

# Infidelity in Dating Relationships

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Even though research on dating infidelity has been conducted for years, it still contends with limitations, including over reliance on heterosexual college student samples and a lack of longitudinal research on patterns and long-term effects of infidelity. Still, the limited research reveals that college students use very broad criteria for defining dating infidelity. Effectively, almost any form of emotional or sexual intimacy with a person other than one's primary dating partner qualifies as infidelity. Relying on such broad criteria, the studies reveal that many, if not most, students have engaged in some form of infidelity. Extradyadic involvements generally involve flirtation and passionate kissing, which culminate in sexual intercourse for nearly half of male students and one third of female students. The majority of students disapprove of infidelity in virtually all circumstances, although it may be more excusable if it occurs because the primary relationship is troubled or because of an irresistible attraction to another person. Reactions to a partner's infidelity are almost invariably negative, often involving termination of the relationship. Motives for infidelity are varied, but they are usually tied to concerns or problems in the primary relationship. Degree of commitment to one's primary relationship is a significant predictor of risk for infidelity. Sexually permissive attitudes and attachment styles that involve anxiety over abandonment may predict likelihood of engaging in dating infidelity. Additionally, individual differences, such as low "conscientiousness," may play a role.

**Key words:** cheating, dating relationships, extradyadic involvement, infidelity.

Alfred Kinsey and colleagues elicited a great deal of controversy when they reported that nearly half of married men and over one quarter of married women admitted to having had an affair by age 45 (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). These rates of marital infidelity were shocking for at least two reasons. First, at the time there were strong sanctions against extra-marital sexual activity. More recent surveys reveal that the vast majority of adults in the United States still disapprove of marital infidelity under any circumstance (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2003; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Second, the reported rates were higher than anyone expected.

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Infidelity remains a topic of widespread interest in popular culture, routinely featured in popular media such as soap operas (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996; Greenberg & Woods, 1999) and daytime talk shows (Greenberg, Sherry, Busselle, Rampoldi-Hnilo, & Smith, 1997). But as Smith (2006) lamented, "There are probably more scientifically worthless 'facts' on extramarital relations than any other facet of human behavior" (p. 108). Although this is probably an overgeneralization, the literature on infidelity in dating relationships is definitely limited, due in part to the potential difficulties in defining a dating relationship. Because dating relationships often lack the formal commitment to sexual and emotional exclusivity that characterizes marriage, violations of the exclusivity may be more difficult to define. Dating partners may rely on an implicit agreement of what is acceptable without having articulated the precise extradyadic behaviors that are unacceptable. The expectations or "rules" for dating may be especially unclear in contemporary culture (DeGenova & Rice, 2005).

Even though the rules for marital infidelity are clearer, it is apparently more common in younger cohorts, presumably because they have been married for a shorter period of time and are struggling with the transition from having multiple sexual partners prior to marriage to a monogamous sexual partnership (Smith, 2006). If true, dating patterns may be predictive of marital adjustment. Some authors (e.g., Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999) have speculated that the causes of dating infidelity carry over into marriage; however, we found no empirical tests of this assumption. Regardless, dating patterns and associated problems are important topics of inquiry of their own right.

In one recent pair of reviews, Blow and Hartnett (2005a, 2005b) addressed infidelity in committed relationships, but they were primarily concerned with marital infidelity. In this review, we are concerned with the literature on infidelity in dating relationships. It does not include studies on infidelity among married or cohabiting couples unless those studies also included unmarried, noncohabitating couples. Some researchers have suggested that dating patterns and expectations for exclusivity are more variable among gay and lesbian couples (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Because the vast majority of studies in this area have relied on unmarried heterosexual college students, we limit our discussion to this group, although there is clearly a need for research with other samples to assess the generalizability of the major findings. For the sake of simplicity, we use the term *infidelity* to refer to any form of emotional or sexual intimacy with a person other than one's primary partner. Defining infidelity,

however, has proven to be a vexing problem for researchers, so our review begins by addressing this topic.

### Defining Infidelity

The literature reveals various operational definitions of infidelity. Indeed, the terms commonly used to refer to infidelity (*cheating, having an affair, being unfaithful, stepping out on, extradyadic involvement*) betray the ambiguity in meanings. This problem is evident in most of the relevant research, including studies of marital infidelity (see Blow & Hartnett, 2005a, for a review). The earliest studies tended to rely on narrow definitions of infidelity, particularly marital infidelity, in most cases, limited to engaging in sexual intercourse with a person other than the primary partner while being involved in an exclusive and committed relationship (see Lieberman, 1988, for example). This narrow definition is problematic for several reasons. First, it does not capture the full range of behaviors that most students consider forms of infidelity. Second, other types of infidelity are apparently more common and often just as troublesome for the parties affected by the transgressions. Finally, significant variations in operational definitions of infidelity make comparisons across studies and over time difficult. Therefore, narrow definitions of infidelity tend to underestimate the extent of the phenomenon.

The relevant literature reveals two general approaches to defining infidelity. One approach is to allow respondents to define the term. For example, some researchers asked participants if they had ever been "unfaithful" (Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995) or if they had "cheated" on a dating partner (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006). This approach is potentially problematic if participants do not share the same definition of cheating or infidelity. In these studies investigators have revealed that students have divergent views of such seemingly basic terms as *having sex* and what constitutes a *sexual partner*. Over one third of college students would not label another person a sexual partner even though they had performed oral sex on that individual (Randall & Byers, 2003). Because similar findings have been reported by researchers who have studied students' definitions of *virginity* and *having sex* (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000; Carpenter, 2001; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), it seems imprudent to assume that students share the same definitions of cheating or even of *sexual activity* (see Forste & Tanfer, 1996). Even though in one study Randall and Byers (2003) found a high level of agreement in college students' definitions of infidelity, it seems advisable to ask respondents what they consider infidelity to ensure that their understandings are consistent.

The other approach is to provide participants a definition of infidelity. Although this approach promises consistency in criteria for defining infidelity, its usefulness hinges on the accuracy of the criteria. Some early researchers did not include some common sexual practices in their list of potential extradyadic sexual behaviors. Both Hansen (1987) and Feldman and Cauffman (1999b) omitted oral sex in their surveys. Feldman and Cauffman (1999b) queried their 417 college students about experiences with extradyadic "petting" and sexual intercourse to measure betrayal, but did not include any questions about oral or anal sex. Hansen (1987) asked participants if they had experienced "extradyadic relations" in the form of "erotic kissing, petting, or sexual intercourse." In that study, petting was defined as "sexually stimulating behavior more intimate than erotic kissing and simple hugging, but not including full sexual intercourse." It seems questionable to include oral sex as a form of petting. Petting usually refers to fondling or "sexual touching," and surveys that make a distinction between fondling and oral sex produce different frequencies (see Wiederman & Hurd, 1999, for example).

In contrast to the limited definitions of many researchers, college students generally have very broad definitions of infidelity. Moreover, very few gender differences appear in students' definitions. For most students, spending excessive time with another person and virtually any form of extradyadic physical intimacy qualify as infidelity. In their survey of 164 Canadian college students, Randall and Byers (2003) found that all forms of extradyadic physical intimacy qualified as infidelity to the vast majority. Over 90% of participants agreed that "deep kissing/tongue kissing," oral contact with nipples, oral sex with or without orgasm, and masturbation to orgasm in the presence of another person, would count as being unfaithful if their partner engaged in any of these acts. Vaginal and anal intercourse yielded near unanimous agreement. Yarab, Sensibaugh, and Allgeier (1998) derived a list of 29 behaviors suggested by students as examples of unfaithful behaviors. This list included many behaviors not typically included as forms of infidelity, including having sexual fantasies about a person other than the primary partner and having even mild romantic feelings for another person. In a subsequent study, Yarab, Allgeier, and Sensibaugh (1999) found that men and women alike rated a variety of extradyadic "romantic attachments" and sexual behaviors as "highly unfaithful in dating relationships" (p. 311), including flirtation. Wiederman and Hurd (1999) asked students if they had ever gone on a date with someone other than their primary partner "while involved in a serious dating relationship." They also queried participants about their experiences with extradyadic romantic kissing, kissing and fondling, receiving and performing oral

sex, and sexual intercourse with a person other than their primary dating partner. Differences in the reported frequencies of the various acts suggest that although all qualified as infidelity, respondents do make distinctions between them.

In every study but one, virtually every respondent labeled extradyadic intercourse as a form of infidelity. The results of the study by Roscoe, Cavanaugh, and Kennedy (1988) are anomalous in that only 41% of the students identified having sexual intercourse with a person other than one's primary partner as constituting being "unfaithful." More students (57%) identified "dating/spending time with another" as "unfaithfulness." These findings may be due to the open-ended format used in the question: "What behaviors do you think constitute being 'unfaithful' to a dating partner provided the couple is in a serious dating relationship (in other words, they have assumed that they are to date only each other)?" There are several possible explanations for this finding. Many of the participants may not yet have initiated sexual intercourse and, therefore, it might appear irrelevant to their perspective of infidelity. Alternatively, they may have assumed that extradyadic intercourse would invariably be included and needed not be listed. The lack of follow-up questioning makes it impossible to evaluate students' responses, but nearly all students in the other studies consider that extradyadic sexual intercourse qualifies as infidelity.

In their review of infidelity research, Blow and Hartnett (2005a) offered the definition of infidelity as 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" (pp. 191-192). These researchers have developed a clear definition, but we find no research on the process by which dating couples themselves develop implicit or explicit norms regarding exclusivity. Anecdotal reports suggest that many couples reach a point in the relationship when they agree to exclusivity. How couples reach this point and the manner in which it is negotiated are essential to understanding what would constitute a breach. In the end, they not only expect that their dating relationships should be emotionally and sexually exclusive, some even seem to expect "mental exclusivity" because extradyadic fantasies qualify as infidelity to some individuals (see Yarab et al., 1998).

### **The Prevalence of Dating Infidelity**

Prevalence estimates of dating infidelity are complicated by inconsis-

tencies in operational definitions and other factors, such as social desirability. Broad definitions of infidelity tend to yield higher estimates. As we noted previously, narrow definitions may produce more reliable estimates, although they probably do not capture the full extent of pertinent extradyadic involvements. In their review of infidelity in committed relationships, Blow and Hartnett (2005a) concluded that the most reliable estimates were derived from nationally representative samples of married, heterosexual couples and focused on extramarital sexual intercourse. In their National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS), for example, Laumann et al., (1994) revealed that 25% of married men and 15% of married women admitted to at least one life-time experience of extramarital sexual intercourse. When measured over the preceding year, the prevalence was less than 4%. A consistent finding is that the rates of extramarital intercourse increase over the duration of marriage (Wiederman, 1997a).

Because dating relationships are usually shorter in duration than marriages, one might expect lower prevalence rates of infidelity because the relationship may still be in its "honeymoon" phase, and partners have simply had less time for extradyadic involvements. However, this does not seem to be the case. Dating women are more likely than married women to report having a "secondary sex partner" (18% vs. 4% respectively; Forste & Tanfer, 1996), possibly the result of the lower degree of formal commitment that characterizes dating relationships. Cohabiting women have rates of infidelity similar to those of dating women, which may support the idea that both kinds of relationships are less committed and less exclusive than marriage (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). Another possibility stems from social mores; married persons may be less likely than individuals in dating or cohabitating relationships to admit to infidelity because it is viewed as a more serious transgression (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Alternatively, college students may actually have more social opportunities for infidelity than their married counterparts (e.g., parties attended by numerous available potential partners). Opportunities may interact with degree of relationship commitment to determine a person's likelihood of infidelity: For a person with low relationship commitment, relatively few opportunities might be required in comparison to a person who is highly committed to the relationship, a topic that we will revisit later.

Recent broad-definition surveys of students in dating relationships report relatively high prevalence rates. Allen and Baucom (2006), for example, found that 69% of the 504 students they surveyed reported engaging in some form of infidelity in the previous 2 years. Their definition of infidelity—romantic or sexual behavior with someone other than

one's primary partner—could have included noncontact activity such as flirting with another person. Indeed, a vast majority of students in committed dating relationships report having flirted with someone other than the primary partner while in a dating relationship, although they may not have considered it “cheating” at the time.

The reported rates of extradyadic involvement decline steadily as the contact becomes more physically intimate. Although extradyadic flirtation and kissing are highly prevalent, oral sex and intercourse are less common. The reported prevalence of actual extradyadic sexual contact in dating relationships is generally in the range of 50% or lower. Over 65% of men and 39% of women in Hansen's (1987) study reported extradyadic erotic kissing, but only 35% of men and nearly 12% of women reported extradyadic intercourse. Yarab et al. (1998) reported that 90% of men and 81% of women in their survey had engaged in extradyadic casual flirtation, but fewer than 45% of men and 38% of women reported sexual intercourse with someone other than their primary partner. Wiederman and Hurd (1999) noted that 68% of the men and 61% of women engaged in extradyadic romantic kissing. Actual extradyadic oral sex and intercourse were engaged in by approximately half of the men and one third of the women in the survey. Men were more likely than women to report experience with all forms of extradyadic activity except kissing and receiving oral sex, the rates of which were equal with women's reports. The perspective of experiencing a partner's infidelity offers additional, though very generalized, data on prevalence. In her study of community samples of heterosexual and homosexual men and women, Harris (2002) found that 70% of the participants had experienced partner infidelity, defined as “having a partner cheat on you.” Because infidelity is often secretive and undiscovered, this may be a low-end estimate. No separate data for dating individuals is available from this study.

Several studies of dating infidelity (e.g., Hansen, 1987; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999) reported higher prevalence rates for men than women, with the possible exception of extradyadic romantic kissing. This discrepancy, which has been reported in surveys of other sexual behaviors, warrants an explanation. Several researchers, for example, have noted that men consistently report a higher number of past sexual partners than women (see Laumann, et al., 1994; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Wiederman, 1997b), a consistent finding generally attributed to sampling bias or self-presentation bias (Baumeister & Tice, 2001). One possible source of sampling bias could be due to the men having extradyadic sexual encounters with women who were excluded from the sample, such as younger female high school students. Another possibility is that men engaging in infidelity do so mostly

with women who are unattached, perhaps by lying about their own relationship status. Alternatively, a smaller number of women may be having extradyadic sexual encounters with a relatively larger number of men. Self-presentation biases could result from gender differences in definitions of cheating and sexual partners, although this explanation seems unlikely, as we have previously noted. Another possible source of presentation bias could involve overreporting by men and underreporting by women (Davis & Smith, 1991). In their reports of lifetime number of sexual partners, men are more likely than women to use "ballpark" figures or "round up" their estimates (Brown & Sinclair, 1999; Wiederman, 1997b), causing them to overreport. Given the widespread disapproval of infidelity, however, this effect seems rather unlikely. Underreporting of infidelity by women seems more likely, but this factor has not been systematically evaluated. Arguing against any gender bias in self-presentation, the study by Grello et al. (2006) revealed no actual gender differences in rates of extradyadic casual sexual encounters among students. Nor did Feldman and Cauffman (1999b) find any gender differences in reported rates of extradyadic dating, emotional involvement, kissing, and petting. If the early married cohort reflects dating behaviors, Wiederman's (1997a) research further supported the idea that no gender differences occur in extradyadic involvement.

The lifetime prevalence of dating infidelity is higher than the reported rates over a 1-year or 2-year period, perhaps due to greater opportunities combined with fluctuations in degrees of commitment to the relationship. For men, the amount of dating experience is positively correlated with extradyadic involvement (Hansen, 1987). The evidence for women is mixed: Hansen (1987) found that relationship length did not correlate with rates of infidelity in women, but Forste and Tanfer (1996) found a significant relationship between these variables. Another possibility for explaining variation is that infidelity represents a repetitive pattern of behavior for some individuals. At least one study supports the popular notion that "once a cheater, always a cheater." Wiederman and Hurd (1999) found that individuals who had participated in extradyadic sexual behavior once were highly likely to have experienced it again. The vast majority of men and most women who have experienced extradyadic kissing, fondling, oral sex, or intercourse have done so more than once. In terms of extradyadic sexual intercourse, nearly 86% of men and 62% of women who reported the behavior have repeated it. Unfortunately, we find no other study on patterns of dating infidelity over time. Repeated infidelity may reflect low commitment to a relationship, a threshold effect (once a person has crossed that line, any subsequent transgression seems less serious), or some



other individual characteristic (such as sexual permissiveness) that merits empirical study.

### **Attitudes Toward Dating Infidelity**

One consistent finding across studies is that a decided majority of young adults disapproves of any form of infidelity. Almost universally, they disapprove of marital infidelity (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998), which they view as immoral, socially reprehensible, and often illegal. Although they connect fewer sanctions with dating infidelity, it too meets with widespread disapproval.

In the first survey of college students' attitudes toward dating infidelity, Lieberman (1988) revealed that two thirds disapproved, with no gender differences. Sheppard et al. (1995) also found that both male and female students disapprove of infidelity in both married and committed dating relationships, although males rate both forms of infidelity as less unacceptable than do females. Knox, Zusman, Kaluzny, and Sturdivant (2000) reported that two thirds of the students they surveyed disapproved of dating partner infidelity and would terminate a relationship because of it. Nearly half of the sample reported that they had actually done so.

Although the majority of students disapprove of infidelity, the degree of disapproval is apparently influenced by the context. Infidelity motivated by being in a troubled relationship meets with less disapproval (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b). Similarly, if the infidelity results from a strong attraction it is less condemned than if it occurs out of spite, to test the primary relationship, or simply because the culprit believed the infidelity would not be discovered. Infidelity that is deliberate rather than opportunistic seems to be more widely condemned (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b).

Betrayal of sexual exclusivity in marriage is a more serious transgression than dating infidelity to most people, whether community samples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) or college students (Lieberman, 1988; Sheppard et al., 1995). This social sanction may explain why students who acknowledge their extradyadic involvement are less worried about being judged negatively than individuals who have engaged in marital infidelity (Allen & Baucom, 2006). However, students view both as serious breaches. Although the context of the infidelity influences disapproval ratings, to most students infidelity in any committed relationship is never justified.

### **Reactions to Infidelity**

Reactions to partner infidelity are generally negative. Hansen (1987) found that 72% of women and 77% of men reported that their partner's

behavior had hurt the relationship to some degree. According to Feldman and Cauffman (1999a), the most common reaction reported by men and women who have been unfaithful to their partner is feeling guilty (63%). Some ambivalence is evident, however, as nearly as many students report positive emotions (such as happiness or excitement) as negative reactions. One third of the sample experienced confusion, shame, and feeling "immoral." It is not surprising that male and female students in committed relationships who engage in an extradyadic casual sexual encounter report more regret afterwards than do unattached students who had "casual sex" (Grello et al., 2006). One of the most common end-results of infidelity by a partner is termination of the relationship (Harris, 2002). Over half of the participants in Roscoe et al.'s (1988) survey would terminate (44%) or consider terminating (16%) the relationship with an unfaithful partner (see also Knox et al., 2000). Over half would discuss the incident with the partner in hope of understanding or explaining it. Although a small number of respondents report that they would forgive the transgression or retaliate, their actual reactions may be different.

A common reaction to infidelity, or threatened infidelity, is jealousy. The literature on jealousy in reaction to hypothetical partner infidelity has been prolific, spurred in large part by evolutionary theorists (see, e.g., Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). Although a review of that literature is beyond the scope of this paper, we want to address a few points relevant to our review. Typical studies employ hypothetical scenarios that require participants to imagine a partner's infidelity and anticipate their reactions to it (Mongeau, Hale, Alles, 1994; Mongeau & Schulz, 1997; Nannini & Myers, 2000; Wiederman & LaMar, 1998). Although this research design is simple and efficient, several researchers have revealed that individuals' reactions to hypothetical scenarios are sometimes different from their actual reactions. Harris (2002) recruited four community samples: gay men, lesbians, heterosexual women, and heterosexual men. Using a forced-choice format, participants were asked if they would be more upset by imagining their "partner trying new sexual positions" with another person or falling in love with that person (see Buss et al., 1992). Across groups, a large majority of respondents picked emotional infidelity as more upsetting. The heterosexual men were more likely than any other group to report that sexual infidelity was more upsetting, although 74% of them chose emotional over sexual infidelity as most upsetting. When participants were asked about their actual reactions to partner infidelity, no group differences emerged, as all were more distressed by emotional infidelity and over half reported that the relationship had ended because of it.

Allen and Baucom (2006) found differences between persons who had actually engaged in infidelity and those asked to imagine their reactions to doing so. Individuals who only imagine being unfaithful to a partner report higher levels of anticipated distress and remorse than do persons who have actually had the experience. The authors concluded that individuals who actually engage in dating infidelity seem either to feel justified or at least to minimize its impact in order to reduce cognitive dissonance (p. 315). Gender differences in response to the hypothetical scenarios are inconsistent; where such differences do occur, they are only modest (see Harris, 2003; Nannini & Myers, 2000; Sheppard et al., 1995; Yarab et al., 1999). Across studies, and considering all participants, infidelity in any form elicits jealousy and constitutes a threat to the relationship.

The aftermath of dating infidelity, however, is not inevitably negative. According to Hansen (1987), approximately one fourth of students who participate in extradyadic involvement report that it actually improved the primary relationship. This claim seems to be a matter of perspective, because individuals feel much less positive about their partner's infidelity: only 7% to 12% of students whose partners were unfaithful reported that their relationships benefited from it.

### **Motives for Infidelity**

In their review, Drigotas and colleagues (1999) delineated five categories of motives for infidelity: sexuality, emotional satisfaction, social context, attitudes-norms, and revenge-hostility. Sexuality motives include the desire for variety and dissatisfaction with the primary sexual relationship. Emotional satisfaction might imply relationship dissatisfaction, ego bolstering, and/or emotional attachment to the other person. Social contextual factors refer to opportunity and absence of the primary partner. Attitudes-norms includes sexually permissive attitudes and norms. Revenge-hostility applies to infidelity that occurs in retaliation for some perceived wrong by the partner. Barta and Kiene's work (2005) compresses the categories of the earlier study and seems to eliminate the social context factor. They derive four factors from the Motivations for Infidelity Inventory they administered to students: dissatisfaction, neglect, anger, and sex. Obviously, infidelity can result from multiple motives.

Feldman and Cauffman (1999a) found that sexual attraction was the most commonly reported motive: 53% of their participants endorsed it. Partner absence was a close second (48%), followed by feeling unable to resist the opportunity. Sexual dissatisfaction and insecurity about one's relationship were reported by one third of participants who engaged in

infidelity. Vindictiveness was not a common motive in their study. No gender differences were found in motives for infidelity. Barta and Kiene (2005) reported that dissatisfaction with the primary relationship and feeling neglected were the two most commonly cited motives in their sample of 120 students. Sexual motivation and anger were listed as motives by only a minority of their respondents, with men more likely than women to identify sex as a motive. In Grello et al. (2006), a previously unstudied factor emerged: The finding that extradyadic encounters involved less affection than encounters with the primary partner suggests that these different relationships serve different needs (Grello et al., 2006). Men and women in committed dating relationships who had a casual sexual encounter reported having engaged in fewer affectionate behaviors (such as holding hands and hugging) with the third party than did unattached persons who also experienced a casual sexual encounter. Affectionate behaviors are perhaps reserved for the primary partner; restricting them may implicitly signal that the casual encounter is only sexual and just a "one-time" thing (Grello et al., 2006).

The implication of sharing affection between partners creates other issues. Several studies have examined the role of relationship factors in infidelity. Allen and Baucom (2006) investigated the contribution of self-esteem needs, love needs, intimacy needs, and autonomy needs among three groups: a group of students who engaged in infidelity, a community sample that reported marital infidelity, and a sample of students instructed to imagine having engaged in infidelity. Compared to the students who had engaged in infidelity, the marital infidelity group was more likely to endorse intimacy reasons (felt neglected and lonely) and self-esteem needs. The marital infidelity group was also more likely than the student groups to report having been in love with the extradyadic partner. The authors concluded that, because marital infidelity is a more serious transgression than dating infidelity, married individuals may require higher levels of multiple motives to betray their spouses. Lewandowski and Ackerman (2006) evaluated the relationship between need fulfillment and self-expansion needs and the susceptibility to infidelity, examining five types of need fulfillment (intimacy, companionship, sex, security, and emotional involvement) and three types of self-expansion (self-expansion, inclusion of the other in self, and potential for self-expansion) as predictors of the self-reported likelihood of engaging in dating infidelity. As hypothesized, all five need fulfillment variables were negatively correlated with susceptibility to infidelity, as were all self-expansion variables. Limited by its reliance on self-reported susceptibility to infidelity, the study would have been strengthened by adding a measure of actual

infidelity because self-reported susceptibility may not always predict participation.

In the only study to employ a prospective design, Drigotas and colleagues (1999) used the investment model to predict actual dating infidelity. Simply, the model states that commitment to a relationship is a function of relationship satisfaction, alternative quality (the extent to which alternatives to the relationship are viewed as attractive), and investments (tangible and intangible) in the relationship. Dissatisfaction with one's current relationship combined with the prospect of a desirable alternative partner could erode commitment to the relationship and increase the likelihood of infidelity. According to the model, lack of commitment to one's relationship is ultimately at the root of infidelity. In Study 1, degree of commitment to the relationship at the start of a semester was predictive of subsequent emotional and sexual infidelity. The findings revealed that "individuals who were more committed, more satisfied, had fewer alternatives, and were more invested in their relationships were less likely to be unfaithful to their partners" (p. 513). Study 2 essentially replicated these findings showing that the degree of commitment was predictive of infidelity among students on spring break. Commitment was also predictive of the number and intensity of interactions with opposite-sex strangers over the break. Lower commitment was associated with more frequent and more intimate interactions with strangers, thereby creating opportunity for infidelity.

Possible motives for dating infidelity are numerous and varied—and possibly inaccurate, given the retrospective nature of most studies and the widespread disapproval of infidelity (see Allen & Baucom, 2006; Drigotas et al., 1999). The limited research on motives for infidelity reveals that relationship factors should be carefully considered, particularly the degree of commitment to the relationship. As Drigotas et al. (1999) recommended, "Paying attention to one's partner's commitment would be a very diagnostic tool in the prediction of partner infidelity" (p. 520). Allen and Baucom (2006) also suggested that motives for dating infidelity may differ from those behind marital infidelity. Therefore, we cannot assume that the relevant research on marital infidelity can be generalized to dating relationships (e.g., Glass & Wright, 1985).

### **Predictors of Infidelity**

The search for potential predictors and other correlates of infidelity in committed relationships is in its infancy. The few variables that have been studied include religiosity, personality type, love style, and sexuality-related attitudes. Each of these, however, has been investigated in

very few studies. Because most samples used in the studies are relatively homogeneous (i.e., unmarried heterosexual college students), restrictions of range in scores could attenuate potential relationships between the variables and infidelity.

Hansen (1987) derived a religiosity score that combined self-rated importance of religion and frequency of church attendance. It was negatively correlated with infidelity for women, but not for men. Wiederman and Hurd (1999) used two ratings of the importance of religion in participants' lives, but these did not predict infidelity. Sexuality-related attitudes have also been investigated in relation to infidelity. Sexually permissive attitudes were predictors of infidelity in several studies. Attitudes related to sex outside of committed relationships have proven useful, as expected. Sociosexual orientation (self-reported willingness to engage in sexual encounters without emotional attachment) is related to infidelity, with this factor partially mediating the relationship between gender and a sexual motivation for engaging in infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005). Seal, Agostinelli, and Hannett (1994) had previously found the sociosexual orientation was related to self-reported willingness to engage in infidelity. They also reported that men were more likely to express an interest in extradyadic relations than women. The second part of the study included a behavioral measure of participants' willingness to engage in extradyadic dating; the gender difference disappeared, but sociosexual orientation remained a significant predictor of willingness to go on a date with someone other than one's primary partner. A Ludic love style (a playful and cavalier view of romantic relationships) and sexual sensation-seeking were unique predictors of past sexual and dating infidelity in one study (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Permissive attitudes toward infidelity are predictors of self-reported infidelity for women and men (Hansen, 1987). Accepting attitudes toward infidelity are also related to overall sexual permissiveness and earlier initiation of sexual intercourse (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b).

Research on attachment style and infidelity has yielded interesting results. Individuals with a secure attachment style have less accepting attitudes toward infidelity than those with avoidant and preoccupied styles, but there was no difference in terms of actual infidelity in one sample (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b). Allen and Baucom (2006) found that individuals whose attachment style causes them significant anxiety over possible abandonment (i.e., fearful and preoccupied types) are more likely to complain of neglect in their primary relationships and to identify a need for intimacy as a motive for infidelity, whether actual or imagined, than those with low anxiety (the secure and dismissive

attachment styles). Bogaert and Sadava (2002) also reported a relationship between anxious attachment styles and past infidelity in a community sample.

Finally, two studies examined the relationship between personality traits, the "Big Five" traits, and infidelity. Orzeck and Lung (2005) administered a questionnaire to measure the Five Factors to a sample of 104 college students who also completed the same instrument to describe their dating partners. Participants who reported infidelity scored higher on Extroversion and Openness, but lower on Conscientiousness than the "noncheaters." Higher levels of Extroversion may reflect a more socially active lifestyle, which presents more opportunities for meeting extradyadic partners. Lower Conscientiousness may be associated with unreliability and erratic behavior. An interesting finding was that the participants who reported infidelity rated their partners lower on all five factors relative to those who reported no past infidelity. These lower ratings may be due to perceived incompatibilities and resulting relationship dissatisfaction, which could be motives for infidelity. Alternatively, these might serve as justifications after the fact. Somewhat different findings were reported by Barta and Kiene (2005) who found that individuals admitting to infidelity scored higher in Neuroticism and lower in Agreeableness than their counterparts. The lower level of Conscientiousness in the infidelity group was replicated (Orzeck & Lung, 2005). Personality factors may influence the types of motives given for engaging in infidelity. Extroversion and female gender predicted reporting relationship dissatisfaction as a motive for infidelity. Neuroticism was related to claiming neglect as a motive. The combination of high Neuroticism and low Agreeableness predicted reporting anger as a motive for infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005). Certain personality factors seem to interact with relationship variables in influencing a person's likelihood of being unfaithful to a dating partner. Tolerant attitudes toward infidelity, insecure attachment styles, and personality traits associated with erratic behavior seem to be related to extradyadic involvement, possibly as a function of opportunity and dissatisfaction with the primary relationship.

There is clearly a need for more research on possible correlates of dating infidelity. Researchers have only begun to explore the contribution of such factors as attachment style and personality traits on infidelity. It seems likely that a number of individual differences interact with relationship factors, such as level of commitment, and with contextual variables, such as opportunity, to ultimately determine a person's likelihood of engaging in infidelity. We agree with Blow and Hartnett (2005b) that there is a need for studies on individuals' vul-

nerability to infidelity and on the process by which individuals decide to engage in infidelity, particularly the process by which costs and benefits are evaluated.

### Research Limitations

The literature on dating infidelity suffers from the same limitations as the research on marital infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). With few exceptions, all data are derived from self-report measures. Given the widespread disapproval of infidelity in any context and the apparently high prevalence of extradyadic involvement, it seems likely that results are influenced by social desirability. As Feldman and Cauffman (1999b) concluded, "Acts of betrayal are likely to be underreported, whereas disapproving attitudes toward such behavior are likely to be overstated" (p. 245). By its very nature, infidelity is an illicit and clandestine practice that defies investigation (Charny & Parnass, 1995). One method that may be useful for evaluating the reliability of infidelity data would be to compare the individual's self-report to that provided by the "third party." Although fraught with ethical, methodological, and logistical complications (it would require participants to identify the third parties in order to recruit their participation), this method may yield some answers (see Ochs & Binik, 1999, for the use of couple data in sex research). Agreement between two individuals, however, does not ensure that the data are valid.

Another limitation is that the few studies on dating infidelity rely almost exclusively on samples of college students. The vast majority of participants in the relevant studies are unmarried Caucasian college students. By our count, of the 7,253 participants in approximately 30 studies of dating infidelity, a total of 7,138, or 98.4%, of participants were undergraduate college students. Although the study of dating practices among college students is a legitimate topic of inquiry, it is important to also evaluate other groups. Research on dating practices and infidelity in high school students, older unmarried adults, and divorced persons would be useful for evaluating the generalizability of the findings. Research on same-sex couples is very limited and dated (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Longitudinal research to assess patterns of infidelity over time is also needed. If infidelity is a pattern for some persons, what attitudes, experiences, and traits predict susceptibility to the pattern? The extent to which dating infidelity predicts marital infidelity is also an important question. Although popular lore suggests that behavior patterns in dating relationship predict marital adjustment, this hypothesis has not been tested. Related to this, the long-term sequelae of infidelity are rel-



evant from the perspective of both the participants and their partners. Finally, the literature on dating infidelity is largely atheoretical. Commenting on a larger problem, Baumeister, Maner, and DeWall (2006) noted that much sex research accumulates in a theoretical vacuum. Outside of the studies of jealousy to hypothetical partner infidelity, few have attempted to explain dating infidelity from a theoretical perspective. Drigotas and Barta (2001) suggested that the study of infidelity would benefit from the combined perspectives of evolutionary theory and the investment model. Whereas both perspectives emphasize the role of exchanges in relationship satisfaction and the inverse relationship between relationship satisfaction and the attractiveness of alternative partners, the evolutionary viewpoint postulates different motives for infidelity in men and women. The investment model, on the other hand, focuses more on factors that are beneficial or detrimental to relationship commitment for both genders, including satisfaction and degree of investment. We would add that other perspectives, such as script theory can shed light on possible gender differences in infidelity, attitudes toward extradyadic involvement, and students' definitions of infidelity. As Randall and Byers (2003) have observed, a broad and inclusive definition of infidelity may serve to reinforce the cultural script that promotes monogamy and fidelity. Conversely, a narrow definition of sex may reinforce the script that emphasizes sexual restraint. Finally, changing scripts for dating and sexual exclusivity could create some ambiguity about when extradyadic sexual activity qualifies as infidelity.

### Future Directions

Research on dating infidelity could offer important insights into sexuality and intimacy. It could provide valuable information about the nature of commitment in dating relationships, potential gender differences, and the process by which couples negotiate problems in relationships, such as betrayal. Such findings could lead to applications in the field of couples' therapy.

Several interesting questions remain unanswered. Information on the *other* person involved in infidelity is lacking—what might be called the "*third party problem*." Although infidelity was not a primary focus, the study by Grello et al. (2006) of casual sex among college student is an exception (21% of the students who participated in casual sex were involved in a committed dating relationship at the time). In order to better understand the context of infidelity, there is a need to study the perspective of the third party. How often do unfaithful partners misrepresent their relationship status, as in the popular stereotype of the mar-

ried man who strategically removes his wedding band? What were the motives, justifications, and reactions to the infidelity for the third party? It would also be important to understand individual characteristics, including personality traits and relevant attitudes, from the partner's perspective. Some researchers have suggested that infidelity could result from the third party's intentional pursuit of a person who is in a committed relationship, so-called "mate poaching" (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2004). Davies, Shackelford, and Hass (2007) reported that 54% of the male students and 34% of the female students in their survey admitted to having knowingly poached a person in a committed dating relationship for "sexual relations." An even larger number of students (70% of males and 80% of females) reported that they had been the objects of attempted poaching, and 38% of both genders claimed to have been "successfully poached" for a sexual encounter. A significant number of men (64%) and of women (74%) claimed that others had attempted to poach their partners, with some success (22% of men and 30% of women reportedly had a partner who gave in to the pursuer). It would be informative to learn of the factors that differentiate those who give in to poaching from those who do not. Although infidelity can result from poaching by a third party, it has not been possible to determine how many cases of infidelity might be explained by this strategy. It seems likely that situational (such as opportunity) and relationship factors (such as low commitment or ongoing conflict) are also important. If poaching is indeed a widespread phenomenon, what makes a person vulnerable to the third party's pursuit? Finally, some, if not many, instances of infidelity probably involve some degree of receptivity and even initiation by the cheating partner, even if only providing subtle cues of ambivalence about one's availability.

Over the past decade, a number of researchers (see Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007) and social critics have lamented the changes in the institution of marriage. The median age at first marriage has steadily risen, divorce rates remain relatively high, and alternatives to marriage have become increasingly popular. We wonder whether the "institution" of dating, as popularized during the 1950s in most Western cultures (Gordon, 1978; Hareven, 1977), is undergoing a similar transformation. For example, the script for dating in contemporary culture appears to be changing (DeGenova & Rice, 2005; Sessions-Stepp, 2007): College dating has reportedly become more informal, which may reflect a revision of such former scripts as "going steady" in favor of "hanging out" and "hooking up" (Grello et al., 2006; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). The study of infidelity could shed light on the changing meanings of commitment and exclusiv-

ity in contemporary college dating relationships.

The study of dating infidelity illustrates the inconsistency between stated attitudes and actual behavior. Although the vast majority of college students disapprove of most forms of extradyadic intimacy, a majority of them report having cheated on a dating partner at some time. A variety of motives and predictors of infidelity have been identified, most of which can be categorized as attitudes, traits, or relationship styles that compromise commitment to the relationship.

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