to healing and sought to determine whether or not these factors were correlated with healing for the exclusive partners in this study. She developed two new measures of healing, the Infidelity Healing Factors Questionnaire (IHFQ) and the Infidelity Healing Scale (HIS), to assess level of healing and factors associated with healing and also used the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS), a well-used, reliable, and valid marital satisfaction scale for data collection. Clark (2013) computed Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each new scale to show scale reliability, and the instruments were shown to have internal content validity. Clark (2013) used factor analysis to analyze the data and test her hypothesis about particular factors being linked to healing after infidelity.

This study adds empirical support for 10 of the factors linked to healing from infidelity: open and honest communication, discussing details of the infidelity, ending the infidelity relationship, empathy for the exclusive partner, empathy for the non-exclusive partner, non-exclusive partner taking responsibility for infidelity, genuine apology,

understanding of factors contributing to infidelity, rebuilding trust, and forgiveness. Interestingly, the 11th factor studied, seeking help, was not correlated with healing. Knowing that these factors are strongly associated with healing from infidelity is a useful practice resource for clinicians. There is, however, a lack of discussion about how these factors are enacted by the couples.

Vaughan (2002) conducted an online survey with 1,083 individuals whose spouses had had an affair, and 76% of these respondents were continuing in their marriages. The survey was 35 multiple-choice questions related to the experience of infidelity, and then participants were also asked for their advice to therapists, so that they could be more effective in dealing with infidelity. Vaughan (2002) used Chi-square statistics to test eight specific hypotheses related to how recovery and honest communication are associated and demonstrated that open and honest communication is strongly linked with recovering after infidelity. Vaughan (2002) also summarized the participants' advice for therapists in order for them to be more helpful to their clients. This advice includes the following: (a) deal directly and specifically with the affair, not just the overall relationship; (b) deal with the emotional, physical, and psychological impact of the affair; (c) don't "blame" the affair on the exclusive partner; (d) be supportive of and hold hope for those couples who want to try to save the relationship; (e) don't keep secrets or too quickly believe the non-exclusive partner, especially about whether or not the infidelity relationship is continuing; (f) see both partners together; (g) be aware of the impact of your gender/beliefs/personal and professional experience on how you conduct therapy; (h) don't expect the exclusive partner to forget the affair or "set it aside and go on"(p. 61); (i) help clients connect with others who have "been there"

(p. 63); (j) be well informed about the complexities of infidelity and provide good information about what couples and individuals might experience as they move forward after infidelity; and (k) encourage honest communication between the couple and encourage partners to answer all questions each may have for the other. Vaughan's (2002) strongest finding was "the extent to which the spouse answered questions w[as] significantly associated with the current marital status and quality of the marriage and . . . with recovery" (p. 13). The couples' perspectives and the particular coupled interactions involved in the recovery from the infidelity are missing in this research.

Heintzelman et al., (2014) conducted a quantitative study with 587 exclusive partners who stayed in their relationships after infidelity. The purpose of the study was to identify factors that contributed to recovery from infidelity, which was defined as forgiveness and post-traumatic growth. These scholars clearly conceptualize their understanding of infidelity as an interpersonal trauma and reviewed the literature on trauma, forgiveness, differentiation of self, and posttraumatic growth to explain the focus of their study. Heintzelman et al., (2014) were interested in the extent to which the level of trauma and differentiation of self were linked to forgiveness and what variables such as time since infidelity, differentiation of self, relationship satisfaction, and commitment might be linked to posttraumatic growth. The survey package included a demographics form, and "measures of trauma, relationship commitment, posttraumatic growth, differentiation of self, current relationship satisfaction, and stage of forgiveness" (Heintzelman et al., 2014, p. 18). These scholars conducted a number of statistical analyses on the data including regression analyses, and they examined collinearity, histograms, and normal probability plot of the residuals.

Differentiation of self was found to be a statistically significant predictor of forgiveness but level of trauma was not (Heintzelman et al., 2014). Regarding predictors of posttraumatic growth (PTG), “forgiveness trumps all” (Heintzelman et al., 2014, p. 25). These findings parallel the findings of Gordon and Baucom (2003) who link forgiveness with higher levels of relationship and personal satisfaction. Heintzelman et al. 2014 draw from the work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (as cited in Heintzelman et al., 2014) and write, “that those who are more able to forgive their partners’ infidelity would develop the emotional relief and cognitive clarity that is characteristic of PTG” (p. 25). This study has utility for clinical work with couples dealing with infidelity as it provides some empirically grounded direction for recovery from infidelity, specifically promoting forgiveness. The authors mention two particular models for promoting forgiveness: one is based on emotion-focused couples’ therapy and the other is based on a psycho-educational group. These are resources for practitioners working with couples dealing with infidelity. One of the limitations of this study is that it only included the perspective of the exclusive partners. The following two studies included both exclusive and non-exclusive partners.

Olson et al., (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with 13 married individuals who had experienced infidelity, and 11 of these respondents were still married at the time of the study. The researchers used a grounded theory approach to develop a tentative three-phase theoretical model of emotional and relational processes following infidelity: (a) roller coaster of personal emotions and intense interactions between partners, (b) moratorium or stability and meaning making, and (c) trust building, which included deciding to stay together, taking responsibility for the infidelity, enacting open and honest

communication, and extending forgiveness. This proposed three-phase theoretical model could be a resource or possible map for individuals and therapists in the aftermath of infidelity. These researchers compared their results to previous findings related to impact and recovery and found more evidence of anger, rather than trauma, and substantiated the importance of forgiveness. This study was significant as it had a relational focus, even though the interviews were conducted with individuals. The researchers were interested in revealing relationship processes or interactions between partners following infidelity that were useful in staying together. Some of these specific actions include offering an apology, increasing accountability, re-engaging in the relationship, and seeking forgiveness. In explaining one aspect of their theory, Olson et al. (2002) invite readers to track how one couple enacted trust building through rich description of how one exclusive partner noticed and appreciated specific efforts made by her husband at rebuilding trust.

Abrahamson et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study with seven individuals, both exclusive and non-exclusive partners who stayed in their relationships after infidelity. These authors utilized a narrative approach to interviewing, focusing on both the events and the interpretation of the events. They combined thematic analysis with a metanarrative or plotline approach for data analysis. This research was significant in several ways. First, the participants were interviewed in depth about their perceptions of what helped rebuild their relationships after infidelity. While the interviews were with only one of the partners, the focus was relational. Second, having a non-clinical sample is unique to the study of couples staying together after infidelity, and not all participants in this study engaged in therapy services. Third, the theoretical framework for this research

was postmodernism, fitting for the problem of infidelity that is so clearly influenced by socio-cultural dynamics. Fourth, the findings are clearly detailed and include new empirically grounded information that might be useful for other couples dealing with infidelity. The new information was the importance of acts of kindness enacted by the exclusive partner and knowing other couples who have dealt with infidelity. These new findings can also be conversational resources for therapists working with couples healing from infidelity. One limitation of this study is that the interviews were conducted with individuals, not couples, and it is important to also explore what couples would say about how they rebuilt their relationship after infidelity.

This focus on the individual is prevalent in the research on infidelity despite infidelity being a relational experience. Even in the professional practice literature, many of the tasks related to healing and recovery are listed separately for each partner or as general tasks for the couple. Little is written about how to hold a systemic perspective considering both partners' contributions to healing or recovery and what this might look like.

I move now to review the nine empirical studies involving couples sustaining their relationships after infidelity. Battleson (1997) studied eight married couples who stayed together after infidelity, interviewing them both together and then individually. Battleson (1997) sought to develop a grounded theory of forgiveness following infidelity, and the focus of the interviews was on why couples stayed together, the meaning that they attributed to their experience of infidelity, and how forgiveness was related to staying together and managing conflict. He interviewed using a Socratic-questioning approach and utilized techniques and processes of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin as

cited in Battleson, 1997) for analysis. Battleson (1997) found that forgiveness was a significant factor in couples staying together after infidelity and that forgiveness was linked to other factors such as reasons for staying together, rebuilding trust, forgetting, the passage of time, and the active implementation of strategies associated with forgiveness such as personal acceptance and relational interactions, or what the couple did together that facilitated forgiveness. These included admitting mistakes and offering reassurance or commitment to the marriage and were unique to each couple. The findings of this study support the significance of forgiveness after infidelity and link forgiveness to other variables such as rebuilding trust and accepting that it takes time highlighting the complexity of forgiveness and the importance of multiple healing initiatives. Battleson (1997) emphasizes the importance of couple specific relational interactions in staying together after infidelity and in achieving forgiveness.

Bird, Butler, and Fife (2007) conducted an in-depth exploration of healing from an affair with two couples who had participated in therapy with the second author. The researchers had hoped to interview more couples recruited from a number of other therapists, but after 10 months of recruitment efforts, they decided to move ahead with their study with the two participant couples they had. Two methods were used to collect data: a structured interview with open-ended questions plus the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier as cited in Bird et al., 2007). The focus of the questions was on what initiatives/processes contributed to change and what behaviors of the therapist contributed to the changes.

The interview data were interpreted using a group hermeneutic/interpretative approach (Wright, Watson, & Bell as cited in Bird et al., 2007, p. 6), which involved four

phases of interrogating the data and discussing the analysts' interpretations in order to clarify and organize the data. "The findings of this study are presented as a model of healing from affairs . . . and are organized processually, so as to provide a profile of healing from an affair" (Bird et al., 2007, p. 8). Three phases of therapy were identified: (a) seeking expert assistance—successful transition into therapy, (b) regaining control, increasing emotional openness, and rebuilding trust, and (c) seeking and extending forgiveness. Some of the therapist behaviors identified as facilitative of successful therapy include the therapist (a) creating a positive therapy environment through being non-judgmental, accepting, and non-hierarchical; (b) working with the couple together; (c) having a specialty in this area and confidence in the ability to help; (d) normalizing client experiences yet seeking to understand the couple's particular experience with the affair; (e) providing some kind of map and expectations for the therapy and holding hope; (f) offering coaching and specific instruction as needed, both in session and for between session couple interactions; (g) helping partners be accountable, open, and honest; and (h) helping couples understand and work toward forgiveness. The process of healing was organized into seven steps: (a) exploration of emotions and thoughts surrounding the infidelity, (b) expression of these to their partners, (c) development of empathy, (d) softening of emotions, (e) acceptance of personal responsibility and reduction of blame, (f) establishment of accountability, and (g) restoration of trust.

Though the sample size in this study is small, this study adds to the field of therapy for infidelity in a number of ways. The process of healing for these participant couples is richly thematically described, so that the elements or factors contributing to healing are identified. Also, these authors specifically highlight some of the interactions

that occur between the couple that contributed to healing. For example, discussing the theme of rebuilding trust, the researchers explain, “as Jeff was accountable, Julie reported that she no longer has to monitor [his actions]” (Bird et al., 2007, p. 13). This is significant because much of the literature on healing from infidelity describes healing acts as individual behaviors; for example, accountability, but the specific coupled interaction between the partners is often not identified. While the healing process is described and offered as a model for working with couples dealing with infidelity, one of the shortcomings of this research is that the authors did not identify coupled interactions for all healing themes and did not explicitly mention the importance of tracking the particular ways that couples enact the healing processes. This would increase the specificity of how healing happens and help orient therapists toward noticing and facilitating particular couple interactions that are healing.

Staples (2012) conducted a study with three couples who were sustaining their relationships after infidelity and who were working on healing through couples treatment. He used semi-structured interviews to collect the data and then used grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss as cited in Staples, 2012) to “delineate theoretical constructs and the essences of shared phenomena from the data acquired” (Staples, 2012, p. 22). The findings were that healing involved rebuilding trust and managing reactionary emotions, which were achieved through deciding to forgive or heal, changing perspective about self and/or partner, communicating, and engaging in therapy. Staples (2012) compared his results with the finding from the significant Bird et al. (2007) study and noted two differences. One is that his participant couples described a more circular rather than linear healing process, and secondly, that forgiveness was not only the end point of the healing

process but also a starting point for healing. The findings corroborated the clinical contributions of Bird et al. (2007) that the characteristics of the therapist are important for engaging the partners in therapy and that managing emotions and rebuilding trust are essential to healing and difficult to achieve. Though only three couples participated in this study, it was conducted with sound qualitative methodological practices and reported on couples' experiences of healing from infidelity.

Gordon et al. (2004) recruited six couples recovering from infidelity to participate in free conjoint therapy and studied the efficacy of their integrative treatment approach with infidelity. Couples completed a number of measures of individual and relational functioning at pretreatment, midtreatment, termination, and follow-up. The scores were discussed "both in terms of raw scores (*Ms* and *SDs*) and in standardized *z*-scores to provide a common metric by which to compare participants' deviation from community couple norms across measures" (Gordon et. al., 2004, p. 219). The authors then engaged in a replicated case-study design to examine couples' progress and to identify common themes both across the couples and in unique couple-specific findings.

This model conceptualizes recovery from infidelity as similar to recovery from an interpersonal trauma. These authors, Gordon, et al., (2004), view infidelity as a relational betrayal that violates trust and safety between the partners. This study adds to the professional practice of therapy with couples dealing with infidelity by offering a three-stage model for dealing with couples in the aftermath of infidelity: (a) dealing with the impact of the infidelity, both individually and relationally; (b) offering guidance for exploring factors that contributed to the affair and making sense of it without blaming the exclusive partner and dealing with relevant relational issues; and (c) providing ways the

couple can move on from the infidelity through forgiveness. The integrative model incorporates the authors' three-stage forgiveness model and utilizes cognitive-behavioral and insight-oriented interventions. The particular strategies utilized in this model (i.e., managing intrusive traumatic memories and rebuilding trust) have been discussed in other professional literature (see Abrahms Spring & Spring, 2012; Glass, 2003), but this is the first empirical study to provide evidence for the effectiveness of these strategies. This research showed that this infidelity-specific model was useful for these participant couples in reducing both emotional and relational distress and for facilitating forgiveness.

Atkins et al., (2005) studied outcomes of non- infidelity specific therapy models with 19 couples who had experienced infidelity. This research was part of a larger randomized clinical trial of two marital therapy models, the TBCT or traditional behavioral couple therapy model (Jacobson & Margolin as cited in Atkins et al., 2005) and IBCT or integrative behavioral couple therapy (Jacobson & Christensen as cited in Atkins et al., 2005). Participants completed self-report measures at four points during therapy, and hierarchical linear modeling was used to analyze this data. These researchers found that the couples with infidelity experiences that were revealed before or during therapy reported a higher level of distress at the beginning of therapy but also showed greater levels of improvement in level of satisfaction at the end of therapy compared with couples who did not reveal the infidelity or couples without an infidelity experience. While the sample size is small, this research helps substantiate the effectiveness of two models of couple therapy and offers hope for couples with an infidelity experience that when infidelity is revealed and addressed, the relationship can experience improvement.

To further examine the effectiveness of marital therapy for couples with an infidelity experience, Marín, Christensen, and Atkins (2014) followed the 19 couples in the previous study and assessed their post-therapy outcomes every 6 months for 5 years. They looked at relationship status and measures of relationship satisfaction and stability and compared the results with the couples in the larger study who did not have an infidelity experience. This analysis was performed in several ways. First, relationship status was examined descriptively and then compared using logistic regression. Then, longitudinal outcomes of relationship satisfaction and relationship stability were analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling. The results show that the divorce rate for couples for whom infidelity was revealed was 43% and 80% for the couples for whom infidelity was not revealed, as compared to a divorce rate of 23% for couples with no experiences of infidelity. Marital stability, characterized by steps taken toward separation or divorce, was high for those couples who divorced, but for those couples who had experienced infidelity but who did not divorce, marital stability did not differ from couples with no experiences of infidelity. Furthermore, level of relationship satisfaction for those couples with known infidelity, measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), did not differ from couples with no experiences of infidelity. This study suggests that gains made in therapy are as likely to last for those couples who sustain their relationship after infidelity as those who do not experience infidelity.

Greenberg, Warwar, and Malcom (2010) conducted a study of the effectiveness of an emotion-focused therapy (EFT) approach with 20 couples who had experienced a range of emotional injuries that included infidelity for nine of these couples. These researchers used a number of self-report measures to assess level of change from pre- to

post-treatment in the areas of forgiveness, trust, and relationship satisfaction. Correlations were calculated between the various treatment variables for both the “injured” and “injuring” partners. The results showed significant improvement in level of distress for injured partners and for promoting forgiveness. What stood out for me in this research was the finding that the behavior of the non-exclusive partner, particularly actions that were experienced by the exclusive partner as demonstrating taking responsibility for the harm and apologizing, was positively correlated with experiencing forgiveness from the exclusive partner. These researchers highlighted the relational, interactional aspect of forgiveness rather than forgiveness as linked with individual emotional health of the exclusive partner. EFT emphasizes attunement to the other’s pain, and in this study, specific behaviors that promoted healing of the attachment injury and forgiveness were identified and included apologizing and expressing remorse and regret. EFT focuses on relational attachment, and these authors specified how resolving, forgiving, and letting go were linked to expressing regret, taking responsibility for the harm, and behaving in ways that helped the partner heal. This is one of the few articles that discusses how to sustain a relational view throughout and highlights how coupled interactions can become healthy and result in healing patterns or interactional cycles for the couples. While this research supports the use of EFT with couples experiencing betrayals including infidelity, unfortunately, the specific results related to the nine couples who experienced infidelity are not known.

While the majority of this literature review is American based, the next two research studies were conducted in Germany, and I included them because of the scarcity of empirical literature on couples sustaining their relationships after infidelity. Atkins,

Marín, Lo, Klann, and Hahlweg (2010) conducted a secondary analysis of a community-based sample in Germany and Austria. They examined therapy outcomes for 145 couples with an infidelity experience and compared them to therapy outcomes for 385 couples with other presenting problems. Measures of relationship satisfaction (Marital Satisfaction Inventory) and depression (Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale) were used to assess change in the relationship and in depressive symptoms, and then data were analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling. The findings of this study were similar to those of Atkins et al. (2005) in that couples who had experienced infidelity were more distressed at the outset of therapy, but that they made more gains in therapy than couples who had not experienced infidelity, so that by the end of therapy, the level of relationship distress and satisfaction were indistinguishable between couples who had experienced infidelity and those who had not. Therapy models utilized by the therapists in this study were more diverse than the Atkins et al. (2005) study, and this could suggest that “existing treatment approaches represent a solid base that could be improved, but do not seem to argue for an infidelity-specific approach” (Atkins et al., 2010, p. 215). This study adds to the limited research with couples seeking therapy for infidelity, specifically offering encouragement to couples and therapists that couples’ therapy does help. This study highlights the importance of rebuilding trust and of facilitating forgiveness for couples with an experience of infidelity but falls short on outlining the particular interactional processes through which trust and forgiveness occur.

Lastly, Kröger et al., (2012) conducted the first randomized-controlled trial evaluating the effectiveness of a therapy model that was developed specifically for couples who have had an experience of infidelity. The treatment model studied was the

integrative model developed by Gordon et al. (2004), and each therapist involved in this study followed a standardized manual and adhered to the therapy protocols selected. Of the 46 couples assigned to the experimental group, 18 of these couples completed the posttest, and of the 43 couples assigned to the control group, 13 completed the posttest. Measures pertaining to depression (Beck Depression Inventory), post-traumatic anxiety (Impact of Event-Scale-Revised), and relationship satisfaction (Partnership Questionnaire) were used to assess change, and these effects were analyzed with hierarchical linear modeling. The results provided some evidence for this approach for mitigating PTSD-like symptoms but not depressive symptoms experienced by exclusive partners. Non-exclusive partners experienced a reduction in both anxiety and depressive symptoms. Relationship satisfaction improved for non-exclusive partners, but less so than what is reported in other marital therapy studies and did not improve significantly for exclusive partners. The authors proposed that these results could be somewhat explained, in part, by how recent the disclosure or discovery of the infidelity was and suggest that with a crisis situation like infidelity, longer term therapy might result in greater and sustained improvement in relationship satisfaction. While this research does not clearly support specialized treatment for all infidelity couples, when PTSD-like symptoms are present, this research offers initial evidence that this therapy model might be useful. One limitation of this research is that the specific mechanisms and processes linked with change were unknown, and the authors recommended further research with an emphasis on identifying relationship processes associated with change.

Gap in Research/Literature

Having reviewed the 15 empirical studies pertaining to couples who sustain their relationships after infidelity, I noted several gaps in the literature. Despite the widely held assumption that “with infidelity, partners suffer together, and they must heal together” (Fife et al., 2008, p. 316), we have little knowledge about *how* couples heal together. There is very little research conducted with couples with this actual lived experience. The four studies that examined the experience of healing for exclusive partners who stayed in their primary relationships after infidelity offered significant insight into healing, but the relational perspective and the perspective of the non-exclusive partners were missing. While two other studies included the experiences of both exclusive and non-exclusive partners, participants were interviewed individually, and again relational processes were not identified or discussed. What is missing, therefore, in terms of research is the investigation of the actual processes that occur between the partners that contribute to healing and staying together. These processes are not frequently identified in the literature. Only three of the empirical studies with couples healing after infidelity focused on the specific processes involved. The other six studies that involved research with couples with an infidelity experience focused on therapy effectiveness and outcomes. These studies examined both traditional models of couples’ therapy utilized with the problem of infidelity and a specialized model of therapy for infidelity, and there is some initial evidence for the effectiveness of couples’ therapy for the problem of infidelity. The scholars who conducted these studies have contributed significantly to clinical practice with couples dealing with infidelity by offering various conversational resources for therapists working with couples in the aftermath of infidelity. However, these clinical practice resources are more usually discussed in individual rather than relational terms,

and this is the third gap identified in the literature. When factors involved with healing from infidelity are discussed, they are most often listed as individual tasks and behaviors rather than relational or interactional tasks or behaviors. For example, when Gordon et al. (2004) identify the importance of dealing with the initial impact or crisis of the infidelity as part of their treatment model for promoting recovery from infidelity, they discuss engaging in self-care and social support as individual behaviors and do not discuss the impact on the partner or the relationship or how the actions of the partner impacts engaging in acts of self-care. They talk about strategies such as time outs and venting to regulate emotional intensity, but they do not articulate how couples enact these strategies, and how therapists might track the relational impact or effectiveness of these strategies. These scholars outline a number of other useful practices for couples healing from infidelity, but again, they do not explicitly offer a relational lens through which to view and make sense of what is going on for the couples.

In my assessment, much of the infidelity-related literature discusses healing tasks or behaviors for each partner separately, and these tasks or behaviors tend to be divided based upon who participated in the infidelity behavior and who did not. While the literature in this section of the literature review has been produced for the purpose of healing the relational breach caused by infidelity, and the practice ideas generated are successfully used with couples, often the ideas appear grounded in individual orientations rather than relational orientations. By relational, I mean foregrounding the interactional patterns that occur between the couple, and for each couple, tracking the meaning and impact of particular patterns. This thinking is one of the unique aspects of couples therapy approaches and those practitioners with specialized training in couple therapy

will be familiar with the principle that partners' behaviors are understood in the context of the other partners' behaviors and that these behaviors are mutually inviting and reinforcing and can become patterned and are the focus of our interventions (Davis et al., 2012). Yet, these patterns are not often identified and explicitly discussed in the infidelity literature.

Although many practitioners who work with couples in the aftermath of infidelity hold the belief that relational problems are best understood by identifying the associated interactional patterns and are best resolved through changing these patterns, there is a surprising gap in our literature related to what these particular patterns of interactions between couples are, as they move forward after infidelity. Yes, individual behaviors are important, but it is the coupling of the behaviors and how the partners experience the patterns that are most important. I think a relational lens offers another practice for therapists through which any of the other practice ideas and resources can be viewed, utilized, and assessed for effectiveness. Holding a relational view rather than an individual view allows for the coupled interactions to be tracked and built upon. This is the gap I propose to bridge through my research inquiry. Specifically, I want to conduct research with couples who are staying together after infidelity and identify the particular relational interactions or patterns that they enacted that contribute to healing and sustaining their relationships. And perhaps these interactions, discussed by the couples with insider knowledge about infidelity, can result in additional healing or interventive resources for practitioners and possibly for other couples to consider and utilize.

CHAPTER 3

Research Process/Steps Taken**Engaging in a More Formal Research Process**

As a direct outcome of my clinical practice, I was inspired to conduct a research inquiry about couples dealing with infidelity. Though I have thought a lot about the ways this problem is experienced by the individuals involved and about how to therapeutically engage in ways that might be useful, I wanted to further develop my knowledge and clinical skills in this area through learning from the couples who have successfully navigated moving forward together. Since I am a clinical practitioner in independent practice and will continue in this work, I felt that my inquiry should be practically grounded both relationally and ethically in my clinical practice. Seen through an ethical lens, research is “another form of talk” (McNamee, 1995, p. 79) not significantly different from a therapeutic interview (McNamee, 1995), and there should not be any need for knowledge translation from inquiry to practice (Wulff & St. George, 2016). In their work as both academics and clinical practitioners, Wulff and St. George (2016) aim to bring together the activities of research and practice with the ultimate goal of serving clients better.

The drive to find new and better ways to help clients is not trivial—creating new ways of approaching troubles requires that we not be limited by disciplinary borders or traditions. Clients are waiting and hoping for ways to better respond to the troubles in their lives. Developing new and more effective ways to help clients is the focus of both practice and research. Given the common purposes, it would

be most beneficial if research and clinical practice were as closely allied as possible. (p. 296)

As my clinical work is largely influenced by systemic and collaborative practices (Anderson, 1997; Lock & Strong, 2012; Simon, 2014; Tomm, St. George, Wulff, & Strong, 2014), and I wanted to deeply understand the lived experiences of couples with infidelity experiences, it makes sense that I would conduct a qualitative study grounded in relational constructionism. “Qualitative research often calls for a higher degree of personal involvement and direct engagement with people’s lives and problems” (Prasad, 2015, p. 292), which is analogous to the therapy process and hopefully more resonant with practitioners. The researcher is situated within the research process, and the implications of this are made transparent. Other features of qualitative research include engaging research participants directly in natural settings when possible, using methods of data collection and analysis that results in generating themes, revising and updating methods in response to how the study is developing, and embracing reflexivity (Creswell, 2013). These features of qualitative research are also similar to systemic and collaborative therapy practices, grounded in relational constructionism, that guide my clinical work. In the next section, I discuss the philosophical stance of relational constructionism, and then I outline the methodology, which is Research As Daily Practice (Wulff & St. George, 2014) and the specific steps taken in this inquiry.

Philosophical Grounding—Relational Constructionism

First I want to explain why I use the term relational constructionism rather than social constructionism. To me, these terms can be used interchangeably, but I prefer relational constructionism. McNamee and Hosking’s (2012) “reason for preferring the

term ‘relational constructionism’ is because it directs attention to relational processes as opposed to pre-existing (individual and social) structures and their influences on how we construe the world” (p. xiv), which is one of the key assumptions of constructionism. McNamee and Hosking (2012) are intentional in inviting readers into a “radically relational” orientation in which relational processes are foregrounded and understood as the site of reality construction for individuals as they live in the world. Orienting toward relational engagement and relational processes as elemental to how we create our realities resonates strongly for me. This is not to dismiss or minimize the larger social or cultural influences on moment-to-moment interactions, but for me, *relational* constructionism seems more “experience near” (White, 2007, p. 40) in terms of the focus and emphasis of relational processes. I emphasize that there is no single correct way to refer to the epistemology of constructionism. Rather, my preference for the term relational constructionism is just that, a preference, and one “way of talking” (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, p. xv).

Writers such as Burr (2003), Gergen (2009, 2012, 2015), Lock and Strong (2010), and McNamee and Hosking (2012) note that there are multiple authors who write about social constructionism, and though there are differences regarding what they focus on and understand as significant, there are common threads or assumptions related to constructionism evident in their work. While many scholars offer coherent and useful discussions on constructionism (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009, 2012, 2015; Lock & Strong, 2010), it was McNamee’s (2012) article, “From Social Construction to Relational Construction: Practices from the Edge,” in which she highlights what she perceives to be Ken Gergen’s most central contributions to the practice of constructionism across

disciplines that most influenced my philosophical grounding in this inquiry. McNamee (2012) focused on Gergen's drive to bridge the distance between theory and practice and his call for practitioners to generate useful ideas for "resources for action" (p. 151) in our areas of practice. This aligns with my hope for this inquiry, that practice-oriented ideas might be developed in order to better assist couples dealing with the aftermath of infidelity. McNamee (2012) wrote about Gergen's emphasis on processes that construct our world and notes that understandings, meanings, and options are "always temporary" and "on the move" (p. 151). To me, this means being open to possibilities that are tentative and shifting and are socially, culturally, and historically relevant, which is how I orient in my clinical work rather than seeking to define one "right" enduring way to assist my clients. McNamee (2012) points out that in his more recent writings, Gergen emphasized opening up possibilities for how the world might be constructed in terms of "co-action" (p. 152) or what we do together. This is what Gergen (2015) refers to as the "future forming" potential of research. Constructionist understandings invite a relationally responsible (Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Gergen, 1999) approach to inquiry.

McNamee (2012) identifies three key resources in Gergen's version of constructionism that are forms of action for practitioners across disciplines: "(1) centering relational processes which, in turn, generate the expansion of (2) collaborative, participatory practices that embrace alternative worldviews through (3) a reflexive stance" (p. 150). Each of these resources relates to general assumptions or orientations of relational constructionism that underpin both my clinical and research activities.

In this inquiry grounded in Relational Construction, I identify relational processes between primary partners as they move forward together after infidelity. Centering

relational processes refers to the move from individualism with a view of the world as made up of separated or bounded individuals “acting according to ability and state of mind” (Gergen, 2009, p. 10) to a relational stance that posits that all traditions, practices, and knowledges are developed in the interactions *between* individuals (Gergen, 2009). Related to infidelity, there are a number of practices like blame and judgment that are rooted in individualism. Individualism supported by our cultural institutions sustains practices of separation and alienation, whereas a relational stance focuses on knowledge of self and our world as a by-product of relational processes in which activities are coordinated into patterns in order to “achieve a viable form of collective life” (Gergen, 2009, p. 24). I aim to identify patterns enacted between the couples that contribute to “a viable form of collective life” (Gergen, 2009, p. 24) that for many couples sustain their primary relationships.

By relational processes, I am referring to “our means of generating a sense of how and who to be in the world” (McNamee, 2012, p. 152). Individual notions are not dismissed outright but are questioned in terms of their utility to transform and coordinate our relational world. I am not only interested in what individuals do in response to infidelity, but also more interested in how the individual actions are coordinated by the partners. According to Gergen (2009), “only in coordinated action does meaning spring to life” (p. 33). And it is this coordinated action, or “what people do together . . . in historical and cultural contexts—that become(s) the focus of attention” (McNamee, 2012, p. 153) of relational constructionism rather than what goes on internally, cognitively, or emotionally for people. For example, emotions “only make sense within a sequence of actions” (Gergen & Gergen, 2012a, p. 133) that happen between people. I acknowledge

that there are a number of strong emotions felt in response to infidelity, but rather than evaluating or attending to individual responses, I am curious about how the partners deal with these responses together. Centering relational processes is one way of widening the lens in order to notice and track the sequence of actions (Gergen & Gergen, 2012a).

Relational constructionists hold a view that knowledge is historically and culturally specific (Hosking, 1999) and therefore relative and subject to change depending on time, culture, and coordination of actions. This inquiry conducted with a different set of participant couples with a different researcher in a different setting would lead to different knowledge construction. While “an infinity of co-ordinations is possible—though not probable” (Hosking, 1999, p. 19), co-ordinations are contingent on how actions are patterned and in what contexts. Related to the possibility of multiple co-ordinations, practitioners’ focus on interactions as being constructed and reconstructed in relationships, as opposed to what is “true or real,” opens up space for multiple possibilities, change, and “what might be” rather than on sustaining “what is.” The purpose and value of this study is not in its findings being generalizable to all other couples but rather to develop practice knowledge that can be held tentatively by practitioners as conversational resources rather than prescriptive ideas to be adhered to. Relational constructionists question “taken for granted knowledge” (Burr, 2003, p. 2) or what we hold as real and true and challenge the idea of essentialism, or one true way or nature of being (Burr, 2003; Losantos, Montoya, Exeni, Santa Cruz, & Loots, 2016).

Another common thread of relational constructionists and their relational stance is the importance of language (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2012; Hosking, 1999; Lock & Strong, 2010). From my early training in systemic, collaborative, solution-focused, and narrative

practices, I have paid attention to the use of language. I believe that language practices are constitutive of what we construct and sustain as meaningful in our world (Lock & Strong, 2010) and are forms of action with consequences and practicalities (Burr, 2003). I have previously described how I grappled with terminology to describe the phenomenon I wanted to study and with how I wanted to refer to the individuals involved. Relational constructionists view language as “performative” (Burr, 2003, p. 8) and as “generative, (that) gives order and meaning to our lives and our world, and functions as a form of social participation” (Anderson, 1997, p. 3). This is very different than the view of language as representative of or reflecting meaning. Relational constructionists note the significant and shaping effects of language in terms of specific interactions, relationships, and world events. What is talked about, by whom, and how is critical in this theoretical approach. I am careful about my linguistic performance in relation to this inquiry.

Preferring and utilizing collaborative practices are the second key resource of relational constructionism according to Ken Gergen (McNamee, 2012). McNamee (2012) notes that collaborative or participatory practices are a better fit with relational constructionism across all forms of practices, and my clinical and research practices are built around collaborative (Anderson, 1997) and participatory practices. In other words, any particular methods or procedures gain their significance or usefulness in relationships or relational processes. In my practice and inquiry approach, I aim to be a conversational partner who participates in a mutual and unfolding inquiry, rather than directing the conversation in a single way. This approach honors the expertise of all those engaged in the dialog and makes space for what might not yet be known or constructed (Anderson,

2012). As Anderson (2012) writes, “dialog, knowledge and language are inherently transforming” (p. 11).

The third and final relational constructionist resource that McNamee (2012) highlights is “a reflexive stance of uncertainty” (p. 154). I take a stance of curiosity in my clinical work, and it made sense that this would guide my research. For me, this is enacted when I continually check my “certainty” and ask myself, “how else might this be?” (McNamee, 2012, p.155). Certainty or confidence in one’s assessment or proposed way of moving forward possibly limits options and opportunities for transformation. Throughout sessions, I talk to myself about what I have not thought about so far, and I check in with clients about what they thought should have been talked about and how the conversation is going. Anderson (2012) writes about how “living with uncertainty” (p. 19) can be a resource for therapists/practitioners that promotes spontaneous responding in conversations as the path forward is made, created together by practitioners and clients. This is also my orientation for the research conversations, and one way this is enacted is my decision not to use standardized interview questions, and focus on being responsive to what is developing between the participant couples and me.

In their chapter about tensions and possibilities related to the future of qualitative research, Gergen and Gergen (2000) discuss the concept of “polyvocality.” Polyvocality is incongruent with the notion of the singular or unified self and instead acknowledges that both researchers and participants hold multiple, competing, and often contradictory values and ideas (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). I mention this concept in my discussion about epistemology because this concept was important in helping me extend my understanding of the relational stance or focus and how relational processes involve more than the actors

present. Also, this concept was useful for me to think about as I reflected throughout the inquiry process about holding multiple viewpoints, including a number of voices, both the participants, and mine and about being aware of my biases and not overcommitting to any one way of moving forward.

Research Methodology—Research As Daily Practice

Wulff and St. George (2014) “trouble the distinctions between practice and research with the hope of reconnecting the notion of research to practice by illustrating how they can be understood and performed as one and the same process” (p. 292), and they emphasize “that practitioners are researchers by virtue of consistently and rigorously using reflexive analytical processes in daily practice moment by moment” (p. 292). I found Wulff and St. George’s (2014, 2016) work on Research As Daily Practice to be useful for organizing and planning this inquiry. While they do not define which steps to take, their collection of processes offers a pragmatic way to go about identifying and answering clinical concerns (Wulff & St. George, 2016). My study developed out of my struggling with the clinical problem of infidelity, and Research As Daily Practice (Wulff & St. George, 2014, 2016) is an option for responding to this struggle in a way that fits for me as a clinician in independent practice.

Wulff and St. George (2014, p. 299) suggest the following processes to bridge research and clinical practice:

Table 2. Research and Practice Processes from a Social Constructionist Perspective

Holding and Valuing curiosities
Developing Relationships
Observing/examining
Making Sense
Reflecting-in-Action

This study shaped by Wulff and St. George's (2014) processes of Research As Daily Practice is systematic, meaning "that the study is coherent with respect to a purpose, question of inquiry, data collection, and analysis" (Wulff & St. George, 2016, p. 30) and follows a coherent path. The purposes of this inquiry, research question, methods of data collection, and analysis are detailed below.

Research Methods—Steps Taken

Holding and valuing curiosities—the research question. Research As Daily Practice starts with a question that we grapple with in our work and one we might want to better understand (Wulff & St. George, 2014). It facilitates turning our reflexive gaze to our work in search of ways of doing it better (Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, Laws, Mueller-Rockstroh, & Bendix Petersen, 2004). Holding and valuing curiosity about how couples move forward together after infidelity inspired me to direct energy and focus to this inquiry. I hoped some new ideas or practices might be generated and useful for therapists and couples dealing with infidelity. Gergen (2015) wrote about a growing sense of appreciation for pluralism within research communities and a shift away from the matters related to philosophical stances toward what is useful about the research

being conducted. Just as strengths-based therapy practices moved from problem talk to solution talk, research might be employed for “future building” (Gergen, 2015, p. 307) rather than only reporting or mirroring what is. In my work with couples, there is value in discussing what is or what has been happening in the relationships, but clients also want change. To align research goals with practice goals of our clients, it makes sense to also imagine what might be preferred, as well as describing problems. Therapists make relational and ethical choices when we respond to certain developments in sessions and not others. The distinctions we make—what we highlight or ignore—have great implications for the conversations we engage in with our clients (Tomm, 1999). What I pay attention to will have a direct effect on both clients and myself. If I look at problems, I will be more influenced by the problems and what has been; if I look at solutions, strengths, exceptions, coping, unique outcomes, or accomplishments, I will be more oriented toward possibilities.

My orientation toward what is preferred and what is valued by clients underpins my research question and is facilitated through holding and valuing curiosity, which guides my everyday clinical practice. This means inquiring into and being interested in the lives of clients, caring about the particular difficulties that they may be facing, and noticing and valuing the unique and sometimes surprising solutions they generate. It also means taking up the position of “not knowing,” which is not disregarding clinical expertise or experience but rather centering the client’s experience and expertise and coming to understand what fits best for them (Anderson, 1997, 2012).

My research question was the following:

What do couples say about how they are moving forward together after infidelity?

While I embrace a “not knowing” stance, I also acknowledge that my biases are present. Specifically related to this inquiry, I am interested in better understanding how couples who experience infidelity describe how they stay together and heal this experience. While there are multiple options for responding to infidelity, I am focused specifically on this choice. This particular focus influences all decisions made about this inquiry and has implications for how we might consider using the findings from this inquiry. With this acknowledged, respected, and not bracketed, I decided to position my prior knowledge and experience as a therapist who works with couples in the foreground of this inquiry. One of the main ways this was expressed was in how I went about engaging couples to be participants in my research.

Developing relationships.

Participants/Research sample. I wanted to talk with couples about their experiences of moving forward together after infidelity, and I wanted to talk to both partners at the same time. A number of colleagues suggested that I was likely to get “the real story” or that couples would be “more willing to tell me the truth” if I interviewed them individually. My thinking was similar to Beitin (2012) who wrote, “a researcher with an interpretationist, postmodern worldview would be less interested in a single truth and more interested in multiple versions of reality, with no single view valued more than the others” (p. 251). I was interested in the story that the couple would tell in the context of the research interview, and as my research question is about how couples described how they moved forward together, it made sense to me to invite the partners to communicate with each other and me about this. This decision is also consistent with my collaborative practice approach and is corroborated by Sesma-Vazquez (2011) who

wrote, “that three people instead of two in a conversation can improve . . . the process” (p. 59).

Given my research question, the participants would be strategically and purposively selected for their insider knowledge about infidelity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). It is a common practice in qualitative research to conduct one’s inquiry with a small number of participants (Beitin, 2012), and I decided to interview 12 couples. This target was decided upon in view of the in-depth nature of the interview conversations I hoped to have, the time it would take to read and re-read the data based on my plan for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the difficulties involved in researching infidelity (Bischoff, 2003), and the numbers of participants in previously completed qualitative research studies about infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Bird et al., 2007; Gordon et al., 2004; Olson et al., 2002).

Recruiting participants. I have read widely on topics related to infidelity, and I was aware of the difficulties of research with individuals with this lived experience (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Bischoff, 2003; Parker et al., 2010). In response to reading about other researchers’ challenges in obtaining participants, researching infidelity and assuming that infidelity is a sensitive topic, I looked at recruitment methods used by other researchers who studied infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Bird et al., 2007; Clark, 2013) and at conducting research on sensitive subjects (Decker, Naugle, Carter-Visscher, Bell, & Seifert, 2011; Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2008; Hydén, 2013) for leads about successful methods of recruiting. I thought my chances of inviting couples to participate in my inquiry were higher if referrals were made through personal connections, and I distributed my recruitment poster (see Appendix A) to a wide network

of colleagues. This network included private therapy practitioners, lawyers, family and specialist physicians, and therapists who work in community or publically funded programs. An esteemed colleague who is connected with a large law enforcement service arranged for my recruitment poster to be emailed to all 2100 plus members. Other colleagues who work in large mental health teams and various community programs took my recruitment poster to their communities of practice to distribute.

When I did not get *any* response in 6 weeks, I began to distribute the recruitment poster more widely to massage therapy practitioners, esthetics practices, friends, neighbors, my mum's favorite church minister, and family members who managed large numbers of staff in their jobs. Only a couple of the people I approached said no to helping me recruit, and I understand that there were organizational policies that prohibited recruiting in these contexts. Interestingly, I contacted forums and chat groups on infidelity, and either no one replied to my contact attempts or my request was denied. Explanations for declining my request included being told the following: that the online forums I contacted were a resource for exclusive partners only and that I was going to re-traumatize individuals with this lived experience. I placed ads on Kijiji, a platform that facilitates Canadians connecting locally to exchange goods and services, and I received only spam responses. My professional college, the Alberta College of Social Workers, agreed to send my recruitment poster to all 6,477 members, and I developed a personal website with the recruitment poster to have an online presence, so potential participants could know something about me and my credentials if they were considering participating. Friends "tweeted" my recruitment poster and used "Facebook" to share it on my behalf. And yet, after 6 months of very active recruiting, I had only two couples

for my study that I had met in my own therapy practice. I had three other inquiries about participating, but in two situations, the couples were not together, and in the third situation, I was not given an explanation about why the couple decided not to participate.

In response to a lack of recruiting success, I made changes to my recruitment poster and started to use the word infidelity rather than affair, as this was the word most people used when talking with me about this experience (see Appendix B). After discussions with my advisor, Dr. Sally St. George, I decided to change the criteria for inclusion in the study from 2 years past disclosure or discovery to 1 year. In my clinical judgment, 1 year past disclosure or discovery was enough time for patterns to develop that facilitated moving forward together and be sustained, which was the focus of my inquiry. Other researchers (Heintzelman et al., 2014) had used 6 months since the infidelity as their inclusion criterion.

Though I was discouraged, I considered Tom Andersen's (2001) thoughts about being in a research conversation and how he hoped that "there will always be somebody in such a situation that will be ready to talk about those issues in some way or another" (p. 13). While his comments were in reference to suicide, domestic violence, and abuse, I think they apply to infidelity, as well.

Recruitment—Change in strategy. After the disappointing response to my numerous attempts to recruit couples from networks and connections, I was advised and encouraged to consider using Craigslist to advertise my study. I had heard of Craigslist but assumed it was mostly in use in the USA and was surprised to find that Craigslist was also in use in Canada, Europe, Asia/Pacific/Middle East, Oceania, Latin America, and Africa (<http://www.craigslist.ca/about/sites>). According to the Craigslist factsheet on the

Craigslist website (<http://www.craigslist.org/about/factsheet>), Craigslist gets more than 50 billion page views a month world-wide with more than 60 million people using Craigslist in the USA each month. I thought Craigslist was primarily a buy and sell site and learned that “Craigslist is a classified advertisements website with sections devoted to jobs, housing, personals, for sale, items wanted, services, community, gigs, résumés, and discussion forums” (Craigslist. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. (Retrieved February 18, 2016, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craigslist>). When I surveyed multiple Craigslist sites in large cities in both Canada and the USA, I noted a sizeable number of posts recruiting participants for research studies. I conducted a review of the literature on using Craigslist to recruit research participants and found that Craigslist is

Increasingly implemented as a recruiting tool for surveys in such fields as political science (Grosskopf and [*sic*] Frye 2011), public administration (Van De Walle and [*sic*] Van Ryzin 2011), medicine (Wu, Wang, and [*sic*] Reinheimer 2009), public health (Palamar, Kiang, and [*sic*] Halkitis 2011, Katz-Schiavone, Levenson, and [*sic*] Ackerman 2008, Moskowitz and [*sic*] Seal 2009), social work (Alessi and [*sic*] Martin 2010) and psychology (Grillo and [*sic*] White 2011, Khurgin-Bott and [*sic*] Farber 2011, Hamedani, Markus and [*sic*] Fu 2011, Howell 2010, Kugeler and [*sic*] Cooper 2010, Shusterman et al. 2009). (Anderson, Wandersee, Arcenas, & Baumgartner, 2013, p.1)

While there is some solid literature available to guide researchers in their use of Craigslist, Anderson et al. (2013) acknowledge that Craigslist users may not be a representative sample if this is important to the study design. As I was clearly interested in a purposive/convenience sample, this limitation did not deter me. Lastly, Clark (2013),

a Ph.D. student, and DeGroot (2014), an M.S.W. student, used Craigslist to recruit participants for infidelity-related studies. And like me, their recruitment strategy was pursued after insufficient response to other recruitment efforts such as connecting with a local support group and local therapists.

Using Craigslist to advertise my study and recruit couples opened up new possibilities for recruitment and also resulted in some technical and research design challenges such as how to post an ad and how to interview participants who were not geographically near. While Craigslist is worldwide and I was intrigued about the possibility of interviewing couples all over the world, I decided to limit recruitment to Canada and the United States of America (USA). This decision was made both because much of the literature I reviewed for this inquiry was written by Americans and because there is a lack of research with Canadian couples.

Anderson et al. (2013), Subbaraman, Laudet, Ritter, Stunz, and Kaskutas (2015) and Worthen (2014) delineated very clear guidelines and described lessons learned in using Craigslist to recruit research participants. I modeled my posting strategy on the experiences of these researchers and on what I noticed about other recruitment ads that were successfully posted on Craigslist and not subject to “flagging” and removal by Craigslist. Craigslist offers users the opportunity to “flag” listings that users think have broken the terms of use or rules of self-posting and with enough “flags” the posting is removed from Craigslist. After monitoring multiple Craigslist sites in various cities over a period of about two weeks, I felt confident that I understood what to write to increase the chance that my ad would not be “flagged” for removal. I specifically highlighted that I am an experienced therapist and Ph.D. student. I hoped my experience as a therapist

might inspire some interest or confidence in possible respondents. I acknowledge that situating myself as an experienced therapist would impact the conversation that was generated.

Following Worthen's (2014) advice, I posted my recruitment ad in the "Volunteers" subsection of "Community" in 10 large urban cities in both Canada and the USA. I chose the particular cities based on population base and on frequency of usage of Craigslist for recruitment of research participants (see Appendix C.) Like Anderson et al. (2013) and Subbaraman et al. (2015), I rotated the posting with slight wording changes to meet the criteria of the Craigslist terms of use. I checked the postings every other day to make sure that they were not removed and reposted to keep the ad at the beginning of the page/section. The only city where my post was flagged and removed was Los Angeles. I do not know the reason my post was flagged.

Based on researching Craigslist as a tool for participant recruitment, I made one other adjustment to my recruitment strategy, which was to offer a financial incentive as compensation to participants for completing the research interview.

Using incentives to recruit participants. I researched the ethics and practices regarding providing incentives, compensation, payment, and inducement (Grant & Sugarman, 2004; Klitzman, 2013), and I specifically explored the practices at the University of Calgary, Taos Institute, and Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Providing incentives and/or reimbursing research participants is a common and ethical practice, both in Canada and the USA (Grant & Sugarman, 2004; Klitzman, 2013). I reviewed what other researchers were offering participants, reflected on what was required of the participants, and decided that a \$100.00 gift card of their choice, per couple, for the completed

research interview seemed fair. When I inquired about preferences regarding gift cards, I learned that the couples preferred a cash gift, and I provided each of the nine couples I recruited on Craigslist with \$100.00 cash gift delivered via Interac[†] e-Transfer, PayPal, or MoneyGram. I wanted to be as flexible and responsive as possible in providing the compensation. I did the transaction for the incentive immediately following the completed interview and frequently received a warm note of thanks and confirmation of receipt from the couple. I initiated the gift incentive as a recruitment strategy after I had completed interviews with two local couples in Calgary and so did not offer this incentive to them. By the time I interviewed the third Calgary couple, I had decided to offer an incentive to participate in the interview, but this couple declined to accept it.

Conducting the interviews using Zoom. Since enlarging my recruitment to major North American cities in addition to my location in Calgary, I needed to investigate options for conducting the interviews. I decided to use the Zoom video conferencing and web conferencing service, as this would make face-to-face, real-time interaction possible. The quality of Zoom was high, it was easy to use, and I had experience using it as a result of Taos online activities. I also assessed the recording features, especially the security features, as safeguarding the interview data was critically important to me. A number of qualitative researchers had written about using online synchronous interviewing (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012; James & Busher, 2012; Janghorban, Latifnejad Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014; Sullivan, 2013), and while three of these authors specifically talked about using Skype, a media platform similar to Zoom, I believe the Skype reports are generalizable to my use of Zoom.

Using video conferencing technology to conduct qualitative interviews was described as an innovative, interactive, flexible, inexpensive, safe, and authentic replacement for face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012). Deakin and Wakefield (2014) assert that while “online research practice is in its infancy” (p. 606), “online interviews can produce data as reliable and in-depth as produced during face-to-face encounters” (p. 604). McCoyd and Kerson noted, “[t]he face-to-face interview has become somewhat of a ‘gold standard’ in terms of validity and rigour” (cited in Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, p. 604). This technology allowed me to connect with participants who lived too far away to be interviewed in person, and participants could choose to be in their own homes or other preferred locations for the interview. Also, participants could choose to use audio and/or video and to easily discontinue the interview at any time.

Issues of consent and security were discussed in the literature (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Janghorban et al., 2014; & Sullivan, 2013), and this invited me to reconsider how to obtain consent to participate in the interview. For interviews conducted in person, I provided a paper copy of the consent form and reviewed it with the participants, answering any questions before they signed it. For the Zoom interviews, I researched online consent options and decided on HELLOSIGN (see Appendix D), a legally binding way to sign and send documents online. HELLOSIGN tracks documents sent via email regarding when they are read, signed, and returned. I also verbally reviewed consent to participate again at the beginning of each research interview.

I acknowledge that although “the internet has expanded globally . . . and it has reconfigured the way in which individuals communicate and connect with each other”

(James & Busher, 2012, p. 177), not everyone has access to the internet or a computer. I understood that my request for participation in interviews via Zoom was limiting my potential sample to only those individuals with access to a computer with webcam capabilities and internet connection. This decision made sense given my move to recruit via Craigslist, which also requires access to a computer. And I also acknowledge that the sample I was going to interview was an opportunistic or convenience sample (Sullivan, 2013).

Couples were offered the choice to respond to my recruitment ad via email or telephone. The majority of couples contacted me through email, and through email, a number of additional steps were taken in order to confirm the research interview.

Firstly, I double-checked criteria for involvement in my study with the couple.

- Couples who have experienced infidelity, both partners know it occurred, and the couples have stayed together.
- Couples who separated after the infidelity and subsequently reconciled were also welcome to participate.
- The infidelity relationship has ended.
- Couples who have or have not engaged in therapy related to the infidelity.
- Couples who are one year past the discovery/disclosure of the infidelity.
- Committed couples who are married or not married, cohabitating or not.
- Couples willing to share the story of their infidelity experience with me, in a conversation with both partners present.

Note: Although I did not specifically recruit heterosexual couples; all couples who participated in this study were in heterosexual relationships.

Secondly, I sent a letter of invitation to participate in my inquiry that more fully explained my research project to potential participant couples (see Appendix E). Thirdly, I sent via HELIOSIGN copies of the form outlining consent to participate via Zoom for each partner to complete and digitally return (see Appendix F). Fourthly, I invited and answered any questions the couple might have.

Fifthly, I offered to help connect the couple to counselling resources should they wish to participate in a counselling conversation following the research interview. For couples in Calgary, I was planning to provide a list of local resources (see Appendix G), but the couples in Calgary whom I interviewed declined these resources offered to them. For the couples outside Calgary, I was going to research options for them as needed. None of the non-local couples asked for assistance in accessing counselling resources following the research interviews.

The last step was to schedule an interview at a mutually agreeable time for the couple and myself. Once we decided on a time, I set up a Zoom meeting and sent the couple an invitation to participate in a Zoom meeting. In this invitation, sent via email, there was a link for the couple to click on and follow the prompts in order to be able to meet on the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Prior to the interview, I checked to make sure each couple was comfortable downloading the Zoom program. All couples reported that the steps to take to “meet me” on Zoom were easy to follow. Only once did time zone differences create challenges for the interview, and when this occurred, I merely adjusted the interview time to when the couple became available. Only one couple who completed the consent forms and agreed upon a meeting time did not attend the meeting/interview. I tried to contact this couple after the missed interview time, but they

did not respond to my efforts to contact them via email to understand why they chose not to participate in the interview. I thought that the Craigslist/Zoom strategy of reaching inquiry participants was highly successful as 9 out of 10 interviews scheduled were completed. None of the inquiry participants left the interview conversations early, and many interviews went longer than the 60 minutes I initially asked the couples to set aside for the interviews.

Three couples were interviewed in my home office in Calgary. They were offered the option of meeting in their homes, but they all preferred to meet in my office. At the beginning of the conversation, I reviewed consent and each partner signed the consent form indicating that they were consenting to participate in the interview in person (see Appendix H) Each of these three interviews was audio recorded on my iPhone, and the file was downloaded and saved on my password-protected personal computer. The nine couples who reside outside Calgary were interviewed via Zoom. These couples agreed to the interview with the recording of both video and audio. I think it was important for the couples to be able to see me and for me to see them, and Zoom allowed for this face-to-face experience. I hoped that having face-to-face contact might have contributed to increased comfort and engagement, and some couples commented that they liked seeing the office where I meet clients. I think when we know something about the person we are talking to a more person-to-person connection is possible.

Response to Craigslist recruitment.

Introducing the couples. For this study, I interviewed 12 heterosexual couples in committed relationships who sustained their relationships after an experience with infidelity. Five couples were married, five couples identified their relationships as

common law or cohabitating, and two of these couples were planning to get married. Two couples identified as being in a committed relationship, while living apart, with plans to continue to be together eventually moving toward cohabitation and perhaps marriage. Five of the couples reported having been in previous common law or married partnerships. Nine couples had children as a part of their relationships. Four of these couples had biologically related children, two couples had remarried families with both biological and stepchildren, and three couples parented children together whom the partner(s) brought into the relationships from previous relationships. Three couples did not have children at the time of the interviews, although two couples identified themselves as planning to have children.

The 10 employed female partners held full-time positions in education, health care, real estate, human resources, retail, finance, research, and municipal services. Two of the female partners were not currently working outside the home while parenting young children full-time. Education levels achieved ranged from high school to advanced university degrees. The 10 employed male partners held full-time positions in education, healthcare, construction, finance, sales, warehousing, municipal services, and two were business owners. One male partner was attending school in order to further his employment opportunities, and one male partner was participating in a full-time mental health treatment program. Education levels achieved ranged from not yet completed high school to advanced university degrees.

The participant couples lived in large cities in both Canada (five couples) and the USA (seven couples). The interviews ranged in length from 48 minutes to 2.5 hours. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face in my home office, and nine interviews

were conducted face-to-face via Zoom with the participants connecting from their homes. One couple was recruited from my therapy practice, one couple was referred by a colleague, and one couple included a former client from my therapy practice. Eight couples were recruited via Craigslist, and one couple who participated in the study referred another couple with whom they were friends.

In terms of length of relationships and length of time since discovery of the infidelity, the participant couples represented a range of experiences. Four couples were together for more than 23 years at the time of the infidelity with the longest relationship being 32 years. Three couples were together between 11 and 15 years, and five couples were together between 1 and 6 years at the time of the infidelity. The criteria for inclusion in this study was that the infidelity had to have been known, and the infidelity relationship was over for a year or more, and six couples were at the 1-year point past disclosure or discovery. Three couples were at 3 years past knowing of the infidelity, and three couples were at the 3-, 4-, and 5-year point since finding out about the infidelity. For six of the couples, the infidelity experience was disclosed or discovered at or near the time it was happening, and for three of the couples, the infidelity relationship was continuing at the time of discovery/disclosure. For one of the couples, the infidelity relationship had ended 7 years prior to disclosure; for two couples, it had ended at least 6 months prior to discovery. The extent of the infidelity behaviors ranged from a one-time occasion (four couples) to multiple occurrences with more than one person (two couples) to an outside relationship lasting between a few months to several years (six couples). In eight of the couples, the non-exclusive partners were the male partners, and in four of the couples, the non-exclusive partners were the female partners.

At the time the infidelity experience occurred, the participants ranged in age from 23 to 60. Of the 24 participants, five were in their early to mid-20s, five were in their early to mid-30s, six were in their early to mid-40s, five were in their early to mid-50s, and three participants were 60 years old. Four of the couples interviewed sought therapy services to help them address the infidelity experience. Eight of the couples did not engage in therapy. In two of these couples, one partner would have liked to participate in therapy, but the other partner refused. The partner who declined therapy was an exclusive partner in one couple and the non-exclusive partner in the other couple.

Participants who contacted me and were ineligible for the study. There were a number of individuals who contacted me to participate in my research and were ineligible. Ineligibility was linked to not meeting all criteria for inclusion or because they did not speak English, and I had not designed this inquiry with arrangements for interpreters.

Observing/examining—Collecting data

Interviewing couples. Given that my focus was on deeply understanding how couples move forward together after infidelity, it made sense to conduct an in-depth interview with both partners present. “Interviews result in stories” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 151) and “interviews with people who share a relationship also reveal patterns of social interaction otherwise unseen in individual interviews” (Allan as cited in Beitin, 2012, p. 245).

According to the literature I reviewed on interviewing couples together (Allan, 1980; Bjornholt & Farstad, 2012; Mellor, Slaymaker, & Cleland, 2013; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011), there are two main reasons for conducting couple-based interviews. The

first is that interviewing the partners together is consistent with the premise in couple (and family) therapy to invite those involved in the relationship into the conversation. This premise is rooted within a relational constructionist stance that honors the understanding that knowledge generated from the conversation is co-constructed with the persons involved in the conversations. With only one partner involved, the knowledge generated would be different and since I was interested in what couples say about how they move forward together, it was appropriate to interview partners together. The second reason for interviewing the couple together is that a more complete account of the couple's experience may be possible as each partner may add to the comments of the other, and as a result of the interaction in the conversation, other ideas might be triggered and brought forth in the interview that might otherwise not have been discussed.

The disadvantages of interviewing couples are connected to whether or not any new information might emerge in the course of the interview and how such new information might be experienced by the partner hearing it for the first time. Whether or not this information is perceived as being "withheld" might be significant for couples with a history of infidelity because of the harm typically experienced when there have been secrets or acts of deception. If this new information is viewed as something that was developed in the course of the interview, like a new understanding or way of thinking about something, it might be a positive development for the couple, but the risk is that it might detract from the interview purpose/focus. The second disadvantage relates to the potential for tension to develop between the couple. This might be uncomfortable for the partners, and they are faced with how, if at all, to respond to the tension in the moment or

after the interview is concluded. This might be uncomfortable for the interviewer, and she/he is also faced with how to respond, if at all, to the tension.

As a result of my work as a therapist, I am aware that from tension and conflict, deeper understandings can emerge, and I am not opposed to making space for tension when it surfaces. My approach to the interviews was to pay attention to the level of distress being experienced by the couple and to pay attention to what they were doing with the tension. Through the consent form to participate in the research, the possibility for new information and/or tension to emerge was addressed.

One other disadvantage of couple-based interviews is the possibility of one partner telling a story that the interviewer suspects is in some way objectionable to the other partner, but the partner does not speak up. The bind for the interviewer is whether or not to ask any questions that draw attention to this and to consider what this might mean for the couple. While it is assumed that if the couple has given consent to be conjointly interviewed, each is free to tell whatever he/she feels is important to tell, there is no way of anticipating what will be told as the interview is constructed and evolving (Allan, 1980; Bjornholt & Farstad, 2012; Mellor et al., 2013; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). I reflected on what Andersen (2001) says about ethics in conversations, and how he understands ethics as “activities that connect one’s self with Others” (p. 11), and the importance of preserving “both the Others’ and one’s own dignity and integrity” (p. 11). What might be experienced as harmful to one person or couple might be different from another; thus, it is imperative for a researcher/practitioner to observe and note effects occurring in the interview conversation.

Researching sensitive topics. I thought about the ethical considerations of interviewing couples who have experienced infidelity and how it might be for the couples to share this information about their relationships. I was given feedback from colleagues that the topic was “too sensitive” and that it could be harmful for the partners to be asked about what is a very painful problem in a relationship. I reflected on and turned to the literature regarding what is considered a “sensitive topic” and what the risks and benefits might be for individuals to participate in conversations about these topics. I noticed one particular definition of sensitive research repeated in several texts: “a sensitive topic in research has been defined as a topic that poses a potential threat for those involved, causing data collection, holding, or dissemination to be problematic for participants, researchers, or both” (Lee & Renzetti as cited in Decker et. al., 2011 p. 55). I agree with Hydén’s (2013) view that this definition suggests that what is considered a sensitive topic is related to personal circumstances, and I appreciate her “alternate understanding . . . that sensitive topics basically have to do with relational circumstances” (p. 226). Hydén “claims that what is a sensitive topic and what is not is due mainly to relational circumstances, that is, the relationships between the teller and the listener” (p. 224). She notes how “cultural and contextual circumstances and the personal views held by the people involved” (p. 225) shape the research relationship.

I found Hydén’s (2013) ideas about what sensitive research is from a relational standpoint useful in a number of ways. First, her relational understanding of what constitutes a sensitive topic is consistent with a relational constructionist viewpoint. Second, she explicitly foregrounds the power differential between a researcher and a participant when discussing issues that participants “are ashamed of, issues that might be

rated culturally low, or events that have left them vulnerable” (p. 225). She cautions the researcher against positioning him/herself as better than the participant. In her experience, this might constrain the telling of the story. Though Hydén is primarily referring to her work with domestic violence, I think the parallels to infidelity are obvious. Relationships that continue after violence or infidelity often remain hidden and outside of sources of support. Like domestic violence, infidelity invites shame and judgment. Third, Hydén emphasizes the significance of what researchers focus on in interviews and the implications of this for both knowledge generated and potential effects on the participants. She cautions, “that if interviews that include sensitive topics deal primarily with ‘damned old trash,’ they are potentially harmful” (p. 231). As well, Hydén concludes that other useful and important parts of the story are not asked about and are therefore untold. Though participants could decide what they told me about their experiences of infidelity, I can shape the conversation toward highlighting couples’ healing interactional patterns (Tomm, 1991) and strengths. Hydén gives an example of how she used her prior knowledge and experience to monitor the tone of an interview and how she intervened when she thought the participant might be sinking too far down “in the damned old trash.” This example heightened my awareness of the importance of being ready to engage my therapeutic skills with the couples I interviewed. While I was clear that the intent of the conversation with me was inquiry rather than intervention, I acknowledge that “interviewing is unavoidably interactional and constructive” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p.152) and that each participant approached the interview with his/her own reality and hopes for the conversation. I was also aware that though I describe my

experience as a therapist in the recruitment ads to promote a sense of trust and safety with participants, it might also promote the sense that it was a therapy conversation.

Other authors have explored participants' experiences of qualitative interviews. Corbin and Morse (2003) looked at the process of the unstructured interactive interview and at the extant literature for indication and confirmation of benefit and or harm. They observed, "although there is evidence that qualitative interviews may cause some emotional distress, there is no indication that this distress is any greater than in everyday life or that it requires follow-up counseling" (p. 335). They compare talking to a researcher to talking to a friend or family member and even hint that talking to a researcher might be less risky regarding potential distress as researchers are interested in hearing what is being talked about and might legitimize the participants' experiences. Corbin and Morse (2003) also highlight that participants have control regarding how much they wish to talk in the interview and when they wish to end the interview, which can be at any time. I stressed with each couple that they had the choice to respond to my questions or not and that they could end the interview at any point. Andersen (2001) emphasizes the importance of respecting what participants do not wish to discuss. I also encouraged participants to ask me anything about my questions and about my practice and me in general. Using a mostly unstructured interview opens space for participants to shape the conversation and thus offers participants some level of control over the process.

In addition to addressing the possibilities and evidence of risk of harm, Corbin and Morse (2003) cite the research of Hutchinson et al. on potential benefits of participating in research interviews, which includes

seven possible benefits of qualitative interviews. They stated that interviews (a) serve as a catharsis, (b) provide self-acknowledgement and validation, (c) contribute to a sense of purpose, (d) increase self-awareness, (e) grant a sense of empowerment, (f) promote healing, and (g) give voice to the voiceless and disenfranchised. (p. 346)

Decker et al. (2011) delineate further the possible experiences for research participants.

The perceived benefits of participation in sensitive topic research may include the potential ability to help others; a sense of increased self-awareness, self-insight, or self-knowledge; a feeling of relief or clarity from reviewing past events; and a sense that participation may result in societal changes such as increased awareness of relevant issues. (p. 57)

I thought about how my interview might be a kind of celebratory and positively reinforcing conversation in view of my focus on strengths and healing. As a systemic and collaborative therapist, I acknowledge that questions are interventive, and I did recognize that there were potential risks for emotional distress stemming from participating in the interview, so I thought about how deeply to probe and how to support couples after the interview. Offering to connect couples with professional resources was one way of “making an open and explicit commitment to the psychological, emotional, physical, and social well-being” (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 109) of the participants.

Interview preparations. Morse (2012) summarizes the types of interviews: unstructured, guided, focus group, semi-structured, or questionnaires (p. 195). I decided that the interview I wanted to conduct had characteristics of an unstructured narrative

interview and features of a guided interview. I thought that an unstructured interview would make it more possible for me to focus on the unfolding conversation and be more attentive and responsive to the moment-by-moment process. More clearly, the interview would be unstructured as my questions would not be completely planned in advance nor necessarily asked to each couple. Though I started with a similar open-ended question to each couple, subsequent questions were locally generated in each conversation; thus, the interview questions were not the same. I wanted to open as much space as possible for the couples to tell what they thought was important (Sermijn, Devlieger, & Loots, 2008), so I constructed questions as the conversation developed. This approach is consistent with a collaborative therapy approach in which the emphasis is on being a conversational partner and not deciding in advance exactly what I would do with the couple (Sesma-Vázquez, 2011). My interview style would be somewhat guided, as I was exploring what couples said about how they stayed together and healed the infidelity experience, rather than asking more generally about their infidelity experience. Preparing some broad areas to explore facilitated the possibility of such directionality (Morse, 2012). Thus, the interview questions were both guided and open/responsive to the content/process.

I was interested in the story the couple would co-construct together, and consistent with social constructionist philosophy, I approached interviews with couples as an “interactionally active” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 150) process. This means that I understood that not only were the couples constructing their stories of the infidelity together as we engaged in the research conversation, but also that I, too, was contributing to the conversation of the construction of their stories. I imagined “interaction around a question, co-creating meaning and supplementing each other’s answers” (Beitin, 2012, p.

245). I brought to the conversation my ideas about what I would like to talk about, my notions about infidelity based on my clinical practice and the literature review conducted for my inquiry, and all prior social and cultural knowledges from my lived experiences. My “researcher (and professional and personal) values and bias are also evident in . . . particular questions and prompts” (Beitin, 2012, p. 24).

I also acknowledge “one cannot expect answers on one occasion to necessarily replicate those on another, because they may emerge from different circumstances of production” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p.154). With this understanding foregrounded in my thinking as I planned the interviews, I focused on the process and following the conversation to see what knowledge could be produced rather than on uncovering or discovering a single truth about couples being able to sustain their relationships after infidelity. Again, this inquiry was about

generating alternate understandings, not as truth tellings but rather as polyphonic expressions of events, circumstances, or persons . . . evolving understandings, utilizing new information and events to continuously refine with we think we know, creating fresh possibilities for moving toward what is most desired. (Wulff & St. George, 2014, p. 293)

Interview details. Twelve couple-based interviews were completed with couples who have experienced infidelity, are moving forward in their relationships together, and are at least 1 year past the discovery or disclosure of the affairs. The first interview was conducted on November 19, 2015, and the last interview was conducted on March 31, 2016. Interviews conducted via Zoom were recorded both with an iPhone 6 Plus and the recording function of the Zoom platform. These interview recordings were automatically

downloaded from the Zoom program and saved onto a password-protected computer. The three face-to-face interviews were recorded only on the iPhone 6 Plus and were saved on a password-protected computer. An individual file was created for each couple, and a number was assigned to each couple for easy identification and retrieval/access of information. Following the first interview, I attempted to produce a verbatim transcript of the interview, and it took me more than 10 hours of transcription per hour of interview. In view of this, I arranged for the remaining interviews to be professionally transcribed by a transcription service. Two transcription services were used and were selected based on practices ensuring both accuracy and confidentiality.

Protecting confidentiality. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) differentiate between privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, and I reflected on each of these distinctions when designing the research project. Consideration of privacy was reflected in my emphasizing that participants could answer or not answer any of my questions. Though the participants had agreed to talk to me for the purpose of my research study, I wanted participants to have control over how much they revealed to me. Confidentiality influenced how I made decisions about what was to be done with the interview data and what participants understood about this. This included the storage of the interview data, as well as the analysis of data. Some participants expressed concerns about anonymity and wanted to know if any identifiable information would be written in the dissertation. I was clear with all participants that I would not provide any personal or situational details that would lead to them being recognized. Personal demographics and interview findings are presented in aggregate form, so no single person is recognizable.

Making sense—Data analysis. At the time of data analysis, I was working with a number of clients who were discussing experiences of infidelity, and one of the common themes that emerged was the indecision of one partner regarding whether or not to sustain the primary relationship. So I wondered if this theme would be present in the conversations I had with the research participants as part of their experiences in moving forward after infidelity. As I was reading transcripts and conducting analysis, I was working clinically with clients with this problem, and initially I thought this was both an advantage and a potential problem of studying one's own work. The advantage was that I could make immediate clinical use of any new understandings from the research interviews. And I noticed that questions I generated in sessions were linked to something that a participant couple had told me. My capacity for wonderment and curiosity was strengthened by the research interviews as I had more information and conversational resources to stimulate my thinking in developing questions or interventive ideas. The downside, if it is a downside, of working with this problem clinically as I was conducting the data analysis was that there was no way to separate my thinking about the couples in my work from the couples in my study. I decided that rather than viewing this as a downside I acknowledge this as part of the research process, and this is another way that my inquiry is similar to clinical practice. Sometimes patterns or understandings become more visible across multiple sessions and with different couples. Data collection is an ongoing experience for those of us who practice (S. St. George, personal communication, July 25, 2016). I was aware of this as I approached and conducted data analysis.

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy against the original recordings and I corrected any errors. Since I was

interested in the story they told in the interview rather than the mechanics of the conversation, I changed some of the language in the transcripts such as “gonna” to “going to” for ease of reading (Bucholtz, 2000). These changes did not alter any of the content or meaning of the conversations. This auditing process was repeated multiple times for each interview and was vital for achieving engagement and familiarity with the data that contributes to trustworthiness in qualitative research (Tuckett, 2005).

As I wanted to keep my research aligned with my clinical practice, I needed to make sense of what the participant couples told me in similar ways to how I understand client couples’ experiences. I work from a relational or systemic stance, and “identifying themes and tracking thematic patterns” (Skerrett, 2010, p. 504) is a practice I commonly use. I chose two methods of data analysis that I felt were appropriate for my research question, are coherent within a stance of relational constructionism, and align with my clinical practice: (a) thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and (b) a clinical heuristic, the IPscope (Tomm, 1991).

Thematic analysis. I felt the close reading that was possible with thematic analysis would be useful for describing concepts and ideas and commonalities between couples’ experiences of moving beyond infidelity: “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It has been described as an analytical method for particular qualitative traditions such as grounded theory, but Braun and Clarke (2006) “argue that thematic analysis should be considered a method in its own right” (p. 78). They propose that thematic analysis is a research tool independent of any particular theoretical and epistemological stance. Because of this, thematic analysis offers significant freedom and

flexibility in its application to many different qualitative inquiries. While thematic analysis is not associated with any particular theory, it is used in conjunction with a researcher's particular theoretical framework and assumptions, which should be declared to increase the trustworthiness of the research. Research and the interpretations we make are relationally constructed activities, and the possibilities for description and interpretation are only limited by what the researcher can imagine and conceive. This openness and flexibility is in line with relational constructionists such as Gergen (2012) who posited that what we are describing makes no demands for how we speak of it. Very simply, those who are doing the identifying construct the patterns identified, and thematic analysis is flexible and open in its application and can be used within this overarching framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With respect to an inquiry with a relational constructionist framework, the most important aspects of using thematic analysis are engaging in reflexivity about the utility and goodness of identifying themes; continually asking if the themes named relate to the meaning and experiences reported by participants; considering how else the data might be understood; and acknowledging that the themes are constructions generated in conversations that took place at a certain time in history, in a specific context, and are not truths or reflections of objective reality. As I analyzed the interview data, I foregrounded my hope to be able to draw forth ideas and present them in ways that might be useful for practitioners who work with couples dealing with infidelity.

Joffe (2012) contended that thematic analysis is one of the most transparent and systematic ways of thematizing meaning. Thematic analysis is an active process used to condense data from the data set into main ideas, so that the data are manageable and

usable (Walters & Burger, 2013). It is a descriptive qualitative approach to analysis that is used to establish what is happening and what it might mean (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). It involves several iterations or cycles of reviewing and interpreting the data and begins with close reading and re-reading of the transcripts to get a sense of what is said in each interview and between interviews. As I read, I began to interpret what might be important and to make notes about my impressions. I continually asked myself, “what do couples say about moving forward after infidelity?” In the first cycle, I examined pieces of the interview conversation and started to assign codes to these chunks. The codes varied from the exact words of participants to words linked to my impressions of the data. The codes were also particular topics discussed by participants or recurring activities (Aronson, 1995), and codes changed with my engagement with the data. With thematic analysis, cycles of coding or rounds of reviewing the data are likely to occur with some time in between, so that the researcher can assess consistency in coding. It was interesting to me what I noticed when I went back to the data some time later. Distancing through time permits a review of the data and the preferred codes. Again, codes are a way to link what was said in the interviews with what the meaning is interpreted to be (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2011, 2016). Codes can be clustered into categories when they are perceived to connect in some pertinent way. In another round of coding, connections between categories and codes facilitate richer analysis, and themes emerge. I now summarize the process. In the first cycle, I assigned codes to data chunks, so that the data became more manageable. In the second cycle, I worked with the first cycle of codes to organize them into smaller numbers of categories or patterns based on

how the codes related (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Furman, Langer, Sanchez, & Negi, 2007; Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006; Miles et al., 2014).

There are a number of different types of thematic analysis: inductive analysis, theoretical analysis, and thematic analysis with constant comparison (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). For the purpose of this study, I followed an inductive and intuitive process meaning that the data inspired the interpretation rather than the data fitting into preexisting categories. And unlike constant comparison thematic analysis, analysis happened at the end of data collection rather than when each interview was completed. After each interview was analyzed separately, I combined the data for all interviews to construct themes across the interviews.

After I noted and coded pieces of data that I thought were interesting or relevant to my question, I needed a technique to identify how the data were related. Guided by Ryan and Bernard (2003), I decided to use the cutting and sorting method for processing or manipulating the data: "Cutting and sorting is the most versatile technique. By sorting expressions into piles at different levels of abstraction, investigators can identify themes, subthemes, and metathemes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 103). Essentially, cutting and sorting involves taking the parts of the transcripts that I thought were relevant to my inquiry question, cutting them into separate pieces of texts, and then combining the various texts from all interviews into various piles. The coded and cut up sections of transcript were "reconsidered looking for salient trends or patterns" (Tuckett, 2005, p. 82), and this leads to a higher level of abstraction. The piles were organized according to my sense of how the texts were related, an interpretive process to show what the data means. The meanings were then named as levels of themes, either main themes or sub-

themes when it was necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I liked physically manipulating the cut-up pages of transcripts, spreading out the pieces of data, and moving them around to see how they fit best. I used my dining room table, kitchen island, and living room floor to arrange the piles. Somehow physically moving around the data and engaging with it facilitated involvement and connection with the data.

To guide the process of arranging and rearranging the data into more abstract ideas, I asked myself the same questions recommended by Taylor and Bogdan: “What do these quotes or observations have in common?” “What's going on here?” “What does this tell me about how people view their world?” “How do these themes relate to each other?” (as cited in Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015, p. 80). In keeping with the qualitative research principle of ensuring and increasing credibility, the development of themes was reviewed with my Taos advisor on multiple occasions.

Themes are the researcher’s expanding understanding of the data developed through interpretation, moving from concrete to more abstract levels of analysis and include main or primary themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is unmistakably a subjective process (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). The intent is to make sense of participants’ stories to develop a greater appreciation of their experiences and is not intended to make any claims of “truth.” Ultimately, this interpretive practice was engaged in to enhance clinical practice, and Vaismoradi et al. (2016) observe that “the method of theme development . . . can be an effective means by which participants’ experiences can inform practice development and advance the consolidation of results to form well-grounded . . . interventions” (p. 108).

By using thematic analysis to interpret the interview data, I identified main themes such as choosing the primary relationship and making sense of the infidelity experience and sub-themes such as dealing with the infidelity partner and reasons for participating in the infidelity. Identifying and naming these themes and sub-themes gave me some understanding of *what* helped couples move forward together after infidelity and a way to describe what the couples told me. The couples talked about specific interactions between them that they nominated as useful in staying together and healing from infidelity. When I thought about how to more deeply discern and present these interactions, I thought about my work with couples and what practice approaches I engage in to guide my work. As I look at problems and solutions as developing in relational processes, I use the IPscope (Tomm, 2014b), “a systemic assessment tool for distinguishing interpersonal patterns” (p. 13) in my clinical work and in consultation with my Taos advisor, I decided to use this tool for data analysis.

The IPscope. The IPscope is a cognitive tool, a heuristic, an instrument for examining concerns from a systemic standpoint. Dr. Karl Tomm (1991) and his colleagues at the Calgary Family Training Centre developed the IPscope as a way to maintain a relational viewpoint and understand families’ concerns and their patterns of interactions. The IP stands for interpersonal patterns and the word “scope” and was used by Tomm to remind practitioners that we use other instruments such as telescopes or microscopes to view what is hard to see with the naked eye.

A key feature of systemic practice is to look at interpersonal patterns, not individuals, for the source of the relational distress and for the possibilities for change (Tomm, 1991, 2014a).

Interpersonal Patterns are formally defined as repetitive or recurrent interactions between two or more persons distinguished by an observer (often a systemic therapist) that highlight the coupling between two classes of behaviors, attitudes, feelings, ideas, or beliefs, and that tend to be mutually reinforcing. These patterns maintain themselves as relatively stable components of the overall relationship between those persons. The patterns exist in the interpersonal space and when internalized, predispose a person to re-engage in similar interaction patterns with the same person and with other persons. (Wulff, St. George, Tomm, Doyle, & Sesma, 2015, p. 55)

The patterns that occur over time and become stabilized in relationships can be problematic and concerning for people, or they can be preferred and positive. Both types of patterns are sustained over time by the coupling of the behaviors enacted by the persons involved in the patterns.

The IPscope features a visual representation of an interactional pattern and demonstrates the behavioral coupling of interactions. Descriptions of the interpersonal patterns are made in behavioral terms using gerunds, action words ending in “ing,” to show the moving and shifting nature of interactions. The visual diagram serves to “collapse time,” so that the circularity of the pattern is more visible. Some patterns are easier to identify if they occur in the moment but can be harder to detect if the couplings happen over time or are irregularly enacted (Tomm, 1991, 1999, 2014a, 2014b).

The IPscope is drawn in a standardized way (see Figure 3.1) with two arching arrows linking two categories of behavior that are separated by a backward slash a “complementarity marker,” a thread taken from George Spencer-Brown (1969)

that implies the coupling of complementary behaviors. The arching arrows, taken together, imply the circularity or recurrent nature of systemic interaction as we collapse time into one dimension. The arrows, taken separately, are to be read as invitations that are mutually reinforcing. The coupled mutuality of the invitations creates the stability of the pattern. Behavior A invites behavior B, while behavior B, in turn, invites behavior A, and so on, around and around.

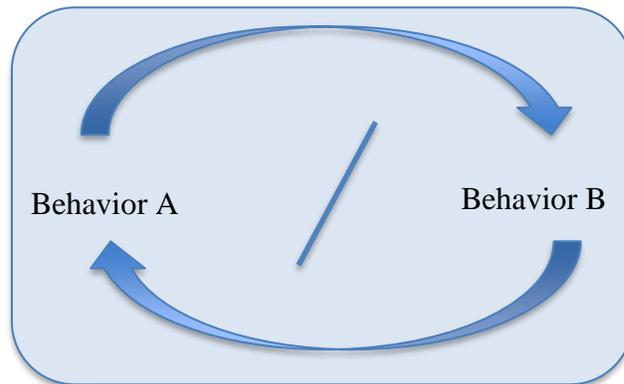


Figure 3.1 **Coupling of behaviors.**

When there appears to be a significant power differential, we draw the pattern vertically rather than horizontally, and place the stronger component in a hierarchical position above the weaker component of the pattern (see Figure 3.2). This hierarchical positioning of one component becomes useful in therapy by suggesting a safer starting point for therapeutic initiatives (i.e., to orient toward deconstructing the more powerful component first) (Wulff et al., 2015, pp. 55-56).

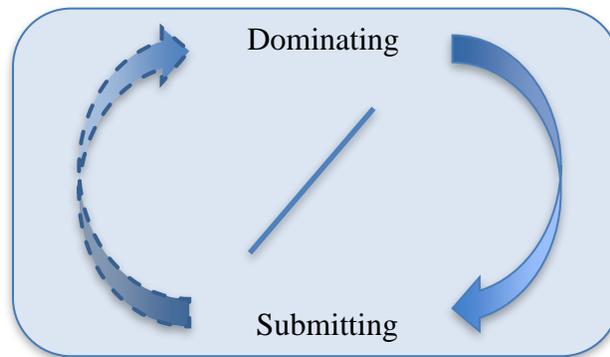


Figure 3.2 Sample PIP with power imbalance

That the IPscope facilitates an examination of power is important. Not all individuals enjoy equality in relationships, and I want to position my experience and theoretical knowledge of power as being meaningful in understanding couples' relationships (Knudson-Martin, 2013; Williams, Galick, Knudson-Martin, & Huenergardt, 2013). This way of noting and seeing the power imbalance is also useful for relational research.

To further explain the IPscope, I will refer to one of the most frequently used examples of a problematic behavioral coupling, criticizing and defending, which was also identified in the interview data from my inquiry (Tomm, 1991, 2014b). Criticism, which can take many shapes and forms such as pointing out the “flaws” in the other’s behavior, accusations, and disapproval all invite the response of defending, which could be enacted in many ways such as counter criticizing to justifying a position and refusing to consider the other’s position. When someone is not heard, she/he may try again to be heard and often in the same way, which invites further criticizing, which invites further defending, and the pattern is sustained. This pattern often results in negative effects such as distress, frustration, and feelings of hopelessness for those involved. Tomm (1991, 2014b) names patterns that are problematic in relationships as PIPs—pathologizing interpersonal patterns. While any individual can enact either behavior in the pattern, in some

relationships, one of the partners may occupy and take up a particular behavior more often. Again, practitioners who use the IPscope pay attention to how a particular behavior invites a particular response, and how the behavioral response is reinforcing of the other behavior.

The purpose of using the IPscope is not to learn, memorize, or fit interactions into pre-existing couplings but rather to identify and name the couplings as they seem to fit for particular individuals. While there are more common couplings, such as criticizing and defending, it is the responsibility of the practitioner to focus on the interactions occurring in front of him/her and identify and name behavioral couplings in response to what is transacted between the individuals. There are as many couplings and possibilities of descriptions of the couplings as practitioners can imagine, but once the interactional patterns are identified, their purpose is to become a useful conversational resource (Strong, 2014).

Tomm (1991, 2014b) names the patterns that offer possibilities for changing or intervening in PIPs as HIPs, healing interpersonal patterns. HIPs are interactions that move people toward healthy relationships and are often the focus of attention in therapeutic conversations. As with solution-focused therapy practices (De Jong & Berg, 2002), HIPs can be exceptions to the problem and can be unique outcomes or alternate stories, as discussed in narrative therapy practices (Chamberlain, 2012). For collaborative practitioners, HIPs are interactions that contribute to dissolving problems (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). HIPs might be thought of as antidotes, preferred directions, solutions, or restorative patterns of interaction that are also comprised of behavioral couplings. HIPs are linked to PIPs and are initiatives that can facilitate a change in a pathologizing

interpersonal pattern: “In everyday language, HIPs represent the interpersonal patterns that family therapists encourage families to achieve” (Wulff & St. George, 2016, p. 31). Practitioners can look for possible HIPs by considering what is not stated but is implicit in a PIP. If an individual is complaining about feeling criticized, he/she is really talking about what he/she is objecting to and/or standing up against, and while an individual is not stating what is wanted instead, clinicians can draw inferences about this. One potential HIP linked to criticizing and defending might be offering respectful feedback coupled with openly considering feedback. I wanted to identify HIPs enacted by the participant couples as they move forward together after infidelity as perhaps these HIPs might be practice resources for use with other couples facing the aftermath of infidelity.

Tomm reminds us that the patterns and the behavioral couplings identified by practitioners are not truths or representations of realities in relationships but are a constructionist heuristic that is offered as a “serviceable fiction” (Tomm, 2014a, p. 11) intended to orient systemically to concerns and possible preferred relational experiences. As the behavioral couplings are viewed as dynamic and as being reinforced over time, they are, therefore, just as inclined to not being reinforced over time if another preferred pattern is enacted. A change in a PIP occurs when individuals enact a HIP. PIPs no longer get performed when individuals experience more preferred ways of connecting through a HIP, and the more the HIP is taken up, the more it is reinforced and becomes the new familiar way to interact. What individuals experience in terms of behavioral couplings that constitute a PIP or a HIP is dependent on those involved in the interaction and what meaning they make of the interaction at the time it is enacted. Behaviors can be experienced as either positive or negative and therefore have different effects on the

individuals involved. Again, this is contingent upon what gets attributed to particular behaviors by the persons involved. For example, an attempt at teasing could be experienced as funny or as hurtful, or multiple other ways, depending on the individuals involved. This practice resource is grounded in relational constructionist ideas and fits well with this inquiry as a tool for analyzing data.

When developing the IPscope, Tomm (1991) identified five types of IPs: the PIPs and HIPs already mentioned; plus TIPs, transforming interpersonal patterns; DIPs or deteriorating interpersonal patterns; and WIPs, wellness interpersonal patterns. WIPs are interactions that are repeated between individuals that serve to maintain or grow relational health as defined by the individuals and not by any particular model of what is considered to be a healthy relationship. HIPs are a subcategory of WIPs: “distinguishing HIPs during the course of therapy provides useful directionality, a compass of sorts, for our collaboration with clients in establishing constructive change in the course of effective clinical work (Wulff et al., 2015, p. 56). DIPs are a subcategory of PIPs and move individuals away from a WIP, HIP, or TIP toward a PIP. TIPs are the interactional patterns between clients and practitioners in therapeutic conversations and can be initiated or enacted by clients themselves (Tomm, 1991, 2014b; Wulff et al., 2015). And they are the initiatives enacted between clients that help move from a PIP to a HIP. St. George and Wulff (2014) added SCIPs, or socio-cultural interpersonal patterns, to the five initial IPs to widen the lens of the IPscope, so that the larger sphere of influence on individuals might be attended to.

The IPscope provides a way to look at what we are looking at and seeing what we are seeing (Tomm, 1992) and highlights the “patterns which connect” (Wulff et al., 2015,

p. 55). I am interested in the particular patterns enacted by the participant couples as they move forward after infidelity, and because the IPscope has been established as a useful cognitive tool for practitioners, I thought it could also be a useful analytical tool for practitioner/researchers. I went back over the interview transcripts looking through the lens of the IPscope, and in particular, I paid attention specifically to HIPs or interpersonal patterns that the couple identified as having positive, healing, or desired effects. For example, couples talked about healing and forgiveness, but I wanted to identify and name the particular interactional patterns involved. Again, I was interested in the behavioral couplings that were healing and located in the space between the partners, not located within a particular individual (Eeson & Strong, 2016; Tomm, 1991, 2014b).

Looking for the patterns that connect required that each interview be considered as a whole as some of the behavioral couplings were visible across interviews. The sense-making of the interview was similar to that of a therapeutic session in which formulations and ideas take shape over time and throughout the interaction. I was paying attention to the behaviors, attitudes, feeling, ideas, and beliefs (Wulff et al., 2015) that couples talked about that were helpful to them in moving forward together after infidelity. When they talked about strengths, or positive developments, or appreciating things that the other did, I paid attention and looked for the specific interactions involved for both partners. I looked for HIPs in each interview, and then I looked for patterns of HIPs across the interviews. And I looked for the specific TIPs that helped move couples toward HIPs.

Each IP was written on an index card, then sorted into piles based on how they were similar or different, or in any other way connected. Doing this allowed for patterns of TIPs and HIPs to be seen. Once the HIPs were identified, the process was similar to that

of thematic analysis. I took the piles of individual HIPs and made sense of them in a more abstract way, shifting from specifics to patterns or themes of HIPs.

I acknowledge that I am choosing to pay attention to a small part of the couple's relationship and that much of their unique culture will be outside my line of sight. The story constructed of the couple in this inquiry is focused on infidelity, leaving unsaid, and unnoticed, many other aspects of their particular ways of relating. I do this purposefully thinking about what McNamee (2014) invites practitioners to do when she encourages reflecting on what counts as data and how this might be useful to practitioners. This is not unlike clinical practice orientations that privilege stories or actions that draw forth capabilities or positivity and highlight these possibilities in therapeutic conversations. What we as practitioners focus on "depends upon the discursive communities within which we operate" (McNamee, 1995, p. 71). I am a clinician, and as I want my research to be as close to my clinical practice as possible, I am focusing on what is healing and useful rather than the problem story. It is possible that my focus on the interactional patterns that are helping couples move forward together could contribute to a blind spot in this research. On the other hand, if my intention is to identify ways that might contribute to couples experiencing their relationships as healthy and positive, I am biased toward better understanding of what might contribute to positivity rather than what is problematic. Part of the way that relational constructionism informs my inquiry is to acknowledge my bias in my work and in this inquiry, not confront or try to bracket it: "In effect, what we observe is never unbiased; experience is deeply colored by what we bring to the situation. And what we bring is largely the result of the community of which we are a part" (Gergen & Gergen, 2012a, p. 27).

Reflecting-in-Action-Disseminate findings. The final part of Research As Daily Practice (Wulff & St. George, 2014) is to consider how the research findings might be useful for clinical work and to engage in these new practices. In Chapter Four, I will present the findings, and in Chapter Five, I will discuss the findings more directly in terms of the existing research and ideas for clinical practice. For now, I believe that my clinical practice is already better as a result of engaging in this research study. I think I ask more generative questions in sessions, a direct outcome of going over the transcripts and repeatedly hearing myself saying how I wished I had asked a different question, and then I practiced what questions I might have asked. My Vrije Universiteit Brussel promotor, Prof. dr. Katrien de Koster, encouraged me to “not be too careful” in my questioning with the participant couples, and I now better understand the wisdom of this comment. I find myself in sessions asking myself what might be “too careful” and how I am deciding what is “too careful.” And I listen differently now in sessions. I listen more deeply, more relationally, and engage in reflexivity more deliberately to better examine how my listening is shaping the conversation. And while I have been generally attentive to the process of therapeutic conversations in my work, as an outcome of this inquiry, I am even more focused on the moment-to-moment interactions, pacing, reflecting, and use of terms. I now have an even greater sense of relational responsibility in practice (Gergen, 2009).

Orienting to What Comes Next

In the next chapter, I present the interview findings, and the story of the findings is told from my perspective, which is, of course, polyvocal. As I read the interview data, I not only heard the words of the participant couples but also of the other clients I have met

with, as well as the social discourses related to infidelity. I identify five themes from the interview data, and then I show how these themes were enacted (interpersonal patterns or IPs) by the couples as they move forward together after infidelity.

CHAPTER 4

Findings At A Glance – Themes And Sub-Themes

1. Finding Out and Experiencing Initial Impact (TIP)

Finding out – Disclosing the infidelity (TIP)
 Finding out – Discovering the infidelity (TIP)
 Experiencing initial impact (HIP)

2. Choosing the Primary Relationship (TIP)

Dealing with the infidelity relationship (TIP)
 Decision-making about sustaining the relationship (TIP)
Appreciating what was invested and achieved in the relationship
Love and commitment
Valuing partner and relational possibilities
Beliefs about responding to difficulties in relationships
Risks and alternatives
 Hearing and responding to societal messages about infidelity (TIP)
Judgment
Leave
Double standards

3. Making Sense of the Infidelity Experience (HIP)

Reasons for participating in the infidelity (TIP)
Age, midlife crisis and feelings of missing out
Opportunity/impulsivity/mental illness
Lack of social support
Feeling special and important
Relationship dissatisfaction and stress
Experimenting with a different persona
 Beliefs about infidelity (TIP)
 Evolving couple identity (HIP)
 Learning lessons (TIP)

4. Prioritizing and Building a Preferred Relationship (HIP)

Healing in connection (HIP)
Acknowledging that one's partner deserved better (HIP)
Taking personal responsibility for causing harm to partner (HIP)
Expressing remorse and regret (HIP)
Demonstrating shame and distress for causing harm (HIP)
Apologizing (HIP)
Increasing attentiveness (HIP)

Rebuilding trust (HIP)
Forgiveness (HIP)
Managing “ups and downs” (HIP)
Dealing with reminders (HIP)
Living by one’s principles (WIP)
Time (HIP)
Accessing support (HIP)
Developing and enhancing relational habits (WIP)
Engaging in open and honest communication (WIP)
Addressing relationship issues (WIP)
Recommitting to the relationship (HIP)

5. Valuing and Expanding Relational Growth (WIP)

Shifting relational practices (WIP)
Expressing preferences coupled with compromising (WIP)
Initiating collaborative problem-solving coupled with following through with collaboratively generated solutions (WIP)
Feeling closer, more connected, stronger as a couple (WIP)
Increased sense of gratitude (WIP)

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

***WHAT DO COUPLES SAY ABOUT HOW THEY ARE
MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER AFTER INFIDELITY?***

Introduction

I am interested in studying how couples move forward after infidelity. Specifically, I focus on what couples told me they did to sustain and improve their relationships. In meeting the participant couples, I explained my focus and invited them to share their stories of moving forward together after infidelity, including whatever felt important to them. All couples contextualized their experiences of infidelity to some extent in terms of who participated in the infidelity behavior, how long ago it happened, how it was discovered, and the effects of the infidelity experience. Couples differed in how much detail they provided, and I asked questions about particular aspects of their experiences to broaden my understanding.

I analyzed the conversations with the participant couples about their experiences with infidelity and I identified five main themes, which represent my understanding of what was nominated by the participants as important in their moving forward together after infidelity. These themes are the following: *finding out and experiencing initial impact, choosing the primary relationship, making sense of the infidelity experience, prioritizing and building a preferred relationship, and valuing and expanding relational growth*. Then, for each theme, I used the IPscope to present the particular recurring ways that couples interacted that developed into patterns that supported them in moving forward together and holding a positive view of their relationships.

I found it useful to view the data through the IPscope as a way to remain relational in focus as I understood the couples' experiences. Examining the interview conversations through the lens of the IPscope gave me the opportunity to notice multiple patterns enacted by the couples, but I mostly focused on the patterns of interactions the couples engaged in that contributed to sustaining the relationships. The interpersonal patterns that I chose to pay attention to were the following: a TIP, a transforming interpersonal pattern or interaction that enables shifting from a pathologizing pattern towards a healing pattern, a HIP, a healing interactional pattern or emerging pattern of preferred behavior, or a WIP, a wellness interpersonal pattern or pattern of preferred behavior that supports health and satisfaction within the relationship. I discuss two PIPs, or pathologizing interpersonal patterns, to show what happens when a TIP attempt is declined. As was previously mentioned in Chapter Three, the possibilities for responding to TIP attempts are to accept and take up, decline, or expand upon the behavioral invitation.

I discuss each theme, and then I show the interpersonal patterns (IP) diagrammatically. I also explain the sequence of the IP to demonstrate the mutual invitation and mutual influence of the coupled behaviors. While the couplings are of complementary behaviors, as previously explained, interpersonal patterns also involve the view or perceived identity the partners hold of each other. I then present parts of the participant couples' narratives to demonstrate the theme and interpersonal pattern(s). Some patterns were visible within a couple's experience, and some patterns became visible across several couples' experiences.

In a relationship, behaviors are significant when they are meaningful to the people enacting them and for how they shape the experiences of each other; meanings of behaviors may be discerned by members of the couple as either positive or negative and can therefore be a strength or resource or a concern or problem for the couple. And again, I am curious about those patterns that have been a strength or resource for the couple as they move forward together after infidelity. My hope is that the presentation of the findings honors the experiences of the individual participants and keeps the relational processes or interactions between the partners in clear focus.

Most often I use the word infidelity to refer to the behaviors and actions taken by the non-exclusive partner that were contrary to the couple's previously understood agreement. I use the word "affair," "cheated," or "unfaithful" if that was the language used by the couple. Other important terms I use include the following:

- "primary relationship" refers to the committed relationship of the participant couples,
- "exclusive partner" refers to the individual who did not engage in the infidelity behavior,
- "non-exclusive partner" refers to the individual who engaged in infidelity behavior, and
- "infidelity partner" refers to the person outside the primary relationship with whom the "non-exclusive partner" engaged in infidelity behavior.

Finding Out and Experiencing Initial Impact

The first theme relates to how the infidelity became known and the experiences of the initial impact. Some of the partners suspected infidelity and were looking for

evidence, and other partners were completely unsuspecting. Of the 12 couples interviewed, 4 partners disclosed the infidelity to their partners and 8 partners discovered the infidelity. For the four couples in which disclosure happened within the relationship, all of the non-exclusive partners were female. For the eight couples where the infidelity was discovered, all of the non-exclusive partners were male.

The transforming interpersonal pattern or TIP connected to this theme was the start of the infidelity becoming public/known to the couple and their bilateral recognition that it was an issue/threat to the primary relationship. The TIP could be thought of as coming together over knowing about the infidelity coupled with experiencing and reflecting on the initial impact of the infidelity (see Figure 4.1).

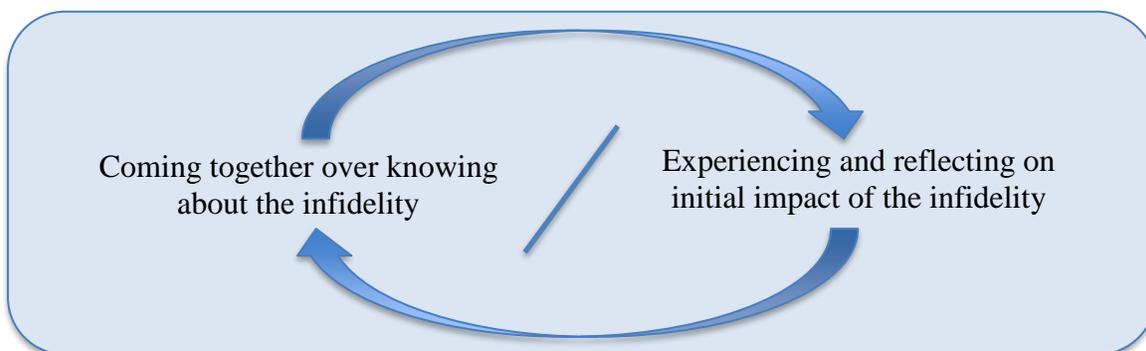


Figure 4.1 TIP related to infidelity becoming known by the couple.

This TIP was very briefly enacted and was the start of the couple dealing with the infidelity. In most couples, both partners occupied each position in this TIP. This TIP was initiated when a non-exclusive partner made a decision to disclose or when an exclusive partner was told about the infidelity from an outside source or found out that the infidelity had happened, and the partners came together around the infidelity. No longer was the exclusive partner unaware or uncertain and the couple brought the infidelity to the center of the couple's attention. This TIP may appear obvious, and I discuss it because in some circumstances both partners know the infidelity happened but it is not

dealt with within the couple's relationship. In this study, at least half of the partners, both exclusive and non-exclusive, had the choice to either disclose that the infidelity had happened or disclose that the infidelity was known. Of significance for these participant couples, they made the choice to deal with the infidelity together rather than individually.

For the exclusive partner, the initial impact was often shock, disbelief, and extreme uncertainty about the meaning of the infidelity, and his/her response was one of starting to absorb the information: "What the fuck?" (Adam); "I couldn't believe it" (Cal); "I immediately packed my stuff and went back to my mom's house" (Michonne). For Tara, who found "evidence" that led her to suspect that Ben had cheated on her, making a decision to raise this with him was part of experiencing the initial impact, as was her experience of extreme hurt.

Well, when I first saw them, I was doing laundry, and my first reaction was extreme hurt, and then I took a deep breath, I relaxed . . . got the laundry, came back up, and then while I was making the bed, he came in to help me, not knowing that I had figured it out. I just told him to let me finish making the bed. And then I just brought it to his attention that next time he should throw things out, and that kind of started the conversation as to what happened. I wasn't angry or I wasn't excessively emotional. It wasn't, "How could you do this to me?" I was more, "So, okay, let me hear your end of the story. Let me see what happened (Tara).

The non-exclusive partners described a range of initial reactions when their infidelity behavior became known. For Liz, it was a mix of feelings "just like a relief even though it was horrible." Explaining her sense of relief, Liz stated, "that it was done. I didn't

have to worry about anything anymore. Well, new things I guess. New worries.” For Matt, “it was tight at first. It wasn’t a good situation. I didn’t enjoy it” [referring to the fighting, yelling, and uncertainty about their relationship after Sarah found out from a friend that he cheated]. When Ian’s wife, Gloria, found evidence of his infidelity, he considered denying it, but then he decided that the evidence was “irrefutable. I couldn’t really dispute it and I had to confess” (Ian).

Both partners in all but one of the participant couples in this study talked about how they valued acknowledging and dealing with the infidelity and made decisions to deal with it within the relationship. Again, this might seem obvious, but in some couples, non-exclusive partners refuse to admit or discuss the infidelity, and some exclusive partners decide not to “let on” they know about the infidelity if this is an option; therefore, the couples do not come together over the infidelity. However, this response is outside the scope of this study.

Finding out—Disclosing the infidelity. The four partners who disclosed the infidelity to their partners described different developments leading to the decision to tell, but all were motivated to tell because they wanted their primary relationship to continue and desired to end the personal distress that they were experiencing about their participation in infidelity.

The TIP that was a part of disclosing the infidelity experience could be described as valuing the primary relationship, disclosing infidelity, expressing love for partner and strong desire for continuing relationship coupled with hearing disclosure and partner’s love and strong desire to sustain the relationship (see Figure 4.2).

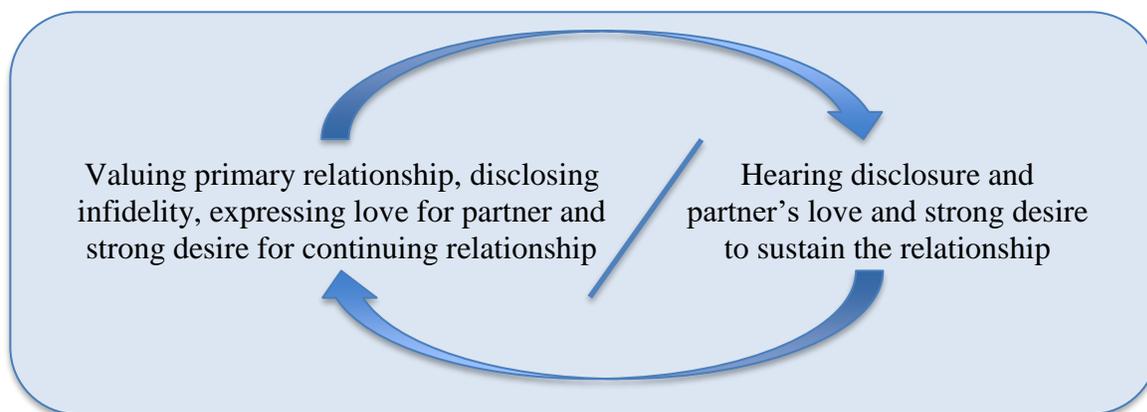


Figure 4.2 TIP related to finding out—disclosing infidelity.

The non-exclusive partners who disclosed their infidelity behaviors made it explicitly known to their partners that they absolutely wanted their relationships to continue. They conveyed love for their partners and commitment to making the relationship work and did this in various ways with one telling her partner that she loved him, and to attest to that, she took out a restraining order against the infidelity partner. The exclusive partners heard the disclosures of infidelity, and it took repeated attempts by the non-exclusive partners expressing love and preference for the relationship to continue for the primary partners to really hear the strong expressions of love and preferences for the relationships. Hearing the expressions of love and preference for continuing the relationship were important for the possibility of the relationship continuing because these expressions of love and desire to stay together were outside the dominant single story of the relationship at that time. Hearing the non-exclusive partners' valuing and preference for the relationship continuance was only possible in response to their repeatedly expressing love and desire for the exclusive partners and the relationships; these expressions were enacted in different ways.

Liz disclosed to Adam (who did not have any suspicions of her infidelity) before he found out from someone in the couple's social circle. Liz explained, "There was a lot of other stuff coming out. I just knew that it would be better to get it over with. I didn't think I could hold it in anymore. And I'd rather him hear it from me." Discussing why it was important for Liz to be the one to disclose the infidelity to Adam, she said, "because then I could tell him the truth" (long pause, tears). For Liz, it seemed disclosure was about protecting Adam and herself from others' versions of the infidelity story, about freeing herself from the secret she had been keeping from him, and hoping that her telling Adam would communicate her commitment to him and the relationship. Adam said,

Well, one thing that saved our marriage was the text she sent me 30 seconds after I left the house when I found out, and it said, "I love you so much." I didn't understand it, and after just getting the shock of your life, right, and then to get this text saying I don't remember what it said, but "I still love you and I want to be with you. We're going to work through this." And it didn't make any sense because, of course, I'm thinking, "Oh my God, I just lost the love of my life." I think she's fallen in love with another man, right? So I'm like done. Then to get that didn't make any sense. So, there was a curiosity coming up (Adam).

Adam stated that he was confused by Liz's expression of love immediately after she disclosed her infidelity behavior, and that this confusion opened space for him to be both devastated and aware of the possibility of staying together.

Yasmin's motivation for disclosing her 2-year "affair" was based on emotional distress; "things were building up" and she needed to tell her partner, Trey, that she wanted to make changes in their relationship. "And I eventually told him because the

reason why I was doing it is because there were certain things that I felt were missing in our relationship.” Yasmin did not seem to think that she could enhance her relationship with Trey if she kept her affair a secret, even after she ended the affair.

I could have kept it to myself and not said anything, but that right there would have just eaten me up. It would have come out in some way. I was just hoping that he could forgive me. I really didn't even give it much thought. I was just trying to relieve whatever emotions I was going through because I just really wanted to vent that out. And he's the one I needed to vent it out to (Yasmin).

For the couples in this study, this TIP was enacted for a brief period and was significant in sustaining the relationships. The non-exclusive partners' strong and explicit expressions of love and commitment, which were enacted in different ways, and the exclusive partners' hearing these expressions appeared to be a way to counter the assumption or fear that an infidelity experience automatically means the end of the primary relationship. For the couples in this study, this TIP seemed to create opportunities to more broadly consider what their choices could be in relation to responding to the infidelity.

Finding out —Discovering the infidelity. For the other eight couples for whom the non-exclusive partner did not voluntarily disclose the infidelity, finding out happened in a number of ways. Tara, Gloria, and Anja found evidence (i.e., text messages) that the infidelity was happening. Sara's friend told her about Matt's involvement with another woman. The husband of the woman Tim was involved with called Nancy and told her about Tim's affair. Tyrese's infidelity partner called his home and gave his partner, Sonja, information that led to her confirming an affair that she had suspected when she

noticed unaccounted for household expenditures. Carol and Michonne came home early from work and found their partners with other women.

The previously described TIP associated with disclosure of the infidelity was also important when infidelity was discovered—with one important difference—which was the timing of the enactment of the pattern. For the couples with non-exclusive partners who were clear that they wished to sustain the primary relationships, the interactional pattern was enacted very shortly after the discovery happened, and disclosure was more about admitting to rather than revealing the infidelity. For the couples with non-exclusive partners who were unsure about maintaining the primary relationships or were not ready to end the infidelity relationships, the development of the pattern was delayed for some time after the discovery of the infidelity behavior, and this created further harm for the exclusive partner.

The TIP when finding out what happened through discovery was valuing primary relationship, disclosing/admitting infidelity, expressing love for partner, and a strong desire for continuing the relationship coupled with discovering infidelity and hearing partner's strong desire to sustain the relationship (see Figure 4.3).

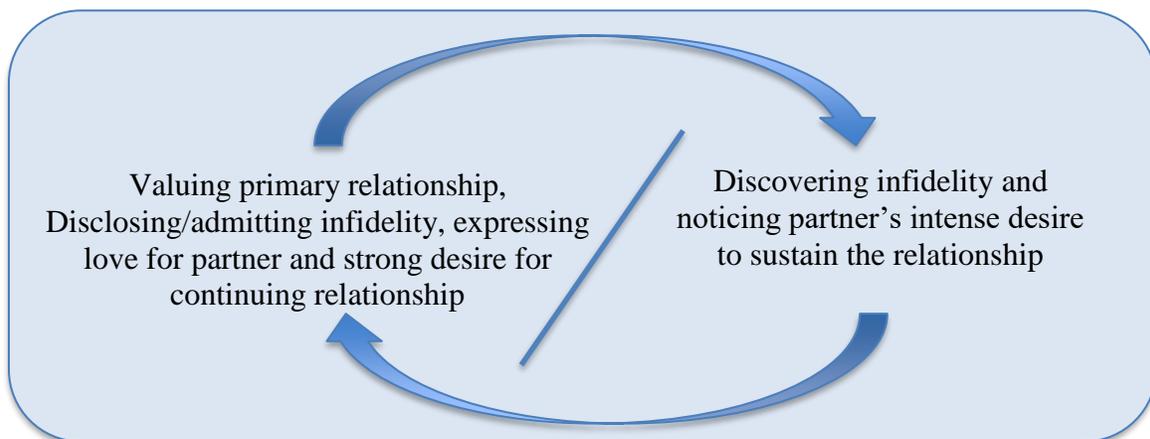


Figure 4.3 TIP around finding out—discovering infidelity.

In most of the couples, it was the non-exclusive partner who initiated this TIP and persevered in the behavior of expressing love for partner and strong desire to sustain the relationship until the exclusive partner heard this clearly. For one of the couples, it was the exclusive partner who initiated this TIP. In response to receiving a call that revealed Tim's infidelity behavior, Nancy approached Tim and asked him, "do you love me?" Tim responded with a then recent story of being asked about his marriage and he had said, "Yeah, of course, I love you. As a matter of fact, yeah. This . . . girl asked me if I see myself with my wife, and I said, yeah, of course." Nancy remembered that Tim's response at that time was significant for her because he did not yet know that Nancy knew about his infidelity. His expression of love and commitment to her encouraged Nancy to notice and believe Tim's subsequent expressions of love and commitment to the relationship that came after she asked him about the infidelity. Nancy's question about loving her invited Tim into this TIP, and his response invited Nancy to notice and then believe that Tim really did love and care for her, which is typically questioned after infidelity.

Experiencing initial impact. Most of the participants chose to discuss their initial responses to finding out about the infidelity. All exclusive partners described experiencing negative emotional reactions that included shock, disbelief, anger, hurt, stress, humiliation, anxiety, despair, betrayal, sadness, depression, self-doubt, embarrassment, vindictiveness, and feeling deceived and diminished. While the extent to which these feelings were experienced ranged from brief and intermittent to very consuming and overwhelming, for most of the exclusive partners, the feelings were intense, lasting, and devastating.

The non-exclusive spouses also described having negative emotional reactions when the infidelity became known including shame, regret, remorse, suicidal ideation, guilt, disappointment in self, fear (of relationship ending), and sorrow. The level of pain and suffering experienced by the exclusive partners was markedly more severe than what the non-exclusive partners experienced in response to the infidelity behavior, and the couples' acknowledgment of this was important for moving forward together.

The HIP linked to experiencing initial impact could be conceptualized as openly expressing one's emotional experience coupled with listening and acknowledging the other's emotional experience (see Figure 4.4).

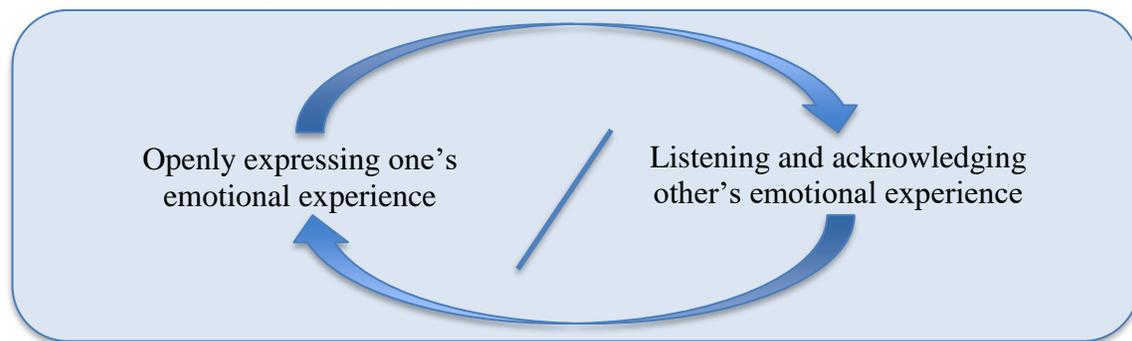


Figure 4.4 HIP related to experiencing initial impact.

Most often in the early aftermath of finding out, the exclusive partner openly expressed his/her emotional experience, and the non-exclusive partner listened and acknowledged the other's emotional experience. In this HIP, as one's partner engages in openly expressing her/his emotional experience, the other partner is invited to listen and acknowledge that experience. As listening to and acknowledging the other's emotional experience happens, especially when the emotional experience being expressed is hard to hear, the partner feels her/his thoughts and feelings are of interest and importance to the partner, and this invites further expressing. Listening is a caring act, and expressing one's feelings requires vulnerability, and both behaviors seemed to send the message that the

relationship mattered. The behaviors reinforce each other and opened space for the possibility of sustaining the relationship.

Some of the exclusive partners' feelings were intense and overwhelming in response to the infidelity. Nancy stated, "I was gobsmacked, pretty hurt. At first it was over the top occupying." "It almost killed me, to tell you the truth. It was very devastating to me at the time. It was very unexpected" (Anja). "Shock. It's probably the one word that describes it for me. Completely blindsided," and "I've been depressed. I mean I've been low and high, and some days are great, some days suck" (Adam). "Mad as hell" (Trey).

Several exclusive partners felt that everything about their marriages was now in question. Cal said, "because you think everything's crashing." For Gloria, "it was very hard to deal with. Knowing that my husband would do that to me after knowing him for that many years," and she noted that the infidelity "devastated our marriage and put everything in jeopardy and [it was] hard to make sense of."

The negative effects of the infidelity experience were significantly compounded when a partner initially refused to end his/her infidelity relationship, and Anja likened her emotional experience of this with her partner of 29 years to being in combat: "It just was a nightmare, the whole thing. And I'm a really strong person, but I felt like I was . . . under assault daily with it, in combat."

Several of the exclusive partners expressed a desire for vengeance and considered cheating: "I felt like I wanted to get back at him in some kind of way" (Sonja).

I wanted to strike back. I did get a bit of glee of knowing that it was eating her up. And that she was sick over it because she should have been. But I wanted more retribution than that. I wanted to know, "how do I hurt her the same way?" (Cal).

And for Sara, her emotional experience was intensified by whom Matt was involved with: "I had been talking to this girl since it had happened. And yeah, it was very embarrassing and hurtful to think that he would've let me associate with this person and not tell me."

The emotional impact of infidelity was evident in disrupted sleep, physiological distress, worry, alcohol misuse, problems with family members, and a deep sense of instability and uncertainty about the primary relationship. "The adrenaline, the anxiety, like I don't get that now at all, but then I thought what's happening to me? So it's just a physiological reaction in your body" (Nancy). And she recalled experiencing anxiety that she believed disrupted her sleep for 4 years. Sonja recalls that it was very hard just to get through her day: "I just felt sick the whole time, like physically, I don't know why. I had to push myself to go to work and just try to maintain my everyday life without Tyrese."

Anja remembers struggling with day-to-day functioning, and alcohol became a significant part of her life: "Everything was compounding on me and I just lost control. And I started drinking really bad and I almost drank myself to death." She was able to stop using alcohol, but when she found out her partner was still involved with the infidelity partner she

started the drinking thing again because it just hit me so hard again that I just became a nervous wreck. I didn't have anything to take, like a nerve pill or anything to calm me down and that was the easiest thing to grab, to go get. I self-

medicated like that again for a couple of months. Every day, like almost 24 hours a day I was doing that. I just stayed in bed; I wasn't eating (Anja).

Anja's family knew how bad things were for her, and they blamed her partner. "Because of what happened with us, it broke my relationship with my son."

Sara recalled that she felt uncertain about the future of their relationship when Matt's infidelity was exposed, not because they did not want to stay together, but because it significantly strained their relationship, something they had not previously experienced. Fighting occurred for about the first year after discovery: "I yelled a lot. Fighting was a big thing initially" (Sara). They remembers many interactions marked by instability and volatility as he and Yasmin dealt with her affair: "It was a lot of arguing at first. I would probably say we spent maybe about a year off and on, going back and forth with it."

Non-exclusive partners experienced significant distress sometimes before, as well as after, the infidelity was discovered/disclosed. Tim remembers how he felt after the first time he participated in infidelity: "I cried a lot that night. I had suicidal thoughts because I was just so disappointed in myself." Yasmin expressed extreme remorse and guilt about her actions: "It was very heartbreaking for me. I felt very, very bad. I felt worse than he did. I was like, wow, he took it much better than me. And still to this day, it still bothers me" (4 years later). Through frequent tears in the interview, Liz stated, "I was a disastrous mess" referring to both her fear of losing her husband and her remorse about the hurt she caused him. Ian recalled, "struggling with . . . the shame that I could let . . . something this horrific happen to us, and it's a very embarrassing and sensitive issue because the way I was raised, you're supposed to be 100% honest and not lie." "I was

ashamed. I had done exactly the opposite of what I said that people should do, so I was a hypocrite” (Robin).

Again, pain and suffering experienced by the exclusive partners were much greater than what the non-exclusive partners experienced in response to the infidelity behavior, and acknowledgment of this was important for moving forward together: “It was a huge help to me that Tim was so tuned in . . . and was there to talk. We did a lot of talking and a lot of walking and a lot of rubbing feet” (Nancy). “I knew she needed to get that off her chest because if she didn’t, she’s going to be buzzing around. I knew it needed to happen” (Tim). “He would just listen to what I was saying and not yell back. And he’d always just say nice things to me and caring things, even though I was calling him every name in the book, to be honest” (Sara).

Ben, one of the non-exclusive partners, described how he occupied both the listening and acknowledging positions and how important the openly expressing position of this HIP is.

You're both . . . these two wounded kind of things. You either close up or run away, or you just open up even more and more [than] you have in the past. If you want to make it work, you become this vessel of receiving and giving, whether it be opinions, thoughts, feeling someone's emotional state. . . Especially early on, bringing things up early on . . . People have to be sensitive (Ben).

Tara expressed her appreciation for how she and Ben communicated about their emotional experiences:

Communication is the biggest thing, and communication's always been my biggest struggle because for me, you hurt me, and I close up. I run and hide and

that's it. But with him, it's very easy to talk to him. He makes it very comfortable to talk. He's a great listener. He never judges (Tara).

Openly expressing one's emotional experience coupled with listening and acknowledging the other's emotional experience was a significant HIP as couples moved together after infidelity. This was a pattern that involved both partners shifting attention and efforts more deliberately toward each other and their relationship.

Choosing the Primary Relationship

For all but one of the participant couples, questioning and doubt about whether or not to sustain the primary relationship was one of the responses to the infidelity experience. For these couples, choosing the primary relationship involved dealing with the infidelity relationship, engaging in a significant decision-making process that included a period of separation for two couples, and hearing and responding to societal messages about infidelity. The couple who did not consider ending the primary relationship did not engage in decision-making about the relationship, but they did have to deal with the infidelity partner and respond to societal messages about infidelity.

The general TIP related to choosing the primary relationship might be thought of as identifying infidelity as a threat/problem for sustaining the primary relationship coupled with taking steps to choose the primary relationship (see Figure 4.5).

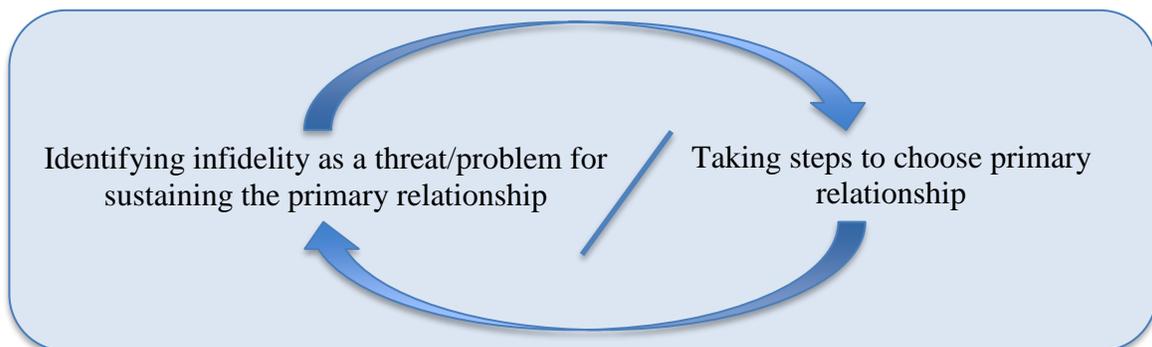


Figure 4.5. TIP linked to choosing the primary relationship.

Both partners occupied each position of this TIP, and this TIP was time sensitive. The partners recognized that there were some more immediate or crisis-oriented issues to deal with in order for them to move forward together. These issues related to the infidelity partner, decision-making about sustaining the relationship, and hearing and responding to societal messages about infidelity.

Dealing with the infidelity relationship. All of the couples reported that in order for their primary relationships to continue, the infidelity relationships needed to end, and for any possibility of future contact between the non-exclusive partners and the infidelity partners to be eliminated or reduced. For two of the couples, the infidelity relationships continued after discovery until the non-exclusive partners made a decision to end them, and one of these couples separated while decision-making about the infidelity relationship occurred.

As part of dealing with the infidelity partner, all except two of the non-exclusive partners revealed the identities of the infidelity partners, and in these two instances, it was the exclusive partners' choice not to know the identity of the infidelity partners. For three of the couples, the infidelity occurred with individuals who were not directly involved in the day-to-day lives of the couples or non-exclusive partners, and the involvement seemed to end immediately after the infidelity interactions. For nine of the couples, the infidelity partners were a part of the couples' daily lives, and dealing with the possibility of contact between the non-exclusive partners, or the couple and the former infidelity partner had to be addressed.

The TIP linked to dealing with the infidelity relationship might be thought of as taking and maintaining explicit steps to end all current and future contact with the infidelity partner, coupled with noticing these steps and acknowledging the partner's intention to sustain the primary relationship (see Figure 4.6).

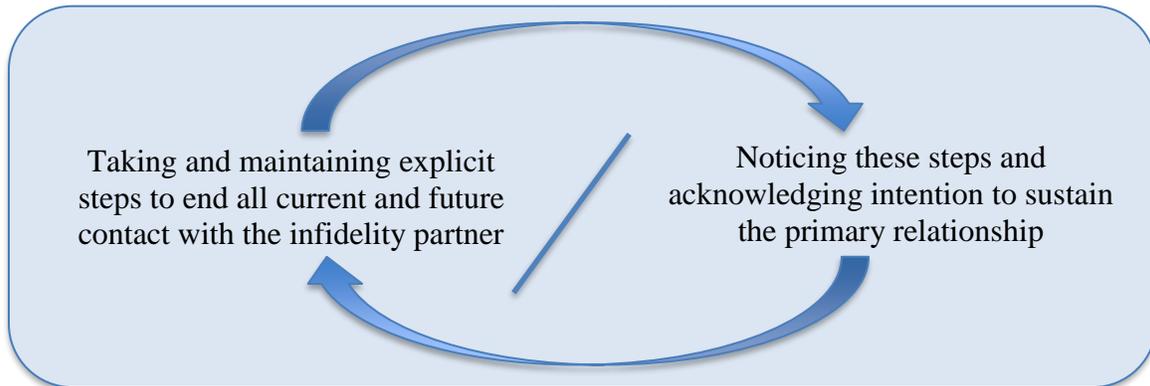


Figure 4.6. TIP linked to dealing with infidelity relationship.

While this TIP was most often time-limited, when the infidelity partner was a part of the couple's everyday life, this TIP was enacted over a sustained period of time. For these participant couples, most often the non-exclusive partners took steps to end contact with the infidelity partners and did so intending to send the message that (a) he/she wanted the primary relationship to continue and (b) that she/he could be trusted to be loyal to the primary partner. Again, for these participant couples, the non-exclusive partners' participation in the infidelity behavior was not intended as a way to leave the primary relationships, and this needed to be communicated in multiple ways to the exclusive partners. To increase the possibilities of sustaining the primary relationship after the infidelity, the non-exclusive partner took actions that initiated the beginning of this TIP as a way of demonstrating accountability to the primary partner and the relationship. The exclusive partner also had to be receptive to noticing and acknowledging these actions, and receptivity was linked to behaviors that were

meaningful to her/him and that were sustained. The non-exclusive partners seemed to understand that it would likely take sustained efforts related to ending the infidelity relationship and eliminating possible future contact for the exclusive partners to notice these efforts and perhaps even more time for them to acknowledge the efforts. This was linked to the breach in trust as a result of the infidelity and to the disbelief, shock, and emotional distress experienced by the exclusive partners that may have made their noticing and acknowledging more challenging. When a partner enacts a behavior, his/her efforts to keep enacting the behavior can be kept up for a period of time, but eventually these efforts are not continued if there is no reinforcing behavioral response, so the exclusive partner's receptivity or willingness to notice the efforts was important. For the couples who separated or did not immediately decide that the primary relationship would continue, this TIP was enacted when the decision was made to end the infidelity relationship.

Some of the non-exclusive partners took significant initiatives to eliminate or reduce contact with their former infidelity partners. Tim changed his business travel schedule, stopped attending functions without his wife, and "he quit drinking. And that was appreciated" (Nancy). Rick stopped going to the gym where he met his infidelity partner: "I kind of cut it off with her. I haven't seen her since. I actually quit the health club" (Rick). "He changed health clubs, and he hasn't seen her, and so I'm trusting him" (Carol). Ian discontinued online activity where he met his infidelity partners: "I'm not making a secondary Facebook account, I'm not making multiple email addresses . . . everything is transparent" (Ian). For two couples, the infidelity partners lived in the same neighborhood, and it was particularly difficult for the couples to limit contact with the

infidelity partners. For one couple, it meant getting a restraining order because “he wouldn’t leave her alone. So she got the restraining order against him” (Glen), and for the other couple, it meant changing their social network “totally” (Liz). In two situations, the possibility of contact was reduced by actions of the infidelity partners: one infidelity partner left her employment, and another infidelity partner moved to a different city.

Decision-making about sustaining the relationship. Most of the couples described decision-making about sustaining their relationships as a process that took time. Engaging in decision-making over time seemed to allow for healing to begin and might have contributed to their increased confidence that the couples would be able to successfully sustain their relationships. During the time of decision-making, the partners, and most often the exclusive partners, appeared to be looking for reasons to stay in the relationships, and the reasons they paid attention to were influenced by the actions of their non-exclusive partners. Separation was considered by all but one of the couples when verification of the infidelity happened, and two couples did separate for a period of time. Of the 10 couples who did not separate, one of the non-exclusive partners considered not continuing in the primary relationship, which was very hurtful for the exclusive partner, who wished to maintain the primary relationship. One couple described the decision-making process as mutual, and for the remainder of the seven couples, the non-exclusive partners viewed the choice to end or sustain the primary relationship to be solely that of the exclusive partners as these non-exclusive partners were already clear they wished to sustain the relationship. And most couples talked about the utility of pausing, waiting, thinking, reflecting, and not making quick decisions about the future of their relationships.

The predominant TIP present in decision-making about sustaining the relationship can be thought of as reflecting on, pausing, and appraising what is valued in the relationship coupled with holding hope, drawing the other's attention to valued relational attributes, and acting patiently (see Figure 4.7).

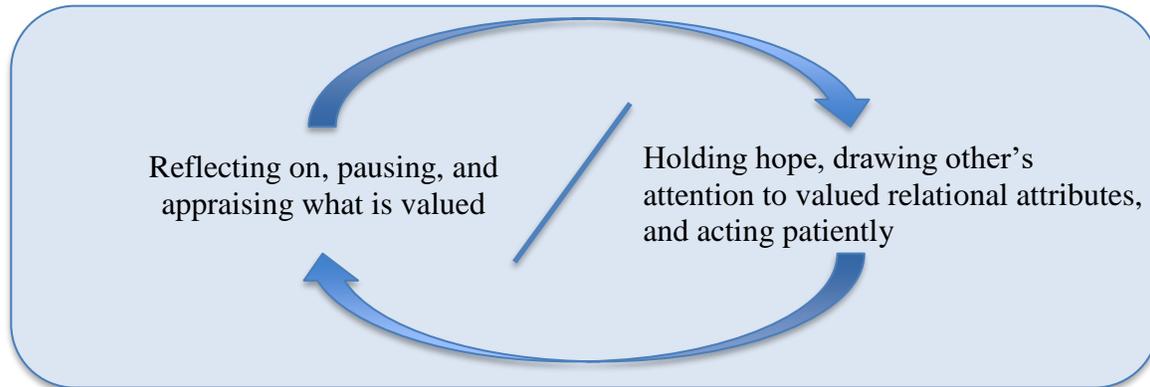


Figure 4.7. TIP related to decision-making about sustaining the relationship.

For those couples for whom sustaining the relationship was to any extent in question, most often it was the exclusive partners who occupied the position of reflecting on, pausing, and appraising what was valued, and what was emphasized and considered varied amongst the exclusive partners and will be discussed more fully below. The non-exclusive partners most often occupied the position of holding hope, drawing the other's attention to valued relational attributes, and acting patiently. None of the non-exclusive partners seemed to make demands of their partners to make a decision quickly and used this period of conscious reflection to remind their partners of what was shared and valued in their relationships. Acting patiently and highlighting cherished relationship attributes such as shared history invited the uncertain partners to consider the relationship apart from and beyond the pain of the infidelity experiences. When one partner engaged in reflecting on and appraising what was valued, the other partner was invited to hope, act

patiently, and continue to point out aspects of the relationship that might have been otherwise eclipsed by the infidelity experience. When decision-making was a mutual process or followed a period of separation, either partner could and did occupy both positions of this TIP. In the couple with the non-exclusive partner who was unsure about sustaining the relationship, it was the exclusive partner who was certain she wanted to continue in the relationship who initiated the TIP and occupied the position of holding hope and drawing her partner's attention to what was valued about the relationship.

Here is an example of what reflecting on the relationship and holding hope looked like for Robin and Cal. Robin stated, "It's his decision and I have to deal with whatever he decides. I just only hoped that we had enough there that he would want to work through this all and continue on." Cal recalled reflecting on their long marriage and all that they had gone through together that included the loss of a child. Cal said Robin's understanding that he needed and deserved time to think about what he wanted to do plus her unwavering commitment to staying together made it possible for him to overcome his first impulse to end the relationship. He said, "I was looking for reasons not to end it." And reflecting on the marriage created an opening for him to reconsider leaving the relationship: "that's what started some of that to seep in. It opened it up." Robin gently reminded him of their life together, and when Cal reflected on their relationship, she fully attended to this and amplified what was valued between them: "Us talking about what we had in the past [and] . . . I had to wait for him" (Robin).

In the early aftermath of the disclosure, without Robin's knowledge, Cal initiated divorce proceedings but decided to wait after meeting with his lawyer, who said,

that in his experience there are more than a number of cases of divorces that he had handled that 2 years later, the couples wished they had waited longer to get the divorce. So that caused me to think, okay, wait a second here. I know deep down, I would still be with her if this hadn't happened, and now that it's happened, is there any way to retrieve anything. So that made me pause (Cal).

Again, Cal's pausing and reflecting coupled with Robin's actions to show what was valued in the relationship helped them sustain their relationship.

The partners reflected on and appraised a number of factors as they decided whether or not to continue in their relationships, including appreciating the investments and achievements that were a part of their relationships. These involved length of time having been a couple, finances, children, getting through tough times together such as death of close family members, and shared businesses. The couples also mentioned love and commitment, valuing partner and relational possibilities, beliefs about responding to difficulties in relationships, and risks and alternatives such as availability of alternate suitable/desirable relationship prospects as other considerations in their decision-making.

The specifics of what the partners reflected on and appraised are the following.

Appreciating what was invested and achieved in the relationship. Gloria thought about separating from her husband, Ian, and said, "I stayed because I wanted to work it out. Because I figured it was too much time invested in the relationship and the marriage to just move on." Ian said, "I scrambled and it was urgent. I convinced her to work it out." Trey said of his 10-year relationship with Yasmin,

Well, we have a lot invested here [laughter]. So you have to weigh it out. . . . all our stuff was combined, finances, everything was all jelled together. Your anger

wants it [separating] to be an option. And it's like, nah, you can work this out.

This is just part of life. You can work this out. Let's cool off and fix this (Trey).

Trey seemed to value what was invested and achieved, while he understood the importance of taking time to respond, and believed that significant difficulties happen in relationships and can be worked out.

Love and commitment. Love and commitment to each other and the relationship were also important parts of reflecting on and appraising what was valued for many of these couples: “And the emotional connections . . . you're just deeply invested in who they are as a person. You care about them, how they're feeling, how they're feeling affects how you're feeling” (Ben). “I'd known him since I was just a kid basically. I didn't want to be without Matt, honestly. He's a major part of my life. I love him” (Sara). “I just honestly think we're just in a unique situation, like we love each other, we've always respected each other, so we can't help but work through this together” (Adam).

I'm one of them guys, if we team up, I'm on the team. I'm your co-pilot [chuckle].

I expect you to stay in the pilot seat, just like I'm going to stay in the co-pilot seat.

Whether it's my mission or your mission, I'm going to go on with it all the way, until we succeed and so that's the kind of guy I am (Trey).

Valuing partner and relational possibilities. How partners viewed each other was important as they struggled with whether or not to stay in their relationships. Adam talked about his wife being his soul mate and how much this contributed to his decision to work through the infidelity: “[B]ecause of who she is, and how much I've known her. She wanted the exact same things I wanted out of life, kids, family, career, and ideas for a future. We're just a perfect match. ‘Because she is everything’” (Adam). For Adam and

other exclusive partners, appraising and appreciating the partners as more than their infidelity behaviors seemed to cultivate hope and a sense that they could recover from the infidelities.

For two non-exclusive partners, appraising their partners also included thinking about whether or not their partners could recover from the infidelity experiences. For example, Ben stated, "A lot of people can't live with the fact that their partners have been unfaithful." And Duane expressed a similar sentiment: "She's pretty strong . . . She doesn't come off vengeful. Like she's going to get me back or anything like that." While appraising their partners, some non-exclusive partners considered that other couples have survived infidelity and that for some couples, their circumstances were worse:

I guess it's not like, oh my god, no one ever did this. I have friends whose husbands done that and so it's not like it's the first person. Everyone is different. Some people can handle it; some people can't. Listen, look at Clinton. She's still with Bill. Hello, it's all over the world. Mine was not all over the world (Carol). Appraising the primary partner also included comparing her with the infidelity partner for Tyrese, and this comparing helped Tyrese (re) appreciate his primary partner:

I was helping her along, 'because she got a couple of kids . . . She started looking at me like I was her daddy and so [chuckle] that kind of shocked me back to my senses. 'Because with [Sonja], she's independent, and she's a go-getter and she don't make excuses. And so with [infidelity partner], it was just the opposite. She's not a go- getter, and she was full of excuses, so that's what deterred me away from her. Right, those things you don't look at because we've been together

for so long. You tend to think everybody is like that. But then once you actually interact with others, and then you see that nobody else is like that (Tyrese).

In addition to appreciating what was achieved so far in the relationships and whom their partners are perceived to be, partners also thought about possibilities for their future together:

Because at the beginning of the day, all of that good still outweighs that little bad business decision of infidelity. It really does. Appreciation comes into play too on this, of looking at one another, your kids, what you've built together, the wonderful things that are up the road. It's like, do I want to let it go for that? No. No. Because what you did is nothing compared to the greater thing that is about to happen . . . we're going to move on (Trey).

Beliefs about responding to difficulties in relationships. Another factor influencing participants in decision-making about choosing their relationships was their beliefs about how to respond to difficulties in relationships. Some participants valued working on issues together and believed that difficult issues are resolvable:

People go through real things, so you have to be really strong to be one of those couples and get through. Because nobody's perfect, and you're going to always have to compromise and adapt to anybody you meet. So you got to take the bad with the good (Michonne).

Making reference to the culturally dominant idea that relationships should be easy if you are in love, Ben explained his belief about responding to difficulties:

[I]n a long lasting relationship it isn't just the things that you hear, the things that you see on TV. It takes a lot of work, and it takes a lot of effort. I guess that's the

way that we deal with things. We don't hide from them; we take them head on (Ben).

Risks and alternatives. For some partners, their decisions to stay in the relationships were influenced by their perceptions of a lack of attractive alternative partners and the risks associated with new partners such as sexually transmitted infections. “There's nothing out there that much that's so great. There are a lot of people on singles, but who knows what their stories are. So I figured, I'll keep him” (Carol). “It's hard to, at this stage, start over. What you think you're going to find” (Anja). “Maybe I need to be with the person who I basically haven't had any sexually transmitted diseases from” (Tyrese).

The above variables show the range of what was reflected on and appraised as part of the process of couples deciding about maintaining their primary relationships. And all that was appraised was evaluated against the significance of the infidelity:

What would my life be without her? I mean, the delight of her being the mother of [daughter], and what a good mother, in her own way, she is. The way that she was at work. I respected that. It still came down to the eventual acknowledgement that she could either make or break my day. And that had gone on for a long time, and still did. So you had to start thinking of memories of little things that she did or we did. The good things. And there [were] so many more of those. I think I had to come to the realization that I loved her enough, that I was looking for reasons not to end it. Based upon all that we had that was good even ended up outweighing this (Cal).

Hearing and responding to societal messages about infidelity. Many of the couples in this study talked about sociocultural and or familial messages they had heard regarding infidelity. The overall message seemed to be that infidelity leads to negative social and relational repercussions for those involved. A dominant perception about people who engage in infidelity was that there is something wrong with them, and a dominant assumption about relationships after infidelity was that most relationships do not continue. In order to sustain their relationships after the infidelity experiences, many of the participants had to disregard these messages and privilege their own values and preferences.

The TIP that related to hearing and responding to societal messages about infidelity could be constructed as identifying invitations into enactments of social discourses about infidelity and declining to participate coupled with identifying and honoring one's own principles and acting in line with them (see Figure 4.8).

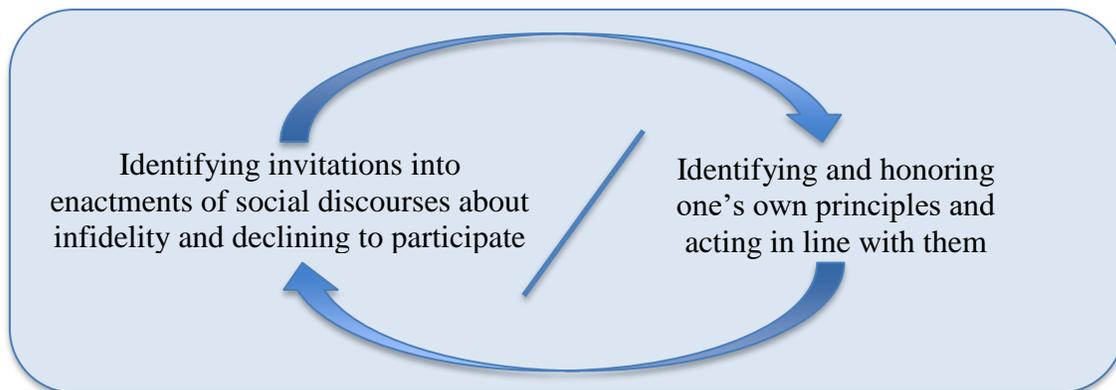


Figure 4.8. TIP related to hearing and responding to infidelity discourses.

Prior to their experiences of infidelity, staying together after infidelity was not what most partners assumed would be their course of action, and seemed more possible when the partners could link wanting to stay together with other strongly held values or principles such as making their own decisions. In this TIP, both partners occupied each

position, and this TIP helped guide the couple in moving forward, often in the absence of social support or role models. When partners could identify the dominant discourses about infidelity and decline to participate in practices that sustain these discourses, they invited their partners to alternately identify, value, and act in line with their own principles. Acting in line with one's own principles leads to confidence and a stronger sense of personal agency, which further invites and reinforces identifying and declining invitations into enactments of the dominant discourses. This TIP helped couples open space for the option of staying together and for valuing this choice. The particular discourses circulating in our culture about infidelity that couples were aware of related to judgment, an expectation that the exclusive partner would leave the primary relationship, and double standards.

Judgment. Many of the participants did not share their infidelity experiences with others or shared in limited ways, and their not talking about the infidelity experiences seemed linked to fear of judgment: "I think people are judgey for sure. And everyone knows people who have done it, but no one wants to talk about it for some reason. Maybe it wouldn't happen as much if people talked about it" (Liz). Both exclusive partners and non-exclusive partners assumed that others would negatively judge them, regardless of whether they were the partner who participated in infidelity or the partner of someone who participated in infidelity. Non-exclusive partners said, "No, it was kind of like an embarrassing situation. I mean, I'm not going to tell my brother or sister about that. They'll think I'm a pervert" (Rick). "I, personally, didn't tell my family because I didn't want to have them see me any differently" (Matt). "Society . . . [says] you're such a bad person. You shouldn't have done that. So I keep beating myself up"

(Yasmin). Exclusive partners said, “It's a little embarrassing for me. It makes me feel like I was the reason why it happened. Something I did. I didn't want anybody else to know about it” (Glen). “And the real reason is 'because I was just too embarrassed to. I didn't want someone to know that I couldn't control my wife. What society looks at is a very important mandate for marriage” (Cal). Anticipating negative responses and not positive support if others knew, Tim said, “Yeah, I think, you know, had more people known, it would've been more of a distraction, might have gotten in our way a little bit at times.”

These participant couples said that they kept their infidelity experiences largely private, in part, due to fear of judgment and fear of negative consequences in terms of their relationships with others. Sometimes keeping the infidelity private meant not disclosing to anyone, and sometimes it meant selectively disclosing to a close friend or healthcare professional. Fearing judgment and feeling shame in response to judgment might have negatively influenced these participants' views of themselves and their partners, which might have made managing the infidelity experiences even more difficult. Infidelity already ruptures the couple's sense of connection, and judgment and shame tend to intensify disconnection. It seems that protecting their relationships from judgment may have contributed to their moving forward together and to maintaining their connection.

Leave. A number of the couples talked about their perceptions that relationships do not or should not continue after infidelity. Referring to a lack of options for couples to consider as they respond to infidelity, Cal said, “I think it is because there are a number of people who will slam the door on it when it happens. There's no recourse.” And since the only presumed option available to couples was to leave the relationships, the advice

most anticipated receiving from others in response to knowing of the infidelity was to leave/end the relationships. "Leave him alone, leave him alone. That was the most obvious reaction but I kind of didn't want to. It's kind of up to me" (Michonne).

I know my mom would've never understood why I stayed because my father had cheated on her a lot. And she stayed for a while, but that was because she had me. I was a little girl. So she always drilled it in my head not to stay with someone who does that sort of thing. So she would have judged heavily, both of us. I just, I didn't want all of that, at that time, and I wanted to just focus on us getting better. I didn't want to have to deal with other people at the same time, trying to work on their emotions, when I was working on my emotions (Sara).

Participants in this study talked about the cultural prescription that men should respond to women's infidelity by leaving the relationship. Cal talked about what it took for him to reject this prescription and said,

I realized this was my decision, and not everybody else's. And it isn't talking about skill. It's talking about your guts, your fortitude, you won't quit. That's why the decision had to be on my part, not the way society looks at it (Cal).

Some participants said they understood that deciding to stay together meant not expecting any social support if something else happens in the relationship "because when you go against people's advice, they tend not to want to listen sometimes if things go bad. I have to deal with the consequences if things go worse 'because I wouldn't have the support" (Michonne).

While the dominant discourse creates a version of infidelity that ends or should end many primary relationships, the experiences of the participants in this study

challenge this single story and drew on more marginalized yet available discourses. Contrary to what she previously thought, Liz now believes, “it probably has happened to a lot of people that stayed together but no one knows about it. No one wants to talk about it” (Liz). Her comments invite a consideration about how the dominant discourse that relationships do not continue after infidelity might not be accurate and how significant this discourse might be for couples making decisions about their relationships after infidelity.

Double standards. Some of the cultural messages that couples mentioned regarding infidelity were related to standards that differed based on gender and social status. One belief was that in heterosexual relationships, infidelity is harder to get over for men than for women. Cal said,

And not only do we not think like you do; we don't respond emotionally the same way that you guys might. And that's just the nature of the gender. It's [an] attack on their manhood. It's [an] attack on so many aspects of being a male, not even the husband, but being male. Now I know we're not supposed to speak in terms of property or anything else, but this is your woman. And this is who you take care of. This is who you show respect to. No one's allowed to offend them; no one's allowed to harm them. And I don't care how civilized, you think, our culture is.

Deep down that's still the way it is. It's really hard for a guy (Cal).

Yasmin seemed to suggest that Trey's willingness to sustain their relationship after her infidelity was unusual or exceptional because of the belief that it is less common and therefore somehow worse if it was the woman who participated in the infidelity:

“Because it is usually the guy that'll be the one that cheats. But it is the other way around.

And I'm so fortunate that he's still here with me. I still feel that men cheat more than women" (Yasmin).

Another double standard mentioned by several couples was how and to what extent infidelity is portrayed in popular culture versus how it is perceived or how much it is revealed in "real" life. These couples noticed numerous references to infidelity in movies, TV, and the world of sports, and couples contrasted this with how little infidelity is talked about among non-famous people in day-to-day life: "I don't know. I guess it's a society thing. People just don't sit down and talk about, oh by the way, guess what happened to us" (Liz). "Yeah, it's all over the place like in TV and movies. It's everyone's source of entertainment. It's so odd because we know so many people that have had experiences, but we don't know much about it" (Adam). "You don't realize how much there is of that in society and popular music and everything until you really start listening" (Nancy). Liz observed that infidelity appears to be accepted and perhaps even glorified for famous people, but for non-famous people, it is more likely judged negatively:

In Hollywood or the news, people move on all the time. It's like oh those two are splitting up . . . oh now they're with someone else, now they're splitting up. It's not status quo what I'm thinking of. It's just like it's okay, accepted. But if it's regular people, it's not really accepted at all, and people frown upon you (Liz). For these couples, the discourses related to infidelity that they were aware of in popular culture did not offer them support or hope for sustaining their relationships.

Rather, it seemed that the dominant messages within popular culture directed individuals towards breaking up instead of staying together, and if they did stay together,

to feel shame about this. The couples in this study were able to counter the dominant story of infidelity leading to breaking up by enacting what they valued such as making their own decisions about their relationships and acting in line with these decisions.

Making Sense of the Infidelity Experience

At least one of the partners in all of the couples and both partners in most of the couples talked about their need to make sense of the infidelity experience. Sense making appeared to help move the couples from feeling disconnected from each other toward being able to invest in each other again. For many of the couples, sense making was incomplete at the time of the interviews, but they were still able to move beyond the infidelity experiences strongly influencing their relationships when “enough” sense making happened for them. I have the impression that what was most important in getting to “enough” sense making was the feeling that the partners were doing it together. It seems that despite often unsatisfying or incomplete understanding of why the infidelities happened, the couples who “puzzled” together over why it happened—and extended the puzzling to include what the partners believed about infidelity, what it might mean for who they are as a couple having “survived” infidelity, or their couple identity and what might be learned from this experience—were able to move on and focus on more than understanding or making sense of the infidelity experience.

The general HIP related to making sense of the infidelity experience could be understood as reflecting on and inquiring about the infidelity experience coupled with respecting one’s partner’s needs for information and constructing meaning, and providing information about the infidelity (see Figure 4.9).

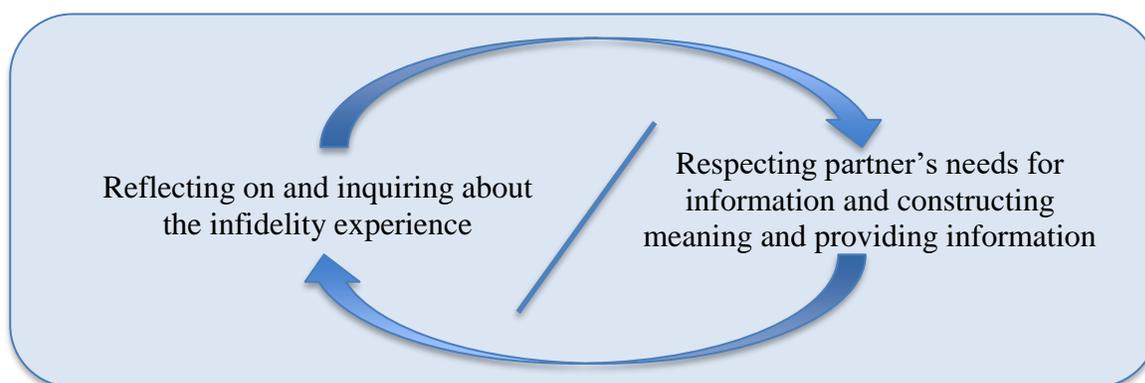


Figure 4.9. HIP about sense making.

In this HIP, the exclusive partner typically occupied the inquiring position, and the non-exclusive partner typically occupied the position of respecting one's partner's needs for information and constructing meaning and providing information. Inquiring sometimes took the shape of the exclusive partner's questions about specific details and sometimes inquiring included both partners expressing wonder and sharing a perspective. Respecting a partner's need for information sometimes included the non-exclusive partner's answering particular questions and spontaneously disclosing information, and sometimes looked like listening and validating the other's perspective. As one partner engaged in questioning and the other partner engaged in respecting the need for information and for providing information, more could be known or considered that contributed to more sense making.

The participants differed in their needs for precise information or details. What was significant was the overall healing pattern that developed over time related to the exclusive partner's inquiring joined with the non-exclusive partner's respecting and disclosing/providing information. Responding to one's partner's inquiries with willingness to think about and explain communicated interest and care for the other's

needs. In general, inquiring and disclosing were important for coming to terms with what the infidelity was, what it meant, and how the partner might be viewed. I see this as a healing pattern in that it was a preferred way of engaging in communication about what mattered and has the significant potential to contribute to relational health.

Reasons for participating in the infidelity. Most of the non-exclusive partners made repeated attempts to understand and explain their decisions and actions that lead to the infidelities. The particular reasons and circumstances that lead to the non-exclusive partners participating in infidelity in this study included midlife crisis/age, feelings of missing out, opportunity, mental illness, lack of social support, wanting to feel special and important, relationship dissatisfaction, experimenting with a different persona, and stress. Again, none of the non-exclusive partners identified their motivation for the infidelity behavior as a way of leaving the primary relationship. However, for two of the couples, considering which relationship the non-exclusive partner wished to sustain was an unintended outcome of the infidelity experience that complicated the infidelity experience and intensified the harm felt by the exclusive partner.

The TIP that was linked to understanding the particular reasons for participating in the infidelity behavior as part of sense making might be identified as asking about reasons for the infidelity coupled with disclosing reasons for the infidelity (see Figure 4.10).

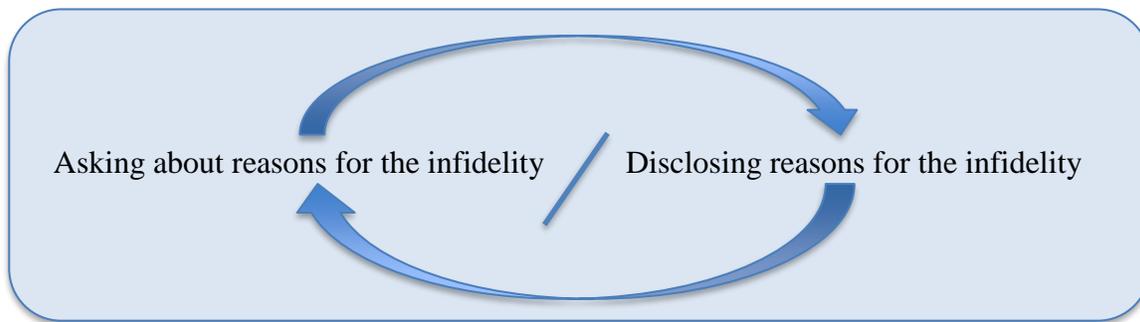


Figure 4.10. TIP associated with understanding reasons for infidelity.

This TIP was interesting to me in terms of who occupied which position in the TIP. Seeking to understand why the infidelity behavior occurred was not only important to the exclusive partner but also of real importance to some of the non-exclusive partners, as well. When the non-exclusive partner was asked about the behavior, his/her disclosing invited more asking, and asking resulted in more disclosing. This pattern contributed to making sense of the infidelity behavior as more could be known about it, and when more is known, uncertainty and doubt decrease. Another aspect of this TIP that I found interesting is that even after the pattern of seeking and being given reasons was repeatedly enacted, the reasons sometimes felt incomplete and unsatisfying. However, moving on was still possible, and it appears that the mutual willingness to engage in this TIP in addition to other relational initiatives supported moving forward together even when sense making was incomplete.

Age, midlife crisis, stress, feelings of missing out. Rick's experience speaks to the impact of age combined with work stress and his feeling of missing out:

After being with the same woman for so long (30 years), I met this girl at the health club, and we kind of started talking to each other, and she told me she was divorced, and we had a chemistry between us, and so we decided to get together. And I had a boss that he was always on my back, so that caused a lot of stress.

Because I knew if they canned me at my age, I'd have a hard time finding another job. See when we got married, I didn't have that much experience with other women. So, I kind of felt in the back of my mind that I was kind of missing something, but I wasn't (Rick).

Opportunity/impulsivity/mental illness. Matt's one-time infidelity behavior occurred when he was experiencing a manic episode and misusing alcohol and drugs, and the infidelity experience appears to have precipitated his seeking mental health services. Several partners whose infidelity behavior was a one-time event explained their actions as opportunistic and not planned. For Ben, he attributed his infidelity behavior to opportunity: "it wasn't even anything that was something planned. Take a couple of drinks, and then, it's like, that's my place."

Lack of social support. Maggie had a four-year relationship with Ron, and he continued to pursue an ongoing relationship with her. Though Maggie had ended the relationship with Ron and was involved with Glen, there were times when she and Glen were apart, and she felt alone, which she appears to link to her infidelity behavior: "Glen would go to jail. I didn't have anybody. Ron helped me out. My family's in [another city]. And so, I don't know, it's support, I guess on my part. His intentions were different" (Maggie).

Feeling special and important. Frank was involved with a beautiful woman half his age whom he believes "care[d] about me," and it was important to him that he did things for her and gave her gifts that impressed her: "Where I'm from originally, you want to always impress people, and do things for people, and make them think like you're not the average Joe Schmoe" (Frank).

Relationship dissatisfaction and stress. Robin articulated the impact of problems in the relationship coupled with stress as precipitating her infidelity:

Then I also felt that he was treating me more as an employee than a wife. Telling me always what to do; nothing was ever good enough for him. I just got to the point where I thought I don't care anymore. I wasn't looking for an affair. It was very brief, but it was when I probably was the most stressed that I've ever been in my whole life, the most angry at him that I've ever been in my whole life. And yes, there was a guy that looked at me and thought I looked beautiful. And I would say to him, I'd put something on, and I just never got a nice comment from him. I'd been working out, and just never got a nice comment from him (Robin).

Experimenting with a different persona. Yasmin and Trey link her motivation to have an affair to the 12-year difference in their ages and experiences in relationships:

I was living a total different life, okay? I didn't look like this. I would put on a wig. I would go out as a different person. I was living out a different life that I thought that I wanted. It was just not me. I even came up with a nickname just to protect my identity. Because I was totally fulfilling a void and a fantasy of what it is I wanted, which was very selfish. And I said to myself, I was like, girl, men do it all the time. You've been good. I almost told myself that I deserved it in certain ways. I was like, you know what, nobody's going to know. This is your secret. You guys are in the process of being married because at the time, we were engaged. I said to myself, people do it all the time before they get actually married. So whatever you need to get out, you need to just get it out (Yasmin).

Adam made many attempts to understand Liz's infidelity behavior including asking his wife to explain her reasons, seeking therapy, reading self-help books, and reading online forums related to infidelity. He compared his personal history with his wife's history and speculated that their different life experiences may have contributed to her infidelity behavior: "Accepting that [Liz] had different life experiences than I did and I think that's helped me because I wasn't the greatest guy when I was younger. So, I've made a lot of mistakes in my day" (Adam). Liz and Adam wondered if Liz's infidelity was related to her habit of always being good: "I was always good" (Liz). "You were" (Adam). "He made some bad choices in the day, I guess. I never did" (Liz). In their attempt to make sense of Liz's behavior, they suggest that the infidelity was a temporary reprieve/lapse from her being "good."

In addition to exploring possible reasons for the infidelity, it was also important for some of the partners to reject some commonly held explanations: "Some have affairs because their marriages are terrible, and they love somebody else and stuff and that didn't happen with us" (Adam).

Non-exclusive partners differed in how much they spontaneously offered information about the reasons for their infidelity decisions and also in the level of detail that was initially shared when asked by their partners. Sometimes, exclusive partners had to ask repeatedly for information: "Sometimes I had to come back at a couple of different angles till it was completely done" (Nancy). And the degree of fit or adequacy of understanding preferred or needed for the exclusive partners differed. A TIP was developed when the non-exclusive partner respected his/her partner's need for

information and respected the partner's right to determine what level of detail she/he preferred and provided both to explain and to provide the requested information.

Beliefs about infidelity. Couples' meaning making about the infidelity experiences was also influenced by personal beliefs about agreements in relationships related to exclusivity, secrecy, and openness, and what it means to break these agreements.

The TIP that was linked to beliefs about infidelity could be constructed as identifying and examining one's own beliefs about infidelity coupled with being curious about and acknowledging the other's beliefs about infidelity (see Figure 4.11).

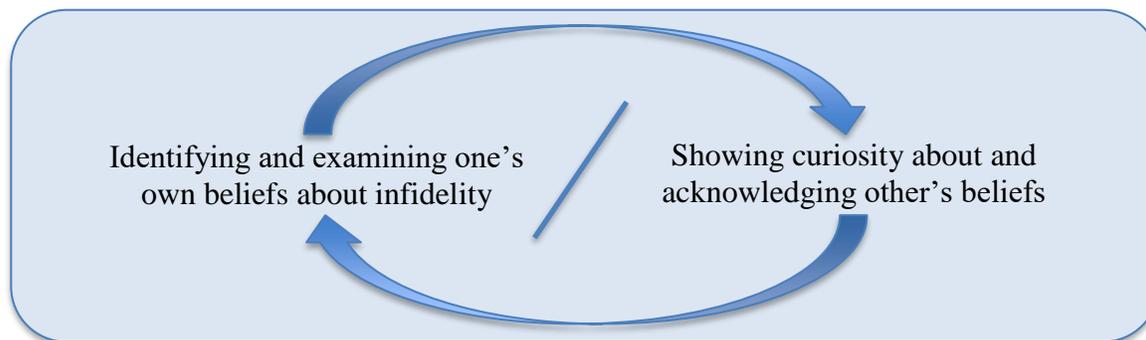


Figure 4.11. TIP regarding understanding each other's beliefs about infidelity.

Identifying and examining one's own beliefs about infidelity involved thinking about what one believes about infidelity, clarifying what it might mean to stay in a relationship after infidelity, and expressing this to the partner. Acknowledging took the shape of listening, honoring, and expressing understanding of the way one's beliefs influenced the infidelity experience.

This TIP was also somewhat short-lived, and it was the exclusive partner who mostly occupied the position of identifying and examining his/her beliefs about infidelity. This was important for exclusive partners as part of their understanding what the infidelity experience meant for them, and also so they could communicate this meaning

to their partners. When the partners (most often the non-exclusive partners) could understand and acknowledge their partners' beliefs about infidelity, and what they might have to overcome or reconcile to stay in the relationships, the exclusive partners felt validated and understood. When partners felt that their beliefs were acknowledged, they seemed to be able to consider what *else* infidelity might mean for the relationships. The non-exclusive partners invited examining and opening up space for considering other ways to make sense of the infidelity—not by challenging the partners' beliefs, but by acknowledging and honoring them. Caring about and honoring someone else's beliefs invites empathy, and couples' expressions of empathy were very important in sustaining these relationships at many different points in their moving forward together. It seems to have been empowering for both partners to experience empathy related to what the infidelity experience meant, and feeling empowered may have led to their increased receptivity to consider other possibilities of what it could or might mean for them.

In the segment that follows, Ben did not challenge, minimize, or criticize Tara's beliefs about infidelity but rather validated and acknowledged these beliefs:

I don't know. It's a knock to everything on a female level. It's like what does she have that I don't have? So it's definitely, just as it would be for men, an ego hit. It's the same thing for a woman. Like, I can't satisfy my man enough, whether it be emotional, physical, whatever it is, you can't satisfy him. And now he's had to go elsewhere. So it's almost like, well, what do you want from me now? What else can I do? What else are you going to go through in a relationship that could be as bad? Anything that knocks you ego-wise, it tends to be the hardest thing (Tara).

Ben understood that for Tara, the issue was significant because his infidelity behavior was counter to what they had explicitly agreed to: “A little background to this story . . . is that we initially had started off in a[n] open relationship, and then it turned into, recently becoming exclusive. It was more or less coming from one point in our relationship to another” (Ben).

Honesty and openness, as well as talking and deciding together, were important for this couple, and Ben’s infidelity behavior directly violated this:

More so, the secrecy because we've always been very open with each other, and very much able to talk to each other. So it was, if he was feeling a sense that he had to venture outside, it would have been nice for him to say, hey, this is kind of what's going on in my head. Maybe help talk me out of it, or talk with me. But it was more so that he just went and did something, [as] opposed to talking with me like we always did (Tara).

Even though Tara believed infidelity was the worst that could happen in a relationship, this couple views their relationship positively. Ben expressed empathy for Tara and promised to act differently in the future:

Once it happened, it cements the fact that, okay, this is a very painful experience. You understand what the person goes through; you put yourself in their shoes, and you try very hard not to repeat the same mistakes that you did in the past (Ben).

Like Tara, Cal thought infidelity was the worst thing that could happen in a relationship:

Basically that we could feel there's nothing worse for a guy than his wife to be screwing around on him. Nothing worse. And I still believe a good portion of that. But what is worse is the collateral damage that is done, everything that is lost. There's where I think you got to do the balancing. If you let your ego rule, you're not going to look at it in a balanced way, 'because you're always going to feel wronged (Cal).

To keep his relationship intact, Cal had to struggle against (male) “ego” that was urging him to leave his marriage, and make sense of not only why he chose to sustain his relationship, but also how he might challenge a strongly held belief, and what he wanted to define him and his relationship. Considering what he valued in the relationship that would be lost if his marriage ended helped him look beyond this strongly held assumption that a man should not stay with a woman who cheats, and this was connected to his belief about the significance of infidelity in a relationship. So even when personal beliefs about infidelity being the worst thing that could happen in a relationship are present, people can sustain their relationships. This seems to have been made possible by exploring and holding multiple beliefs and values about what else is important in the relationships.

And for some partners, infidelity was considered serious, but not the worst thing to happen. Carol compared her husband’s infidelity behavior to other things he might have done: “he didn't kill somebody. It's not the worst thing in the world. Seriously.” When Carol cited this extreme example, she opened space to consider that there were other betrayals or hurts that might be viewed as serious or even “worse” by couples. Comparing and contrasting other “wrongs” also seemed to contribute to how and to what

extent the infidelity might define the relationship. Trey viewed Yasmin's infidelity as a significant but recoverable mistake: "You can just look at it as it was a bad business decision. Okay, how do we reel that deal in, that loss in, and recover from it and get profitable and go forward?" Though most of the couples in this study held views about infidelity that were consistent with the dominant discourse of it being the ultimate betrayal in a relationship, they were still able to move past the infidelity together.

Evolving couple identity. This sub-theme has similarities to the sub-theme of feeling closer, more connected, and stronger as a couple that is discussed in the final theme of valuing and expanding relational growth. The difference in how these sub-themes are understood is that evolving couple identity is a part of the process of sense making, and the sub-theme feeling closer, more connected, and stronger speaks to growth and change in the relationship.

Evolving couple identity refers to the shift in focus from constructing a thin story of the relationship based on "what happened and why" to including multiple stories that include "who we are as a couple and what we want to define us." Asking about what happened and why is essential in making sense of the infidelity experience, and it also maintains the focus on the past and on the distress. Evolving couple identity includes attempts by the couple to reconstruct their couple identity or relationship narrative beyond only the infidelity experience. When couples can make sense of their relationship identity as based on more than just the infidelity story, they are more likely to move together and hold a positive view of the relationships.

The HIP that corresponded with evolving couple identity could be conceptualized as refocusing on couple identity, inviting decreased focus on infidelity coupled with

expressing readiness to move forward as a couple, beginning to view infidelity as part of past history (see Figure 4.12).

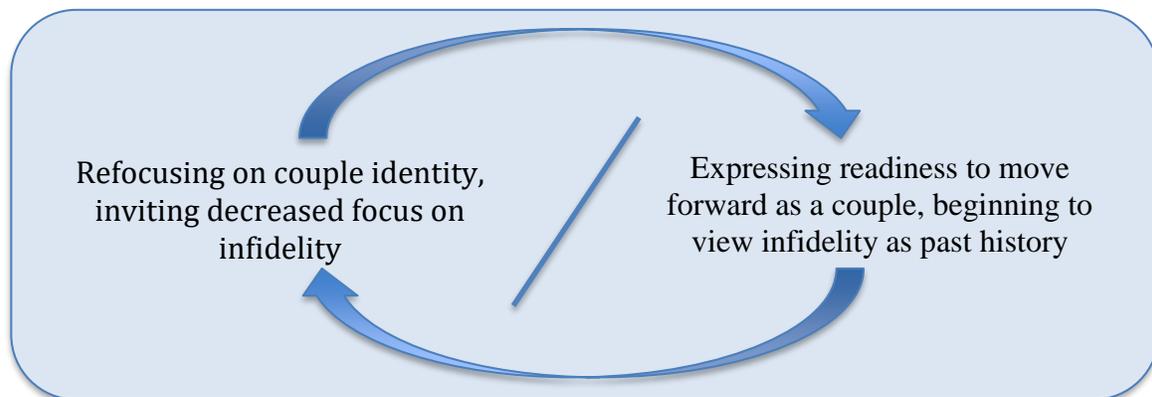


Figure 4.12 HIP for re-focusing on couple identify.

Either partner occupied both positions of this HIP. Refocusing seemed to involve changing what was attended to or thought about, not in ways that minimized the infidelity experience but that added to the relational story. This involved thinking about what was wanted and preferred in addition to what had happened and understanding why.

Expressing readiness to move forward and beginning to view infidelity as part of past history involved acceptance and a decision to move on. Accepting that the infidelity happened made it possible to decide to shift focus to lessen the effects of the infidelity. The effects of infidelity were lessened, in part, by the couples' attention to other positive aspects of their relationships including their recognizing and valuing staying together as relational achievements and appreciating their partners' resilience. It was important for non-exclusive partners not to move on too quickly, and it was important for exclusive partners to be open to moving on.

Adam's need to understand and explore the reasons for the infidelity conflicted, at times, with Liz's need to move on:

I mean I don't want that to sound bad because I have gone to [Liz] for a lot of questions . . . It's kind of me catching up, like she went through something for 8 months. Well it took a while for me to kind of catch up to where she's at. Because I know for you, (talking to Liz) I can tell you just released that. Thank God this is over. I know that I asked you that question. If you were happy this whole thing was over, and you said yes, and I looked at you, and I knew you meant that. I couldn't understand at the time but for [Liz] was like, okay, done (Adam).

Liz discerned that she and Adam were in different places understanding what the infidelity meant: "Now I'm like ready to move on, but he's still catching up." Referring to not fully understanding and shifting focus toward the future, Adam said, "It's very difficult. But I'm accepting that. To move on is great, and I want that as much as she does." Shifting focus back on the couple and their future was possible for Adam, even though for him, sense making was incomplete.

Sonja talked about accepting that the infidelity happened and at some point deciding it was going to be in the past: "Like I said, I really don't understand it, but it happened, it happened. That's another thing. You can't keep dwelling on something that's in the past because it's really in the past." Her partner's efforts at compensation and reconciliation helped her make the decision to shift focus to their future by his "saying nice, sweet things. Things to make me come back and stuff. Making me feel bad, we [were] sad together on the phone [laughter]."

Discussing how they made sense of their infidelity experiences, many of these couples remarked about how they regarded their partners and about how they viewed whom they are as a couple. Valuing each other and the relationship seemed to build the

relational story, so it became more significant than the infidelity experience. In these couples' narratives, infidelity was not the central theme of the relational story.

While trying to understand what had happened and why, Nancy struggled to incorporate the infidelity experience into her and Tim's marriage:

I kind of thought of the whole thing as happening on a different plane, like it wasn't my real life. It was some other. I don't even know how to explain it, incredulous that it happened to me and to us because that wasn't Tim right? Tim thinks of himself too as a family man and you know, moral and integrity. You know, it's just kind of a slip up. Tim would say stuff like, you know, it was selfish. You know, like I'm sorry. I was selfish. It was a selfish act (Nancy).

Nancy decided that her view of Tim would not be based on the infidelity experience but rather on his behavior throughout their long marriage:

I'd say through the years Tim's done millions of things right and only a couple things wrong. That's one way to think about it. And you can either focus on the couple things wrong or the millions of things right (Nancy).

In the interview, Nancy talked about all that she and Tim had been through together including raising children, burying parents, and coping with job changes. The infidelity was not going to be how she made sense of her long marriage to her "best friend."

It seemed that when the non-exclusive partners viewed their partners as strong and resilient, which was, in part, linked to the exclusive partners' receptivity to moving beyond the infidelity experiences, but not too quickly, and this was made known to and appreciated by the exclusive partners, this contributed to nurturing an overall more

positive identification with their relationships, which further de-centered the infidelity experiences.

Several couples talked with pride about being able to stay together after the infidelity and described themselves as special and unique couples: “We've been through a lot in our time together. And it comes to looking at this as another hit. And neither of us really backed away from it” (Cal). “We aren't like other couples” (Robin). “I think there's a special uniqueness and closeness that other people will never know” (Cal). “I would say that a lot of people probably couldn't get through things that we went through. No matter what happens, most people can't get through or they wouldn't be able to handle it” (Frank). “I think we're strong” (Liz). Referring to staying together after the infidelity, Cal viewed it as “an achievement for both of us because we did it.”

Learning lessons. As they made sense of their infidelity experiences, many of the couples looked for lessons to take forward. The partners seemed to want their experiences to matter or have a positive impact in some way. This did not override the very intense pain that was felt but rather extended the experiences to include some positive outcomes in addition to the anguish and suffering.

The TIP linked to learning from the infidelity experience could be constructed as reflecting on and identifying what could be learned coupled with appreciating and performing what was learned (see Figure 4.13).

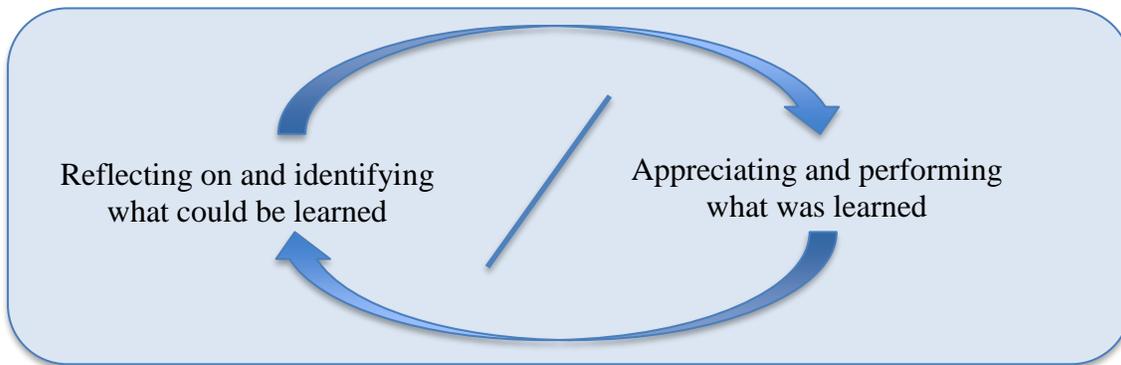


Figure 4.13 TIP involving learning lessons.

This TIP was a part of sense making that appeared to help the couple transform distress into healing. Reflecting on what they could learn from these experiences honored the pain and facilitated something good coming from the pain. When the lessons were appreciated and the subsequent learning performed, the couples' reflecting and identifying lessons to further enact in the relationships were reinforced, which invited further appreciating and performing of the lessons. Both partners occupied each position of the TIP.

One of the lessons was about not taking each other for granted and appreciating what was at stake: "Sometimes something like that has to happen for you to see the value in one another, in each other" (Trey). "You do forget some of the special things about your relationship, and you do take them for granted, and sometimes it takes some sort of a jolt to make you aware of it again" (Robin). "There's a lot to lose, right. So maybe like if it didn't go ahead, that would be hugely devastating, and so then maybe you work a little bit harder" (Nancy).

Making increased efforts toward the relationship was a similar lesson learned.

But, see at the same time as you're going through that ride, you are building strength in areas that you didn't know you was weak in, in the relationship. And so

that's just life pointing it out to you. You need to strengthen over there. You need to pay more attention to her. You need to pay more attention to him. I might have not liked the method or the way it did come, but it showed me it was something, or areas that I had to address (Trey).

Tim vowed to continue to put effort into his marriage: "I mean the good thing about this bad thing was that it really made us look at our relationship again."

Sense making facilitated couples' regaining some measure of control in their lives and appeared important for their reinvesting and recommitting to the relationships. It appeared to be a response to the uncertainty that the infidelity raised and involved exploring "why?" "what's the point?" and "what is important and valued"? The infidelity resulted in doubt about their relationships, their partners, and themselves. Perhaps sense making might continue to develop for some of these couples, but in the meantime, there seemed to be attempts made to accept that while some level of uncertainty remained, shifting focus toward other parts of the relationships was possible and beneficial for the couples.

Prioritizing and Building a Preferred Relationship

For the participants in this inquiry, the infidelity experiences involved significant harm and suffering and resulted in disruption in some of the couples' wellness interpersonal patterns such as extending trust to a partner coupled with behaving in trustworthy ways. As part of moving forward together, the couples talked about how necessary it was that initiatives aimed at healing the hurt and pain were taken up and that the partners put the primary relationship first. This meant both engaging in acts of repairing or healing what was injured or harmed (i.e., sense of self-worth and trust) and

also making some parts of the relationship even better. There were several sub-themes related to prioritizing and building a preferred relationship and include healing in connection, “managing ups and downs,” and developing and enhancing relational habits. And each of these sub-themes was enacted in a number of different ways. The discussion around this theme in the interviews was extensive as this was the focus of my inquiry.

The overall HIP linked to the theme of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship can be constructed as prioritizing attention to the primary relationship and engaging in acts of building a preferred relationship coupled with noticing and appreciating the other’s efforts toward building a preferred relationship (see Figure 4.14).

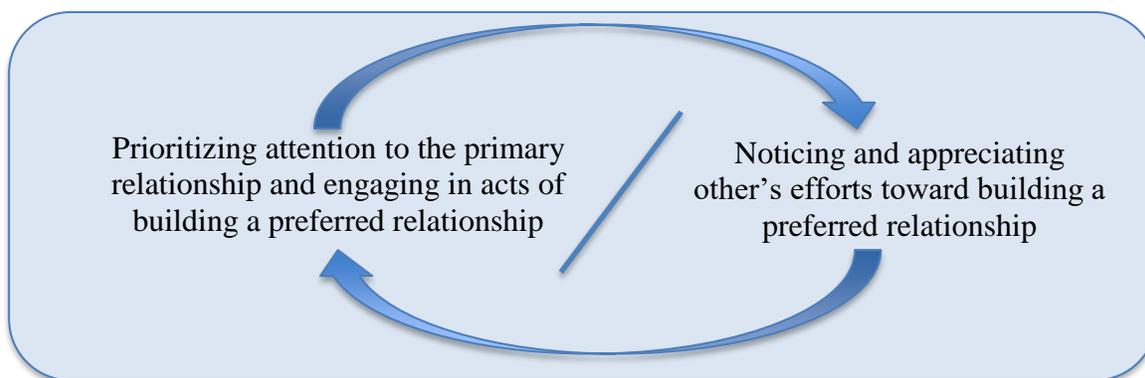


Figure 4.14. HIP linked to prioritizing and building the relationship.

This general HIP was identified as extremely important by the participant couples and was a sustainable and preferred pattern that was relevant beyond repairing the infidelity experience. Partners’ prioritizing their relationships and engaging in efforts that build preferred relationships invite their partners to notice and appreciate these efforts. Noticing and appreciating these efforts reinforce making these efforts. The specific ways, efforts/actions of enacting this HIP, are related to the sub-themes of healing in connection, “managing ups and downs,” and developing and enhancing relational habits.

Healing in connection. The sub-theme healing in connection was an essential part of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship and relates to healing the harm caused by the infidelity experience. In the aftermath of the infidelity, the well-being of the exclusive partners was significantly compromised, and healing the negative effects was prioritized as these couples moved forward together. As the harm was relationally caused, it required relational healing. The couples experienced a sense of disconnection from each other as a consequence of the infidelity, and healing in connection referred to the actions that were taken between the partners that facilitated healing the harm caused. Healing the effects of harm contributed to developing a greater sense of relational connection again, which included rebuilding trust between the partners. While healing was to some extent supported by partners' individual actions such as self-care practices, it was the interactions aimed at healing that occurred between the partners that seemed most significant in their moving forward together.

The overall HIP related to healing in connection can be thought of as inquiring about and acknowledging the other's experience of hurt and harm and taking actions aimed at contributing to the other's healing coupled with expressing hurt and pain to the partner and accepting the other's actions to contribute to one's own healing (see Figure 4.15).

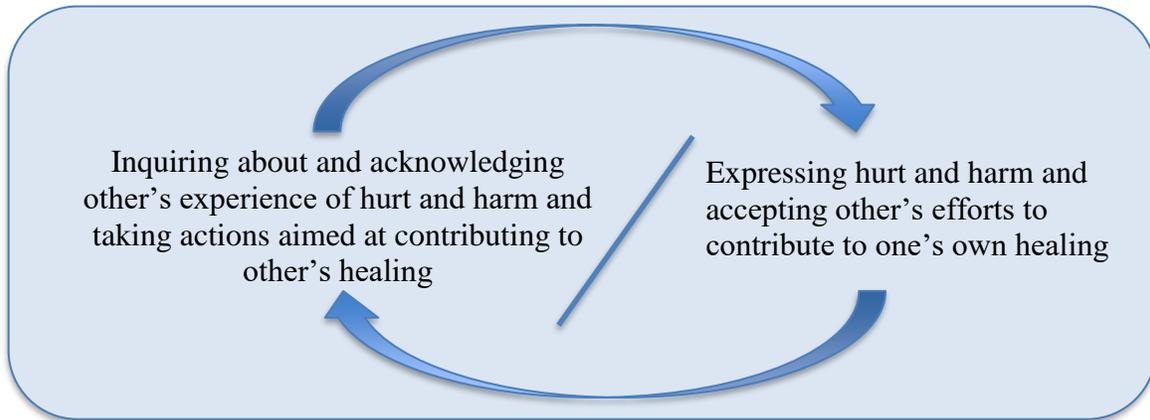


Figure 4.15. HIP linked to healing in connection.

It was most often the non-exclusive partner who occupied the position of inquiring, acknowledging, and taking actions aimed at the other's healing, and the exclusive partner who most often occupied the position of expressing hurt/harm and accepting initiatives of healing. This HIP was identified as being extremely important by these couples, and the non-exclusive partners being active and engaged contributors in the healing of the non-exclusive partners was essential. Inquiring about the other's pain and taking actions to ease the pain communicates to the partner that she/he and his/her experience matter. The more one feels his/her experience of hurt is important, the more she/he can express the hurt, and be receptive to the healing initiatives of the other. Consequently, the other is invited to notice the effect on the partner and to take initiatives to make that effect one of healing. This leads to increased empathy and an increased sense of connection to one's partner.

There were four main ways healing in connection happened including acknowledging that one's partner deserved better, increasing attentiveness, rebuilding trust and forgiveness.

Acknowledging that one's partner deserved better. One of the effects of the infidelity experience was that the exclusive partner's sense of self-worth was to some extent diminished in response to his/her partner behaving in ways that violated what was valued in the relationship. Actions taken by the non-exclusive partner to convey acknowledgement that her/his partner deserved better contributed to increasing self-worth and healing. These actions included taking personal responsibility for harm caused to a partner, expressing remorse and regret for harm done, demonstrating shame and suffering for causing harm, and apologizing.

The HIP linked to the healing aspect of acknowledging that a partner deserved better could be construed as acknowledging that the partner deserved better and taking actions to demonstrate this coupled with noticing and accepting initiatives of acknowledgement (see Figure 4.16).

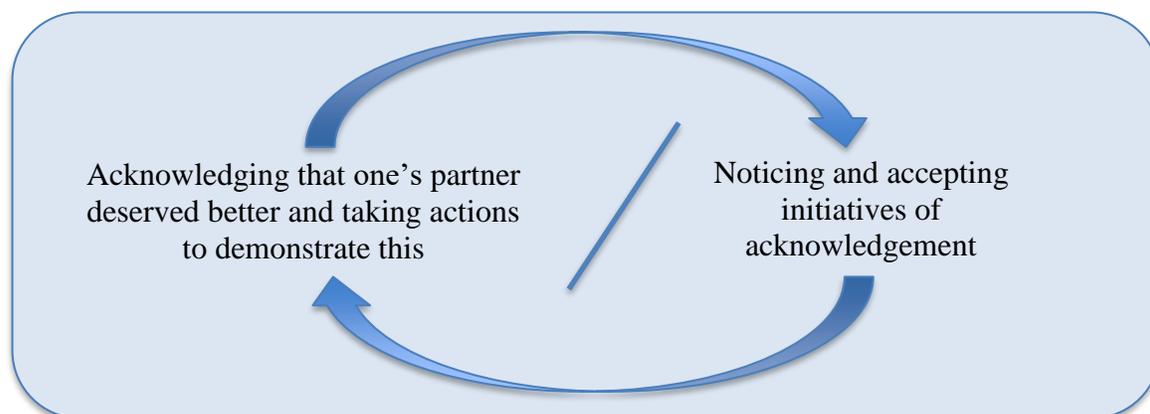


Figure 4.16. HIP related to acknowledging partner deserved better.

When the non-exclusive partner sends a message that the exclusive partner deserved better, and the partner receives and accepts this message, this is an antidote to feeling diminished, and healing becomes more possible. The more the non-exclusive partner acknowledges that his/her partner deserved better and takes action to demonstrate

this, the more it invites the other partner to notice and accept this acknowledgement. When the exclusive partner notices and accepts this antidote and is changed by it, her/his partner is invited to respond such that the non-exclusive partner knows his/her efforts are noticed, appreciated, and accepted, which further encourages her/his behaving in acknowledging ways. The next four HIPs are the more specific ways couples enacted this more general HIP.

Taking personal responsibility for causing harm to partner. One of the ways that the non-exclusive partner communicated to the exclusive partner that she/he deserved better was by the non-exclusive partner taking responsibility for the unilateral decision to participate in the infidelity behavior, for the impact of the infidelity, and for engaging in healing the harm caused by the infidelity. Taking responsibility included listening and acknowledging the other's distress, staying calm and absorbing the other's distress, noticing when his/her partner was upset and acknowledging when his/her partner was upset, and acting in ways to ease the distress felt by the exclusive partner.

The HIP that corresponds with taking responsibility for harm caused to the partner in an attempt to communicate that the partner deserved better as a component of healing can be construed as taking responsibility for wrongdoing and causing harm to another as well as holding oneself accountable for addressing harm coupled with accepting the other's expressions of responsibility for wrongdoing and efforts to repair harm (see Figure 4.17).

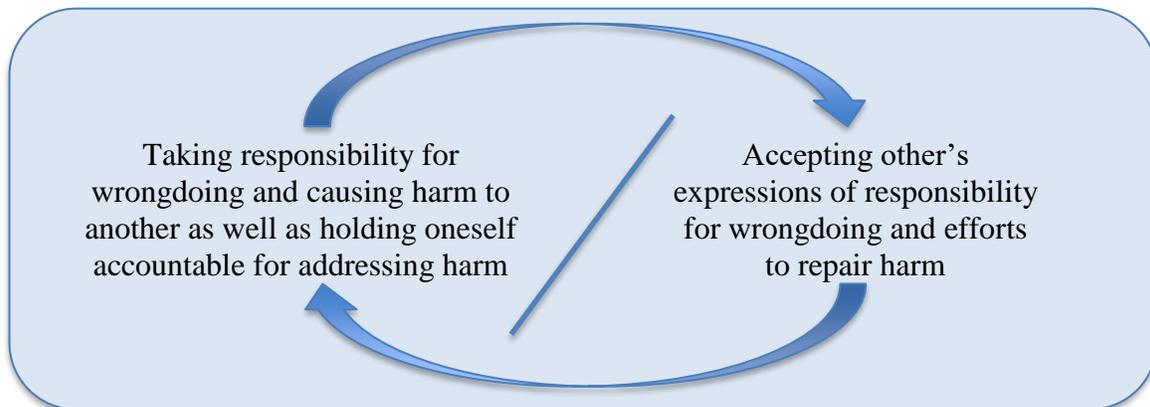


Figure 4 17. HIP linked to taking personal responsibility for causing harm.

For this HIP, the non-exclusive partner occupied the position of taking responsibility for causing harm, and the exclusive partner occupied the position of accepting and being receptive to the non-exclusive partner's actions of taking responsibility for causing harm and making this better. When the non-exclusive partner took responsibility by admitting wrongdoing and expressing empathy for the distress caused by the infidelity behavior, he/she sent a message to the exclusive partner that she/he deserved better. When the exclusive partner accepted expressions of wrongdoing and the efforts of the non-exclusive partner to ease the distress, it helped heal the exclusive partner's pain and invited the non-exclusive partner to continue to express responsibility for causing harm and for making it better.

Duane and Matt talked about taking responsibility: "I'm the one that did wrong, not her. I disrespected by bringing another female in our home, sneaking around, talking to another girl, and taking it the next step and bringing her to our own home. That was wrong" (Duane). "She was very upset and I caused that, completely, by my own hand. I got that I had completely caused that myself. I was completely in the wrong. There was no case to fight back" (Matt).

The non-exclusive partner's taking responsibility also meant understanding the extent of the harm, looking at one's own actions that contributed to the harm, expressing empathy, and acting to help reduce the effects of the harm. Ian spoke about developing empathy and understanding his wife, Gloria's, experience:

It devastated her when she discovered the text messages. I saw her crying . . . just breaking down . . . very emotional event, kind of just like if you lose someone. If there's a death in our family, you're sad. I don't want to see her be depressed (Ian).

Gloria emphasized just how important Ian's empathy for her experience was when she said that "he understands pretty much how much he hurt me, how he devastated our marriage and put everything in jeopardy. So that's why I forgave him and took him back."

Taking responsibility also meant engaging in efforts to help with the healing of the exclusive partner. One such effort appeared to be staying present and absorbing the other's intense pain:

[H]e stayed very calm. When I was yelling at him, he would just listen to what I was saying and not yell back. And he'd always just say nice things to me and caring things . . . even though I was calling him every name in the book, to be honest (Sara).

I understood that it was me that was causing all of that. So, I understood that I needed to be a little bit held back, tried to be, like I said, calm. Overall, when she was upset. Yeah. I didn't want to do anything but be calm and try to be positive 'cause I had done such a wrong thing. I understood why I was being yelled at, so that made it a little bit easier (Matt).

Matt's staying calm (and not yelling back or telling her to move on/calm down) appeared to be a way of holding himself accountable for Sara's pain and sent her the message that he was responsible for her pain and for her healing. And these interactions between Sara and Matt were interesting. Sara described yelling, name calling, and swearing at Matt, and looking at her behavior in isolation might invite an observer to think that she was critical or demeaning in expressing her emotional experience. Typically, critical or demeaning behavior invites defending responses, but what was important for Sara and Matt is that he experienced her behavior as revealing her pain and being congruent with his wrongdoing, not as criticism. The more Matt remained calm and became closer to Sara through expressing kind words and encouraging her to express her pain, the more Sara felt understood and validated. After a while, Sara's response evolved from yelling to talking, and this was invited and supported by Matt's attention to her distress and his attempt to find ways to show his caring and by his staying calm. Matt's response to Sara's expression of her pain was to accept it, acknowledge it, and admit that he deserved it. That he felt she deserved to express her pain helped him to remain calm, and his remaining calm invited her to believe that he truly accepted responsibility for what he did wrong. For this particular couple, the coupled response was more important than the individual behaviors. Again, Sara's behaviors, analyzed on their own, might look harsh or punitive, but what was relationally relevant was Matt's response to her behavior, and Sara's appreciation of his response.

Expressing remorse and regret. The exclusive partners talked about how expressions of remorse and regret communicated to them that their partners understood that the infidelity behaviors were wrong. This seemed important both for sending the

message that the exclusive partners deserved better and appears connected to thinking that knowing something is wrong reduces the likelihood of the behaviors being repeated.

The HIP for this sub-theme was expressing regret and remorse coupled with noticing and accepting expressions of regret and remorse (see Figure 4.18).

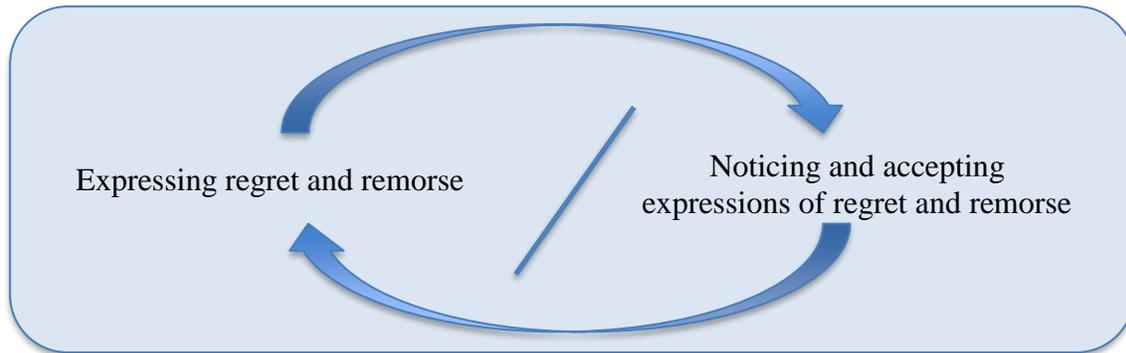


Figure 4.18. HIP linked to expressing regret and remorse.

The non-exclusive partners' expressions of regret and remorse invited the exclusive partners' noticing and accepting these expressions, and this reinforced more expressions of regret and remorse. When the behaviors were interpreted as sincere, the partners felt cared for and that healing was happening between them. The non-exclusive partner occupied the position of expressing regret and remorse, and the exclusive partner occupied the position of accepting expressions of regret and remorse. Again, how this was accomplished between couples varied, and that the behaviors were meaningful and significant for the partners was key.

Glen's willingness to stay in the relationship and work on making it better was related to Maggie's expression of remorse and regret about the infidelity: "It was the biggest mistake of my life . . . If I could go back and change it, I would" (Maggie). "It's hard to deal with, but I believe if she feels that she really did make a mistake, and it was the biggest mistake of her life, then she probably won't do it again" (Glen).

Matt talked a lot about feeling badly about hurting Sara, and this expression of remorse was very important to her. For Sara, his expressing remorse demonstrated his understanding of the effects of his infidelity behavior on her and their relationship, and was linked with his remembering not to repeat the behavior:

It was just a big breach of trust, and it really, really put a wedge in our relationship for a while, so I would hope that he would feel bad about that for a long time, always, actually, that if he thinks about it, he would feel bad (Sara).

Demonstrating shame and distress for causing harm. When the non-exclusive partner demonstrated shame and distress for causing harm, he/she communicated to the exclusive partner that she/he deserved better. Demonstrating shame and distress for causing harm was about responding to the partner's pain by also showing pain/distress and not about feeling unworthy as a person, which can lead to shutting down and not connecting with the partner's pain. Showing pain and distress for causing harm was experienced as the non-exclusive partner's moving toward the exclusive partner to connect with her/him and the partner's pain in a demonstration of empathy.

The HIP associated with this sub-theme could be constructed as noticing the other's pain and demonstrating shame and distress for causing pain coupled with noticing and acknowledging the other's shame and distress for causing pain (see Figure 4.19).

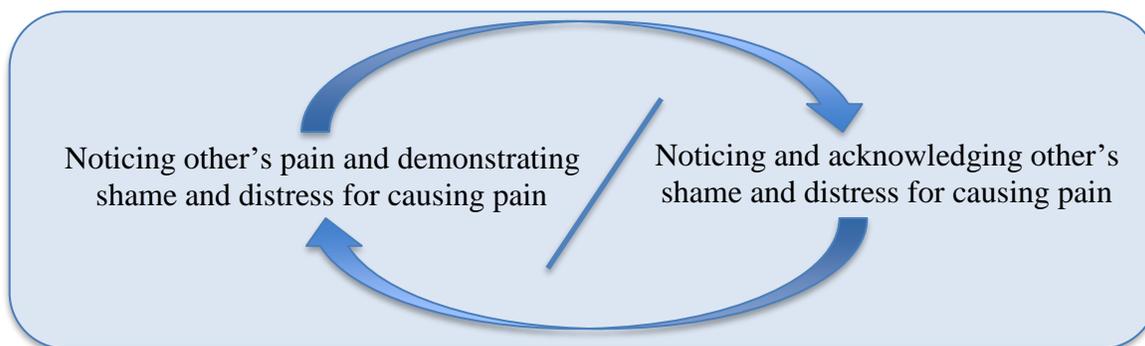


Figure 4.19. HIP associated with demonstrating shame for causing harm.

When this HIP was enacted, it was the non-exclusive partner who demonstrated shame and distress for causing the partner's pain. This was an important message to the exclusive partner that seemed to validate his/her experience of pain. The exclusive partner needed to notice and appreciate the partner's expression of shame in order for the behaviors to be coupled and for the pattern to develop. Interestingly, over time, as this HIP was enacted, appreciating and acknowledging the non-exclusive partners' experiences of shame as validating the exclusive partners' pain seemed to invite the exclusive partners' compassion for the non-exclusive partners, which may have been important for the non-exclusive partners continuing to notice their partners' pain and to continue to express shame and distress about causing that pain. This was a time-limited HIP, and it is important to highlight again that the shame expressed was specifically related to the infidelity behavior. This is an important distinction from shame related to self-description or identity. For the relationships to continue, non-exclusive partners needed to "feel badly" about their infidelity behaviors but also to feel worthy of having these relationships continue and to hope that their partners could still love them and might forgive them:

Knowing the feeling of depression that she felt herself falling into, so she underwent a mental deterioration; she was undergoing a physical one with the vomiting, and felt dirty. And it's like bearing everything. Not only bearing the truth, but bearing the fact that this is destroying me on every level. I'm affected on every level by this (Cal).

Cal's witnessing of Robin's shame and distress in response to her infidelity behavior may have been a form of vindication for what he was experiencing. It mattered to Cal that she experienced shame for what she did, shame for the pain it caused him, and that she expressed it to him. Robin's feeling bad about what she did and for the pain this caused opened up possibilities for healing when expressed to Cal.

In the following excerpt, we read Tim's explanation of how Nancy's understanding of his shame and distress was important to him:

Obviously a lot of pain on her part, but it was also painful for me too because I hurt her. That was very important to me that she understood it wasn't just all her pain, and I certainly didn't want to say that the first day, hey, you know, I'm hurting too. It was important for me—for her to understand that I was not happy with myself either; hence, the suicide talk, and I really appreciated the fact that she understood that too (Tim).

Tim seems to be saying that he understood that Nancy's pain needed to be fully acknowledged and prioritized and that healing for this couple included acknowledging both of their experiences at some point. Nancy acknowledging Tim's pain for causing her pain was experienced as an acceptance of his efforts to communicate that he knew she deserved better from him and as an expression of compassion and kindness toward him. And her receptivity invited further efforts by Tim to make things even better between them. Tim also makes the point above that he initiated this HIP and sustained his behaviors for some time until Nancy responded by noticing and acknowledging his shame and distress.

The responsibility of the non-exclusive partner was to express shame and distress in ways that were understood by the exclusive partner, which for these couples was shame about causing the partner harm. Expressing shame was important as this suggested to the exclusive partners that the non-exclusive partners did not like the self-identity of being ashamed of himself or herself for causing harm. If this was an unwanted identity, then perhaps the non-exclusive partner would not repeat the harm-causing behavior.

Apologizing. Apologizing was a valued initiative as part of communicating that the partner deserved better and was conveyed by both verbal statements and acts of contrition.

The HIP linked to apologizing as a way to communicate that the partner deserved better might be construed as apologizing for infidelity behavior and effects and taking steps to lessen effects and possibility of reoccurrence coupled with accepting apology and possibly extending forgiveness (see Figure 4.20).

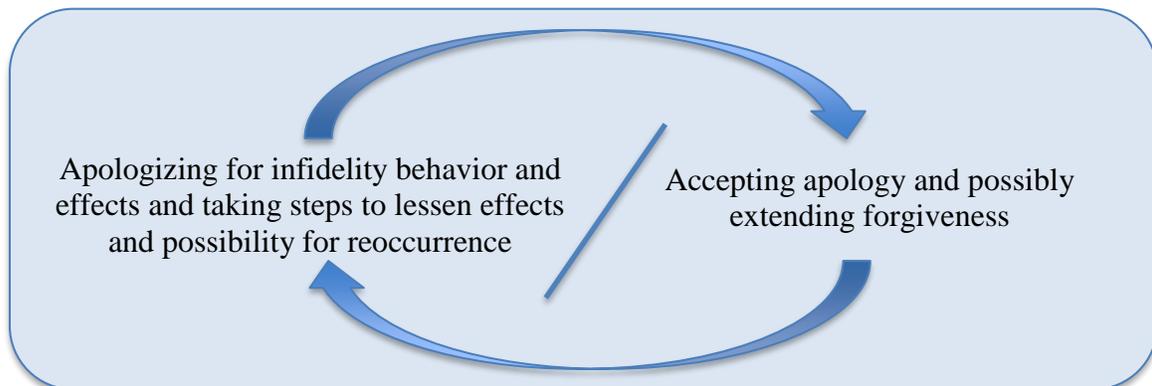


Figure 4.20. HIP associated with apologizing.

Again, it was the non-exclusive partner who initiated this HIP in an attempt to convey that he/she did wrong, understood the impact of her/his behavior, wished to contribute to his/her partner's healing and to make sure the behavior was not repeated.

When the exclusive partner noticed and accepted the apology, she/he did so because the apology felt meaningful, sincere, and like a promise to not participate in infidelity again. Accepting the apology sent the message to his/her partner that there was hope for sustaining the relationship and for healing. This inspired the non-exclusive partner to repeat the apologizing behaviors, which when again received by the exclusive partner, created space for even more healing. This HIP appeared to be enacted very deliberately and frequently in the early aftermath of the infidelity but was important at any point in moving forward together. Again, words of apology were effective when accompanied by actions that showed remorse and commitment to not making the same mistake.

As part of enacting this overall HIP, the non-exclusive partners could not demand forgiveness or push their partners to notice or accept their efforts. It was the repeated behavioral invitations made by the non-exclusive partners that encouraged the exclusive partners to accept the efforts of their partners and to then respond in ways that sustained this significant HIP.

Sara seemed touched by Matt behaving humbly when they were fighting about the infidelity, and understood this approach as his expressing his apology and regret:

He kept it very calm with me, mellow, and caring always. He was never cocky about what he'd done. Humble about it. I could see he was sorry about what he'd done. I could tell by how he wasn't fighting back at all when I was yelling at him or anything. That's not really his style, usually, so that told me he was sorry (Sara).

For Tara and Ben, sorry included expressing empathy, making an overt apology, and making reparative actions aimed at healing: “Obviously I'm sorry, but I'm sorry

doesn't do a whole lot. Being there for the person and just trying very hard to help them along in the process” (Ben).

Your actions will always speak louder. So if it's something that you really are sorry for then what are you doing to show me that you're sorry for it, whether it be sitting there and listening to me, sometimes nag him, [chuckle] or if it's just being that shoulder that I need and being that open book that I need to just be like, what were you thinking? Whatever questions I have, as long as he was there to answer my question, that was a sorry because he was trying to help me to understand, to help me through it (Tara).

Tara talked about empathy and apology at several different points in the interview, and it seemed very significant for her healing:

It wasn't like a feel bad in a, well you did this to me, so I need to make sure that you feel hurt, but it was more so that he understood what I was going through. He understood the pain, the betrayal . . . whatever it was that I was going through that he understood it too. Because if he couldn't understand it, then how can we move on because at that point we're not on the same page. But for the fact that he was able to say, you know what, I understand what you're going through, and I empathize with you, and I sympathize with you. That made it clearer that he's trying; he's trying to see where I am. And trying to say I'm sorry for what I did. I fully understand where you're coming from. Let's see if we can move on (Tara).

The exclusive partners felt acknowledged in terms of their deserving better when the non-exclusive partners took responsibility for wrongdoing, validated their partners' pain, expressed regret and remorse, and apologized. Healing was said to have occurred

when the exclusive partner felt satisfied that acknowledging happened. Anja's words illustrate the experience of an exclusive partner who has not enjoyed the healing process described above.

He didn't help me. And he just went back to being like we used to be. It just fell right back into our old pattern. It was almost like that had never happened except for the feelings that were left behind, the wreckage was there for me. I don't think any of that affected him. I think that makes me mad too. I feel like I'm the one who did all suffering, and I don't feel like that I was the one who deserved to do any suffering at all. And I think that's a little unfair because it's just like he's got to have a good time with this blonde, and I'm the one that suffered all the wreckage to the point where it almost killed me (Anja).

Anja appears to have made repeated attempts to engage Frank in taking responsibility for his behavior and in acknowledging her pain and suffering. His response to her ongoing and often desperate attempts to feel heard was to stay silent: "Just let her say whatever she's saying. I'm not a type that's going to start rationalizing it or getting an answer why. I'm not one to give answers, I'll just say okay." Anja did not experience her pain being acknowledged in the ways that would feel meaningful for her, and this invited her ongoing wishing that he "talked to me more, be more open and showed that he cared about what I was going through. Listened to me more and answered the questions." Frank's experience was that "if a person says something critical about me or criticizes something, that's it . . . I'm done. I can't do it." These comments suggest that this couple

may be struggling with a PIP that might be thought of as criticizing coupled with defending (see Figure 4.21).

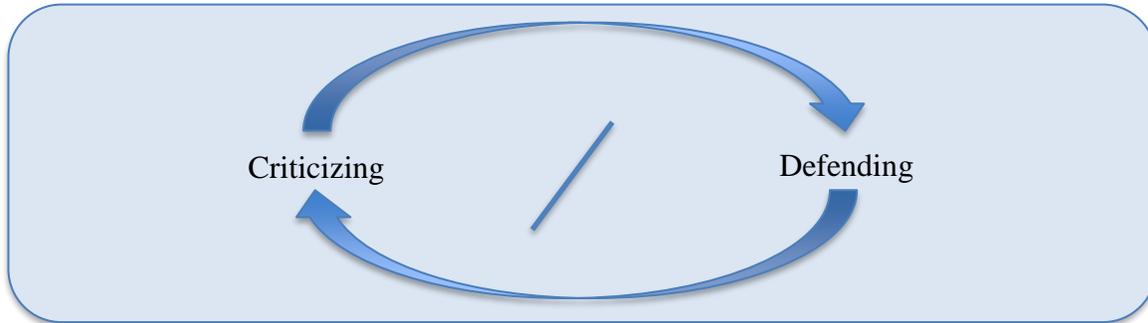


Figure 4.21. PIP linked to criticizing and defending.

While this couple is staying together, and they are making relational changes such as spending more time together, and they have a positive view of some aspects of their relationship, there is considerable healing related to the infidelity that had not been experienced at the time of the research interview. This finding illustrates what can happen when an attempted TIP is unsuccessful. A risk with an unsuccessful TIP attempt is that the repetition of the same unsuccessful behaviors can potentially lead to a deteriorating or pathologizing interpersonal pattern rather than a healing interpersonal pattern as was intended. To be clear, Anja's need for acknowledgement from Frank and for efforts from him to help her heal is not the issue. Rather, the problem is the failure of this couple to develop a meaningful TIP or HIP related to her need.

Increasing attentiveness. Most of the couples in this study talked about how they began to pay more attention to each other and the relationship after the infidelity experiences, and that these acts of kindness, care, and consideration were engaged in with the hope that healing would be more possible, and again these acts were about healing in connection. These behaviors included doing little things for each other, giving small gifts,

expressing positive feelings about the partner, and spending more quality time together. These behaviors of increasing attentiveness appear intended to send messages to the partners that they matter, the relationships are important, and the relationships are the priority.

The HIP associated with increasing attentiveness could be construed as engaging in acts of attentiveness toward partner coupled with identifying and accepting acts of attentiveness (see Figure 4.22).

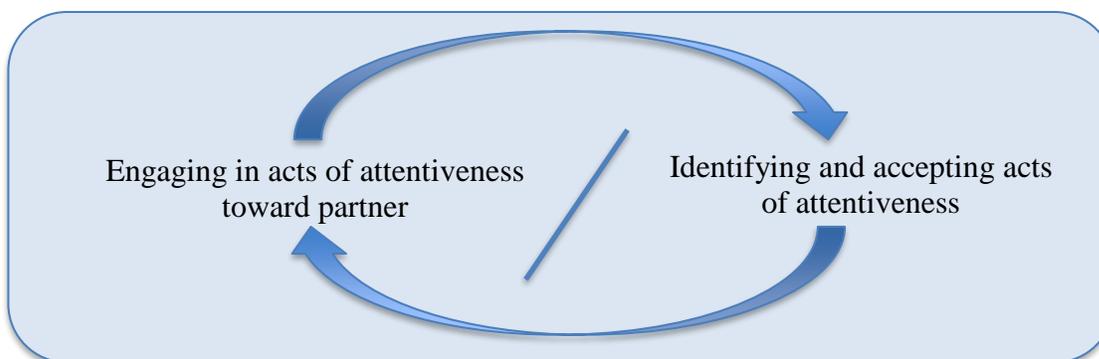


Figure 4.22. HIP related to increasing attentiveness.

This HIP was most often initiated by the non-exclusive partner and was a part of healing in connection. The non-exclusive partners engaged in various behaviors aimed, in part, at “making up” with the partners by showing more attention and care and were often responded to in kind by the exclusive partners. To show how important it is that the acts of attentiveness fit for the particular partner, I have included a segment that shows a failed TIP attempt followed by a description of the non-exclusive partner’s other TIP attempts that then succeeded and therefore became a source of healing for this particular couple:

13:33 RICK: Well, to me, I just said that I have to be more focused towards Carol and express my affection towards her more. (Rick goes on to talk about housework, etc.)

18:03 HEATHER: Carol, tell me, what do you think is the biggest change for you? What have you noticed between the two of you since all this happened?

18:09 CAROL: Well, I just think he is a lot nicer and more respectful with me.

18:24 HEATHER: Carol, what do you mean more respectful and nicer?

18:27 CAROL: Well, he's being more . . . Doesn't take things for granted about our relationship.

22:26 RICK: Yeah. Now we have more sex.

22:39 HEATHER: Do you think that, Carol, Rick's being nicer to you, not taking you for granted, does that . . .

22:44 CAROL: Yes. Yes. He's not taking me for granted.

22:47 HEATHER: And so does that make you want to have sex with him more?

22:49 CAROL: Yes.

23:10 HEATHER: I guess I'm wondering, Carol, the things that Rick's doing, being nicer, being more patient, not losing his temper, bringing you flowers. Are those things kind of

23:20 RICK: I only brought her flowers once. To me, they're like a waste of money because they just die.

23:23 CAROL: They are a waste of money. I like going to nice restaurants, and we go to (sports) games, but not yet, but we will. And then we went to a couple sports game, and I like to bowl. I'm very into sports.

Rick bought Carol flowers (attempting to make up, showing increasing attention), but she did not value receiving flowers (identifying preferences). Carol provided feedback that she did not like to receive flowers, which invited Rick to make other attempts. When he made another attempt at showing attentiveness by taking her to a sports event or dinner or helping more around the house, and she appreciated these actions and accepted them, their behaviors became reinforcing. For the TIP to develop, Rick needed to be persistent and try out various ways to show increasing attentiveness to her, and Carol needed to provide feedback about what fit for her. And when Rick's efforts to show increasing attentiveness were successful, they invited Carol to show increasing attentiveness to him such as being more sexually responsive.

Tyrese described his efforts of being attentive to show Sonja he cared:

Well, actually it made me be more considerate. I'll pick her up some flowers, or I had got her some tickets to this theatre show. I had bought a prepaid thing at a restaurant. And theatre tickets. I had pre-ordered some theatre tickets for the movie that was coming out. So, I just endeavor to be nice, do the laundry, and clean the car. So I tried to compensate by doing all those things (Tyrese).

And Sonja said this about his efforts: "things he don't normally do. [Laughter]" From their playful exchange, it seemed Sonja appreciated these efforts, and when I asked Sonja about the impact of these efforts, she responded, "that really helped a lot because that really showed me that you do really love me, and want to be with me, to put forth a good effort. [Laughter] Yeah, so, yeah that helped a lot [chuckle]." The non-exclusive partner's increasing acts of attentiveness contributed to the healing in connection and supported the

couple building their preferred relationship as such attention helped heal the harm caused by the infidelity.

Rebuilding trust. The non-exclusive partners' acknowledging that trust was damaged as a result of the infidelity behaviors and their actively working to rebuild trust was a very significant part of healing in connection and in building preferred relationships for the couples in this inquiry. Rebuilding trust often meant engaging in a lifestyle above suspicion and involved transparency with respect to social media/digital property. As well, the non-exclusive partner disclosed actions and whereabouts, demonstrated efforts to prove trustworthiness, and provided evidence of behavioral competency with respect to trustworthiness. The actions taken by the non-exclusive partners to prove trustworthiness were varied and most often related to the circumstances of the infidelity behaviors(s). Another feature of rebuilding trust was the recognition that it takes time.

The HIP linked to rebuilding trust might be conceptualized as engaging in trustworthy behaviors coupled with noticing efforts and extending trust (see Figure 4.23).

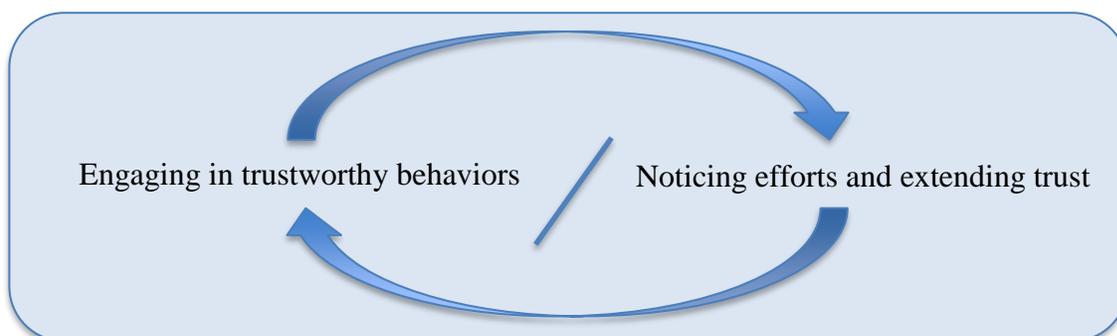


Figure 4.23. HIP about rebuilding trust.

Many of the couples in this inquiry previously enjoyed wellness patterns related to trust. When trust was fractured as a result of the infidelity, the interpersonal patterns around trust shifted. For the purpose of building a preferred relationship and moving

toward wellness patterns related to trust, it was constructed as important that the non-exclusive partner engage in performing meaningful trustworthy behaviors and that these behaviors were noticed and valued by the exclusive partner. When the exclusive partners noticed and extended trust, the non-exclusive partners' behaviors were reinforced. Both partners had a relational responsibility and opportunity for rebuilding trust, but these responsibilities were not the same. The non-exclusive partner needed to prove his/her trustworthiness, and for trust to be re-established, it was necessary for the exclusive partner to be open to the trust building initiatives. The exclusive partner's response to rebuilding trust was dependent on the non-exclusive partner's engagement in behaviors that signaled trust to the exclusive partner. And the non-exclusive partner's repeated engaging in such trust building behaviors was dependent on the exclusive partner's responsiveness to these behaviors.

Ian had relied on social media and his second cell phone for his infidelity connections, so his use of social media and his cell phone became important factors in rebuilding trust with Gloria:

I had to destroy and deactivate all the secret accounts and phone numbers and just purge myself from it. And I just made a list of my digital property. And she has access to everything. I can go inside any of her digital property if I want. We use a master control sheet with all our usernames and passwords (Ian).

As transparency with respect to digital property was important for rebuilding trust, so was permission to check. Gloria talked about how her need to check Ian's online activities has shifted over time: "Whenever I feel uncomfortable with something. But I pretty much

have trust in him now, and I really don't spy on him like that anymore. I don't feel there's a need for it.”

The infidelity partner lives near Glen and Maggie and apparently continues to initiate contact with Maggie. In the following segment, we can read Glen's comments about Maggie's ability to act on her own by obtaining and enforcing the restraining order against her infidelity partner. This seems to relate to Glen's need for proof of Maggie's behavioral competency, or in other words, her ability to be worthy of his trust:

Yeah he'd come over every day. But I didn't tell her to get the restraining order. She went down and did that on her own when I was in class. I was surprised about that. That's what helped me deal with it a little bit better. Went to court on her own. I didn't even know about it. And then she showed it to me afterwards. And she's been calling, so she's following through with it on her own without me saying anything to her. Before when she had the restraining order, I'd say, call! Call! And when I would try to call, she'd take the phone from me or go warn him, so that he would leave before the cops got there or whatever. But she's not doing that any more. It's told me that she's ready to focus on our relationship and get him out of it. Yeah, it's contributed to the trust quite a bit more because before, we were on the verge of splitting up because of it. But now that she showed me that, I don't want to leave. I want to stay with her, and I don't want to lose my family (Glen).

The participant couples confirm that trust can be restored in relationships after significant damage, and that rebuilding trust or building a new trust is a component of developing and enhancing relational practices. Rebuilding trust requires efforts directed

at the specific actions that caused the damage, and it takes time. There did not seem to be one way of living a lifestyle above suspicion; rather living a lifestyle above suspicion required partners to engage in actions that were particular and relevant for each couple.

Forgiveness. Most of the couples recognized forgiveness as a significant part of healing in connection, and one couple talked about the lack of forgiveness. Forgiveness was linked to feeling unburdened, letting go of holding something over the partner, earning trust, making meaning, changing personal philosophy, extending goodwill toward one's partner, and giving each other time. Forgiveness for these couples was a relational experience and was important for both exclusive and non-exclusive partners. Forgiveness was not something that was unilaterally granted but was pursued through meaningful interpersonal actions and then perceived as deserving based on meaningful interpersonal actions. And a lack of forgiveness seemed about the exclusive partner wanting to take a stand to honor the harm done and holding the non-exclusive partner accountable for sustaining preferred relational changes.

The interpersonal pattern most frequently enacted in relation to forgiveness for these couples can be construed as seeking forgiveness through performing acts of contrition and apology coupled with accepting these actions and extending forgiveness (see Figure 4.24).

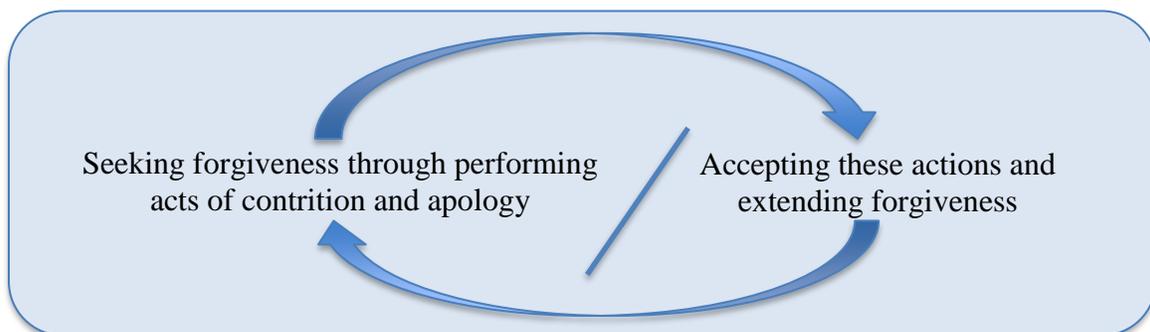


Figure 4.24. HIP involving forgiveness.

When this HIP was enacted, the non-exclusive partner occupied the position of seeking forgiveness, and the exclusive partner occupied the position of extending forgiveness. Seeking and extending forgiveness seems to have been a corrective experience for most of the couples and was an important part of healing and of prioritizing the relationships. When the non-exclusive partners engaged in meaningful behaviors that communicated to the exclusive partners that they were sorry and regretted their infidelity behavior and its impact, the exclusive partners felt vindicated, and entitled to making the non-exclusive partners earn their forgiveness. The exclusive partners' extending forgiveness invited and reinforced behaviors of the non-exclusive partners aimed at seeking forgiveness, which further invited the extending of forgiveness. The non-exclusive partners' seeking forgiveness sent the message that the exclusive partners' compassion and goodwill were important and invited a further extension of forgiveness, which was often expressed as kindness towards the partners and a willingness to get close to the partners rather than withdrawing and protecting themselves, a stance that might be present in situations where there was a lack of forgiveness. Apologizing was previously mentioned with the non-exclusive partner acknowledging that his/her partner deserved better and was significant and related to forgiveness. Apologizing as part of affirming that the partner deserved better was about healing what was diminished for the exclusive partner as a result of the infidelity experience, and was coupled with the non-exclusive partner's hope that the apology would be accepted and that it could possibly be a step toward forgiveness. The act of apologizing as part of forgiveness was more about establishing good will between the couple through specifically achieving forgiveness.

Discussions with the participant couples around forgiveness include the following. For Adam, forgiveness came after making some sense of the infidelity experience. It was not easy to get to and he remarked that it felt good to give:

Well I've forgiven her. It's just accepting the life karma and understanding that this wasn't intentional by any means. It was an out of our realm cosmos experience and I've had to dig deep down and forgive her, and I've felt really great about it (Adam).

Cal, too, felt good about forgiving his partner. It was connected to rebuilding trust, and he described feeling unburdened through extending forgiveness:

It's essential. I think relief is part of it. I don't know how, but you feel like a burden's off. It allows an opportunity to re-bond. This fear that you're going to get screwed around again. And then I think if you reach that level, then there's where the relief comes in, and it's great not to have to feel the burden of wondering does she mean it, doesn't she mean it? (Cal).

Glen appears to have relinquished his right to hold the infidelity over Maggie when he forgave her: "I forgive her for it. I don't want to hold it against her no more. I forgive her for it."

Most of the partners talked about how forgiveness took time: "Slowly, but surely, she forgave me. I told her I won't do it again, and I haven't. So I was very glad that she forgave me" (Rick). "I didn't forgive him in one day, but he tried to improve" (Carol). "I finally said I forgive you. So it took a while" (Nancy).

Sara draws distinctions between moving forward and working to minimize the negative influence of the infidelity behavior and the idea of forgiveness. And for this couple, non-forgiveness seems to be acceptable:

Right off the bat, I think Matt knew I wouldn't forgive him for it. It doesn't mean that I haven't moved past it. It's not a factor in our relationship being where (it) would never be the cause of us not being good, or anything like that, no. But forgive him? No, I don't think I could ever really forgive him, and I think he knows that. Forgiveness is like, when he does little things like forgets to come pick me up or something like that, and he says sorry. I forgive him. It's not something that's important. I just let it go. I don't think about it anymore. It doesn't hurt me after the fact, but something like that, I don't . . . Forgiveness is just basically . . . How do you word it? I guess forgiveness would be like saying that nothing bad or wrong happened, or nothing wrong was done ever, and it was (Sara).

Managing “ups and downs.” All of the couples interviewed talked about having to manage “ups and downs” as they moved forward together, and this was the next part of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship. The “ups and downs” related to dealing with reminders of the infidelity, living by one’s own principles, accepting that healing takes time, and accessing support and resources.

The general HIP linked to managing “ups and downs” may be constructed as feeling entitled to experience and be supported in managing “ups and downs” in one’s own way coupled with respecting and acknowledging the other’s experience of “ups and downs” (see Figure 4.25).

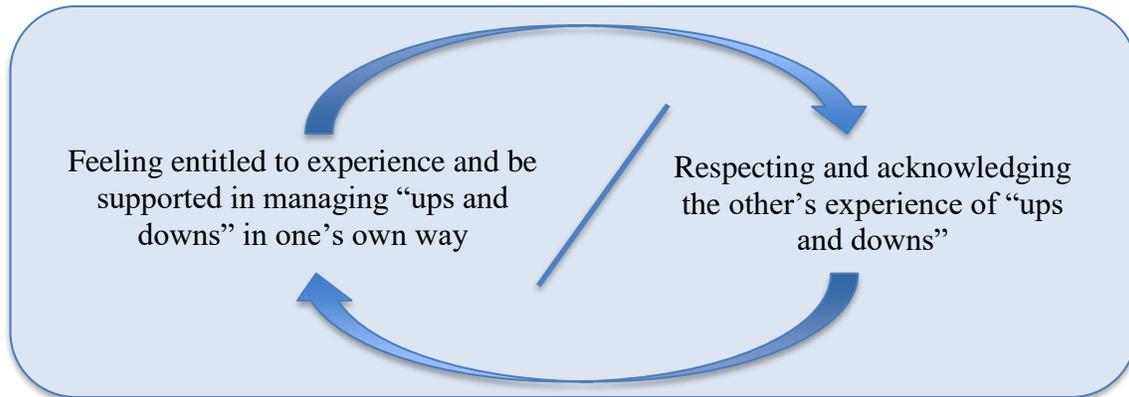


Figure 4.25. HIP about managing “ups and downs.”

This HIP was initiated by either of the partners, and while either partner could occupy both positions of the HIP, most often the exclusive partner occupied the position of feeling entitled to experience and be supported in managing “ups and downs” in his/her own way. This is not to say the non-exclusive partners did not experience “ups and downs” because they did, particularly about their concerns whether or not the relationships would continue, and whether or not repairing the relationships would be possible. Again, for these couples, the infidelity aftermath was more emotionally occupying and distressing for the exclusive partners. What seemed important about this HIP was the space for partners to have and enact their emotional experience in their preferred ways, and for their partners to respond in ways that legitimized their right to do so. The more partners felt permission and support to honor their experiences and to communicate how they were doing, the more they expressed their experiences. Expressing the emotional experience offered opportunities for respecting and

acknowledging the emotional experience, which led to the couple feeling like they were going through the aftermath together, as well as healing some of the rupture experienced in the aftermath and was therefore a HIP.

Dealing with reminders. Part of “managing ups and downs” was dealing with reminders. Reminders were any thought or behavior or activity or emotion that generated intense and mostly negative feelings about the infidelity experience. In the early aftermath, reminders happened daily for most of the exclusive partners and happened with varying frequency for the non-exclusive partners. Some reminders were related to seeing the infidelity partner, some were related to behaviors that seemed similar to what was going on with the non-exclusive partner at the time of the infidelity behavior, and other reminders were intrusive and repeated thoughts or images about the infidelity.

The HIP linked to dealing with reminders might be imagined as identifying reminders and utilizing individual and or relational resources to respond to reminders coupled with noticing and acknowledging reminders and supporting the other’s responses to reminders (see Figure 4.26).

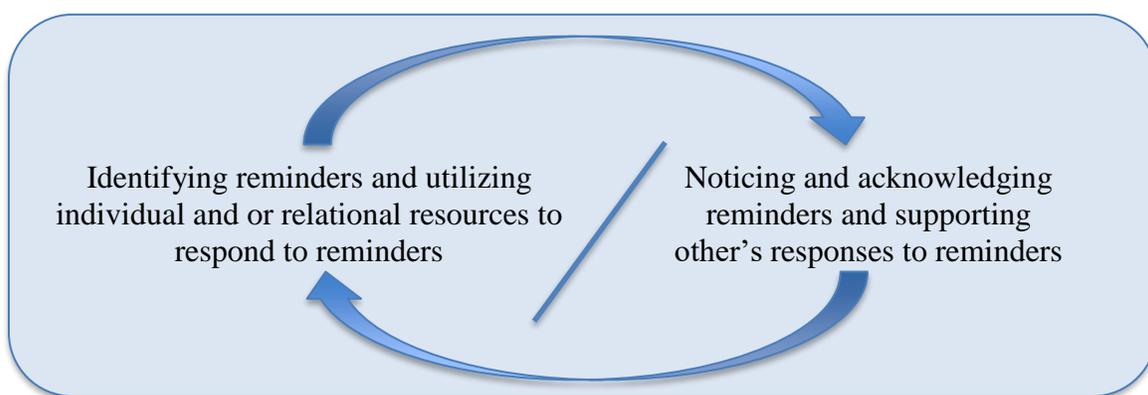


Figure 4.26. HIP related to dealing with reminders.

Again, while both partners could and did occupy either position in this HIP, it was the exclusive partner who more often experienced reminders and therefore occupied the

position of identifying reminders and utilizing individual and relational resources to respond to the reminders. This HIP was enacted less and less over time in conjunction with more healing and with building a preferred relationship.

When one partner identified a reminder, it might be visible to the other partner or it might be hidden. When not visible, the partner who experienced the reminder had a choice to let her/his partner know, and to turn to the partner for support or not. And when the reminder was noticeable, the partner not directly experiencing the reminder had a choice about acknowledging his/her partner's experience. This was a healing relational event when a partner noticed her/his partner had experienced a reminder and then supported the partner in responding in preferred ways. When the partner experiencing the reminder turned toward his/her partner with the reminder and was responded to in ways that felt supportive, or when the non-exclusive partner anticipated a reminder and offered support in the hope of mitigating the experience of the reminder, this was a relational event that contributed to "managing ups and downs" and to building a preferred relationship.

Sara noted that feeling triggered decreased with time and that her response to the triggers had shifted. Part of her response to feeling triggered now is to think about how Matt has helped her, and again this speaks to how the non-exclusive partner's response has significant shaping effects on the exclusive partner's experience.

The first year I thought about it a lot. I couldn't help it, but if something triggered me, I'd still think about it. Now, I don't think about it unless I see her or hear something about her. And when I do think about it, I try and think about Matt's reaction through it, and how much he cares about me. I'm hoping eventually that I

don't just naturally yell because I can't help it. It's just as soon as I see her, it just ticks me off very badly, and I just naturally yell at him and call him a few names. I'm hoping that she doesn't affect me that way, and it just rolls off my back. That it's past; it's history. Generally, we're way better than we were then (Sara).

Trey engaged in self-care and self-soothing activities at times he felt reminded of the infidelity, and Yasmin encouraged and supported this, making his self-care practices a relational resource:

Well, I got my outlets . . . [that] allow me to look at the sky and be calm . . . Because you've got to vent it out before you can begin to plug it up. Then I can come back in the room and address the issue. And in the moment . . . there's a high level of spirituality involved that allows answers to come to me in addressing the issue that's on the table (Trey).

Non-exclusive partners also discussed experiencing reminders of the infidelity and attributed some of their healing to support and compassion from their partners:

I am much further along than I was in 2012, but until I could watch the movie and say, okay, things like this happen in life. It is okay. I mean, it is not okay to do it, but if something like that happens, you just have to be adult enough to come to grounds with it, dismantle it, and just move on. I wish I could look at life like that (referring to Trey's support at times of reminders). The way that he turned it around was amazing. I like how the way he came in and said, hey you know what? This other person—it was a bad deal. We need to move on from that and start something new (Yasmin).

Living by one's principles. Another resource for “managing ups and downs” was living by one's principles, what individuals valued, stood for, and lived. This encouraged participants to act in kind ways and to resist striking back to achieve vindication by building themselves up versus putting the other down. As previously discussed, living by one's principles was also important when couples dealt with the dominant discourses related to responding to infidelity. Both exclusive and non-exclusive partners talked about connecting with their principles and values as a resource during “the ups and downs,” and these values and principles were related to religious faith, mindfulness practices, personal philosophy of life, and other self-care habits including exercise, art, and humor. These became relational resources when valued and reinforced by the partner and drawn forth to help sustain and build the relationship.

The WIP linked to living by one's principles might be constructed as acting in accord with one's principles and values coupled with noticing and appreciating the other acting in accord with his/her principles and values and being influenced by this (see Figure 4.27).

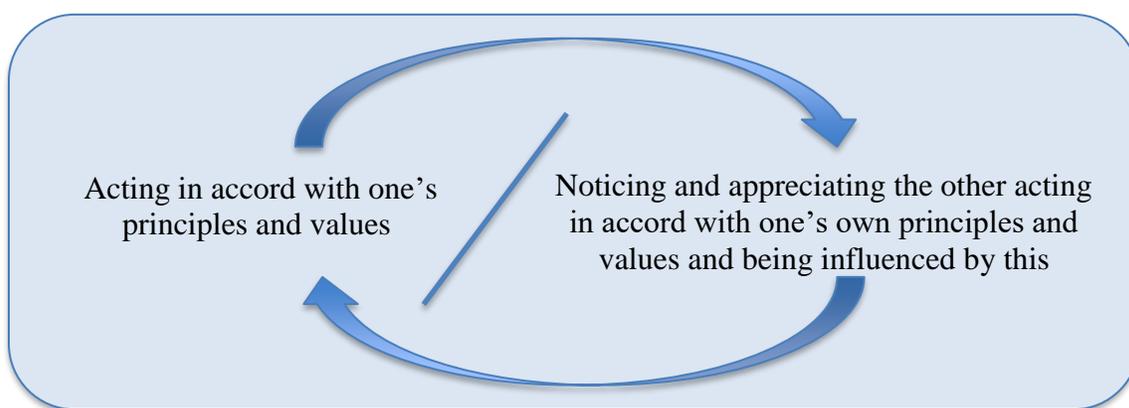


Figure 4.27. WIP related to acting in accord with one's principles and values.

When partners acted in accord with their principles and values, their partners received the messages that they were invested in sustaining the relationships and they

respected the partners. This invited the other partners to notice and appreciate the others acting in accord with their principles and values, be influenced by this, and respond in ways that demonstrated that this was valued and meaningful. Sometimes acting in accord with one's principles and values might be resisting revenge and acting with kindness, sometimes it might be connecting to faith and values at rough times, and sometimes it might be engaging in self-care practices. Noticing and appreciating the other acting in accord with one's principles and values and being influenced by this included saying words of affirmation, engaging in acts of kindness, and holding hope and confidence that the relationship would continue. Both partners could and did occupy either position in this WIP.

Nancy acknowledged that her pain inspired thoughts of behavior that would hurt Tim, but she paused and decided to act in line with her principles which meant treating Tim with love, respect, and kindness, and being receptive to his acts of kindness:

You're mad and you're hurt, but retribution only ever causes more problems than it solves. So I'm not big on retribution; he cheated on me, so I'm going to go and cheat on him? That doesn't solve anything. That just hurts things. Maybe it's just a general life philosophy . . . but . . . if he's trying to do something nice, why would you say, oh well, that's nice, but you're still a shit? That doesn't get you anywhere, right? You just have to accept something that's nice for what it is (Nancy).

Nancy made a deliberate decision about how she was going to respond in the aftermath of the infidelity. In discussing what this meant to Tim, he stated, "because I knew Nancy was strong and I knew she loved me . . . that was a huge boost to the confidence. The commitment, that was easy, because I knew we were going to survive." Tim seemed to

be saying that noticing Nancy doing her best gave him hope and confidence that they were going to stay together, and this hope and confidence encouraged his repeated efforts to make things better for Nancy and their relationship. When Tim felt hope and confidence that the relationship might continue in response to Nancy doing her best, Tim invested in her and the relationship. When Nancy felt that doing her best in line with her values and principles was noticed and appreciated by Tim, and her influence inspired him to behave in caring and nurturing ways, she viewed him as acting in accord with his principles and values. Making one's principles and values known and enacted helped partners to "know" each other again, which appears to be important in building a preferred relationship.

Living by one's own principles was made more possible when partners connected to whatever gave them strength and included "roller-skate[ing] . . . art, even humor" (Yasmin). "Faith" (Adam). "I've got a lot of inner strength within me. And I have a lot of faith in God" (Anja).

Time. In an earlier section, time was discussed with respect to the amount of time invested to sustain the primary relationship and in achieving forgiveness. Time was also mentioned as being an important factor in "managing the ups and downs" while building a preferred relationship. Time seemed relevant both in terms of understanding that feelings and the meaning of experiences can change over time and in terms of giving the couples time to be able to sort through the aftermath of the infidelity. Taking time might have been a way to honor the significance of the harm that was experienced.

The HIP linked to time as part of “managing ups and downs” might be thought of as feeling entitled to take one’s own time to heal and build coupled with understanding healing and building takes time and sustains healing/building efforts (see Figure 4.28).

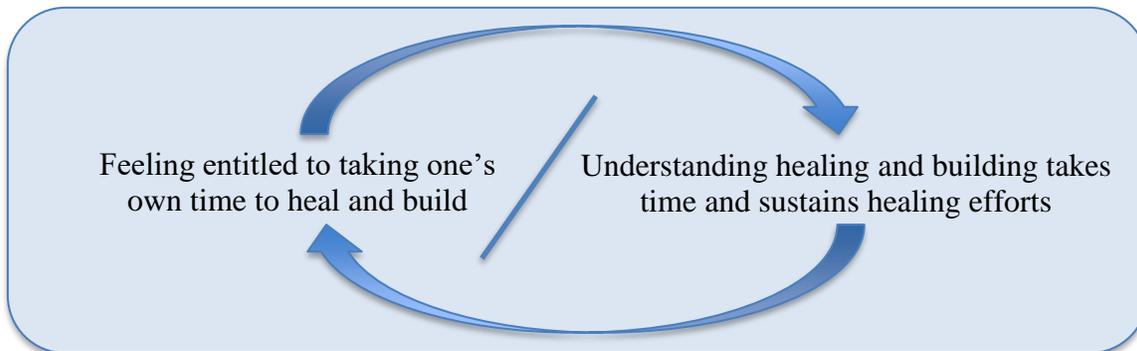


Figure 4.28. HIP linked to taking time to heal.

For the couples with whom this HIP was discussed, the exclusive partner predominantly occupied the position of taking one’s own time to heal and build, and the non-exclusive partner occupied the position of understanding healing and building takes time and sustains healing efforts. When the exclusive partner felt entitled to take the time she or he needed to heal and build, and the non-exclusive partner accepted and understood, and the interaction was repeated over and over, the cycle contributed to “managing ups and downs” and to building the relationship. The exclusive partner felt validated, understood, and acknowledged, and time also allowed for feelings to change. When the exclusive partners took time to heal and build, it signaled the importance of what was experienced, and the non-exclusive partners felt they were providing their partners with something of value (time) to contribute to “managing the ups and downs” as part of building a preferred relationship, and that the partner deserved this. This message invited the exclusive partners to feel cared for, respected, and deserving of taking time to heal, which invited further understanding that healing and building a preferred relationship take time and effort.

Understanding that there would be “ups and downs” along the way, participants said, “You got to work it out, and be realistic about it. And it takes time” (Trey). “Time has passed, and the feelings have diminished, somewhat, but it's still a fact that, yeah, in our relationship, that I'm the guy and she'd feel bad” (Matt). “Just a lot of time” (Sara). “It takes time” (Gloria). “It's going to take some time” (Glen). “It takes time. It's a grieving process” (Anja). “Yes, but as I said, it still might take a little time. But it feels like it's going okay. It takes time for us to heal. There was stuff that was really big, for me” (Sonja). Healing and building a preferred relationship was not a one-time event, and Sonja’s comments recognize that the relationship can feel okay, be moving forward, and require further healing at the same time.

Accessing support. Another way couples “managed ups and downs” was through accessing support. Two thirds of the participant couples accessed external resources to help them “manage the ups and downs” of moving forward together, including reading popular or professional literature on the topic of infidelity, participating in professional therapy, watching TED Talks, talking to friends and family, and participating in online infidelity support groups.

The HIP associated with accessing support could be constructed as selectively utilizing resources for support coupled with respecting other’s preferences in selectively utilizing resources for support (see Figure 4.29).

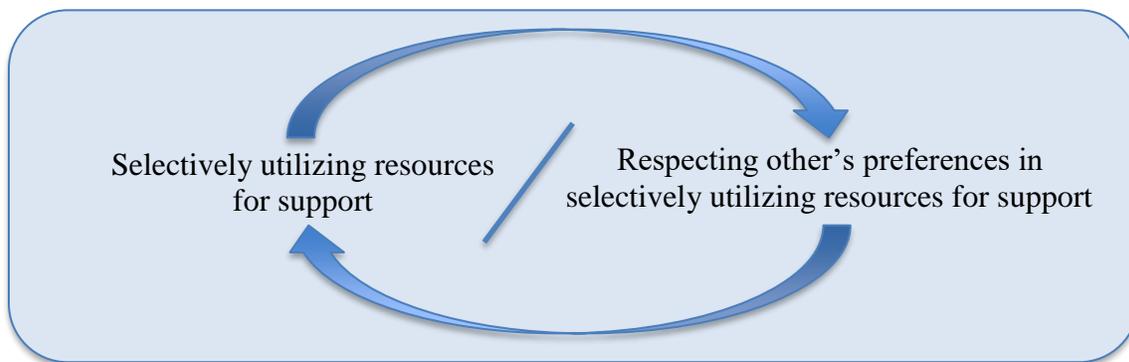


Figure 4.29. HIP about utilizing resources for support.

This HIP was useful for building personal and relationship capacity. When one partner valued and accessed external resources for support, his/her ways of managing “the ups and downs” were developed and/or enhanced. When the other partner respected the partner’s needs and encouraged accessing resources as a way of meeting these needs, the partner felt even more supported. Feeling supported in accessing whatever resources one identified as useful reinforced using resources, which increased individual and couple capacity. Increasing capacity to respond to “ups and downs” benefitted the couple in sustaining and building their relationship during tougher times. As mentioned above, outside resources included establishing online connections, reading, talking to trusted friends and family, and engaging in professional therapy. Respecting other’s preferences in selectively utilizing resources happened in multiple ways. These included attending therapy with the partner, trusting the other to seek social support from those who were supportive of the couple staying together, and exploring together material related to infidelity such as TED Talks. Partners could and did occupy both positions of this HIP and often had different needs or preferences regarding accessing support. A HIP developed when the couple’s interactions (and differences) were coordinated in ways that were useful for them in managing “the ups and downs” of dealing with the aftermath of

infidelity. Coordinating differences sometimes meant compromising and sometimes meant agreeing to the other's preference. The non-exclusive partner in considering the exclusive partner's needs most often took up the position of agreeing to the other's preference.

The four couples who accessed professional counselling identified it as useful: "It was extremely helpful. It's the reason why we're sitting here today . . . I've learned . . . that being open, honest, and talking about it is really beneficial . . . because you uncover so many issues that you didn't realize. I'm a changed man" (Ian). His wife, Gloria, identifies counselling as significant in helping her to decide to stay in the marriage: "I didn't know if I could go back with him. But until we sought out the counselling, and worked it out, and talked out everything, the communication is the key factor in holding a relationship. The counselling really helped." Ian said simply, "it was crucial."

It's been therapy. It's been most helpful for me to gain that understanding that I sought, and I have gained a lot of insight through research and therapy and stories and editorials. I pull a lot of sense from reading other couples and the journey that they went through, and wow, I felt exactly that way, and that makes sense, and there was a video that (our therapist) had shared with us the very first day (Adam).

Cal and Robin accessed multiple resources including professional therapy, reading both on spirituality and infidelity related topics, and watching relevant TED Talks: "And in this case, seeking some help through therapy, and not being afraid to venture into some of the other readings." Cal's approach to understanding infidelity was very similar to how he approached his professional development and any other life experience, and that was to become informed. While he did not speak directly to anyone else who has

experienced infidelity, Cal's comments suggest he benefitted from learning about how others managed:

I think you realize nobody's prepared for it. You've got to do something just like you have to prepare for material you don't know by studying it. You got to prepare for this by recognizing feelings in other people if they've gone through it, or seeing certain statements made, and becoming more familiar with the topic (Cal).

Ian and Gloria found online resources beneficial and these resources helped them not feel alone, which may have been an antidote to their feeling shame and may have opened up possibilities for healing and moving forward together:

We found out there are different support groups online. I was able to find chat threads and discussion forums where others inserted their opinion, so we'd get feedback. It's good to know that other people are suffering through the same things that we are because when she discovered it, and I found out that I was discovered, I felt like we were the only, only people in the world in this situation that happened. As we feel like we're the oddball (Ian).

Half of the couples carefully selected friends or family members to share their infidelity experience with, and two thirds of these couples felt positively supported by those with whom they shared this experience:

Well, it's good to know you have friends that will stand by your side and someone to confide in. Because in a situation like that, it's not an easy thing to deal with, so it's good to have friends that you can talk to about something like this, or any

problem, but this one is really hard to deal with, so it helps to have friends
(Gloria).

Tyrese and Sonja identified their moms as actively encouraging and supporting them as a couple: “Just trying to talk to us and remind us of what we've been through together, and how long we've been together” (Sonja). Referring to his mother’s advice, “She's like, ‘Oh my goodness, man, you better do something. You better do something’” (Tyrese).

The couples who did not access outside sources of support cited lack of belief in therapy, fear of judgment as discussed in a previous section, or reliance on themselves: “We kind of just worked it out ourselves. I don't need to sit and tell some stranger my life story. I think we're adult enough where we can work it out ourselves” (Rick). “It’s no one else's business. It's him and me and that's it because we're the ones in the relationship. We're the one that's fighting for this. So, that's all that really matters” (Tara).

We didn't really talk to anybody really, except each other. We're like best friends because it's been so long that we've been together and known each other. It involved him and I didn't want to lose him, so I wanted to find a way to fix it with him. It just made sense for me to talk to him about it, I guess (Sara).

A few participants mentioned that they would have liked to talk to a close friend or family member, but in all these instances, they feared judgment. “I would've liked somebody to share with besides a psychologist” (Nancy). “I didn't really talk to any women about it at the time, so if my mom hadn't got super mad, like I knew she would have, it would have been helpful, yeah” (Sara).

Adam and Liz both compromised and agreed to each other's preference to coordinate their differences as they managed "the ups and downs." Adam had a clear preference for talking more, and Liz had a clear preference for talking less. To honor the hurt Adam experienced in response to her affair and to respect his need for talking, Liz participated in therapy. With each other's needs and preferences in mind, they both compromised in terms of the extent to which they have accessed professional resources. Adam attended therapy on his own, as well as with Liz, and Liz supported him in this choice: "He just found, I don't know if it's peace by talking and talking and talking" (Liz). "You're not a talker" (Adam). "That's how I was, my whole life" (Liz). Liz also preferred not to tell others as she feared judgment but acknowledged Adam's need to disclose their situation to a trusted friend: "I just had to . . . let it all out. He is a dear and kind soul and he just listened. And that was a stress for Liz, but I didn't care, and that's something I needed to do" (Adam). Talking about what effect talking to this friend had for Adam, Liz said, "That was helpful, for sure." Next Liz commented on her experience of Adam talking to others: "Horrible mostly, (for her), but then it was good because I knew he needed someone." Her statement shows how Liz enacts taking the position in this TIP of supporting Adam's needs in accessing support even when his needs are different than her needs. When Liz accepted Adam's needs related to accessing outside sources of support, he found help, and it benefited the relationship. It is quite a caring and loving gift to support another in the way she/he prefers to be supported, especially when it is not one's own preferred way. This significantly contributes to managing "the ups and downs" and to building a preferred relationship and sends the message that one's effect on the other is being taken into consideration. Infidelity is experienced as an independent

action with relational consequences, and when the non-exclusive partner is able to make decisions for the good of the exclusive partner and the relationship, this facilitates moving forward together.

Developing and enhancing relational habits. Another significant part of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship involved looking at the relationship beyond the infidelity experience to considering more generally how the partners were experiencing their relationships. While healing and repair related to the infidelity continued to be important in moving forward, this sub-theme relates to another shift between the partners toward a focus on the overall relationship, in addition to the infidelity experience. Participant couples talked about the importance of engaging in open and honest communication, addressing longstanding relationship issues, and recommitting to the relationships. The general WIP connected to this sub-theme can be construed as assessing the relationship and identifying areas to develop and enhance coupled with taking steps to develop and enhance relational habits (see Figure 4.30).

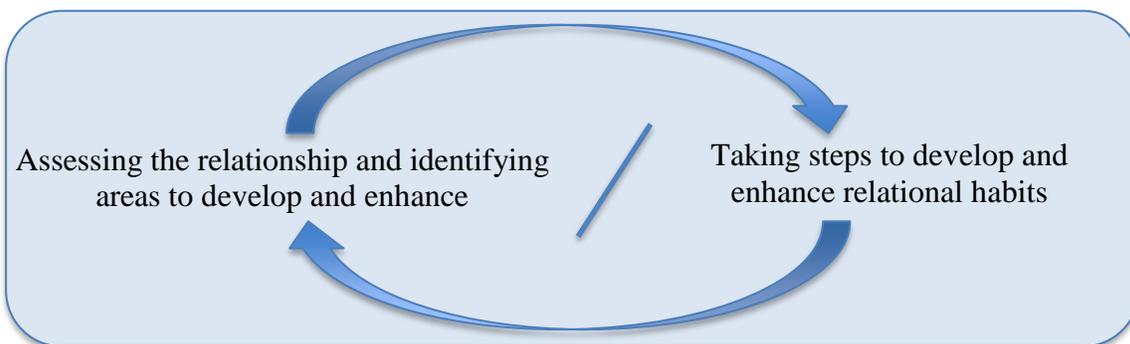


Figure 4.30. WIP associated with developing and enhancing the relationship.

Both partners occupied each position of this more general WIP. The specific WIPs associated with developing and enhancing relational habits are now discussed.

Engaging in open and honest communication. This relational habit involved talking about specific details of the infidelity and about the overall relationship

experience. For some of the couples, talking happened a lot, and both partners valued talking. For one of the couples, talking did not seem to happen much and was not highly valued. For some of the couples, the partners had different ideas about how much talking was necessary, and the couples had varying strategies to manage these differences. One of these strategies was for the non-exclusive partners to defer to the needs and preferences of the exclusive partners when differences in needs were identified. For one of the couples, the non-exclusive partner refused to engage in open and honest conversations despite this being very important to the exclusive partner.

I want to highlight that open and honest communication was a significant and ongoing part of all of the aspects of moving forward together from disclosure to sense-making to building a preferred relationship. I chose to specifically discuss open and honest communication with the theme of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship because open and honest communication seemed more emphasized by the couples as they talked about developing and enhancing relational habits.

The most frequent WIP identified with respect to open and honest communication might be viewed as respecting open and honest communication coupled with engaging in open and honest communication (see Figure 4.31).

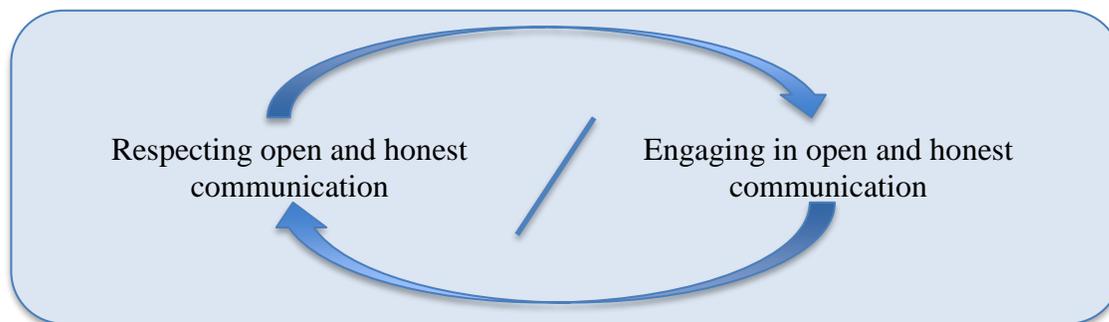


Figure 4.31. WIP involving open and honest communication.

Most partners occupied both positions of this WIP and the specific behaviors enacted by the partners varied. This WIP was more generally described as respecting and engaging in open and honest communication and was purposefully not described in relation to specific communication-related behaviors or strategies. My hope is that the general term might invite practitioners into noticing the effect of the coupled communication-related behaviors rather than on assessing the presence or absence of particular communication practices. So instead of listing specific communication behaviors such as enquiring and listening, I thought it was more useful to consider and be mindful of what respecting and engaging might look like for different couples.

Nancy and Tim seemed to share a strong preference for talking, and they unquestionably linked talking to healing: “We had tons of conversations” (Nancy). “Oh, yeah. Hundreds” (Tim).

And I mean the talking was really human. If I had a question, I could ask it, and I felt safe asking it, and I knew he wouldn't be mad, and he would answer it in an honest and thoughtful way. Like, wow, what a gift. Tim was just there to talk and talk and talk and talk. We did a lot of talking. It was a huge help to me that Tim is so in tuned with me that if I came home and he knew I needed to talk (Nancy). Tim sensed Nancy's need to talk was related to healing: “She told me it made her feel good to ask questions and talk. It was pretty obvious she had to get this stuff off her chest. I just knew it was part of the whole process of us bouncing back.” Nancy framed Tim's openness and willingness to talk as a gift he gave her.

In contrast to most of the other couples, Rick and Carol did not talk very much about the infidelity or their relationship in general, and valued time together and behavioral changes over talking: “I wanted to go away, and . . . Carol did too, so we just don't really talk about it too much. What's there to talk about? It's over and done with. It's past history. Can't go back and change it” (Rick). “Now it's been a while, so he's been good. So, hopefully, he'll stay good. We don't talk about it. What's to bring up? It's done; it's done. Move on” (Carol). Carol and Rick enacted the WIP respecting open and honest communication coupled with engaging in open and honest communication, but what this looked like for them was very different than the other couples previously discussed. They were both honest and open with each other about how much communication was necessary and about what was preferred, and they respected each other's preferences, and these preferences matched. Again, it is important to observe the interactional pattern between the couple and the effect of the pattern rather than evaluating communication from a stance that there are normative or standardized ways as to how communicating should happen.

One of the participant couples was making attempts at developing a TIP around open and honest communication and had yet to be fully successful in stabilizing a preferred HIP. Glen and Maggie both wish they could find a satisfactory way to talk to each other about the infidelity and their overall relationship: “I just kind of over time thought that talking about it, talking through it, and being honest with each other about it, that it would help in a big way to be able to put it behind us” (Glen). “I would love to communicate with him way better. I just, I don't know. It's hard to get out. So I mostly write it on paper” (Maggie). Though each has attempted to talk to one another, they

continue to struggle to find a way that works: “She'll cry and then I will want her to stop crying, so we'll stop talking about it completely. And I'll tell her let's just talk about something else. And we put it off a lot” (Glen). “He's not the easiest person to talk to. When I'm trying to talk to him, he says let's talk about it later. I know it hurts, of course, and you don't want to deal with anything that hurts you” (Maggie). They appear to value open and honest communication and are making some attempts (i.e., writing to the other) to find a path toward engaging in open and honest communication.

For one of the couples, their differing views on the importance and meaning of open and honest communication and their inability to negotiate these differences over time suggest the presence of a PIP that might be viewed as devaluing and resisting open and honest communication coupled with criticizing and pressuring the other for open and honest communication. Anja stated she wished Frank would have

talked to me more, been more open, and showed that he cared about what I was going through and . . . listened to me more and . . . answered the questions. . . . Talk to me about my feelings, whatever it is. . . . But he doesn't do that. He doesn't seem to show that concern (Anja).

Frank explains his view:

I only say what I'm going to say, and no matter what you do to me, I'm not going to talk about it or say it. How I get along with people, what I tell people, and a lot is held back. Like a lot of more private, not as honest (Frank).

At the time of the interview, Anja was continuing to make repeated attempts to get Frank to answer her questions and to listen to her emotional experience, and Frank was maintaining his position: “just let her say whatever she's saying. I'm not a type that's

going to start rationalizing it or getting an answer why. I'm not one to give answers; I'll just say okay." The PIP and ongoing conflict over different needs and preferences with respect to communication seemed to hinder healing and constrained the building of some preferred and mutually valued relational practices for this couple.

For most of the couples, maintaining an open and honest stance around communication was valued and enacted and was a part of developing and enhancing relational habits as part of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship. For the couple who did not highly value talking and their preferences aligned, the amount of talking was not related to healing or relationship satisfaction. The couples in which partners had different needs related to communication found ways to manage these differences, and progress was not apparently hampered. Progress building a preferred relationship appeared to be negatively affected when preferences regarding communication did not match, and the couple could not successfully coordinate these differences. When the couple did not navigate differences successfully, their interactions appeared to have become a PIP that limits possibilities for healing and for overall enjoyment and health of the relationship.

Addressing relationship issues. This was another aspect of developing and enhancing relational habits that might have been present before the infidelity experience and was also a part of dealing with the infidelity. These relational areas included improving communication, developing successful conflict management habits, and enhancing their friendship. For many of the couples in the study, the above changes occurred as part of an overall shift in their relationships toward more mutual and relational processes that privileges both partners' concerns and preferences.

The interpersonal pattern linked to addressing relationship issues can be conceptualized as mutually identifying relationship issues coupled with mutually addressing relationship issues (see Figure 4.32).

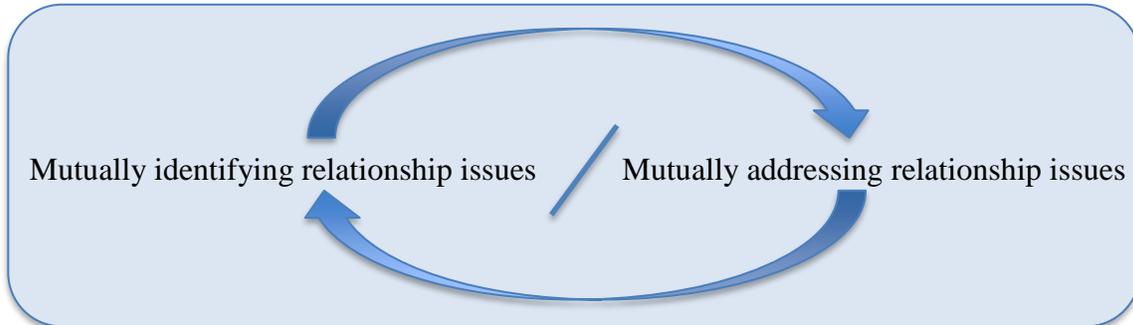


Figure 4.32. WIP linked to addressing relationship issues.

Both partners occupied each position in this WIP. Couples' willingness to identify relationship issues invited addressing relationship issues, and the particularities of the issues and what was deemed as successful resolution depended on the needs and preferences of the partners.

Many couples decided to address how they communicated, particularly related to areas of conflict: "We decided to communicate more . . . talking to each other about . . . our desires, and just things that we want, and try to be a little more open-minded" (Michonne). "Sometimes it'd take me awhile before I'd come out and say something to you. Now I just tell you right away. Yeah, we're able to talk to each other about what we're comfortable with and what bothers us" (Adam).

I think we communicate better now, way better, and way more frequently, now that we know when something's bothering us. I think before we didn't do that, and things would bother us inside, and we'd stew about it or we'd get mad about it or we would feel resentment or something for something. And now we don't. Like if

there's an issue, then we put it out on the table, and we talk about it and find a solution or at least talk about it to get it going. I think that's better (Liz).

While their friendship was a positive part of their 30-year relationship, Rick seemed less engaged than Carol in the responsibility for the overall well-being of the relationship. Since the infidelity experience, he has been more attentive to the relationship and seems more sensitive to how his behavior impacts Carol: “Well, I just think he's a lot nicer and more respectful with me” (Carol). “I'm more patient with her. Before I would kind of blow up a little bit” (Rick). “Well, he doesn't take things for granted about our relationship” (Carol).

As part of developing and enhancing relational habits, Trey and Yasmin have been making time for each other: “Oh, we have our times through the month where we go out on our dates. We get a sitter for our son” (Yasmin). In the following quotation, Trey talks about how Yasmin was asking to go out and spend time together, but he failed to appreciate or support the importance of this for Yasmin. It appears that Trey made a unilateral decision to focus on their child and business instead of making space for Yasmin's need to spend time with him. Trey seems to be letting Yasmin influence him:

I really wasn't paying attention. [chuckle] And probably wasn't fulfilling my role in the relationship in certain areas. And then I had to look at what it was I wasn't doing, where I was not paying attention at. I know where I was not contributing to it. Because a lot of times she would say, we need to go out more. And I would say, no, we need to work on this business, and we do not have the time and resources to go out. But a lot of times, that don't entail having money. It can just be a walk to the beach or something, or a bicycle ride, or a walk (Trey).

Trey's response to Yasmin identifying relationship issues is now to engage in addressing the issues, which reinforces Yasmin's identifying relationship issues.

Ian and Gloria talked about addressing what felt like significant issues in their marriage. These issues were related to who was paying more attention to the work of the relationship, how decisions were made, who felt important in the relationship, and who was accountable for how his/her behavior shapes the other's experience of the relationship:

We talk about it first and come to an agreement, and then we stick to that.

Whereas before if you would have been talking to us about 2 years ago, it would have been just total chaos; we were doing what we wanted to do and drifting apart in different ways, but now as we sit here today, we pull much closer together because of what we call pre-negotiated agreements. We really didn't compromise.

It was like two heads hitting each other (Ian).

Ian describes finding ways to negotiate differences in preferences and to honor agreements that appear to be co-developed.

Recommitting to the relationship. For some of the couples as they moved forward together and engaged in building preferred relationships, their recommitting to the relationships was important. This included deliberately talking about the importance of their relationships and their commitment to building preferred relationships; two couples became engaged to symbolize their renewed promises to each other, and one couple renegotiated their agreement related to sexual exclusivity. This HIP was about loyalty, hope, and the future.

The interpersonal pattern linked to recommitting to the relationship could be understood as engaging in efforts to show recommitting to the relationship coupled with appreciating and accepting efforts of recommitting to the relationship (see Figure 4.33).

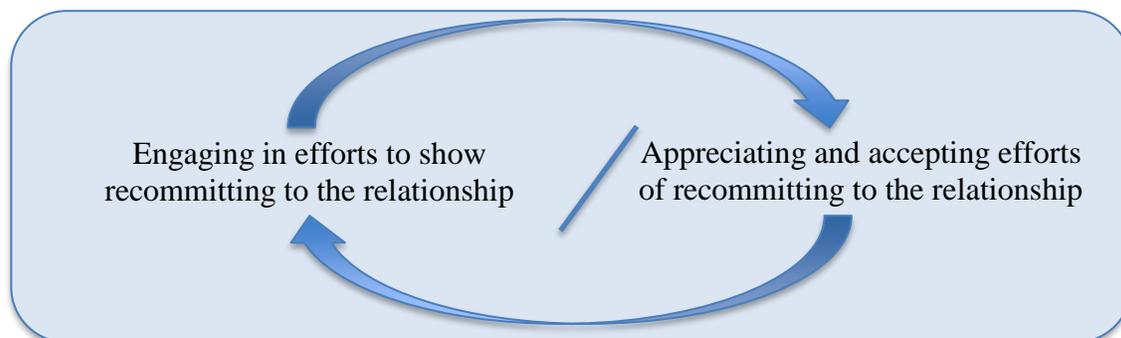


Figure 4.33. HIP related to recommitting to the relationship.

Both partners occupied each position in this HIP. What was important about the particular behaviors is that they were relevant and meaningful for the individual partners and invited responses that showed appreciation and acceptance of these efforts. Partners appreciating and accepting efforts of one's partner's engaging in acts of recommitting reinforced making these efforts. The pattern linked to recommitting seemed connected to trust and progress in healing, and the time needed for the enactment of this pattern was related to how significant the relational breach was experienced and to the meaning and effectiveness of the behaviors of the HIP.

Adam and Liz also talked directly about their commitment to each other and their marriage: "We're only going forwards, so we need to make the best of it now, and enjoy what we have and plan a future and look forward to everything else" (Liz). "Because if we were to not be together, split up, our lives would be incomplete" (Adam). Ian affirmed his commitment to Gloria when he said, "we only know at this point it's being loyal and honest and loyal to one another without cheating on one another and being exclusive." And she echoed her commitment to him saying, "I feel like we're in it for the long haul

and that we're willing to work out any differences that we've had in the past and just move on" (Gloria).

To signify their renewed commitment to each other, Sonja and Tyrese became engaged after their infidelity experience: "We talked about it, and he said that he wasn't going to cheat anymore and that he really loved me. And that's when we got engaged" (Sonja). For Michonne and Duane, part of recommitting to their relationship involved renegotiating their agreement regarding monogamy: "We decided to have an open relationship, and invite other females in from time to time. It works out okay, but there has to be rules and stuff like that, but it works out good" (Michonne). "It works out fine. It works out pretty good" (Duane).

Developing and enhancing relational habits were an important part of building a preferred relationship and were enacted through engaging in open and honest communication, addressing relational issues, and recommitting to the relationship.

Valuing and Expanding Relational Growth

The last theme relates to couples experiencing growth in their primary relationships after the infidelity experiences. Many of the couples not only repaired what was damaged in their relationships as a result of the infidelity experiences (e.g., trust), but also they made their relationships better than they were before the infidelity happened. These changes enhanced the overall well-being experienced in the relationships, and many couples reported enjoying more mutually supportive and satisfying relationships. They specifically talked about shifting relational practices, feeling closer and stronger as couples, and expressing more gratitude for their relationships and their lives in general. Interestingly, most of these couples perceived their relationships to be quite good before

the infidelity experiences and had no intentions of ending their relationships, and yet they were able to develop as couples in generative and valued ways despite the infidelity experiences. This theme was about the wellness interpersonal patterns that the couples have developed and are enacting much of the time in their relationships.

The overall WIP linked to valuing and expanding relational growth can be thought of as noticing and valuing expanding relational growth coupled with engaging in initiatives of expanding relational growth (see Figure 4.34).

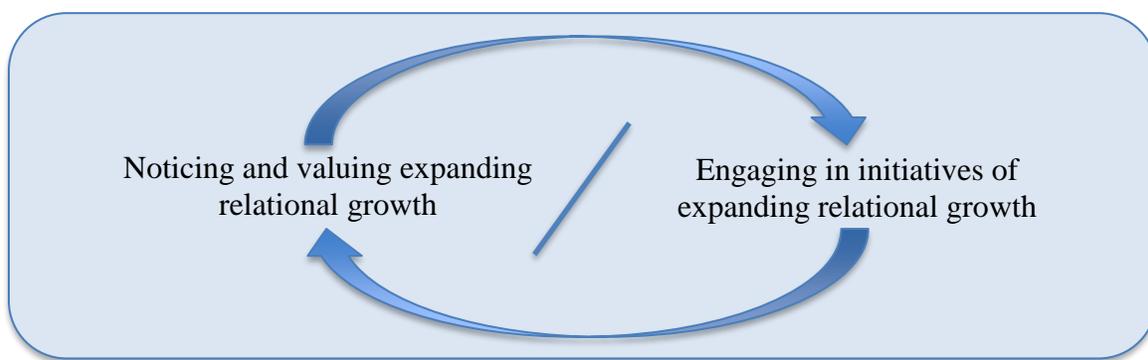


Figure 4.34. WIP related to expanding relational growth.

Through experiencing relational growth, partners seemed to be more mindful that their actions could result in even better relational experiences. Their noticing and valuing relational growth reinforced engaging in ongoing efforts aimed at relational growth, and engaging in efforts of relational growth reinforced noticing and valuing relational growth. Both partners occupied each position of this overall WIP. Growth was experienced in relational interactions related to power, identity as a couple, and gratitude.

Shifting relational practices. Many of the couples talked about increasing their attentiveness and accountability to their partners and the relationships as part of responding to the infidelity experiences. For these couples, this seemed to be more than making amends. It was about updating and expanding some of the ways they went about

their relationships, such as who is taking responsibility for noticing how both partners are experiencing the relationship. Through revising relational practices, couples appeared able to coordinate and support more mutually satisfying relationships. This suggests a change toward respecting both partner's experiences, hopes, preferences, needs, and wants rather than privileging the needs, hopes, preferences, and wants of one partner over the other. This sub-theme relates to power and influence.

The WIP associated with the shifts in relational practices can be conceptualized as feeling entitled to and responsible for expressing one's needs, preferences, and concerns coupled with showing interest in and responding to other's needs, preferences, and concerns (see Figure 4.35).

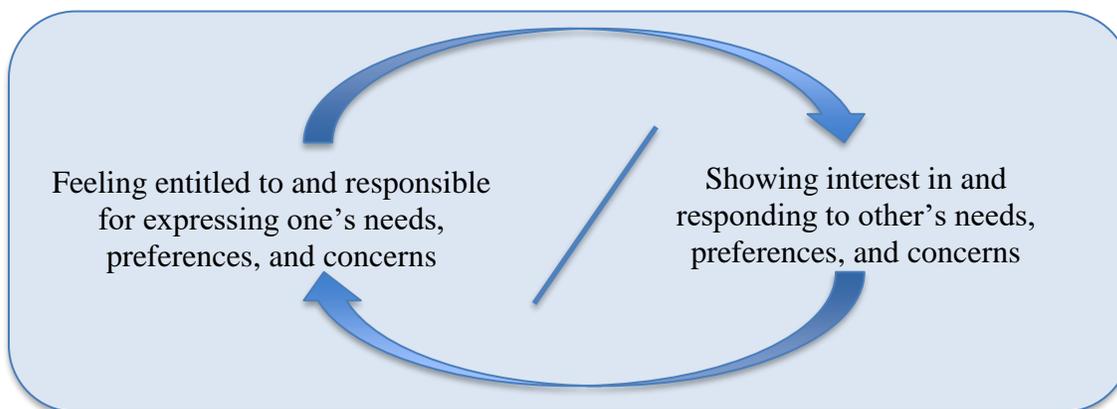


Figure 4.35. WIP linked to shifts in relational practices.

For the couples for whom this WIP was talked about, initially it was most often a change for the female partners to occupy the position of feeling entitled to and responsible for expressing one's own needs, preferences, and concerns, and it was a change for the male partners to occupy the position of showing interest in and responding to the other's needs, preferences, and concerns. When this WIP was stabilized, each partner occupied both positions in the WIP.

Sara made several comments throughout the interview about how important it was for her to see Matt express himself in the aftermath of the infidelity. His increased willingness to share his thoughts and feelings with her and his acts of making himself more visible to her appear to align with a more mutual relational orientation that involves both partners sharing and being open:

I think I know Matt better now, who he is as a person, his emotions, because he hadn't really shown any emotion before that. He's always just been Mr. Cool and doesn't show his emotions kind of thing. So, I think now that I've seen that side of him, I know him a little bit better (Sara).

In the next excerpt, Robin appears to be describing a shift in whose needs are more centered in the relationship and how there is now space for both partners' needs:

I feel like I couldn't be honest with him. I felt I had to tell him what he wanted to hear or else he'd get upset, and "Why don't you feel this way?" or "Why not" kind of thing. Whereas now I feel, through this process, is I honestly feel I can be really honest with him. And whether he likes it or not, he makes me feel like I can be more honest with him because of his changes (Robin).

Through being more honest, claiming her right to have and express her needs, and experiencing Cal as receptive to her honesty and needs, this couple has been able to co-create a relationship that feels good for both of them. Moving forward, they have a "more open, genuine, loving relationship" (Robin), and Cal agrees, "She's right. She's right."

Gloria and Ian not only saved their marriage after the infidelity experience, but also they made it better for both of them: "Well, the way it's changed our relationship is it's made us closer. It's made us work more as a team . . . more collaborative . . . instead

of as individuals” (Ian). “I think the same thing he says. We're team oriented. We try to do things together and we compromise” (Gloria). Ian also talked about how he and Gloria are behaving in respectful ways toward each other, and that this is a significant change that he has made:

We'll talk it out and we'll communicate one-on-one respectfully . . . and not raise our voice and get angry whereas over a year ago, I was angry and furious, and just be mad. Whereas now . . . I'm respectful. I try to have a polite and nice tone at all times. I don't get angry, and I'm open and receptive to what other people have to say, and I never criticize people anymore. Or if someone offers me constructive criticism, I don't get mad. I take it as a learning opportunity (Ian).

Gloria's next statement seems to point to how this couple has shifted away from practices that privilege one partner toward more mutual and relational processes: “I probably was the one paying attention more into the relationship. And he was the one that kind of distracted by other things.” Gloria's earlier statements related to her and Ian being “team oriented” suggest development from a one-sided to a relational orientation. This shift has the potential to support a more mutually shared experience in the relationship.

Some of the specific behaviors of this WIP enacted by the couples in this study are, the following:

Expressing preferences coupled with compromising. Ian and Gloria talked a lot about how they have shifted from acting individually to supporting a more mutually shared relational experience, and one of the ways they enact this is through expressing preferences and compromising: “We figured out the way to do things is to come up with pre-negotiated agreements . . . it is . . . a two-way street whereas before it was just

executing things (without talking first). We over lap and we agree . . . (Ian).

“Compromise” (Gloria).

Initiating collaborative problem-solving coupled with following through with collaboratively generated solutions. Michonne and Duane talked about how they developed the capacity to collaboratively problem-solve. They gave the example of negotiating their agreement of monogamy: “We decided to take a break and figure out . . . where the relationship went wrong” and to make changes aimed at improving the relationship (Michonne). This meant re-negotiating their agreement related to monogamy and being willing to mutually discuss it, being open to collaboratively generating options, and deciding together what might work for the couple: “Speak up, when you want something. I think people do not communicate a lot, so that’s why couples often sneak and lie.” (Michonne). “It works out fine” (Duane). “There has to be rules” (Michonne). And each partner agrees that the “rules” they collaboratively generated related to sexual exclusivity are being followed and that this agreement and process for reaching agreements is working for them.

These WIPs are similar in that partners are focused on making the relationship feel better for both of them. There is a slight difference in these WIPs. The first one is more specific regarding expecting and contributing increased efforts and attentiveness, and the second one is more about relational responsibility for how one’s partner is experiencing the other’s behaviors and efforts, and an appreciation for feeling important and cared for in the relationship. Trey and Yasmin talked extensively about how much their relationship is now centered in their gaze, and how they make time not only for

dates with each other but also for how they consider each other and are influenced by the other's needs for well-being:

I had to look at what it was I wasn't doing, where I was not paying attention at. I know where I was not contributing to it. Because a lot of times she would say, "We need to go out more." And I would say, No. (Trey)

I had to turn it around and say, "What is it that I was doing? What is it that I wasn't doing?" Because there were things that he wanted from me that I was not giving. (Yasmin)

We pay a lot more attention to one another. [chuckle] . . . make sure that we don't go down the path that got us to that point to begin with in the first place because there was a reason for it happening, so let's make sure that doesn't happen again. So, be a lot more attentive to what's going on, and play your role in the relationship the way you're supposed to. (Trey)

I had no idea I was going to be with this spectacular person . . . I never knew I was going to have a family and meet somebody wonderful . . . I did not know what . . . I had, really, until that experience happened. (Yasmin)

I forgot to balance this out, my relationship out, with this and that over here . . . It's all a balancing act. You have to have time for your son, your job, yourself, each other, give her time. It's a balancing act. And sometimes, it gets off balance. A lot of the times it gets off balance because of all the different pressures of life, and what's going on around you, and what's going on with maybe me, or maybe her. (Trey)

I love the way he looks at it . . . the way that he turned it around was amazing

[referring to staying together and Trey taking mutual responsibility for making the relationship better] (Yasmin).

These couplings are my interpretation of what a few of the couples were saying and doing that illustrated preferred and sustainable relational patterns. Again, what is important to note is how the behaviors are coupled and the effect of the patterns, which for this sub-theme was updating relationship practices to be more equal and reciprocal.

Feeling closer, more connected, stronger as a couple. Another way the relationship was perceived as having developed or grown was related to how close and connected the partners feel toward each other and their shared and valued identity as a strong and resilient couple. This seems to relate to a sense of “we-ness” and to the developing story of what is important to “us” as a couple.

The wellness interpersonal pattern connected to this sub-theme can be constructed as noticing and affirming themselves as a close and strong couple coupled with trusting the couple’s strength and closeness as they move forward together (see Figure 4.36).

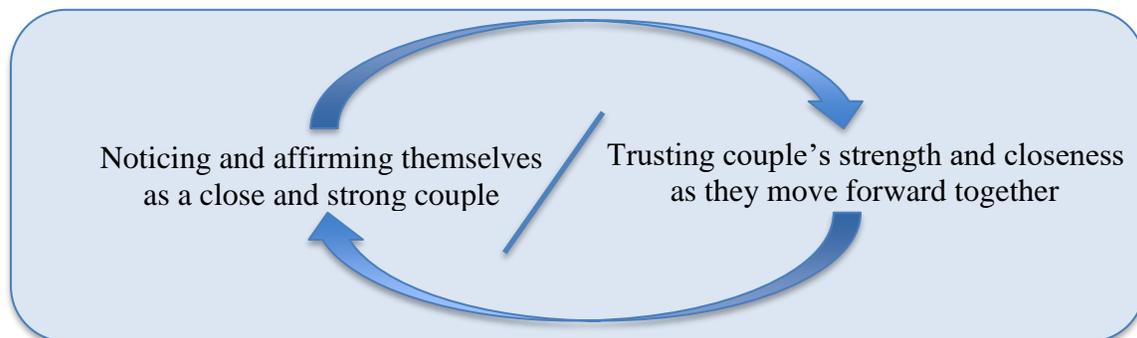


Figure 4.36. WIP linked to feeling stronger as a couple.

Each partner occupied both positions of this WIP, and this WIP may have developed from HIPs related to communicating openly and honestly, rebuilding trust, addressing relationship issues, increasing attentiveness to the partner and the relationship, and garnering lessons learned. When one partner noticed and affirmed the couple as

strong and close, this invited trusting and relying on the couple's closeness and strength as they move forward together to face together whatever else they might experience. As they trust each other and their relationship to successfully face whatever comes up, they feel even closer and stronger as a couple.

Sara talked about how she was experiencing her connection with Matt as stronger and that she is feeling closer to him since dealing with the infidelity: "I think in the end, it made us closer because I would've never thought I would have stayed with somebody who had cheated on me. Just the way he handled it and the way he expressed his emotions like he hadn't before. I think it did make us closer."

After getting back together, Michonne and Duane intentionally engaged in making their relationship better than before the infidelity experience and have the sense that they have accomplished this: "It wasn't bad before, but things are better now" (Duane). "Yeah, things have been so much better. We're planning on having some children pretty soon. And we have a few vacations planned for this year, so things are pretty well" (Michonne). Through addressing their issues and concerns, Michonne and Duane have developed a sense of themselves as a strong couple who can manage whatever might happen in their life: "We're pretty strong . . . people go through real things, so you have to be really strong to be one of those couples and get through" (Michonne). "It just makes it stronger (referring to the relationship). I feel like if anything was to ever happen, I'm feeling like we could probably get over that too" (Duane). It appears that their identity as a strong couple supports future planning like having children together.

Tim talked about feeling more connected to Nancy: “It just seemed to make us tighter again—we were still a good couple, but we were doing our own things a little bit. We didn't have a bad relationship before. We have a better relationship now” (Tim).

Tyrese also views his relationship as stronger after dealing with the infidelity experience and seems to perceive this growth as an outcome of working through a tough time together and that getting through things together can enhance feelings of closeness:

Well, I think it has made us develop into more of a stronger type of a relationship. Because you have to go through something to bond. It's like if you're two friends and you're running around outside on the street having fun, you've not been tested. You get into a scrap out there and then both friends cover each other's backs. And see those things. It seems like it's negative, but those things actually create a stronger bonding (Tyrese).

Robin also notices and appreciates how her relationship with Cal has developed: I think, for us because it has come out, and we have dealt with it, I think our relationship is just that much better. It's that much stronger. We know we want to be together. We enjoy being together. We want to experience things together. We want to be there for each other for the rest of our lives (Robin).

Increased sense of gratitude. Some of the couples noticed that gratitude for their relationships and for life in general has grown since the infidelity experiences. It seemed that actively engaging in gratitude for life in general and the relationship in particular fostered a sense of relational accountability that may support ongoing relational growth and therefore be a protective factor for the relationships moving forward.

The WIP associated with gratitude can be conceptualized as reflecting on one's relationship and life and feeling gratitude coupled with expressing gratitude through words, actions, and choices that honor what one is grateful for (see Figure 4.37).

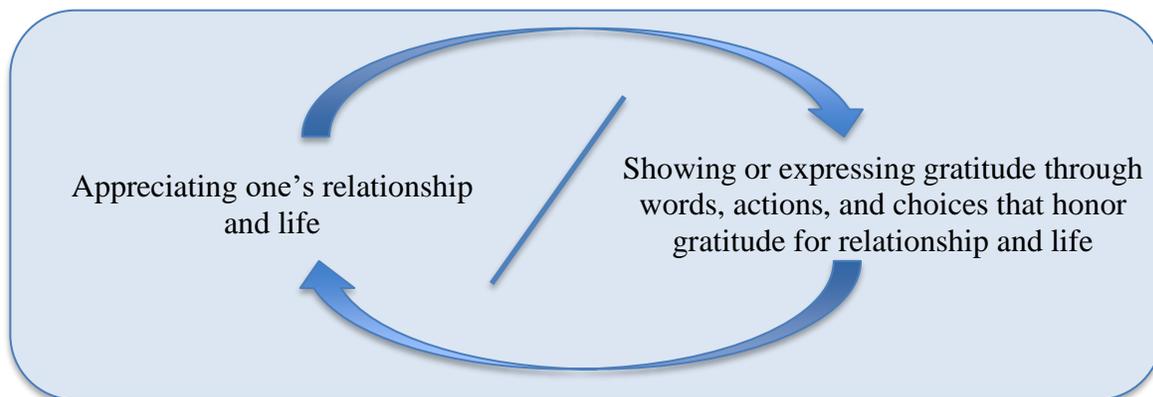


Figure 4.37. WIP linked to gratitude.

Both partners occupied either of the positions of this WIP. Appreciating one's relationship and life and feeling gratitude invited showing and expressing gratitude, which was performed verbally, and also through pursuing opportunities that were felt to be important. Expressing gratitude through words and decisions that reflect what one is grateful for reinforces appreciating one's relationship and life.

Cal seems to be talking about being more grateful for his relationship in this excerpt: "Maybe in an affair, if there's still any stuff left between the couple, it may have taken this for you to realize what's really there." Robin also talked about what was different between her and Cal after dealing with her affair and suggests that her appreciation for Cal and their relationship has grown:

So it's like any unfortunate thing that happens in your life, hopefully you learn from it. You never want it to happen again, and it brought us a lot closer, a hell of

a lot closer, and it's opened him up to communication, which he was not open to. He is 180 degrees different. More open, genuine, loving relationship (Robin). Each talked about reflecting on what she/he is grateful for and then using this experience to remind them to act in ways that align with what they are grateful for. And continuing to express gratitude may have been a protection against taking each other for granted, which appeared to be a factor in the infidelity behavior for some participants.

Along with increased gratitude for each other and their relationship, and increased awareness of one's impact on the other, Liz and Adam also seem to have made decisions to live life to the fullest: "We're more open to new things. Not taking things for granted, greater appreciation for life, not wanting to waste it" (Adam). "We were always together before, but I think we make more time, and we appreciate the time more. I think we appreciate each other more, what he does, and I do, and how we help each other out" (Liz).

Nancy and Tim complete each other's sentences as they discuss their experience of increased gratitude: "Sometimes we talk a bit more about gratitude now, what we're grateful for and stuff" (Nancy). "Yeah, and maybe not just in a relationship but just," (Tim) "just in general" (Nancy). "It makes you focus more on what you're grateful for" (Nancy). They give the impression they are grateful for their relationship becoming even stronger. And talking about gratitude for life in general is something they share between them and perhaps keeps them mindful of what there is to be grateful for, which helps sustain what they give their care and attention to. What is valued is held with care.

The Achievement of Participant Couples

The couples in this study are staying together after an experience with infidelity and are planning on sustaining their relationships. As they are moving forward together, they have engaged in making sense of their experiences, initiated acts of healing, and made their relational experiences more generative and mutual. They have identified the importance of pausing before making decisions, have taken time to address the harm that was caused by the infidelity, and have accessed resources and capacities, both individually and as a couple, as well as having sought additional resources ranging from talking to a friend to professional therapy to reading. They also talked about having to identify and disregard certain culturally held ideas or assumptions about how to respond to infidelity. Moving forward is neither a straight path nor a simple process and at times is both difficult and complex. Though I have presented the themes and the IPs in a sequential way, this does not mean the process was sequential or that couples enacted one IP at a time. Many of the themes are important throughout the couples' processes of moving forward and many of the IPs were enacted at the same time. While some of the order makes sense such as disclosure and expanding relational growth, the order of presenting the findings is not intended to suggest a linear path for moving forward. Moving forward together in a relationship after infidelity appears to require both flexibility and strength, and is possible. Many of the couples in this inquiry not only stayed together and healed the hurt and harm caused by the infidelity experiences; they made their relationships even better.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

This inquiry was designed to learn how couples move forward together after infidelity. As previously described, this is a frequently occurring, painful problem for couples and one of the most clinically difficult for therapists to work with (Whisman et al., 1997). Despite the prevalence and significant impact of infidelity, couples' stories of dealing with this problem are underrepresented in the research-based literature (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2010; Reibstein, 2013), and as a result, I was inspired to find a way to add these important stories to this literature. My hope was to contribute knowledge to help practitioners understand how couples move forward together after infidelity and that such knowledge might be useful in therapeutic conversations. A further aim of this inquiry was to join other practitioners in a wider reaching conversation about infidelity with the hope of influencing some of the dominant discourses about infidelity that currently guide the thinking of both therapists and individuals directly affected by this problem. In this way, we might decrease the shame and isolation experienced by the individuals involved.

In the preceding chapter, I presented the participant couples' stories, and this is where I stop my representation (Frank, 2005) of their stories and consider the implications of what was told. "By passing [the participant couples' stories] on to new audiences, we pave the way for possible new meanings" (Hydén, 2013, p. 231), and these new meanings might be useful for other couples dealing with this problem. In this chapter, I discuss what this inquiry adds to the practice- and research-based literature

regarding infidelity, as well as clinical practice, while acknowledging the limitations of this inquiry, and considering how this conversation might continue.

Inquiry Results within the Context of Existing Literature and Openings for Practice

Shortly I discuss each theme in relation to the literature that I reviewed for this inquiry and then I identify possible practice implications. First though, I highlight what I think is most important about the findings. For the couples in this inquiry, moving forward together after infidelity is made possible through enacting relationally attuned and accountable interactions. By relational, I mean that the individuals are attentive and attuned to their actions in relation to their partners (Silverstein, Bass, Tuttle, Knudson-Martin, & Huenergardt, 2006). My research explains that it is within the relational space, or what happens between the partners (McNamee, 2004), that transformation and healing occurs and involves multiple, varied, and repeated processes and interactions. Many of the interactions and processes presented in Chapter Four were co-occurring, happening mostly in small moments, although sometimes as big events, and the relationship was foregrounded. While the choice of a partner to participate in infidelity was an individual act, the impact was relational as are the ways the couples are moving forward together. Very simply, “with infidelity, partners suffer together, and they must heal together (Fife et al., 2008, p. 316).

While the importance of healing together is acknowledged in research and practice-based literature, frequently the discussion of how healing happens tends to be characterized in individualizing language. Often, relational healing is approached from the standpoint of what each partner must do separately with little emphasis on how the coupling of the separate behaviors and tasks are linked. This is what is significant and

different in this inquiry. I have utilized a relational lens from which to view how couples move forward together and to discuss the findings. After situating these relational healing interactions within the current literature, I will highlight noteworthy openings for practice.

Discussing the five themes. The findings in this inquiry have previously been identified and discussed to some extent either in the significant body of professional practice literature or in the limited research-based literature. The findings of this study lend empirical support to the variables associated with healing after infidelity and sustaining the primary relationship and help illuminate the processes involved.

Linking to existing literature.

Finding out and experiencing initial impact.

Finding out. Allen et al. (2005) noted that there is little known about how decisions are made to disclose infidelity, and this study extends this knowledge as the participants who disclosed felt it was important to explain their decisions, which lead to telling their partner about the infidelity. The reasons for disclosing were relationally focused as the participants who disclosed, and interestingly all were women, did so hoping to make the primary relationship better and to counter the ways the secret of the infidelity was impairing the relationship (Schneider, Corley, & Irons, 1998). Consistent with the literature, “voluntary disclosure represent[ed] a relationship-accountable gesture which can signal some measure of relationship resolve, spark hope, and initiate healing work (Butler, Seedall, & Harper, 2008, p. 272). The more complete the initial disclosure, the more space opens up for staying together, recovering, and enjoying a positive relationship (Allen et al., 2005). Disclosure rather than discovery or finding out from a

third party appears to play a role in the relational outcome of moving forward together (Afifi, Falato, & Weiner, 2001), however, discovery is more typical, and yet many couples sustain their relationship.

Experiencing initial impact. In line with the existing literature on the impact of infidelity (Baucom et al., 2009; Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Cravens et al., 2013; Dean, 2011; DeGroot, 2014; Glass, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Gorman & Blow, 2008; Hall & Fincham, 2009; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Hertlein et al., 2005; Vossler, 2016), the participants in this study described the initial aftermath of finding out about the infidelity as devastating, both personally and relationally. While the impact was significant for both partners, it was by far more difficult for the exclusive partners. There was wide variation in how long the feelings of devastation lasted, and the extent to which the exclusive partner felt influenced by the devastation. This is also consistent with the infidelity literature (Baucom et al., 2009; Lusteran, 1998; Perel, 2017a; Scheinkman, 2005). The initial impact for these participants was linked to what the infidelity behavior was, their beliefs about infidelity, their expectations of the primary partner in the relationship, and their interactions with the partners upon discovery. One finding that may surprise practitioners was that the devastation experienced by the exclusive partner was not predominantly related to the extent of the infidelity behaviors. For one long term cohabitating engaged couple, the non-exclusive partner was involved in an “affair” over a number of years, and the exclusive partner described “less” devastation than the exclusive partner in a dating relationship whose partner had a “one-night stand.”

It is well documented that the initial aftermath is experienced as a crisis and is often characterized as an emotional roller coaster (Olson et al., 2002). Often one of the

first responses to learning of the infidelity is for a partner to question whether or not the relationship is over. One way this study extends the literature on infidelity is to reveal how partners, mostly the non-exclusive partners, responded to the crisis about whether or not the relationship would continue through their expressing a clear preference for the maintenance of the primary relationship. These expressions needed to be repeated and appear to help open space for the relationship continuing despite the initial shock and disbelief felt by the exclusive partner.

As mentioned in the literature review, much of the professional practice literature considers infidelity a relational trauma, and a trauma-informed approach is often used in clinical practice (Glass, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004). The description of the impact and effects provided by a couple of the exclusive partners appeared consistent with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, and not for most others. This finding supports Baucom et al.'s, (2009) approach of “conceptualizing affairs as *potentially* [emphasis added] interpersonally traumatic events” (p. 14) for therapy planning. Interestingly, none of the participants referred to their experience as traumatic in the interviews.

Choosing the primary relationship. The second theme identified in the findings related to whether or not couples were going to try and move forward together. Moving forward together involved dealing with the infidelity partner, and the participants in this study were clear that the beginning of healing was possible when the infidelity relationship ended. Harm was compounded when the infidelity relationship did not end after the infidelity was known by the exclusive partner, and these findings are consistent with the literature (Clark, 2013; Vaughan, 2010). Disagreement exists regarding whether or not practitioners should engage in therapy with the primary couple if the infidelity is

ongoing (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Weiner-Davis, 2017a), and some practitioners are taking a flexible approach based on the needs of the couple (Baucom et al., 2009; Weiner-Davis, 2017a). Making clear distinctions about the purpose of engaging in therapy with couples when infidelity is ongoing is important. Healing the harm caused by the infidelity is more possible when the infidelity relationship has ended, and couples may benefit from therapy when deciding to end or facilitate ending the infidelity relationship (Baucom et al., 2009; Weiner-Davis, 2017a).

For most couples in this study, making an explicit decision to stay together and being clear about their reasons for doing so were also a significant part of moving forward. In the decision-making process, couples looked ahead and beyond the infidelity experience and reflected back to their shared history in order to find reasons to sustain the relationship. The existing infidelity literature (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Abrahms Spring & Spring, 2012; Lusterman, 1998; Weiner-Davis, 2017b) addresses aspects related to decision-making about sustaining the relationship or not, and in this literature, decision-making tends to be discussed as an individual act/responsibility. While most of the non-exclusive partners felt the ultimate decision to stay together would be made by the exclusive partners, for the participants in this inquiry, there was a significant interactional component to the decision-making process. As discussed, most of the non-exclusive partners stated clearly that they were motivated to sustain the relationship, willing to engage in the hard work of repairing the relationship, and hoped that their actions might be thought of as “fighting” for the relationship. They reminded their partners of what was valued in the relationship, what was yet to be, and acted patiently. When exclusive

partners noticed these efforts, they were invited to pause and consider the relationship as more than the infidelity experience.

One of the findings that is discussed to a limited extent in the literature is the degree to which societal messages about infidelity are involved in the partners' process of choosing to sustain the primary relationship (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Atwood & Seifer, 1997). Some scholars have written about how expectations of primary relationships and beliefs about infidelity impact how infidelity is experienced (Perel, 2017a; Reibstein & Richards, 1993; Scheinkman, 2005; Vaughan, 2003), and many of the participants specifically discussed how the dominant discourses around infidelity impacted decision-making about sustaining the relationship. Participants feared judgment for wanting to stay in their relationships, held the (incorrect) belief that most relationships end after infidelity, and were aware of gendered double standards related to infidelity. How individuals relate to societal messages is a choice based on many factors, is context specific, and not all couples are aware of how immersed and influenced individuals are by the dominant discourses related to infidelity. To decide to stay in the primary relationship, participants had to identify these discourses and disregard them in favor of counter stories based on what they valued instead. For some participants, this meant going against family scripts about responding to infidelity and sometimes meant standing alone. Some participants did not disclose the infidelity in their social network believing that others would not support their decision to stay. Individuals make comments about infidelity without knowing to whom these comments might relate and they have an impact. Consider the impact for a couple dealing with infidelity and struggling to decide whether or not to share this with friends if they heard a friend make a comment, referring

to friends or family members who participate in infidelity, “that they are dead to him”. This comment has the potential to shape the couple’s experience of infidelity.

Making sense of the infidelity experience. For participant couples, making sense of the infidelity experience was a significant part of moving forward together, and it is widely discussed in the infidelity literature that meaning making is an important part of sustaining and healing the primary relationship (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Clark, 2013; Glass, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Olson et. al., 2002; Perel, 2017b). Most of these scholars link meaning making to understanding *why* the infidelity happened, and there are detailed guidelines for practitioners of areas to explore that might help with facilitating couples’ understandings of what lead to the infidelity (e.g., see Baucom et al., 2009). Contextual, individual, partner, and relational factors (Allen et al., 2005) are all areas that therapists can help couples explore in understanding what lead to the infidelity. Some practitioners have discussed meaning making as associated with forgiveness (Gordon et al., 2004), which is identified as one of the important variables that supports healing (Clark, 2013; Miller, 2009), and meaning making is also central to the trauma literature, which as previously discussed is often applied to the experience of infidelity (Glass, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Heintzelman et al., 2014). Often meaning making is discussed as a phase of healing, which follows dealing with the initial crisis of disclosure (Gordon et al., 2004; Olson et al., 2002).

For the participant couples in this inquiry, sense-making went beyond understanding why the infidelity happened and was an ongoing process. Their seeking to understand what lead to the infidelity was an intense part of the early aftermath of discovery, and then the focus of sense-making shifted to also examining their own beliefs

about infidelity (i.e., is infidelity the worst harm in a committed relationship?), exploring what the infidelity might mean for their relational story/identity (i.e., infidelity is not the title of our relational story), and learning lessons from this experience (i.e., don't take relationships for granted).

One of the significant findings is that sense-making involved discussions of couple identity and was a relational activity. These ideas are largely absent in the infidelity literature, and these findings support as one possible practice resource, engaging couples in sense-making beyond understanding the reasons why the infidelity happened. To engage clients in conversations that widen the scope of sense-making, Penn, Hernández, and Bermúdez (1997) “remind therapists to locate their work with couples in the couples’ unique cultural meanings concerning infidelity” (p. 170), and specific areas to explore include gender roles, expectations of what marriage and committed relationships should be, socioeconomic status, race, and religion (Penn, Hernández, & Bermúdez, 1997).

Prioritizing and building a preferred relationship. The participant couples reported that it was important to heal the harm related to the infidelity, and for most of the couples, it was also important to enhance their overall relationship experience. The variables or factors that the couples in this inquiry talked about that were useful to them in prioritizing and building a preferred relationship are consistent with those discussed in the extant literature on healing after infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Bird et al., 2007; Blow & Hartnett, 2005b; Clark, 2013; Gordon et al., 2004; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Miller, 2009; Olson et al., 2002). What is different about this inquiry is the emphasis on how the healing variables are enacted between the partners. In much of the infidelity

literature, healing “tasks” are mostly listed separately according to who participated in the infidelity and who did not. Looking at the coupled behaviors of the partners and the many different effects, practitioners then have multiple openings to explore with couples.

Healing in connection. While there were various ways the partners specifically enacted the assorted healing factors, the partners clearly described the most important aspect of healing as engaging in these meaningful acts together. Some of the healing factors discussed by the participant couples included taking responsibility for causing harm and for repairing the harm, expressing remorse and regret, demonstrating shame and distress for causing harm, and apologizing. Some practitioners characterize acts associated with acknowledging that one’s partner deserved better as acts of demonstrating empathy for the partner’s experience (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Clark, 2013) and as important for forgiveness (Gordon et al., 2004): “The more the involved partner can acknowledge the legitimacy of the spouse’s pain and apologize for the transgression, the more likely that the spouse can forgive” (Allen et al., 2005, p. 119). Forgiveness as an important variable for healing was identified in this inquiry, but for these participant couples, forgiveness had different meanings and purposes and was achieved alongside many other initiatives of healing in connection, which included trust building and increased attentiveness to the primary relationship.

These are not new ideas to practitioners who work with infidelity, and there are robust practice and research-based resources to guide work with couples regarding acknowledgment, personal responsibility, apology, and forgiveness (Abrahms Spring & Spring, 2012; Allen et al., 2005; Gordon & Baucom, 1998, 2003; Hall & Fincham,

2006a; Miller, 2009; Schade & Sandberg, 2012; Woldarsky Meneses & Greenberg, 2014).

Rebuilding trust is frequently discussed in the infidelity literature (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Bird et al., 2007; Blow & Hartnett, 2005b; Clark, 2013; Gordon et al., 2004; Heintzelman et al., 2014; Miller, 2009; Olson et al., 2002) and was recognized as crucial for healing by the participant couples. Trust was established over time through many acts of partners behaving in trustworthy ways, and when partners viewed the non-exclusive partner as having competency in trustworthiness, space opened for making the relationship better, not just repairing the harm. Another aspect of healing identified as important by these couples was increasing attentiveness to the relationship and doing nice things for each other. This is also described in the infidelity literature as behaving in loving or kind ways toward one's partner (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Glass, 2003; Scuka, 2015; Weiner-Davis, 2017b).

Managing “ups and downs”. Findings of this inquiry support the existing literature that healing from infidelity is not a step-wise process, and that finding ways for managing the “ups and downs” is important in healing and building the preferred relationship. The ways identified in this inquiry included dealing with reminders, living by one's own principles, allowing time, and accessing support. Responding to “triggers” or reminders of the infidelity are discussed in the literature (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Baucom et al., 2009; Olson et al., 2002) and are often talked about as individual behaviors or tasks such as self-care (Baucom et al., 2009; Weiner-Davis, 2017b). The couples in this inquiry talked about how they responded to reminders, both individually

and together, and that both dealing with reminders alone or together were resources for the couple.

Compassion, kindness, and empathy for each other are discussed in the existing infidelity literature as variables of healing after infidelity (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Clark, 2013), and the participants in this inquiry discussed these variables in relation to sense-making and managing “ups and downs.” It seems that when acts of kindness, compassion, and empathy were connected to what the couple valued and stood for in their lives, and they were noticed and appreciated by their partner, they were more likely to continue to be enacted.

Time was a variable that came up in the findings related to decision-making about the primary relationship (time as an investment) and in terms of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship. The importance of time for healing is well substantiated in the literature (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Battleson, 1997; Heintzelman et al., 2014) and appears connected to honoring the pain that was experienced and to appreciating that healing is a process.

Some of the participant couples in this inquiry identified accessing support in addition to the primary partner as helpful in managing “ups and downs” as they healed and built a preferred relationship. Scholars have identified the important role that couples therapy can play in providing support to couples dealing with infidelity (Dupree et al., 2007; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Miller, 2009; Perel, 2017b), and there is evidence for the effectiveness of couples therapy with this problem (Bird et al., 2007; Gordon et al., 2004; Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2008, 2010; Marín et al., 2014). While there is confidence that couples counselling has much to offer couples facing the aftermath of

infidelity, it is important to highlight the findings related to accessing support that counselling was one way of many of dealing with the “ups and downs” of prioritizing and building a preferred relationship. Other ways included accessing social support through online resources as well as family and friends. Accessing social support is a protective factor for not developing post-traumatic stress disorder (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).

Developing and enhancing relational habits. This sub-theme related to focusing on healing the infidelity experience and shifting beyond the infidelity to looking at how the partners were more generally experiencing their relationship. It is well documented in the professional practice and research literature that counselling with couples facing infidelity may include dealing with additional relational issues (Bird et al., 2007; Gordon et al., 2004; Gottman & Gottman, 2015; Hertlein & Weeks, 2011). The general issues that couples in this inquiry addressed were related to how they communicated, how they engaged in conflict management, and how they looked after their personal friendship.

The participant couples in this inquiry discussed the importance of engaging in open and honest communication as a specific variable related to healing infidelity and as a more wide-ranging practice across their relational interactions. While open and honest communication was an essential relational practice in moving forward together, participant couples emphasized it as they discussed both getting the details of the infidelity including what happened and why, and as they engaged in building a preferred relationship. Engaging in open and honest communication is likely the most frequently discussed healing interaction in the infidelity literature and is an element of the clinical models for treating infidelity (Baucom et al., 2009; Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Weeks & Fife, 2009) and of the general guidelines for practice with this problem (Bird et al., 2007;

Dupree & White, 2010; Scuka, 2015). Vaughan (2002) proposed that open and honest communication is the single most important healing factor for couples, and Weeks and Fife (2009) name open and honest communication as the process through which trust and intimacy is restored.

Another finding related to developing and enhancing relational habits was couples recommitting to the primary relationship. For some couples, this might include renegotiating their agreement on monogamy (Nelson, 2012; Perel, 2017a), and practitioners might find it useful to raise this with client couples. Some couples openly discussed their agreement and understandings of monogamy and this led to other conversations about their expectations of relationships and about not taking the relationship for granted. Some couples discussed commitment in terms of hopes for the future, loyalty, and co-constructing shared goals.

Valuing and expanding relational growth. As discussed in Chapter Four, this last theme relates to growth in the primary relationship and was associated with shifts in power, with a sense of “we-ness” as a strong couple and gratitude. A few scholars and practitioners who work with infidelity have noted that couples not only heal the harm of infidelity but also that they can enhance their overall relational experience (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Charny & Parnass, 1995; Olson et al., 2002; Perel, 2010), and the findings in this inquiry corroborate this. Many of the participant couples described enjoying relationships that were mutually supportive, and one of the ways that relationships were made better was through shifting and equalizing the power dynamic in the couples’ relationship. This has been discussed directly in the literature related to infidelity by a limited number of practitioners (Abrahamson et al., 2012; Huenergardt & Knudson-

Martin, 2009; Williams, 2011; Williams et al., 2013; Williams & Kim, 2015; Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013). The participant couples discussed more reciprocity and power sharing as an enduring wellness pattern that was related to a number of healing and relationship building initiatives including rebuilding trust and dealing with relational issues, as well as offering and receiving forgiveness. In all of these initiatives, both partners' experiences mattered, not one dominating the other. In view of the finding that these participant couples identified a shift in relational power as important for moving forward together, practitioners are encouraged to evaluate their clinical approach regarding how issues of power are addressed. Practitioners who directly address power dynamics in couples' relationships are in a position to "help . . . couples develop a shared vision of new relational possibilities by exploring and operationalizing previously unscripted egalitarian ideals as they move forward" (Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013, p. 279).

Given the application of the trauma model to the experience of infidelity, it makes sense that scholars would explore whether or not the concept of post-traumatic growth could characterize individuals' experiences after healing from infidelity (Heintzleman et al., 2014). Post-traumatic growth involves feeling stronger, relating to others with more authenticity and freedom to be one's self, and having a greater sense of intimacy (Heintzleman et al., 2014), and the participants in this study did describe personal growth as a result of "getting past" the infidelity. However, they seemed to emphasize couple growth and in particular, a strengthening of their *relational* identity or sense of "we-ness," which has not been directly investigated or significantly conceptualized in the infidelity literature: "We-ness, or relational identity stories are those stories partners

develop and tell themselves, each other, and others with whom they interact about their lives together” (Strong, Rogers, & Merritt, 2014, p. 401). Conversations about relational identity are already a resource for many practitioners, particularly narrative therapists but are largely absent in the infidelity literature. These conversations might be a powerful way to address the effects of stigma and judgment and to support the counter ways the couple is responding to the infidelity in general. Generating a strong sense of “we-ness” or “us” can become a part of the relational identity and perhaps act as a protective factor in dealing with any issues the couple may yet face. Though not specific to infidelity, Rogers-de Jong and Strong (2014) investigated relational identity conversations and couples’ sense of closeness and found that “talking about we-ness . . . increased their sense of closeness” (p. 368). Rogers-de Jong and Strong (2014) remind us that identity stories are co-constructed in conversation, so what practitioners invite into the conversation is developed and can be a resource for the couple.

Lastly, participant couples talked about experiencing an increased sense of gratitude for their lives in general and their primary relationships in particular. Gratitude is appreciation for what one has and is characteristic of post-traumatic growth (Heintzelman et al., 2014), and a number of the participant couples discussed relational growth as linked to gratitude for the primary relationship. In the infidelity literature, gratitude is mostly discussed from an individual rather than a relational experience.

Openings for practice. In this section I highlight some of the possibilities for practice based on the five themes and on intersections across themes. First, the findings lend support to using the themes as entry points in conversations with couples, to paying attention to how couples particularize and enact the various themes and sub-themes and

to track the utility of the themes. Second, in view of the shaping effects of the dominant infidelity discourses, it is important to interrogate assumptions about infidelity held by both the couples with this experience and the therapists working with this problem. Third, the trauma lens is one practice resource for working with couples dealing with infidelity and practitioners need to explore other, experience near ways to relate to this problem. Fourth, the findings support using an approach to infidelity that centers relational attunement and viewing the relationship as more than the infidelity experience. Fifth, this research encourages the use of couple identity conversations and connecting to one's own principles as therapists help couples move forward together. Sixth, couples benefit from social support and resources including and in addition to therapy and therapists should be able to help couples discern how to access such support. Seventh, power is an important concept in working with couples and infidelity and therapists should incorporate issues regarding power into their work with couples dealing with infidelity. Lastly, as a result of the findings of this inquiry, therapists can hold hope that couples dealing with infidelity can heal and make their relationships even stronger. For further discussion of openings for practice, please refer to Appendix I.

Implications for Research

Limitations. While this inquiry clearly lends support for a relational approach to the problem of infidelity, there are limitations to the findings, and there is more to understand about couples dealing with infidelity. First, my initial recruitment strategy of using my professional network was largely ineffective. And despite the success with the second recruitment strategy using Craigslist, I was unable to recruit any same sex couples though I had hoped to. Second, I did not ask the participant couples to perform member

checking for development of themes. Third, the participant couples were not involved in the construction of the IPs beyond telling me how they moved forward together which I then interpreted. It could have been more collaborative and more “experience near” (White, 2007) to have invited participant couples into co-constructing and drawing the IPs. I was however, reluctant to ask more of the participant couples. Fourth, in view of the literature review and of my focus with the particular participant couples involved, the findings of my inquiry are limited to Western culture and couples who want to sustain their primary relationship. There are multiple stories of infidelity and this inquiry focuses only on the story of the primary couple moving forward together.

Fifth, in two of the interviews, the internet connection was intermittent, and I had to switch from using both audio and video to audio only until the internet connection improved, so in these interviews, there were a few minutes when I did not see the couple as I was talking to them. Sixth, while the primary relationship is constructed and reconstructed in the context of wider social relationships, I did not explore how other relationships were important in creating preferred relational identities beyond exploring if the couples told anyone else and if they experienced telling others as a resource for moving forward together. Seventh, only one interview per couple was conducted and conducting multiple interviews with the couples would have generated richer data.

Eighth, decisions associated with outsourcing the task of transcribing the interviews were made in line with qualitative research practices including uploading interviews in an encrypted format and checking the security and confidentiality practices of the transcription service. While the practice of transcribing interviews was discussed in

the context of the overall consent to participate in the inquiry, I did not discuss that the task of transcription would be outsourced.

The ninth limitation pertains to my decision to use thematic analysis as one of the methods of data analysis. There could be some debate about whether or not constructing themes is consonant with a framework that foregrounds relational and dialogic processes. Thematic analysis is a generic approach to analysis to be used from any theoretical orientation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) and is congruent with my philosophical stance because of how I used it in my inquiry.

The themes were created from the data that were generated in a conversation in which I participated to co-construct the story of moving forward together after infidelity. The themes were descriptions of the data, constructed in ways that were immediately usable for therapists and did not need any knowledge translation. To ground my interpretations in the dialogic process, the themes were presented with excerpts of what the participants said. Another way I used thematic analysis in a relationally oriented way is that I offered the themes and findings as potential conversational resources and not as generalizable, absolute, or replicable truths (Losantos et al., 2016).

The last limitation relates to the use of the IPscope as a method of data analysis. While I believe the IPscope is an innovative method for data analysis, I am the first practitioner to use the IPscope for data analysis and without a precedent, it does not have a baseline, scientific or otherwise for comparison. As the first to use the IPscope in this way, there is the possibility that I might have missed some things. And, others might struggle to appreciate the utility of this method because they are not familiar with it. As a

practitioner with prior experience with the IPscope, extending it to a research context made sense and is congruent with a relational constructionist approach.

Some readers may question whether or not the IPscope fits with an inquiry shaped by relational constructionism. It could appear that I was attempting to detect structures (IPs) and that using the IPscope places me as a researcher in an outsider position as observer expert categorizing participants' interactions in different interpersonal patterns and that this position disconnects me from my intended dialogical perspective. However, this was not how I used the IPscope or its intended use. The focus of the IPscope is on relational processes and IPs are understood as moving, ever changing, and growing relational processes (Losantos et al., 2016) not as lasting structures. I constructed the IPs from what the partners told me about how they are moving forward together after infidelity and focusing on "interaction and social practices" (Losantos, 2016, p.31) is one of the principles of relational constructionism applied to research in psychology. I engaged in reflexivity about the IPs I constructed and what my constructions might mean for the participant couples and for therapy practice. The findings of this study constructed as IPs could offer openings for practice with couples dealing with infidelity without the need for knowledge translation. This criterion of goodness (Gergen, 2012) is in line with relational constructionist research practices. When practitioners using the IPscope adopt the stance that the conceptualizations are just one way of understanding interactions and should be grounded in what the clients/participants say, it helps balance power in the relationships and privilege all experience and expertise (Losantos et al., 2016).

Researchers who are interested in exploring relational processes/interactions between individuals across a number of contexts, including between researcher and

participants, might consider using the IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b). Exploring and describing what people do together and what that doing accomplishes is difficult and the IPscope offers one option for presenting the complicated dynamics of joint action.

The categories of the IPscope can be useful in discerning the particular actions and sequence of actions involved in relational processes. These discernments, especially TIPs, can be useful in enabling movement in interactions toward more preferred and positive patterns such as HIPs and WIPs. Conversations that include therapeutic effects are a part of a TIP (Tomm, 1991). While clients can enter TIPs on their own with the intent of making positive and preferred changes, to clarify the distinctions between the IPs and the potential utility, I will use an example involving a couple and a therapist.

While the exclusive partner wants and needs answers and information to understand and make meaning of the infidelity experience, the behaviors criticizing, demanding and dismissing are likely to invite responses of withholding and or withholding answers which will reinforce criticizing, demanding and dismissing (See figure 5.1).

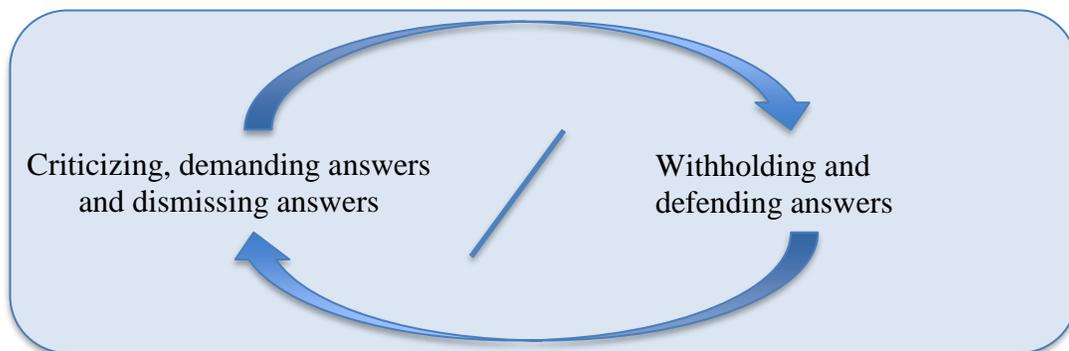


Figure 5.1 PIP

This PIP is constructed in the conversation with the couple and to build a useful PIP, paying attention to strong negative emotions and the behaviors that seem to correspond with these emotions is useful. Clients may express their concerns through

complaining or through describing what they think is the “problem” and in many other ways. Asking individuals circular or triadic questions can help discern which behaviors might be involved in the PIP.

This PIP is likely to be quite distressing and to help move partners into healing interpersonal patterns, therapists listen to what partners say they need, wish for, hope for or prefer that might provide them with relief from the problems and therapists pay attention to which pieces of these “solutions” might be already happening (Wulff et al., 2015). Based on what partners talk about and what might be possible for them, a HIP can be constructed and might be, inquiring respectfully and acknowledging answers coupled with acknowledging the need for answers and providing answers (See figure 5.2).

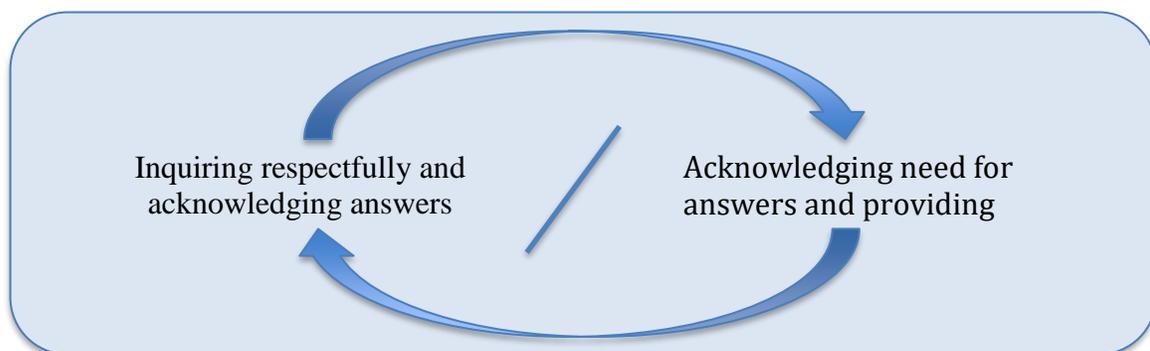


Figure 5.2 HIP

The clinical focus becomes how to shift from a PIP to a HIP and that is where a TIP is useful. With the HIP in mind, a therapist considers what intervention or conversational resource might be useful and when this is put forth to clients and negotiated in the conversation, this joint action can become the TIP. As therapists will have experienced, not all interventions or conversational resources fit for all clients and TIP attempts can be taken up, declined or expanded on (Wulff et al., 2015). One TIP involving partners and a therapist is exploring the actual effects of the PIP and evaluating

whether or not the effects are desired or intended effects through asking reflexive questions (See Figure 5.3).

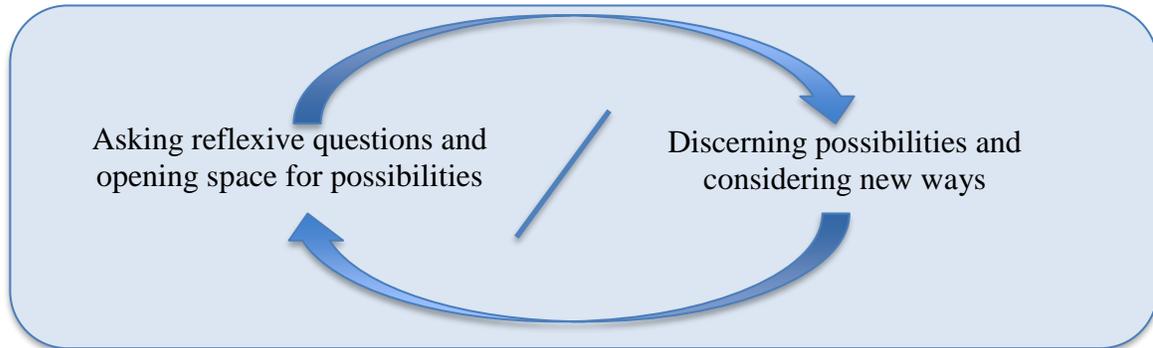


Figure 5.3 TIP

The therapist occupies the position of asking reflexive questions and the clients occupy the position of examining the effects of one's own behavior and what they might do instead. When therapists invite clients into reflexively examining their behavior clients can become more aware of the effects of their behavior and space opens up for considering alternate ways of interacting. If an IP is constructed by the therapist that is not a priority or concern for the client and the client and therapist are not able to negotiate the importance or relevance of the IP then the IP needs to be abandoned, or reconstructed. Again, considering the relational focus of the IPscope, and the practical utility, I think it is a compelling choice for data analysis.

Possibilities. This inquiry shows that talking to the couples with the lived experience of infidelity is important for those practitioners working with this problem, and one of the strengths of this inquiry is that research with *couples* who have experienced infidelity and sustained their relationship *is possible*. Just as one of the roles for therapists working with couples with this experience is to hold hope for a satisfactory relationship, perhaps this inquiry offers some hope to other researchers who would like to study couples and infidelity. It was my experience, with the appropriate recruitment

strategy, that there were couples who wanted to talk about their experience, and one other possible outcome for this study might be that other practitioners/researchers consider using online options such as Craigslist for recruitment for their qualitative studies. This can be relatively low cost and wider reaching when compared to other recruitment methods typically available to practitioner researchers (Lane, Armin, & Gordon, 2015).

You may remember that one initial response to talking with couples who were moving forward together after infidelity was worry about “re-traumatizing” the participants, and there is always a risk in a conversation. As part of representing the participant couples’ voices in this inquiry, I feel compelled to convey that 11 of the 12 couples indicated that participating in this inquiry was a good experience for them. For the 12th couple, the exclusive partner indicated that the conversation was “ok,” not bad, but that she had hoped that her partner might reveal some yet undisclosed details and he did not. Here is an example of what one exclusive partner said about participating in the inquiry. She sent me a note of thanks for the compensation gift:

Thank you for aiding in my process of healing, talking about it to someone I don’t know helped in a good way, we are not going to fight afterwards and (he) let me have the funds, you sent, guess he still feels a little bad, but hey, let’s hope he continues, lol, thanks (Sonja).

I think Sonja experienced Tyrese’s gesture regarding the compensation gift as a relationally accountable act that signaled to her that he understood the importance of enacting ongoing caring. And perhaps if he continues to feel bad, this might act as a reminder of her pain and of his commitment to care for her. If I was following up with this couple, I might ask Sonja, “What did it say to you about how Tyrese feels about your

experience of healing when he let you keep the gift?” and to Tyrese I might ask, “What is it like for you to know that this act had this effect on Sonja”? These questions make explicit one’s shaping effect on one’s partner, and since attending a workshop with Tom Stone Carlson in January 2017, I have been using more of these questions in my work with couples dealing with infidelity.

Regarding another couple’s experience, a couple who did not participate in counselling to deal with the infidelity, nor did they reveal their experience to anyone else, the exclusive partner identified the conversation as “therapeutic” (Trey) and the non-exclusive partner said,

I got so much out of it. It was very good, it really opens up things that I’d never really thought about before . . . and we covered so much that I really answered a lot of my own questions. I could really feel the healing coming out. Because again, we never spoke to anyone about this. So, thank you (Yasmin).

And they wished other couples to know that they can get through this: “you really have to want to, be mature about it, and to know that you can fix it” (Trey).

Most of the participant couples explicitly stated they wanted to participate in the inquiry to help other couples dealing with infidelity. Other reasons included the following: participants wanted the opportunity to talk to a therapist for the first time, to take time to reflect on their experience, and were curious about how they “compared” to other couples dealing with infidelity. One couple specifically wanted to talk to me about my experience with couples renegotiating their agreement on sexual exclusivity after infidelity. Participant couples wanted to “give back” or help me and other therapists out of appreciation for how therapy had helped them deal with this difficult problem. It was

interesting to me that in half of the couples it was the non-exclusive partners who raised the idea of participating in this inquiry with their partners, and in the other half, it was the exclusive partners who introduced this idea to the couple. For all of the partners who were the first to consider participating in this inquiry, they identified thinking about what this might be like for themselves, for their partners, and for their relationships. Hearing a little about what participant couples said about their experience in participating in this inquiry, I hope researchers interested in couples' experience with infidelity will feel encouraged to pursue this important work.

Continuing the Conversation

Combs and Freedman (2012) write that through the "linking of lives" (p. 1035) of people with similar lived experiences, their stories are more likely to be heard in society, hence, the possibility of changing some of the dominant discourses about infidelity, such as infidelity always leading to relationship dissolution, that add to the negative effects of the experience. I hope that practitioners will continue to engage couples moving forward together after infidelity about how they are doing this and to make more of these stories known.

Through engagement with this work, here are some areas of further potential inquiry:

1. Talking to couples whose experience is similar in terms of time since disclosure or discovery might reveal even more deeply what recovery or moving on looks like at different time intervals for couples sustaining their relationship after infidelity.

2. Comparing couples who are in the same type of committed relationships to couples in other types of committed relationships might help with understanding whether

or not type of committed relationship is correlated with moving forward together after infidelity. Couples in this study were in a variety of committed relationships including married, common-law, and relationships in which they were living apart, and some might suggest that levels of commitment to the relationships evidenced by being married or living together might influence moving forward together after infidelity.

3. Examining if there is a relationship between length of time together as a couple and how couples experience infidelity.

4. Exploring whether or not different “types” of infidelity experiences require different healing initiatives or different healing interactional patterns.

5. Examining further whether or not the concept of post-traumatic growth can be applied to couples after infidelity given the application of the trauma model to treatment of infidelity.

6. Examining processes involved in change after infidelity, specifically the relational processes of couples’ experiences moving forward after infidelity warrants further study. What are the “tipping points” of change?

7. Engaging in conversations with couples at multiple times over their moving forward together and exploring the meaning of the infidelity for their relational identity at different points.

8. Exploring to what extent, if any, the experience of moving forward after infidelity is different for couples who engage in counselling and for couples who do not. Comparing two groups based on those couples participating in counselling or not might help practitioners better understand what value counselling adds to couples dealing with infidelity.

9. Exploring how infidelity impacts other relationships, in addition to the primary relationship, such as relationships with friends or family or colleagues.

10. Exploring how couples decide to participate, or not, in therapy services. It was interesting to me that more than half of the participant couples did not engage in therapy, and I am curious about the reasons why couples consult us or not. What might this suggest to practitioners about how to adjust our approach to the common problem?

Another hope I have is for practitioners to continue to engage in reflexivity about what we *know* about infidelity and how we have come to this knowledge and how it fits for the couples with whom we meet. Taken-for-granted understandings and practices related to infidelity can be limiting and insufficient for this complex problem.

I also wish we might generate ways of talking about and working with infidelity that challenge the practices of judgment, isolation, and shame which work to make the effects of infidelity even worse.

Despite spending several years in close contact with the problem of infidelity, I continue to struggle with how to relate to this problem and what words to use to discuss it. Many participant couples did not name or label their infidelity experience as anything other than “it.” This occurred to me as one way perhaps of making the experience smaller or less significant, and both the participant couples and I struggled to talk about their experience of addressing the harm. Talking about infidelity as something that is resolved or healed presupposes that there is a “last chapter” to this story, and perhaps for some couples there is, but for others, their story of infidelity is being constantly revised, and terms suggesting ending will not work well. I ask myself multiple times in a session what I am presupposing or privileging when I am thinking of what to ask and how to respond. I

reflect upon what my questions/invitations and responses are drawing forth from the partners, and how the couple is experiencing these developments in the conversation. I continue to explore how we talk about this problem both in and outside the therapy room and notice what words get used. When others learn of my inquiry, one frequent response is “oh that’s very difficult for couples,” and previously I would have likely said, “yes, it is.” I now think more purposefully about whom I am talking with and what else I might say to open space for multiple ideas about this problem.

Thinking about what was not said. I was clearly focused on exploring what was useful for couples as they are moving forward together after infidelity, and my focus shaped the research context and therefore the understandings that were possible. Couples presented their stories to me knowing that I am a therapist hoping to learn more about how to help couples move forward together, and the stories they told would have been influenced by who I am, the participants’ relationship with me, and my hopes for this inquiry. Even though I asked participants to talk about anything they felt was important, my invitation to share what was helpful and healing was emphasized in the way I recruited participant couples, the account I gave for my inquiry, and the ongoing interview interaction with them. I have written a detailed account of the understandings generated in this inquiry and what they might mean for our work with couples with this problem. At this point, I want to acknowledge what I choose not to hear and to consider the implications of this.

As I looked back over transcripts, there is little discussion of what is *not* going well in the participant couples’ relationships. This might be because I did not ask much about problems or significantly follow up on any openings from the participant couples

about problems, and possibly because there are not many stories of what remains difficult about the infidelity. While I listened and acknowledged when couples mentioned difficulties, I did not explore these aspects of their experience as fully as I did when they told stories of when things were going better or how they moved beyond the difficulties. If I had also examined or made more space for pathologizing interpersonal patterns, I would have had different conversations with the participant couples and different understandings would be generated. What stories might have been told if I had created a context in which problem saturated experiences were more fully explored both on an ongoing basis or at a time when the relationship might have been suffering more from the impact of the infidelity.

What is not resolved or repaired or restored after infidelity and what do partners do, if anything, with these aspects of their experience? Many exclusive partners I have worked with live with some level of uncertainty and vulnerability after an infidelity experience, and I remain curious about how they move forward while experiencing these lingering effects. Some participants talked about “accepting” that this happened, and others talked about “letting go,” and purposefully focusing on the future and on the positive aspects of the relationship. What is the “tipping point” when individuals stop looking back and focus more on looking forward in the relationship. I recognize this can be different for everyone involved, but I wonder what signals or cues I might notice that tells me this is happening and how this noticing might be useful. This is when I start to wonder about individual histories and the effects of personal stories, and while individual history is important and relevant, the relational idea that experiences, stories, and identities are “subject to continuous change through interaction with and among others”

(Gergen, 2006, p. 43) is more useful. I remain committed to a relational orientation as I consider individual experiences, and it is useful recalling that “as the current relationship unfolds, it serves to reform the meaning of the past” (Gergen, 2006, p. 43). While I did not ask a great deal about participant’s individual histories I hope other researchers can find ways to open space for individual stories and situate them in a relational orientation that honor the personal experiences while not individualizing the understanding of them.

I am also aware of the tendency to focus on the pain of the exclusive partner, and of the idea that revisiting the infidelity experience might be “retraumatizing.” This idea impacted my recruitment and likely influenced both the couples and me in the interviews leaving me wondering what the non-exclusive partners did not say about *their* experience. How do they incorporate this into their personal narrative, or do they? What, if any, parts of the infidelity experience do they miss? Some non-exclusive partners have told me that they have had experiences with their infidelity partners that they have not had with their primary partners and would not bring these experiences into their primary relationships. What might it mean, if anything, for the primary relationship if details or valued experiences related to the infidelity are not discussed or introduced to the couple’s understanding of their relationship? What remains unsaid between the primary partners and why? I wonder if I could have found a way to ask about what couples might be unwilling to talk about with a researcher rather than a therapist, and alternately, to a therapist, but not a researcher. I wonder what they might have said if I had asked them how talking to me individually, rather than together, might have been different?

While infidelity is not only about sex, it can be a significant part of the experience, and I was surprised that the participant couples did not speak more about

their sexual relationship after infidelity despite invitations from me. Another related topic I am also thinking more about is monogamy and exclusivity in relationships. One participant couple talked about renegotiating their agreement on exclusivity, and I wonder if other partners would have liked to raise this but did not. I talked about this chapter with a friend who identifies as polyamorous, and she referred to the discourse that it is more shameful to be in a primary relationship that is polyamorous than it is to participate in infidelity. What does this societal message mean for our work with couples dealing with infidelity?

I asked participants how they decided to participate in the inquiry, and their answers were interesting and encouraging. I did not ask them for their thoughts about why other couples might not want to participate or what they imagined were the good reasons that couples would have for not wanting to talk about their infidelity experiences with a therapist. Given the difficulty researchers have recruiting couples with this lived experience, I think these might have been useful questions.

I have a clear bias toward couples healing together, yet I wonder when healing alone might be useful. I have worked with exclusive partners who prefer to engage individually in therapy and who do not want to work through some aspects of their experience with their partners, so practitioners need to find a balance between inviting individuals to consider their options and respecting their choices. I am aware of my own ideals about relationships, and not all couples strive for the same ideals in relationships nor value the same relational ways that I do. What I live by contributed to the context of the inquiry; therefore, particular understandings were possible, and others were not.

Practitioner as researcher. I hoped to develop as a practitioner through conducting this inquiry: first, in response to making sense of usable research knowledge to guide my clinical practice, and second, through becoming more intentional and skilled at engaging in research processes that guided this inquiry and correspond to practice, as well. Almost immediately after conducting the research interviews, I noticed I was improving at asking questions. When I poured over the transcripts, I practiced what I would ask next, or what I might ask instead, or how I might ask the questions more “relationally,” and it was interesting to me that I wished I had asked more, not less, in the interviews. The power of a good question is important in both research and practice (Wulff & St. George, 2016).

In my work with infidelity, I have been practicing asking “more,” and for the most part, couples have been responding positively, and when they do not, I have slowed down and changed my focus. Some examples of what “more” might look like in the conversation include the following: exploring alternate history of the relationship questions, exploring the problem saturated stories about the infidelity from a relational perspective by linking the stories to effects, assessing the effects and shared experiences of the partners, and asking questions about preferred relational connections. I have been making these invitations earlier in conversations while simultaneously making space for the pain and harm to be expressed and acknowledged. And while I still feel some trepidation about moving too quickly, I trust that I can act to remedy the conversation should these invitations be declined. I work harder to clarify expectations and intentions of partners’ actions and invite partners to reflect on the effects of their actions. I more routinely ask partners to reflect on the focus of the conversation and for what we might

talk about instead. Prior to this inquiry, I thought about and was guided by some of the practice models for infidelity, and while I still hold these ideas as guidelines, I am more focused on what is being generated immediately in the session and am continually surprised by what unfolds. For example, several of the exclusive partners in my inquiry did not want to know the identity of the “affair” partner, and most of the couples I meet with tell me that they believe that the identity *must* be made known in the primary relationship. As a result of this inquiry, I now make more space for what information is important to the specific individuals and hear any statement of “what should be” as an opening for a therapy conversation about “what might be, what might be preferred, and of the possible effects.”

Before I did this inquiry, I hoped I would feel much more confident and knowledgeable about how to help couples with this difficult problem. In retrospect, I think I was hoping to construct a clearer path that I could use with couples, and now my confidence is linked more to belief in the unfolding and generative process of the conversational activity. I am more comfortable with uncertainty and trust the relational process rather than relying on particular interventions.

One outcome of participating in this inquiry that I did not anticipate is a change in how I approach research literature. I now pay more attention to the methodology section in articles whereas previously I skipped ahead to the implications section scanning for “pearls for practice.” I now look for “the degree to which research opens space for practitioners to change, creating something that was not there before” (Wulff & St. George, 2016, p. 32). Also, I now more strongly believe that “research is an everyday activity” (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, p. xiv) and am reflecting differently on how to

improve my practice with greater emphasis on how I am viewing a situation and how else I might view it. I assumed I oriented toward practice ideas as resources and not as how things should be, but as a result of this inquiry, I realized I was viewing certain practices related to infidelity as “how it was” and not always taking a look and then a second look at how this fit for the particular couples. Influenced by McNamee and Hosking (2012), I assess the quality of knowledge claims I am making or using to guide my work. This inquiry has helped me better see patterns in my own work (Wulff & St. George, 2016), and moving forward, I aim to participate in ongoing research related to my practice, not so formal, but more intentional, and this IP might be thought of as researching one’s own practices coupled with trying out alternate ideas and practices.

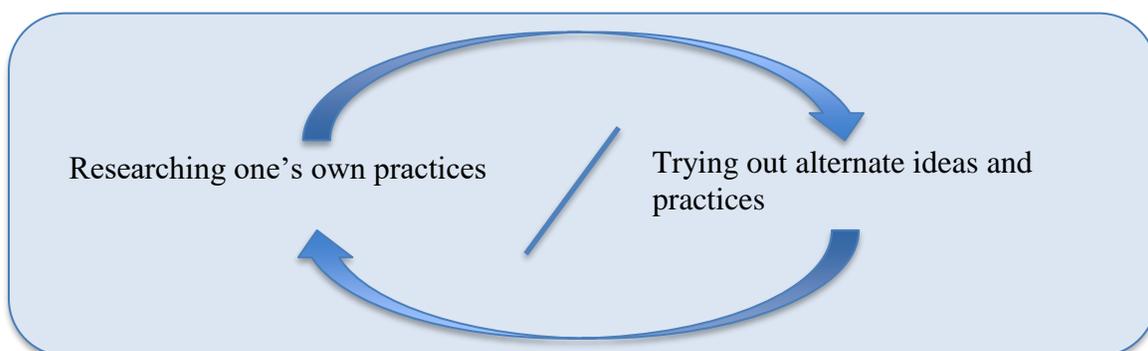


Figure 5.4 IP related to impact of research inquiry.

Key Message From This Research.

The most significant contribution this inquiry adds to the existing literature is to endorse, invite, and sustain an ethical stance of relational responsibility when working with the problem of infidelity. This inquiry offers practitioners an in-depth look into the many ways couples enact various initiatives related to and oriented toward healing as they are moving forward together, and the inquiry supports holding practice knowledge as “good ideas” as opposed to “truths.” Practitioners may have their own unique and

trusted ways of holding a relational orientation in their work with couples, and at this point, I want to show again one possible practice resource that I have found useful for holding a relational orientation.

Working from a relational orientation in clinical practice. A relational orientation means holding the idea “that our stories of who we have been and who we can be wouldn’t exist outside of our relationships with other people; they are shaped by our experiences with others and our sense of how they perceive us” (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1042). Lives and relationships are continually being constructed in interactions with others (St. George et al., 2015c). The findings of this inquiry support the idea that healing after infidelity and moving on together in healthy and preferred ways is more possible when the partners are enacting relationally responsible and accountable ways. Being relationally responsible and accountable means adopting an ethical position that our everyday actions have shaping effects on whomever we interact with and that these effects can diminish or enrich the stories and therefore the lives of others (Carlson & Haire, 2014): “Working from this position, we acknowledge enormous complexity and fluidity in human relationships” (St. George et al., 2015c, p. 17).

While relationships are complex and fluid, they become stabilized over time when mutually reinforcing behaviors become coupled and the couplings become patterned (Tomm et al., 2014). These patterns can be preferred and contribute to health in relationships, or they can be problematic and contribute to difficulties in relationships. As systemic and conversational therapists focus on the interpersonal space, or what happens between individuals, to understand couple distress, clinicians could benefit from practice resources that orient toward viewing this space and discerning the problematic behavior

and interactions. One such practice resource that is useful for distinguishing patterns and identifying the specific behaviors that are coupled and mutually reinforcing in the pattern is the IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b).

The IPscope. The IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b), discussed more fully in Chapter Three, and in the limitations section of this chapter, is a cognitive tool used for “distinguishing and describing Interpersonal Patterns (IPs)” (Wulff et al., 2015, p. 55). The IPscope “includes both perceptual and conceptual elements and is intended to help construct interpersonal patterns ‘in one’s mind’s eye’ that are ordinarily hard to see” (Tomm, 2014b, p. 18). The focus is on the interpersonal patterns made up of particular coupled behaviors. More specifically,

interpersonal patterns or IPs, are formally defined as repetitive or recurrent interactions between two or more persons distinguished by an observer (often a systemic therapist) that highlight the coupling between two classes of behaviors, attitudes, feelings, ideas, or beliefs that tend to be mutually reinforcing. (Tomm, 2014b, p. 19)

Over time, repeated and reciprocal patterns can become taken-for-granted ways that family members treat each other in the overall relationship. Again, these patterns are not necessarily preferred or healthy and are often what inspire people to consult with therapists. The IPscope simplifies complex relationship elements, so that practitioners can focus on specific experiences as targets of change. It allows practitioners to notice and hold tentative and shifting constructions of what individuals are struggling with and to revise and update these constructions in the process of the therapeutic conversation.

The standard practice for making the IPscope specific and concrete is to draw the linking of the coupled behaviors using two arching arrows separated by a backward slash and to describe the behaviors using gerunds (Tomm, 2014b). One common IP in this inquiry was the following:

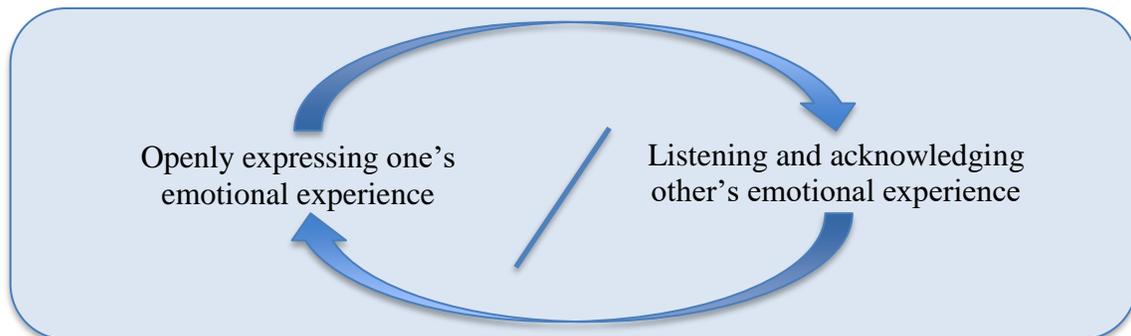


Figure 5.5 Example of a common interpersonal pattern

The IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b) can be a useful heuristic for any systemic practitioner, and those practitioners with a relational constructionist approach (McNamee & Hosking, 2012) to therapy may find that it fits seamlessly with the view that each conversation with couples is an opportunity for meaning and actions to be constructed or deconstructed (Strong, 2007). Strong (2007) conceptualizes therapy interventions as “invitations or proposals made, then hopefully, worked out (or negotiated) in the back-and-forth dialogue” (p. 86), and these interventions can be generated when the problematic or pathologizing interpersonal patterns (PIPs) are made more visible to practitioners.

Again, the IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b) is one tool to help practitioners focus on and organize clients' experiences. All clinical tools and practice resources have this shared aim, and this tool has the unique capacity to depict the complexity and fluidity of human interactions (St. George et al., 2015c). For example, one participant couple talked about a healing interaction composed of one behavior that when viewed individually

looked harsh and critical, but the behavior was experienced as a bid for compassion by the partner, and the coupled response of expressing empathy made the interaction a healing pattern. If the individual behavior was interpreted as “harsh” and responded to with a different behavior such as defensiveness, this could lead to a negative interaction. This highlights the importance of noticing and tracking the effects of individual behaviors. I write about individual behaviors, but I want to stress that all behaviors are relational and can only be understood in the sequence of actions between the individuals who enact the individual behaviors. Every behavior is both an invitation and a response, and behaviors can have many different effects (S. St. George, personal communication, June 16, 2016). The IPscope (Tomm, 1991, 2014b) offers one way for the therapist to orient to what behaviors are being noticed, track the coupled sequence of the behaviors and the effects of the sequence or pattern, and imagine possible changes and movements within the patterns.

Therapeutic possibilities are opened up or closed down depending on that which therapists focus upon and how they approach clients’ problems. Facilitating clinical conversations that take clients beyond their current understanding and actions that may be contributing to their struggles and help them orient toward meanings and actions that promote preferred relational experiences is one of the ways therapists open up possibilities (Strong, 2007). Therapists achieve this, in part, through what is privileged and drawn attention to in therapeutic conversations, as well as the distinctions made about what is talked about in the interactions with clients (Tomm, 1992). “Drawing distinctions may be said to ‘direct’ the course of therapy” (Tomm, 1992, p. 122) because while the distinctions we make are not fixed or absolute, they do orient us toward healing

possibilities or away from them. Distinctions may possibly stem from therapists' preferred ideas, and Strong and Tomm (2007) recommend that "preferred ideas . . . be seen as resources to inform and inspire practice rather than govern it" (p. 44).

Distinctions made utilizing the lens of the IPscope are a choice, and patterns identified/named are to be held as fluid and tentative. The IPscope helps therapists not become too certain or too sure about problems and ways to address them.

Holding the patterns in view can help practitioners generate questions that encourage a partner to see her/his actions as connected to his/her partner's and to see each other's actions as shaping each other's experience. In thinking about how to construct relational questions, therapists are reminded to ask one partner about the other partner and to ask questions that invite partners into relational accountability (Carlson, 2017). Again, relational accountability is awareness that one's action or inaction has shaping effects on one's partner. The goal of couple therapy for relationally-oriented practitioners is to invite couples into living out this responsibility in the moments of unique relational processes that occur between partners to contribute to satisfying and healthy relationships (Carlson, 2017). Perhaps therapists might ask a non-exclusive partner about the effects of the infidelity on his/her partner and to then take a position about whether these effects are acceptable or not. Perhaps therapists might ask an exclusive partner to say what she/he noticed that might be an act of healing/taking responsibility/building trust/ apologizing/showing and/or feeling remorse by one's partner that contributed to safety over the past week (Carlson, 2017). Then therapists might want to linger with the particular effects of these acts and to invite the exclusive partner to evaluate these effects. This is a profoundly different approach than holding and

applying the expert and standardizing gaze, as well as focusing on individualistic notions of the experience of infidelity. Using the IPscope might help practitioners stay “relational” within the conversation about infidelity and avoid the pull toward individualizing notions that can be powerful especially when the pain and harm is so great.

Staying “relational” in a conversation about infidelity is important even when only one partner is present. There might be some conversations or topics that are more likely to occur with only one partner in the couple. Consider if the infidelity experience was quite involved over a significant period of time and whether or not the non-exclusive partner misses the infidelity partner and how couples deal with this. Possibly exclusive partners might support their non-exclusive partner in the loss of the infidelity partner, but more likely, the couple has struggled with this aspect of the infidelity experience and tend to deal with it independently. It is often painful for an exclusive partner to see the non-exclusive partner grieve for the loss of the infidelity partner, and non-exclusive partners often feel constrained by guilt about the “right” to grieve. Practitioners who use a relational approach with this aspect of infidelity both honor the loss of the infidelity partner and hold accountability to the primary relationship. A relational orientation means attending to what the preference of grieving on one’s own is *doing* in the couple’s relationship and to tracking and evaluating the effects of this. *Relational to me does not mean that all issues or concerns or conversations must be engaged in conjointly but rather that all actions taken and not taken have relational effects.* While I am steeped in a relational approach, and I offer ways that this approach might be useful, I acknowledge

that others with an individualistic approach have also had success in addressing the difficult problem of infidelity.

Closing Thoughts

From the co-constructed conversations with the participant couples I was able to report and describe some of the relational ways enacted as they are moving forward together after infidelity, and I have appreciated the privilege of being an “engaged witness” (Frank, 2005, p. 972). As I complete this engagement with the participant couples and this inquiry and reflect on how this work has been transforming for me, I think about what Frank (2005) wrote reflecting on Bakhtin’s dialogical ideas, that this dissertation is “one move in a continuing dialogue” (p. 966). To me, this means that there is no one ultimate conclusion to this inquiry and that we need to continually invite couples into joining us in exploring problems that are important to them.

As I finish writing this dissertation, I find myself thinking about the couples I have met with an infidelity experience. I wonder about previous clients, consider current clients, and am especially attentive to the participant couples I had the privilege to meet as a result of this inquiry. I am drawn to a “selfie” photo sent by a couple who responded to my recruitment ad and this photo of the partners hugging and smiling touches me. I wish other couples in the early aftermath of dealing with infidelity could see this photo as it might send a message of hope to them. Another aim of this inquiry was to offer couples hope for multiple possibilities in response to infidelity, not just relationship distress or dissolution. This photo also reminds me of my relational responsibility to do something careful, respectful, and meaningful with the stories of the couples who have participated in this inquiry. When practitioners and the couples with this lived experience enter into

dialogue collectively about this problem, we can construct more generative ways of moving forward together.

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Appendix A
Recruitment Ad 1



HAVE YOU OR YOUR PARTNER/SPOUSE HAD AN AFFAIR?

ARE YOU STILL TOGETHER?

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO HELP OTHERS WHO ARE WONDERING IF
STAYING TOGETHER IS THE RIGHT CHOICE?**

Couples needed to be participants in a CONFIDENTIAL research study

Someone had an affair. But together you were able to get through it and sustain your relationship. There are other couples who are struggling to deal with the same kind of difficulty you have been through and what you learned during your experience can help these people.

I am a therapist completing Ph.D. research and this is a unique and important project that seeks to honor the wisdom and knowledge of couples who have stayed together. If you have been able to continue in your relationship at least 2 years after an affair, I would appreciate having a **CONFIDENTIAL** conversation with you as a couple about how you have accomplished this. The purpose of this study is to use what you have learned to offer hope and possibilities to other couples in the same situation.

All information provided will be kept completely confidential.

If you would like to help, or if you would like more information about this research study, visit www.heathercoburn.ca or contact Heather Coburn at (403) 230-5569 or heathercoburn@gmail.com

Appendix B
Ad Using Term Infidelity

Moving Forward Together...



**HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED INFIDELITY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP?
ARE YOU STILL TOGETHER?**

Couples invited to be participants in a CONFIDENTIAL research study

You've experienced infidelity in your relationship and together you are able to get through it and sustain your relationship. There are other couples who are struggling to deal with the same kind of difficulty you have been through and what you learned during your experience can help these people.

I am a therapist completing Ph.D. research and this unique project seeks to honor the wisdom and knowledge of couples who have stayed together. If you are continuing in your relationship after infidelity, I would appreciate having a **CONFIDENTIAL** conversation with you as a couple to focus on and understand the personal and couple strengths that made it possible for you to move forward together. The purpose of this study is to use what you have learned to help therapists in their work with couples facing this difficulty and my hope is that you will experience the conversation as a celebration of what you have accomplished.

All information provided will be kept completely confidential.

If you would like to help, or if you would like more information about this research study, visit www.heathercoburn.ca or contact Heather Coburn at (403) 230-5569 or heathercoburn@gmail.com



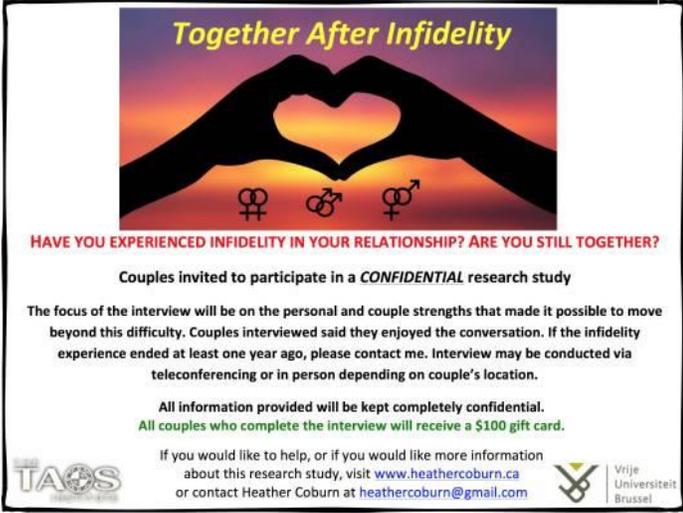

Appendix C

Craigslist Ad – Screenshot

CL vancouver, BC >
 vancouver >
 community >
 volunteers

Posted: 25 days ago

Staying together after infidelity. Couples Research interview - \$100



Together After Infidelity

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED INFIDELITY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP? ARE YOU STILL TOGETHER?

Couples invited to participate in a *CONFIDENTIAL* research study

The focus of the interview will be on the personal and couple strengths that made it possible to move beyond this difficulty. Couples interviewed said they enjoyed the conversation. If the infidelity experience ended at least one year ago, please contact me. Interview may be conducted via teleconferencing or in person depending on couple's location.

All information provided will be kept completely confidential.
 All couples who complete the interview will receive a \$100 gift card.

If you would like to help, or if you would like more information about this research study, visit www.heathercoburn.ca or contact Heather Coburn at heathercoburn@gmail.com

TAOS
 Vrije Universiteit Brussel

I am an experienced therapist and PhD student seeking to talk with couples who have experienced infidelity and have stayed together. If you are enjoying your relationship, are planning to stay together and the infidelity ended at least one year ago, I would really like to talk to you.

reply by email:

w2vtj-
5514603095@comm.craigslist.org



- do NOT contact me with unsolicited services or offers

Appendix D

HelloSign – eSignature Consent

Consent to Participate

Title of Study: *Couples moving forward together after infidelity*

Researcher: *Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT*
Doctoral student Taos Institute- *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels)*

I have read and understand the invitation to participate letter provided by Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT and I consent to participate in the above named research study. I understand that the interview will be conducted via Zoom and will be audio/video recorded, stored with password protection and that the recording will be destroyed after completion of the Doctoral program. I realize that interview recordings will be transcribed and that I may be asked for clarification of my comments. I am aware that I may answer or not answer any questions and that at any time, consent to participate can be withdrawn with no consequence. Some of my quotes may appear in the written dissertation and or any publication that may come out of this study and I know that my identity will be protected.

I agree to a 1-2 hour interview conjointly conducted with my partner/spouse to discuss moving forward after infidelity. I understand this conversation is for research and exploration of how we are moving forward, not therapy. There is a potential for us to be a model for other couples and to offer hope and possibilities for them. There is also the possibility that new information may be discussed in the interview and that it has the potential to be unsettling. If I require support, I can ask Heather Coburn to help me access professional resources. This research may add to the understanding of therapists who work with couples responding to an affair experience and I may request feedback on the outcomes of this study.

Questions or concerns will be answered by Heather Coburn. T: 403-230-5569.

Name: _____ Sample _____

Date: _____ 03/21/2016 _____

Signature: _____ Sample _____

Preferred method of contact: _____ email _____

HelloSign – eSignature Audit Trail



Audit Trail

TITLE	Consent to Participate zoom
FILE NAME	Consent to Participate zoom
DOCUMENT ID	8fb19edf6e1e6826513486adadfaf7eed713fef4
STATUS	● Completed

This document was requested from script.google.com

Document History

 SENT	03/08/2016 02:44:48 UTC	Sent for signature to Sample (sample@email.com) IP: 137.186.:
 VIEWED	03/08/2016 04:01:50 UTC	Viewed by Sample (sample@email.com) IP: 76.193.
 SIGNED	03/08/2016 04:02:27 UTC	Signed by Sample (sample@email.com) IP: 76.193.
 COMPLETED	03/08/2016 04:02:27 UTC	The document has been completed.

Appendix E

Letter of Invitation to Participate in Research Inquiry/Study

Title: *Couples moving forward together after infidelity*

Researcher: *Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT*

Program/Institution: *Doctoral program Taos Institute - Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels)*

What is the purpose of this study?

Infidelity is a frequently occurring experience for couples and couples do recover. While many couples stay together after this difficulty, the stories/perspectives of these couples are largely absent in the extant research on infidelity. The purpose of this study is to consult with couples who have had this experience and have sustained their relationship. There is much to learn from those who have been through this. I'm curious about how you are moving forward together, what are you doing that is helping and how you account for your success. My hope is that couples experience the interview as an opportunity to focus on and celebrate the personal and couple strengths that made it possible to move beyond this difficulty. The goal is to share the study findings with other therapists in order to enhance their expertise as they work with couples dealing with the aftermath of this experience.

By infidelity I mean when one partner is not emotionally and or sexually exclusive to their partner, contrary to what was previously understood as agreed upon by the partners. This could be any form of non-exclusivity, ranging from online chatting to a continuing sexual relationship with another person. Infidelity is what the couple defines it to be in terms of the activities involved, includes another person and threatens the security of the committed relationship.

Who should participate? Criteria for involvement in this study:

- Couples who have experienced infidelity, both partners know it occurred, and the couples have stayed together. Couples who separated after the infidelity and subsequently reconciled are also welcome to participate.
- The infidelity relationship has ended.
- Couples who have or have not engaged in therapy related to the infidelity.
- Couples who are one year past the discovery/disclosure of the infidelity.
- Committed couples who are married or not married.
- Couples willing to share the story of their infidelity experience with me, in a conversation with both partners present.

What will happen if you agree to participate in this study?

- 1.0- 2.0 hour conversation/interview with me (Heather Coburn) either at my private, home-based office, home of participants or via an on-line platform such as Skype or Zoom.
- I will ask you to tell me your experience of infidelity and specifically how you are moving forward together.
- The focus of this conversation is research, not therapy and should you decide at some point that a therapy conversation is desired, I will help you access appropriate resources.
- I will make an audio recording of the interview and after the interview is conducted, it will be transcribed. The audio recording will be password protected and stored until I complete my Ph.D. studies.
- Parts of your conversation may be included in my written dissertation and or any publication that comes out of this study. Your identity will be kept confidential.
- I may check back with you regarding using parts of your story to make sure I have the correct understanding of what you meant before I use the quotes.
- You may follow up with me at any time regarding the findings of my study.
- I plan to use a qualitative approach to the research study.
- At any point, you may decide to discontinue the conversation, either temporarily or permanently. You are free to choose to participate and to end your participation at any time.
- Some of the interview questions may have the potential to be uncomfortable or upsetting and you are free to answer or not answer any questions.
- Some participants may find that the interview process is a kind of celebration, as the focus will be on what has been helpful with moving forward together.
- The participants in this study have the potential to be role models for other individuals and couples who are responding to infidelity.
- The outcomes from this study may influence individuals and couples who did not continue in their intimate relationship but who have an ongoing co-parenting relationship.

Participation process and further information:

To volunteer or receive further information, please contact me, Heather Coburn, by phone or by email. My voice mail is confidential and I will return your call as soon as possible.

Ph.: 403 -230- 5569 or **email:** heathercoburn@gmail.com **website:** www.heathercoburn.ca

Should you have any additional questions, you may also contact my Taos Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Sally St. George at 403-973-1764.

Thank you for your interest and consideration in contributing to research in relationships.

Sincerely,

Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT

Appendix F

Consent to Participate - Zoom

Title of Study: *Couples moving forward together after infidelity*

Researcher: *Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT*

Doctoral student Taos Institute- *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels)*

I have read and understand the invitation to participate letter provided by Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT and I consent to participate in the above named research study. I understand that the interview will be conducted via Zoom and will be audio/video recorded, stored with password protection and that the recording will be destroyed after completion of the Doctoral program. I realize that interview recordings will be transcribed and that I may be asked for clarification of my comments. I am aware that I may answer or not answer any questions and that at any time, consent to participate can be withdrawn with no consequence. Some of my quotes may appear in the written dissertation and or any publication that may come out of this study and I know that my identity will be protected.

I agree to a 1-2 hour interview conjointly conducted with my partner/spouse to discuss moving forward after infidelity. I understand this conversation is for research and exploration of how we are moving forward, not therapy. There is a potential for us to be a model for other couples and to offer hope and possibilities for them. There is also the possibility that new information may be discussed in the interview and that it has the potential to be unsettling. If I require support, I can ask Heather Coburn to help me access professional resources. This research may add to the understanding of therapists who work with couples responding to an affair experience and I may request feedback on the outcomes of this study.

Questions or concerns will be answered by Heather Coburn. T: 403-230-5569.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Preferred method of contact: _____

Appendix G

Professional Resources

Calgary Counselling Centre: 403-691-5991
<http://www.calgarycounselling.com>

Catholic Family Services: 403-233-2360
<http://www.cfs-ab.org>

Calgary Distress Centre: 403-266-4357
<http://www.distresscentre.com>

Eastside Family Centre – Walk in counselling services: 403-299-9696
<http://www.woodshomes.ca>

Private Therapists

Sharon Haladuick MSW RSW: 403-519-7259

Dr. Diane Walters: 403-264-9881

Appendix H

Consent to Participate

Title of Study: *Couples moving forward together after infidelity*

Researcher: *Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT*

Doctoral student Taos Institute- *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels)*

I have read and understand the invitation to participate letter provided by Heather Coburn MSW RSW RMFT and I consent to participate in the above named research study. I understand that the interview will be conducted in person and will be audio recorded, stored with password protection and that the recording will be destroyed after completion of the Doctoral program. I realize that interview recordings will be transcribed and that I may be asked for clarification of my comments. I am aware that I may answer or not answer any questions and that at any time, consent to participate can be withdrawn with no consequence. Some of my quotes may appear in the written dissertation and or any publication that may come out of this study and I know that my identity will be protected.

I agree to a 1-2 hour interview conjointly conducted with my partner/spouse to discuss moving forward after infidelity. I understand this conversation is for research and exploration of how we are moving forward, not therapy. There is a potential for us to be a model for other couples and to offer hope and possibilities for them. There is also the possibility that new information may be discussed in the interview and that it has the potential to be unsettling. If I require support, I have been made aware of professional resources. This research may add to the understanding of therapists who work with couples responding to an affair experience and I may request feedback on the outcomes of this study.

Questions or concerns will be answered by Heather Coburn. T: 403-230-5569.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Preferred method of contact: _____

Appendix I

Expanding on Openings for Practice

In the following section I provide a more detailed discussion on possible openings for practice organized by each theme.

Finding Out and Experiencing Initial Impact

Finding out. This finding could be helpful for practitioners in conversations with partners about whether or not to disclose, and how to disclose, as well as with partners trying to understand the disclosure. Of relevance to this inquiry is that disclosure was clearly linked to partners' hopes for the primary relationship to continue and improve and was at some point appreciated and respected by the exclusive partner. This inquiry also increases understanding about how couples stay together even when disclosure does not happen. Significantly, there were other relational practices initiated that signalled the importance of the primary relationship, and that the non-exclusive partner was acting in relationally accountable ways. As discussed in Chapter Four, these included expressions of love for the partner and strong desire for the primary relationship to continue.

Experiencing initial impact. This finding suggests that it is important for therapists to hear what the partner(s) want to tell about their experience and the details of the extent of the infidelity behavior, and that it is also important for therapists to explore partners' beliefs about infidelity, expectations of the primary partner, and interactions of the partners upon discovery of the infidelity. This has implications both for the exclusive and non-exclusive partner as the partners might have expectations of themselves and their partners based on the extent of the infidelity behaviour. It is also important that therapists

interrogate their assumptions regarding how the extent of the infidelity behaviour relates to the level of impact and effects experienced.

There appears to be little written about how the behavior of the non-exclusive partner impacts the experience of the exclusive partner's initial learning of the infidelity, and as a result of this research, therapists are urged to explore this with non-exclusive partners. Therapists might ask about ways they are already, or perhaps could be, enacting relationally responsible and responsive behaviors that might ease some of the emotional distress felt by their partners and ask exclusive partners about what they notice about their partner's behavior or attunement to their emotional experience. Therapists might notice that non-exclusive partners who realize they are the "cause" of their partner's distress want to ease the distress but fear making it worse by directly acknowledging the distress. Or, the non-exclusive partner might be feeling significant guilt and shame and find it hard to get close to his/her partner's distress. In these circumstances the non-exclusive partners might need support. It might be useful for therapists to spend more time with the non-exclusive partners exploring the preferred messages they want their behaviors to send to their partners at this difficult time and then to inquire about what actions would send the preferred message.

As a result of the finding that partners did not label their experience of infidelity as a trauma, it seems prudent for clinicians and researchers to consider the trauma lens as one practice resource rather than the only way of understanding the relational harm. Practitioners and researchers should assess carefully what effect it might have for couples if they label the experience as traumatic. Does this frame open up or close down space for healing? It is the meaning that the individuals give to their experiences that is important,

and the frame of trauma ought to be used mindfully as it fits. For some exclusive partners, the trauma frame might validate their experience while for others, it might be pathologizing and individualizing of their experience.

As this analysis shows that moving forward is a relational experience, it is important that therapists find ways to invite the relational interactions/responses of the partners that promote relational attunement or validate relational experiences (Duffy, 2012). The couples in this study who dealt with the impact together engaged in a pattern of expressing and acknowledging emotional experiences, and this attunement was a relational resource as they moved forward and dealt with other issues related to the infidelity in addition to responding to the initial impact. How do practitioners honor the pain involved and not contribute to partners feeling more disconnected after learning of the infidelity? This finding makes a case for practitioners to engage in reflexivity about whether or not questions are inviting individualizing of the experience or if they are contributing to the partners experiencing themselves and their behaviors in relation to the other and the relationship. Some practitioners are finding emotion-focused therapy useful as an approach that honors the pain of one partner without alienating the other and focuses on changing the problematic interactional patterns between the partners (Johnson, 2005; MacIntosh, Hall, & Johnson, 2007; Zola, 2007).

Choosing the Primary Relationship

Relating to the finding that there was an interactional component to choosing the primary relationship, therapists might want to pay close attention to the interactions between the couple that might be openings where the couple can have a shared experience of the infidelity. Shared does not suggest equal or the same but this finding

supports finding ways for the couple to experience themselves as dealing with this problem together. From the findings in this study, one way of facilitating a shared experience is to situate the infidelity in the larger context of the relationship. Therapists might feel cautious about asking about relationship stories in addition to the infidelity story in case these questions might be experienced by the exclusive partners as minimizing their experience of the infidelity. While consideration of the effects of questions is indicated, the results of this study lend support for exploring both the story of the infidelity and other stories of the relationship history beyond the infidelity. Findings of this inquiry can help therapists have more confidence to ask clients alternate history questions about their relationship and to encourage both acknowledging the harm and acts of “fighting” for the relationship.

Since the larger context of the relationship is significant, therapists should consider how context is impacting the couples’ experience of infidelity and to find ways to counter negative influence. One way couples in this study accomplished this was through connecting to what they value. This was important in several themes and appeared to be a resource for couples as they struggled with the aftermath of infidelity. Inviting intentional connecting to what is valued, familiar to narrative and other postmodern and strengths-based practitioners, may be a useful conversational resource.

This finding is significant for clinical practice as couples are influenced by their assumptions about infidelity, and as previously cited in the literature review, the exclusive partner’s previously predicted response to infidelity is not necessarily enacted at the time of finding out about infidelity (Harris, 2002; Walters & Burger, 2013). Individuals and couples might benefit from the opportunity to examine their beliefs, and

practitioners can contribute to creating this opportunity. When practitioners examine the societal messages they and clients are immersed in and consider what these messages are “doing,” they can then decide if they want to act in accordance with these messages or not. Practitioners are encouraged to examine their own relationship with infidelity and to acknowledge one’s own beliefs and assumptions about infidelity as these are also developed in relation to the dominant discourses and have the power to shape the conversation (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Vossler & Moller, 2014). Practitioners might ask of themselves: What ideas do I hold and privilege in my work with infidelity? What is the quality of this knowledge (McNamee & Hosking, 2012)? What messages have I heard about infidelity, and what are my personal experiences with infidelity? To what extent, if any, do I view infidelity as a problem that couples can recover from? How have I come to hold this view? What are potentially my blind spots regarding these societal messages? Continually reflecting upon one’s own views is important recognizing that views are ever changing in response to one’s ongoing involvement with this problem in one’s practice and to how this problem is constructed in one’s culture.

Appreciating the extent to which judgment influenced the participants’ experiences of infidelity hopefully invites practitioners and researchers to listen differently for how judgment might be manifest, even in the most innocent-looking questions. For example, consider a situation involving a female client, who is planning to stay in her marriage after infidelity and she makes a comment about “having low self-esteem” and that she thought she needed to discuss her family of origin where she believed her “low self-esteem” started. Her understanding about her own experience is important but considering the importance of judgment, practitioners might consider

inviting this client to consider the conclusions she was making about herself in the context of broader societal discourses. Her ideas about “low self-esteem” might suggest that she holds the belief that there must be something wrong with her because she wanted to stay in her marriage, and the theory of “low self-esteem” was one (another common psychological discourse) way she was trying to make sense of her motivation to stay in the relationship. Ideas about family of origin and self-esteem can be useful in therapy conversations, but based on this research, practitioners are encouraged to look beyond these individualizing notions toward social and relational ways of thinking and understanding. “Clients must be free from the labels and limits they expect to get in therapy that [they] may already use on themselves” (Levin, 2007, p. 125).

Knowing more about how and why others have made decisions to stay in relationships after infidelity may help practitioners to find ways to raise this in therapy conversations. And these conversations can serve to counter judgment. Infidelity is hard enough to deal with, but negative self-judgment makes the suffering much worse. Exploring the dominant discourses with couples might also open space for responding in more generative or hopeful ways. Partners might feel encouraged to be patient or hopeful for the relationship if they were not under the influence of judgment or stigma or feeling isolated as a result of this experience. If they are feeling encouraged, they may make a greater effort with their partners who could then benefit from the increased efforts.

Most of the participant couples described enjoying satisfying relationships and had positive views of their relationship history before the infidelity experience, and this helped them sustain the primary relationship. Though therapists can connect to loss of shared dreams or shared disappointments in the relationship as one way to bring the

couple together to deal with the infidelity, the lack of a positive view of the relationship or prior history of significant harm or difficulties adds more complexity for the couple, and therapists do see couples with these complexities. If “the past” is not a resource for the couple, therapists need to find ways to help the couples construct a more preferred future for their relationship and to hope for this possibility. What might therapists say to these couples when they ask, “what their chances are” for sustaining their relationship? Therapists should also consider if and when holding hope is not possible or therapeutic or useful. It is not the job of therapists to tell couples what decisions to make, but a therapist’s approach shapes clients’ experiences, and therapists should be mindful of opening as much space for the choice of leaving the relationship as for the choice of sustaining the relationship.

Making Sense of the Infidelity Experience

As a result of this inquiry, therapists are encouraged to spend more time asking couples about their ideas about relationships and infidelity, how they have come to have these ideas, the effects of these ideas on their experience of infidelity and how these ideas are fitting for them now. As sense-making was an ongoing experience for the couples in this inquiry and some described struggling with less than fully satisfying understanding, practitioners may find it useful to invite couples to engage in multiple meaning making conversations over time and to invite relational or jointly constructed meaning making. Various approaches can be used in therapeutic conversations aimed at constructing couple identity and joint meaning making, and in the infidelity literature, narrative (Bermúdez & Parker, 2010; Parker et al., 2010) and social constructionist (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Reibstein, 2013) practices have been discussed. The commonality of these

approaches is the assumption that sense-making is influenced by sociocultural factors and the valuing of constructing a relational story or joint sense-making for couples moving forward together.

So how might practitioners invite couples into constructing joint sense-making about infidelity that includes the couple identity and the relational story? How can practitioners open space for clients to address relational meanings and couple identity as part of the conversation? Since sense-making happens in the process of the conversation, it is important that couples consider infidelity and their relationship in addition to, and not only for, the negative impact of the infidelity and the reasons why it happened. Strengths-based therapists may utilize exception or unique outcome questions to broaden the discussion about the couple identity and relational meanings. This is not intended to minimize the pain involved but rather to move beyond a single story of the relationship and to open space for what the meaning of the infidelity might be beyond the dominant stories of infidelity. This is critically important as “the disclosure of an affair may result in the couple excluding or minimizing positive experiences in the relationship, such as supportive gestures enacted by their partners, romantic interactions, or struggles they have overcome in the past” (Parker et al., 2010, p. 70). As shown in the findings chapter, a partner’s positive and supportive acts must be noticed and responded to, or they will not be continued; thus, healing might be less possible. I want to stress that sense-making does not mean coming to view the infidelity as a positive experience, but highlighting that distress and growth can co-exist, couples’ responses to the infidelity could be a positive relational experience. Therefore, it is important to give voice to stories that embody both the distress and growth as couples make sense of their experience. Hurt is always a part

of infidelity, but the significance it has for the individuals and the couple is uniquely constructed. Practitioners might think about how to engage couples in reflexivity about how else this might be and about the future of their relationship. And it is important in creating space for couples to construct their unique meaning of infidelity, and that practitioners do not impose their meaning of infidelity on the couple: “We reduce the risk of imposing meaning by asking questions that support people (clients) to respond in such a way as to challenge, add to or change our thinking or belief” (Bird as cited in Ness & Strong, 2014, p. 98).

Therapists who work with this problem have the opportunity to contribute to conversations that are more transformative and to co-construct multiple stories of infidelity. As enacting and sustaining a preferred identity requires an audience (White & Epston, 1990), practitioners can support, supplement, and facilitate preferred couple identity performances. Practitioners are encouraged to consider a treatment approach that avoids single explanations and to instead construct “multiple perspectives to describe” (Atwood & Seifer, 1997, p. 67) the meaning of infidelity.

Prioritizing and Building a Preferred Relationship

Therapists who work with couples will already utilize multiple ideas for healing harm, addressing relational difficulties and enhancing relational satisfaction. The key point that this study underscores is that any therapeutic practices or ideas used should be assessed for sensitivity to the complexities of the problem of infidelity and for utility in foregrounding relationally attuned and accountable interactions between partners.

Healing in connection. As a result of this inquiry, holding different models of forgiveness can be a resource, but practitioners are advised to explore what ideas and

practices the couples find useful or meaningful about forgiveness. No variables are independently useful or meaningful (or healing) and only gain significance if they resonate for the partners and are responded to with mutually reinforcing behaviors.

What this inquiry adds to practice is that there was no one way the participant couples enacted the healing variables, so holding the models as guidelines for couples while tracking the utility of the guidelines is indicated. For some of the participant couples, forgiveness was something that was achieved after much healing, and came after shifts in emotional experiences and shifts in how the non-exclusive partner was viewed. For one participant couple, forgiveness was a decision made alongside the decision to stay in the relationship, and the emotional and cognitive shifts in experiencing the partner came sometime after the initial decision to forgive. For other couples, forgiveness was “partially” achieved, and the couples still moved on together and identified the relationships as positive.

In this inquiry, acts of empathy, compassion, and kindness were identified as initiatives of healing throughout moving forward together and were enacted and appreciated by both non-exclusive and exclusive partners. It was touching and encouraging by the extent to which the exclusive partners expressed empathy toward their non-exclusive partners, and this research offers practitioners reassurance of the importance of listening for opportunities to talk this into the conversation. Therapists might ask about the effects of compassion and empathy on the relationship both currently and in the past, and if these effects are preferred and might be resources for the couple now. Exclusive partners may want to show compassion and empathy but worry that this could send a message that the hurt or harm has been healed. Therapists might find it

useful to draw distinctions between holding a partner accountable for his/her actions and showing compassion and empathy and invite a conversation in which both accountability and compassion co-exist. Therapists might ask about one's awareness of the effects of one's actions and again evaluate whether or not these effects are preferred. Questions that help make it clear that each partner is responsible for the effects of his or her behavior on the other partner may also be useful. These findings explain that "feeling bad" might act as a reminder for what the couple is trying to construct in their relationship instead of the pain and suffering of infidelity and that guilt and shame might be useful for sending the message that the effects of one's behavior might not be desired or preferred.

This finding also underscores the importance of therapists holding and enacting empathy and compassion for both partners in the therapy conversations. Scheinkman (2005) proposes that a "both and dual position of the therapist—with empathy for the powerful impact that an affair may have on a partner, and empathy for the yearning of the one with the affair . . . will provide the necessary holding environment for the couples in this critical time in their lives" (pp. 243-244). Empathy seems to support or make possible a sense of "sharing" the weight/pain of the infidelity, which again is an enactment of performing healing in connection.

Practitioners are encouraged to look for the earliest opportunities to introduce these healing factors into the therapy conversation, and for moments when they occur between the couple to highlight and amplify any preferred effects of these factors. The participant couples reported that healing happens in multiple small moments over time and these data show that it is incumbent upon therapists to notice carefully the presence of any potentially healing actions and how they are responded to. Smaller or bigger acts

of goodwill and compassion are relevant because both were identified by the participants as contributing to healing in connection.

Managing “ups and down”. One way this inquiry adds to professional practice is for practitioners to feel encouraged to consider talking even more with couples about what the couple can do *together* to respond to the triggers. Practitioners understand that healing must happen between the partners, and practitioners as researchers can do more to write about this and support couples in enacting this. Therapists might consider that in addition to self-care, exclusive partners might want specific actions from their non-exclusive partner in order to deal with reminders of the infidelity. “The unfaithful partner must keep evolving from being the one who has been hurtful to the one who soothes the hurt” (Glass, 2003, p. 321). How might practitioners invite partners to deal with the reminders together? This requires more from the non-exclusive partners than “tolerating” the other’s pain and involves the exclusive partner being open about what he/she might need and receptive to the efforts of the partner.

The practice implication of kindness, empathy, and compassion being variables of healing might be to invite partners to consider/expand their view of their behavior in terms of their identity and values or principles for living: “The purpose is to come to know what should ground any new actions or solutions we co-construct with them” (St. George & Wulff, 2016b, p. 5).

Relating to the healing variable of time, therapists are in a unique position to help clients understand and appreciate the importance of time. Sometimes hearing and understanding that it takes time to heal can be a useful resource for couples and therapists need to unpack ideas about “how much time” is needed to heal. It is dependent on many

factors including the interactions between the couple and expectations of pacing of healing.

Counselling was identified as essential in helping couples move forward together for the four participant couples who accessed professional counselling services. For two other couples, one partner would have liked to participate in counselling services but the other partner declined. That means that half of the couples were not interested in accessing counselling services, and therapists would benefit from further understanding how the experience of these couples of moving forward after infidelity is different for the couples who seek counselling services. Perhaps fear of judgment from *therapists* discourages some couples from seeking help and clearly there are other barriers to accessing counselling such as cost. Some of the participant couples were emotionally supported by family members, others used online infidelity forums for support, and several of the couples read about the topic of infidelity. Couples were creative and diverse in their resourcefulness in dealing with the infidelity and often accessed more than one source of support. As a result of this finding, it is appropriate for therapists to be aware of online resources and current self-help books and to be curious about what supports and resources clients are accessing.

Again, relating to accessing support, several of the couples did not reveal their experience of infidelity to anyone else, yet they wished they could have had someone to trust and share the infidelity experience with. Those who did not disclose to friends and family were influenced by fear of judgment and talked about conversations they had with others about their (negative) views of infidelity. Regardless of whether or not couples experienced direct and personal judgment, they internalized judgment as a result of the

voices of others in their social networks, and some participants had to deal with their own prior judging of others with infidelity experiences before this was a personal experience. This finding calls for generating ways to talk about judgment and stigma related to infidelity both inside and outside the therapy room. When the discourses that support judgment and stigma are made more visible and therapists explore with couples whether or not the effects of these discourses fit for them, couples can better envision the relationship they want instead.

Developing and enhancing relational habits. The findings in this inquiry explain that the kind of practices that were described as enactments of open and honest communication within the couple varied dramatically between the couples. For example, some couples talked a lot about the details of the infidelity, and some did not seem to talk very much about the details of the infidelity, but they still identified their interactional pattern as open and honest communication. This finding suggests that there is no one standardized way that communication happens in couple relationships after infidelity. Practitioners have excellent resources both within the infidelity literature and across couples therapy approaches for helping couples develop useful and generative communication practices (see Abrahms Spring & Spring, 2012; Baucom et al., 2009; Gottman & Gottman, 2015, 2017; Snyder et al., 2007), and based on this inquiry, the stance that no one technique or method or approach will fit for all couples is substantiated (Baucom et al., 2009; Scheinkman, 2010; Weeks & Fife, 2009). Zola (2007) cautions practitioners that

the widely accepted and universally taught approach that complete honesty and the sharing of details is the only way to rebuild a relationship after an affair, [*sic*]

seems ethnocentric, destined to shame one partner, reinforce[s] flawed assumptions, and neglects contextual factors like gender, power, social support, culture, and religion. (p. 27)

What is most important for therapists is to notice and track the effects of the particular practices enacted by the partners and to support couples' unique ways of openly and honestly communicating. This focus of noticing coupled interactions for any particular couple also extends to dealing with conflict and to enhancing the couple friendships. Not surprisingly, participant couples varied in the ways they responded to conflict or built their couple friendship and couples therapists can draw from and utilize a range of tools and techniques as needed with couples. Again, resources utilized should emphasize relational accountability and sensitivity to the complexity of infidelity.

Valuing and Expanding Relational Growth

For an excellent example of a framework for infidelity that specifically addresses power, see Williams (2011). William's (2011) framework of power includes noticing who does the relational work in the couple, whether or not there is shared vulnerability, and to what extent practices of influence and attunement are mutual. Therapists may find this framework useful for discerning how power is enacted and sustained in the relationship and for finding openings for how to work with the couple to construct interpersonal patterns that are mutually supportive and promote wellness.

In working with power and infidelity, this research shows that it is important to include explicit discussions of gender. For example, asking men whose female partners have participated in infidelity to talk about what our culture (or his specific culture) says about how men should respond to their female's partner's infidelity. Not presuming equal

power in relationships, it is fitting for therapists to start with the more powerful partner to identify and unpack the practices that sustain the power imbalance, even when the less powerful partner is the non-exclusive partner. One message for clinicians and researchers from this inquiry is to ensure the less powerful partner's voice is heard. Women in heterosexual relationships who are the non-exclusive partners may tend to silence themselves more than men who are the non-exclusive partners. In this inquiry partners feeling a lack of influence and that their needs were unimportant to their partners played a significant role in contributing to three of the female non-exclusive partners' decisions to participate in infidelity.

Another way that issues regarding power in relationships may be revealed or demonstrated after infidelity relates to individual "rights" to privacy. When infidelity has happened, it is often assumed by the partners that the non-exclusive partner loses some "rights" to privacy as a consequence of the infidelity behavior. This appears related to trust and vulnerability and can be a part of healing and reparation but couples can become engaged in a struggle for power and control over "rights" and "responsibilities" after infidelity. At times, the exclusive partner, at least temporarily, might claim more power in the relationship, a way for him/her to feel less vulnerable and to establish a greater sense of influence over what is happening in the relationship. This might be enacted in "power over" ways that privilege one partner's needs over the other's or "power to" ways related to self-care (DeKoven Fishbane, 2011). It is essential to track the non-exclusive partner's response to this shift in power. Some non-exclusive partners accept this shift in power while others may struggle against this change in relational power and whatever the response, it will invite a reaction from the exclusive partner. Sometimes this shift in

power contributes to individual and relational healing, but not for all exclusive partners. Imagine a couple who describes a mutually supportive and equal relationship prior to the infidelity experience, and one way the non-exclusive partner has responded to his infidelity behavior has been to stop or reduce behaving in equal and mutual ways. The non-exclusive partner believes that he should “lose” some of his “rights” and power in the relationship as a way to atone and show remorse, and that she has a right to “punish” him. He has been deferring to his wife in terms of decision-making and whose needs are met, and this does not work for his wife. She is missing their mutual and collaborative relationship, and his stance feels like another loss as a result of the infidelity experience. He fears losing her, and as a result, acts in submissive and deferential ways with the unintended consequence of undermining her respect for him and diminishing her sense of them as a special and strong couple. Again, it is vital that therapists notice and track the interactional patterns around power in relationships and assess what the pattern is doing in the relationship.

Ideas around punishment and forgiveness are also important in understanding how power is expressed in relationships and the findings in this study around power might lead therapists and researchers to think more about how these ideas are impacting people’s experience of moving forward after infidelity. Practitioners and clients are immersed in various societal messages about punishment and making amends and how these are linked to healing and forgiveness. Participants talked about forgiveness but not about punishment, yet in therapy conversations, therapists are likely to hear non-exclusive partners asking how long they will be “punished.”

Another clinical implication based on this inquiry is the possible connection between gratitude and relational accountability and ongoing relational growth. Enacting gratitude might look like acts of responsiveness to one's partner and demonstrate an overall responsibility to the relationship. So, what openings does this theme offer? If the relationship is appreciated and valued, and couples enact gratitude, it fits that being attuned to the relationship and engaging in ongoing practices of honoring the relationship only serve to make the relationship what the partners want.