

EMOTIONAL PROCESSES FOLLOWING DISCLOSURE OF AN EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIR

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In-depth interviews with individuals who had experienced marital infidelity revealed a three-stage process following disclosure of an affair. The process starts with an "emotional roller coaster" and moves through a "moratorium" before efforts at trust building are recognized. Implications for the literature on forgiveness and the process of change in couples therapy are discussed as well as implications for future research and for practice.

Although there is a strong norm in society against extramarital sexual relationships (Scott, 1998; Treas & Giesen, 2000; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1996), sexual affairs are a problem in many marriages. Recent national studies have found that nearly one-quarter of husbands and more than one in ten wives has had extramarital sex at some point during their marriage (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Smith, 1994). For example, Wiederman (1997) reported that 22.7% of married men and 11.6% of women had extramarital sex during their marriage. These percentages include 4.1% of men and 1.7% of women who had sex outside of marriage within the last 12 months.

Most of the research on extramarital sex has focused on the prediction of infidelity and the identification of specific risk factors. Research has found that risk factors include gender, with men being more likely to have affairs, race, with African Americans being most at risk, and age, with younger couples more at risk (Thompson, 1983; Weiderman, 1997). Other risk factors include employment status, with those working outside the home being more at risk, infrequent church attendance, and low marital satisfaction (Liu, 2000; Treas & Giesen, 2000). For example, although most couples report high marital satisfaction, the odds of having an affair increase 28% when a person reports that he or she is "very" happy in their marriage as opposed to "extremely happy" (Treas & Giesen, 2000).

One of the reasons that extramarital affairs have received significant attention from researchers is that they are so damaging to relationships. In a national survey of marital therapists, the participants rated the types of problems that couples bring to therapy (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). They ranked extramarital affairs as the second most damaging problem to relationships, with only physical abuse having a more negative impact. In another study of more than 2,000 randomly selected married people in America, Amato and Rogers (1997) examined the effect of various marital problems on divorce up to 12 years later.

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Among relationship problems, such as getting angry easily, being domineering, having an affair, having irritating habits, spending money foolishly, or abusing drugs or alcohol, extramarital sex was the biggest predictor of subsequent divorce. In fact, the impact of extramarital sex on divorce was more than twice as large as any other relationship problem.

In response to the damaging impact of affairs on relationships, therapists have addressed the clinical treatment of infidelity. Several therapists have developed typologies of affairs (Levine, 1998). For example, Brown (1991) differentiated five types of affairs: The conflict-avoidant marriage, the intimacy-avoidant marriage, "out-the-door" affairs, sexual addiction, and empty-nest affairs. Pittman and Wagers (1995) suggested that extramarital sex can be classified as accidental infidelity, philandering, romantic affairs, and marital arrangements.

Moreover, a number of therapists have written books and articles about clinical issues and suggested guidelines for treating relationships where one of the spouses has had an affair (Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Brown, 1991; Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Humphrey, 1987; Kell, 1992; Lusterman, 1995; Pittman, 1989; Silverstein, 1998; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990). For example, Spring (1996) suggests that there are three stages in the healing process after an affair has been revealed. First, both partners need to normalize their feelings; second, they must decide whether they want to recommit to their relationship or terminate it; and third, if they decide to recommit to the relationship, they must undertake the process of rebuilding it. This last stage involves ending the relationship with the third person, earning back trust, communicating pain, becoming sexually intimate again if intimacy had been interrupted, and forgiving the person who had the affair.

Despite the abundance of clinical literature that has addressed the treatment of relationships after an affair, none of these approaches have been grounded in empirical research. Rather, these therapists have shared their insights based on their clinical experiences. In fact, there is no existing research that has examined the aftermath of affairs. We have no empirical data that address the process of the disclosure of the affair, the emotional reaction to the disclosure, the interactional process of the couple dealing with the affair, and the healing process among those couples that survived the affair. Hence, there is a need for research that systematically studies the interactional and emotional processes among couples after a spouse discloses an affair. This study begins to examine such processes among individuals who have been involved in a marital relationship in which there has been infidelity.

METHODS

Research Design

Elements from phenomenological and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approaches were used to elicit personal descriptions of the emotional and relationship processes experienced following the disclosure of an extramarital affair. Because of the detailed, descriptive focus of the research, the number of respondents interviewed was small (Bergum, 1991; Giorgi, 1970, 1975; Morse, 1994; van Manen, 1990). The approach yielded in-depth, reflective descriptions of each participant's experience following the disclosure of the affair.

The influence of phenomenology was apparent in the interviewers' efforts to understand the "essence" of the respondents' experiences and the research team's effort to give meaning to the statements and themes that emerged from the interviews. Grounded theory's influence on this study is apparent in data collection, analysis, and "theory" generation—all standing in reciprocal relationship to each other. As the pilot interviews ($n = 5$) and subsequent interviews ($n = 14$) were completed, the researchers met to identify emerging themes. New interview probes were developed to clarify and confirm the existence of themes and then to organize them into a meaningful whole.

Data Collection

An ad was run in two Midwestern newspapers to solicit participation in a study investigating couples' experiences after having experienced an affair. Potential respondents were given a toll-free number to call and were offered \$50 for their participation. Participants agreed to a mutually acceptable time for a phone

interview and to have that interview recorded. Although there are clearly strengths and limitations of both face-to-face and phone interviews as a method for data collection, phone interviews were conducted. The most poignant strength of phone interviews was felt to be its ability to protect the anonymity of the respondents. This may have contributed to respondents' willingness to discuss a topic that is sensitive in nature and may have been painful or shameful. Arrangements were also made for the respondent to receive payment in a way that would preserve anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to decline to answer any of the questions asked during the interview and to terminate the interview at any time for any reason. Each participant gave their informed consent and was offered a summary of the results of the study. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to almost 2 hours. Two interviewers conducted the interviews: one male and one female.

The interview started with a broad question about the "circumstances surrounding the affair and its discovery." The interviewer then used a series of probes from an interview guide to explore emotional and relationship processes surrounding the disclosure. Subjects were also asked about advice they would give to other couples in their situation or the therapists who might treat them. Although a total of 19 interviews were completed, theoretical saturation was achieved after the first 13. These 13 interviews constituted the sample for this analysis.

Participants

Interviews from 13 individuals were included in this study. To be eligible for the study, participants had to have been in a marriage in which infidelity had occurred and had been disclosed. Eleven of the respondents were female, two were male. Two of the respondents were the "offending party" (not specific to the two men participating in the study) in the affair, whereas the remainder were "injured" partners (the terms "offending party" and "injured partner" are those of the researchers and reflect our bias). Eleven of the participants were still married at the time of the interview, whereas one was separated and one was divorced. All 13 respondents had children. The mean number of months since the disclosure of the affair was 28.9 months, with a range from 1.5 to 120 months. In sum, our sample consisted primarily of females who were still married, had experience with couple therapy, were the "injured party," and reported positive outcomes.

Analysis

A qualitative software program, Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (QSR- N.U.D.I.S.T.), was used to code, sort, collapse, and assist in the analysis of the interviews. The data from the 13 interviews were analyzed and explored to identify major categories and properties using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and thematic analysis techniques that relate closely to qualitative research categorized by Tesch (1990) as that which aims at "discerning of patterns" in the data. Each of the interviews was coded independently by each member of the research team to maximize the reliability of the analysis. Meetings for the research team were scheduled at regular intervals during the data collection, analysis, and coding process to compare and discuss the coding procedures and memos and to establish criteria for including or excluding categories. This iterative process of interviewing and analysis (constant comparative method) continued until theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) had been reached.

Theory Development

The researchers utilized methods discussed by Geertz (1988) to achieve both "thick description" and "thick interpretation" from the interview data. At the thick description level of data analysis, data were organized conceptually into thematic patterns without efforts to provide interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The process of achieving thick interpretation flowed directly from the thick description of the data and involved grouping similar concepts that were then given theoretical or conceptual labels. These theoretical concepts were then linked to one another in the development of a model describing how individuals experienced infidelity within their marriage.

RESULTS

The research informants, whether “offending” or “injured,” described similar processes in managing the impact of the disclosure of the affair. As respondents told their stories, a sequence and pattern of experiences shared by the respondents began to emerge. These experiences are summarized in three phases of emotional and relationship processes. The three phases are roller coaster, moratorium, and trust building.

Stage 1: Roller Coaster

Initial responses to a partner’s disclosure of infidelity were often intensely emotionally charged. It was during this phase that many of the negative outcomes of the affair were most apparent. This period of time following the disclosure often involved confronting the offending partner, expressing anger, and managing conflicting feelings. The response to betrayal often led to strong feelings, “I hated my husband, I hated him. There was nothing he could say nor do that would make me feel any different.” Another woman said,

I just went ballistic . . . You’ve got to get your stuff out of this room and out. I kicked him out . . . and with, with that he started to let out some of his anger. Letting me know . . . you know, at first it was supposed to be my fault. Then he started blaming it on my mother . . . then the girls. It took a good month or so after . . . before I would even let him in our home, into my home. Because I had moved. We lost our house . . . and that right there, just me losing my home that both of my children were born in, took all the love I had for him, I thought, away.

Confrontations spurred by such intensity were sometimes violent. One woman said, “I threw a glass thing at him.” For others, there was a delayed reaction before they were able to confront their partner and the affair. These narrative excerpts are illustrative:

It had been a year, about a year and a half since the affair and I still had it bottled up inside of me . . . I cried a lot. The more I cried the better I felt . . . If I could have done it in front of somebody it would have been a lot better. But I cried behind closed doors . . . He wasn’t anywhere around, anywhere involved. I would not let him. And he said he was starting to grow up, that he realized what he was doing. Then he started really telling me the truth about the affair . . . and then, you know, I started getting my anger out. I started showing my anger.

He’s been depressed since I found out . . . There’s been times that I’ve consoled him he’s been so upset about it . . . I think initially I was in a denial . . . It was hard to hate him initially. The first couple days I was kind of okay, I was almost shocked how calm I was and then as the days went by I became more and more angry and angrier.

At times, participants felt less despondent, during which time they would entertain ideas of working on the relationship. However, this vacillation in feelings seemed to cycle so rapidly that a “roller coaster” of emotions was often experienced. One woman stated, “I’ve been on a complete roller coaster . . . one minute I want to divorce him and the next minute I want to work it out and there’s in between times too . . . I go so extreme.” Another woman said, “While I wasn’t so angry I thought that maybe I could at least work on it. And then when I was at the height of my anger, there was no way.”

Although most injured partners experienced overwhelming feelings of anger toward their partner, some nonoffending partners concurrently experienced a host of feelings related to self-blame. One woman described her guilt, “What did I not do enough of?” Another woman talked about her feelings of inadequacy, “I felt very embarrassed . . . I felt inadequate . . . I failed, my husband cheated on me.” Some injured partners described cautiousness, “I gotta watch, I don’t want to be stalking him but I be trying to watch him, making sure.” Another said, “Well . . . I guess I’ll be more careful. I won’t be so trustworthy. I know that’s kind of awful to say. It’s probably scarred me a little bit towards men.”

Many respondents described feeling or experiencing moments of introspection, awareness, and deepened appreciation for spouse and family amidst the current of strong negative emotions. These moments

were often described as “eye-opening” experiences for couples. After the disclosure, participants realized that the relationship had been in trouble even before the affair. One woman said, “I’m not saying that it was a good thing that he cheated, but in a little teeny way he has realized that ‘this is my family, they’re important to me’.” Another participant stated, “It definitely opened my eyes. We may have never figured out what was wrong or had been able to admit what was wrong.” One offending partner said, “Nothing in this world is worth that, to lose something that I had for 12 years and the two kids we share. It just wasn’t worth it.”

Stage 2: Moratorium

A hallmark that the injured party had passed through the first phase of coping following the infidelity disclosure was evidenced by less emotional reactivity and attempts to make meaning of the infidelity. This period of “moratorium” often involved obsessing about details, retreating both physically and emotionally, and recruiting the support of others in an effort to make meaning of the infidelity.

In the process of making meaning surrounding the infidelity, some injured partners wanted to learn about the details of the affair. One woman indicated that knowing the details of the affair was essential to her healing, “I just couldn’t start healing until I knew everything . . . I wanted the truth.” Another woman initially thought details were important, but later decided details were not necessary, “You know, on my side I need to know every single detail. And now that I look back, that was wrong. He was willing to tell me every detail but in the end I didn’t need to know every detail. I mean I thought I did, but really didn’t.”

Some women searched for meaning by learning more about the person with whom their husband had been involved. One woman met her husband’s lover: “You want to know, is this person prettier than me? But you have nobody there but yourself to tell you, you know, no she’s not or yes she is. So I went there and I looked at her and I was talking to her and I couldn’t stop staring at her and I’m like ‘I’m sorry, um, I can’t stop staring. I just wanted to know what it was in you that he couldn’t find in me’.”

For many participants, the process of gathering information about the affair was a long process, “It was very difficult, I would say, though, it took, honestly, a good year before I got most of the information out.” One woman said, “We discussed it. He said he would never do it again and it was put away and right now, I mean, two and a half years later I think we’re just now starting to actually deal with it.”

Many couples spent time apart following the affair. Some injured partners asked their husband to leave, whereas other couples took time away from each other, but continued to live together. One woman insisted her husband sleep in the guest bedroom, “I threw all of his clothes out, all his cologne, his toothbrush . . . ‘you need to be in the guest bedroom and in the guest bathroom too.’ I didn’t want none of his stuff in here.” Another woman explained that she and her husband spent less time together for a period of time following the affair disclosure, “We spent time apart for, you know off and on for a couple of weeks. We weren’t separated or anything, but we definitely, you know, spent more time apart than what we normally would.”

Some injured partners retreated intentionally in an effort to have some time alone to think, whereas for others the retreat was not deliberate. One woman described her feeling of social isolation:

I was once very social, not necessarily a club scene, but very social, you know, I participated in a lot of activities and even church. I couldn’t face anybody, I felt like everybody knew and that everybody was looking at me and saying “ha, ha.”

Couples often communicated with one another during the moratorium, but the contact was typically related to family “business,” such as visitation with the children or paying the bills. This type of communication was categorized by the researchers as “maintenance talk,” meaning that the “talk” that occurred did not help the couple to move forward productively in processing the relationship or determining a new direction. One person said:

We just had to kind of work out the details of that each time and as we gradually started doing that, it got to be a little bit easier where we could hold a conversation. And then just gradually we could handle the business part of it without having to discuss everything else.

Although the intensity of feelings was often reduced during this phase of recovery, there were still instances of emotional flare-ups. For example, one participant stated "I used it against him every chance I had. Every argument, every little fight, it all came down to the same thing."

Family members and friends served as the primary means of support for the injured partners. One woman stated, "I just want to surround myself with friends that love me and that know me. I had a close female friend there that I was able to speak with and kind of, you know, she was one of those people that would listen to me and didn't judge me for what I had done." Another said:

I work on it every day and whenever I feel the need, my aunt, my mom, his mom, my neighbor, they've all been supportive. They all was like, "anytime you need to talk, call us, call one of us. We're here, we've been married for a while, call us."

The support, expectations, and advice of others often served as a factor in keeping couples together. "We kind of wanted to live up to everybody else's expectations. In a way, it was kind of a, you know, was kind of the holding factor I think." Another respondent added "I wanted to leave so bad, but his mom, she talked to me and she was like, 'You know, you guys have three kids, and you have to work through your problems.'" Another example of support was illustrated by one woman who said, "The most important thing they ever said to me was, 'Whatever your decision is, it's the right decision and we support you.' So, it's just helpful to know that, you know, they felt like I was bright enough to make the right decision, I guess."

By the end of the moratorium, the couples who stayed together had decided that they were going to make the marriage work. One participant said, "I was determined to make it work. You know, whatever it took. And I knew that it would take him time to heal over it. I didn't know uh, how we were going to do it, but I've always been able to talk openly with him."

Commitment to marriage and family served as a strong motivating factor for healing. One respondent captures this notion in her statement, "Well, I love this man and I want this marriage and we've got three beautiful kids here." Another woman, when asked about the 4 years of marriage after she had found out about the affair replied "I was trying desperately to keep the family together." Two additional responses that are illustrative of commitment to marriage and family were: "The first thought I had was, do everything possible to keep this together, but, I mean, that's just what kind of family person I am," and "I was determined to make it work. You know, whatever it took . . . you know, we can have a beautiful marriage if one of us don't give up."

Stage 3: Trust Building

Though the process of achieving a trusting relationship is a long and difficult process following infidelity, many respondents reported that trust had been regained, or that they were in the process of rebuilding trust. Rebuilding trust involved reengagement, taking responsibility, reassurance of commitment, increased communication, and forgiveness.

After the distance and isolation experienced during the moratorium, couples (excluding those couples who separated or divorced) in the "trust-building" phase would "reengage." This process of reengagement involved greater openness in the relationship. One participant addressed "opening up," "Being totally open and honest even if that honesty hurts the other person. Just really sort of bearing the whole true self." However, opening up did not solely involve dialogue about the details of the affair. A focus on the relationship problems that led up to the affair was also an important way of reengaging. One woman described, "Actually sitting down and talking about what we want out of our marriage and communication. . . . We don't necessarily just sit and talk about the affair all of the time, but the things that caused it."

Injured partners needed to experience remorsefulness from the offending partner throughout the various stages of the healing process. It was obvious from the interviews that offending partners often expressed words of apology from the time of disclosure of the affair. Words of apology and acceptance of responsibility seemed to become most believable however following the period of moratorium as the couple moves toward trust building and reengagement in the relationship. One possible reason for this may be that couples need a period of confrontation, anger, meaning making, and behavioral change, and so on, before they are able to truly hear and internalize their partner's apology. One woman, speaking of how her husband

took responsibility for what he had done, said, "He apologized for not loving me the way he should have been loving me." This was an important step in the healing process for this couple. Two offending partners' statements reflect an acknowledgment of responsibility as well as the need to address relationship troubles that led to the affair.

I accept complete responsibility for what I did. But I also recognize that there were things that contributed to the moment when the affair started . . . I have to say I did something wrong, and I'm sorry for it. And I really do think it helps if we can work together to get this out and get beyond that. Because there were issues in our marriage that we had.

He's like "I understand, I can feel the hostility in your voice. I guess I deserve that" and he'll admit it, you know, he admits it to me and that helps me heal too. But every time I hear him say "I am sorry. I should have thought about what I did before I did it," that helps me heal.

During the trust-building phase, the injured partner noticed steps the partner was taking to demonstrate commitment to the relationship. "What can I do to save us?" was a powerful question asked of one injured partner. Another sign of commitment included the return of loving behaviors that were common earlier in the relationship, as explained by one woman, "He started showing me little bits of him being a loving person, like he was when we first started dating." Another participant said, "He's becoming a lot more attentive to the kids. . . . He'll do a lot more things with them like give them their baths, read them stories." One offending partner explained what she does to remove suspicion that she was being unfaithful, "I won't be alone with a guy . . . I won't allow myself to be in a position where anybody could bring up a question." Finally, increased communication and sharing of feelings were indicative of increased commitment. One woman said, "I can get him to talk more." Increased commitment was also demonstrated behaviorally as described by one woman:

If he'd go to the store by himself he'd take all the car seats out. . . . Now it doesn't matter, he'll just leave 'em in there . . . It's kinda like I want everybody to know . . . he doesn't take his ring off any more . . . He'll take the kids with him to the store now.

Many participants described how important increased couple communication was to their relationship. One partner explained "Actually sitting down and talking about what we want out of our marriage." "I would say that probably the thing that I guess has been most helpful is that I've been persistent on we have to talk." Another participant explained the process for increasing communication, "We'd set a time, I think at first it was almost every night or a couple nights a week. We'd go in our room, shut the door, and we would talk."

All participants addressed the issue of forgiveness in their healing process. This was clearly an area that many participants recognized as important for healing, but something that not all had mastered. One respondent said, "I needed to find a way to forgive him. Um, but I still don't know if I really totally have. Um, definitely on the surface and, you know, it's still in there sort of." Other participants felt this task of healing had been accomplished. One participant said, "I don't forget, but I definitely have forgiven him." Another explained how forgiveness was achieved in her relationship, "Talking about it and discussing it honestly is the easiest way to get through to forgiveness." One offending partner reflected "I've worked very hard at telling myself the things that I know were wrong. . . . Understanding that I can be forgiven but I still have to face the consequences. I think both spouses have to really forgive." One woman explained in more detail the process of forgiving her husband, she states:

And forgiveness, that was a big thing on his part, me forgiving him and I think it was just in this last year when I actually did . . . He was in Korea and it was just all of a sudden I felt like that was something I needed to do. So I e-mailed him on the computer with a card and told him that I did forgive him. You know, because that was one of the things he was asking for . . . It was a hard process, I mean, I had to really think about it a lot. Then it was just like, "What is it proving not to?" So, I just felt it was time and it was something I did.

Finally, one man talked about what it was like for him to have been forgiven by his spouse. He states, "It was so important . . . when she finally forgave me, that was the highlight of my year. She finally said that she forgave me. I guess for me, that kind of brought closure to it. It was extremely important for me."

Positive Outcomes

Although the offending partners clearly stated that the affair was "not worth it," many participants described some unanticipated positive changes in their lives following the affair. Developing a closer marital relationship, becoming more assertive, placing a higher value on family, taking better care of oneself, and realizing the importance of good marital communication were some of the positive outcomes participants reported following the disclosure of an affair. Increased closeness was described by one participant, "It did bring us closer together. We had been married 12 years at that time, so we had thought everything was fine, but I guess there must have been something that wasn't. But now it's brought us closer together, really." One woman explained her empowerment as a result of the affair, "In terms of my own life, I thought that everything was my fault. I'm better able to accept my needs and to speak out as to what I really need. I'm definitely more assertive, and I'm clear about what I need and what I want." Another woman described the greater attention she gave to her family following the affair, "It's always been important to me [family], for instance, to have family rituals around holidays . . . family excursions and trips. . . . I've just become more verbal with the kids about what I do and why it is I do that." Focused on her personal accomplishments since the affair, one respondent stated, "I began to diet, I started working out, I just did a lot of good things for myself." Another participant described her realization of the delicate nature of marriage thus, "I just think the whole concept of how fragile a marriage really is. And how you've got to work on your marriage daily. How important communication with your spouse is. That's the most important lesson I'll probably take out of this."

These findings are not meant to suggest that couples follow a completely linear process of healing and coping after the disclosure of an affair. Rather, they are intended to convey the sequential pattern apparent in the data. Despite some cycling between the various stages, those individuals who described a process of healing and positive outcomes both individually and relationally experienced stage 3: Trust building.

DISCUSSION

Our study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. It was designed to reveal relationship processes around an emotionally threatening disclosure and to illustrate them with rich text. Because we interviewed people at various stages in the process of coping with the disclosure of infidelity, we were able to formulate a tentative "stage" model and then to compare that model with existing theory.

Despite the strengths of our study in helping us to develop theory "from the ground up," the limitations of our research also derive from its exploratory and qualitative nature. The sample is small and is not representative of any larger group. The results cannot be generalized to other populations. The data are also limited in that, with the exception of one couple, we have a description of the process from only one of the partners. We also have more information from female than male partners and from injured partners than from offending partners. As a result, in addition to underrepresenting the experience of men, our model may underplay the impact of guilt following disclosure of an affair. In addition, we were not able to assess reliability by triangulating data collected from both husband and wife. We suspect that many of the people who volunteered for our study used the interview as a way to "work through" the emotional process one more time. At least one respondent, who was the "offender," was overt about wanting to help others. Being interviewed may have been part of her penance. For others, we believe guilt may have been a deterrent to volunteering to be interviewed. Finally, most of our couples were still married and continued to work on their relationship. Not all couples will experience the positive outcomes our respondents frequently reported.

In addition to our interest in developing a model describing process, we were interested in the advice our respondents might have for other couples in their situation and for the therapists who might be treating them. In the paragraphs to follow, we will address implications of our study for theory and then implications for practice and further research.

Implications for Theory

This research project was designed to help us further understand the process of change within marriage. Our earlier research identified change during couples therapy as starting in any one of three domains (cognitive, affective, or behavioral), but eventually impacting all three domains (Christensen, Russell, Miller, & Peterson, 1998). In this study, we were particularly interested in understanding change in highly charged emotional situations.

Disclosure of marital infidelity qualifies as an emotionally charged event for most couples. We hoped to find clues to how couples can use distressing emotional experiences to make shifts in the relationship that are more to their liking.

We discovered that disclosure of infidelity precipitates a "roller coaster" of emotions that can cycle unprofitably. However, some respondents were able to use the disclosure as an "eye opener" that motivated a review of how they got to this place and how they might move beyond it. Although the process starts with high levels of emotion and confrontations that fail to give the partners control over what is happening to their relationship, those who are able to move forward eventually shift from a focus on emotion to a focus on cognition. They seek time away from the partner to understand what happened and to gain perspective. Eventually the "offending party" may engage in a variety of behaviors that are interpreted by the partners as "trustworthy." Often these behaviors included "truth telling," taking responsibility for past behaviors, and apologies. When this occurred, some of our "injured" respondents described moving toward or achieving forgiveness. The description they provided is consistent in many ways with existing "forgiveness theory."

Three process models of forgiveness are of particular interest to us, each of which consider affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of forgiveness. These are the models of Hargrave (1994), McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) and Gordon and Baucom (1998).

Hargrave's (1994) forgiveness model was inspired by contextual family therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986) and extends forgiveness theory to intergenerational relations (Hargrave, 1994). Within this model, the concept of relational ethics provides a way of understanding how trust is established in relationships and how it can be reestablished when the balance between the give and take results in destructive entitlement. Infidelity is surely one way of threatening trust and creating destructive entitlement. Hargrave identifies "four stations of forgiveness" including insight, understanding, giving opportunity for compensation, and overt acts of forgiving. In Hargrave's model, affect is the result of violations of trust and love and includes such emotions as shame and rage. These emotions are thought to contribute to attempts to overcontrol relationships as well as giving up all control. A position Hargrave calls "chaos." Elements of affect, cognition, and behavior are clearly present in Hargrave's model. He also acknowledges that "Some individuals . . . experience a wide range of feelings and actions as they alternate shame/rage, control/chaotic cycles" (Hargrave & Sells, 1997, p. 43). This description is reminiscent of the emotional "roller coaster" described by our respondents.

McCullough et al. (1997) define forgiveness as a "motivational transformation that inclines people to inhibit relationship-destructive responses and to behave constructively toward someone who has behaved destructively toward them" (p. 321). Their empirically supported model identifies empathy, particularly "affective empathy" as an antecedent to the development of forgiveness and conciliatory behaviors. Indicators of affective empathy include the degree to which respondents felt "Sympathetic, empathic, concerned, moved, compassionate, warm, softhearted and tender" (p. 324). Though McCullough et al. also measured "cognitive empathy" (p. 333; perspective-taking), its relationship to forgiveness was less clear.

Another model by Gordon and Baucom (1998) is unique in that it includes cognitive, behavioral and affective tasks at each stage in the process of moving from the experience of betrayal to forgiveness. Their model is also unique in that it frames betrayal as a traumatic event to which the injured party may respond with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We will describe the Gordon and Baucom (1998) model in more detail and then discuss ways in which our two models overlap. It appears that our qualitative research supports much of the conceptually derived model of Gordon and Baucom (1998). Gordon and Baucom (1998) propose a three-stage model of forgiveness, each stage of which includes a cognitive, behavioral, and affective component. The three stages Gordon and Baucom identify are impact, definition,

and moving forward. In general, these parallel the stages our respondents described as eye opener/roller coaster, moratorium, and trust building. There are, however, differences in emphasis within some of the stages.

In our model, the first stage involves confrontation and intense statement of feeling, including anger, punishment, and guilt. The primary task is affective. In the Gordon and Baucom (1998) model, the primary task of the first stage is thought to be cognitive: "The injured partners need to gather information so that they can begin to reconstruct their understanding of their partners and relationships (p. 427)." Nevertheless, Gordon and Baucom (1998) include "emotional fluctuation" (p. 430), intense affect and "acts of revenge" (p.431) as characteristic components of this stage, all reminiscent of the experiences of our respondents during the first stage.

The second stage in our model, moratorium, is characterized by withdrawal and time alone to make sense out of what has happened. This is congruent with the second stage in the Gordon and Baucom (1998) model, which they call "definition." "Meaning making" is clearly central to the second stage in both models. There are other characteristics of stage two of Gordon and Baucom's (1998) model that are supported by our research. For instance, hypervigilance and acts of revenge were reported by our respondents: one woman said, "Well . . . I guess I'll be more careful. I won't be so trustworthy. I know that's kind of awful to say. It's probably scarred me a little bit towards men." Another respondent stated, "I used it against him every chance I had. Every argument, every little fight . . . it all came down to the same thing . . . Everything went back to her."

Stage three in our model is trust building, which includes a number of behavioral indicators, such as offering of apologies, becoming more accountable throughout the day and making tasks for the good of the family a priority. This nicely parallels stage three in Gordon and Baucom's (1998) model, which they call "moving on" and includes "avoiding selective attention," "creating new predictions," "giving up negative behaviors" and the decision to continue (pp. 141-143). Because of their belief that betrayal within a relationship is a traumatic experience, Gordon and Baucom expect to see repression, numbness, and denial during their first stage of impact. We believe some of our respondents may have experienced some symptoms typical of traumatized persons, though it did not occur to us to label it as trauma until we reviewed the work of Gordon and Baucom. Certainly we heard stories of shattered self-esteem. We reviewed our transcripts for evidence of posttraumatic syndrome, such as numbness, flashbacks, agitation, and did not find them. In general, we found more evidence of anger than trauma. Although several respondents experienced many of the characteristic symptoms of posttraumatic-stress (i.e., detachment, absence of emotional responsiveness, derealization, hypervigilance), we did not feel that criteria were met for a diagnosis of PTSD.

One of the strengths of all the models described above is that, although they highlight affect, cognition or behavior at certain points in the model, they also allow for the overlap and integration of affective, cognitive and behavioral experience. In other words, the three domains of affect, cognition and behavior are not artificially separated from one another.

Implications for Practice

We asked our respondents for advice they might offer to therapists working with couples like themselves and for advice they might offer to other couples in similar situations. Eight of our respondents were, or had been, in therapy as a couple regarding the infidelity and one had participated in counseling individually.

Advice for therapists

Our respondents made it clear to us that they needed a "map" that would help them understand the territory in which they found themselves. A stage model such as the one that emerged from our qualitative research or the conceptual model proposed by Gordon and Baucom (1998) could help provide such a map. Our respondents also told us that when they see a therapist they want that therapist to be active, personable, and to give them some advice. The following excerpts are illustrative:

Treat them like real people, don't try to talk to them at a text-book level. Relate to them more on a human level.

I think they need to share what other couples have done to learn how to get through it. If I'm paying a guy \$100 an hour, I want some answers.

Our respondents also want a therapist who will help them understand what happened in the relationship that made it vulnerable to infidelity. One of our respondents had a therapist who helped her to understand how overfunctioning and distancing worked to the detriment of her relationship. The respondent found this insight to be very helpful. Although our respondents did not routinely show great insight into the dynamics underlying the affair, the Emily Brown (1991) relationship typology is the sort of information the respondents were seeking.

Advice for Couples

When asked what advice they might give to other couples confronted with infidelity, our respondents emphasized the importance of continuing to talk, finding outside support, going slowly, and offering forgiveness. The following quotes are exemplary:

Really listen to one another, to try and really understand where they are coming from.
Don't hold anything back, but at the same time don't yell and scream.
Find someone to talk to outside of the marriage.
Stay around positive people.
Don't make any quick decisions.
If you choose to forgive someone, forgive them. You can't constantly bring it up.

We turn now from a discussion of advice for couples and therapists to a discussion of the implications of our study for future research.

Implications for Research

As an exploratory study, our research leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, because most of our respondents were female, we need to know if the processes are different for males, especially if their wives were the ones to have the affair. Because our respondents were mostly in early-to-mid-stage marriages, we need to know if affairs affect long-term marriages differently from marriages of lesser duration or if the path to forgiveness is different. Finally, we know little about how cultural context influences processes following disclosure of an affair. Our respondents lived in the Midwest in small-to-medium-sized towns. Some were members of the military. We do not know how social class or education or religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or occupation impact relationship processes following the disclosure of infidelity. We also need to know more about the resolution of guilt on the part of "offenders."

CONCLUSION

In summary, our respondents experienced multiple outcomes following the disclosure of an extramarital affair. However, those who achieved or approached forgiveness did so in a fashion that was consistent with developing theory on forgiveness in the psychology literature. It is also noteworthy that the subjects in our study expressed the need for a model that would help them understand the process they were going through. We believe the model put forth in this article is a first step in that direction.

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