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**The Internet:
Changing the Face of Infidelity
by Krista Keddington**

The ubiquity of the Internet in society has had a lasting impact on many things, including the commonly accepted ideals concerning infidelity. This paper reviews current literature on infidelity, beginning with the negative consequences of infidelity and the characteristics most commonly associated with individuals involved in infidelity. Although there is extensive knowledge gained from these studies, the advent of the Internet has changed infidelity, including both the type of people involved and the actions that are considered to be unfaithful. This change in practice may necessitate a change in the current definition of infidelity. Consequently, advances in the research of fidelity need to be made so as to include these changes and increase the effectiveness of prevention.

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When most individuals enter into the marriage contract, implied, if not outright specified, is an agreement of complete fidelity (Lalaz & Weigel, 2011). Yet, according to Buss and Shackelford (1997), 20%-60% of all married individuals, depending on their gender, will be involved in an extramarital affair at some point in their marriage. The consequences of these behaviors are felt not only by the individuals who have direct participation in the extramarital affair, but also by society as a whole. For example, infidelity is one of the leading causes of divorce (Shackelford & Buss, 1997), which is associated with negative consequences such as higher increases in divorce rates for children of divorce and a society that places less emphasis on commitment (Brody, Neubaum, & Forehand, 1988; Murray & Kardatzke, 2009; Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). Even if the couple does not divorce as a consequence of infidelity, emotional distress is increased (Gordon, Baucorn, & Snyder, 2004) and overall marriage quality decreases (Previti & Amato, 2004).

Past Research on Infidelity

Predictors of Infidelity

Efforts toward preventing infidelity and divorce in the past often include identifying individual characteristics linked to higher rates of infidelity. Males are significantly more likely to participate in infidelity than females (Lalaz & Weigel, 2011), as are individuals who rate high in extroversion and openness and low in agreeableness and conscientiousness on Goldberg's Big-Five Personality Factors (Orzeck & Lung, 2005). Other demographic variables associated with higher infidelity include younger age when first married, a

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high level of education, and high income and work status (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). However, dimensions of sexuality characteristics and relationship factors have been found to be more predictive of infidelity than other demographic variables (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011).

Relationship factors associated with high rates of infidelity include low sexual satisfaction and a lack of positive communication (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Similarly, Maddox Shaw, Rhoades, Allen, Stanley, and Markman (2013) found that lower relationship satisfaction, negative communication, and lower dedication predicted infidelity in unmarried opposite-sex relationships across 20 months, indicating that this effect is present in more relationships than traditional marriage ones.

However, as the Internet has grown in popularity and accessibility, the nature of infidelity has changed. Because the Internet provides a more diverse and accessible way of communicating, the definition of infidelity has changed, and likely some of the characteristics of the individuals most likely to take part in it. Thus, the Internet has created a gap in the literature of infidelity, and consequently the applicability of the current knowledge in preventing infidelity is limited.

As I will demonstrate later, prevention of infidelity is important because infidelity is often cited as a destructive influence to individuals, families, and societies in general. Redefining infidelity to include online actions is the first step to identifying personal characteristics of individuals involved in infidelity, which can then be used to aid in prevention of infidelity and its destructive conse-

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quences, including divorce and emotional distress for the individuals involved and their close relations.

Emotional Distress and Infidelity

Knowing that research has illustrated a link between infidelity as a cause of marital distress and divorce, Previti and Amato (2004) were interested in learning whether marital distress was also a cause of infidelity. In their model, marital happiness and divorce proneness were posited as both causes and consequences of infidelity. While divorce proneness at the first time point significantly predicted infidelity, infidelity was a stronger predictor of both divorce proneness and marital happiness at the second time point, and divorce over time.

Emotional distress in the form of depression is common, along with other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, among individuals in relationships where infidelity has taken place. In addition to the individual emotional stress, infidelity has a negative impact on the relationship between the partners, with trust, commitment, and empathy all being severely decreased (Gordon et al., 2004).

Gordon and colleagues (2004) argued for a therapeutic treatment that parallels treatment used when aiding recovery from an interpersonal trauma. The conceptualization of the treatment in this way illustrates the serious and detrimental effect infidelity has on both the individuals involved, as well as the relationship between the individuals. Consistent with this idea, they found the partner not directly involved in the extramarital affair experienced more negative emotional distress, such as a decrease in personal positive assumptions, than the other partner.

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In addition to the injuring partner experiencing less distress, men have been found to experience less distress after an extramarital affair (Cramer, Abraham, Johnson & Manning-Ryan, 2001), a finding that is unsurprising given that men are found to engage in extramarital affairs more often (Lalaz & Weigel, 2011). Investigation into the differences between reactions to extramarital affairs has showed that in relationships where there had been a known extramarital affair, demand behaviors in communication were high, especially coming from the injured partner (Balderrama-Durbin, Allen, and Rhoades, 2012). Surprisingly, there was little difference in withdraw communication behaviors, which normally accompany demand behaviors, between the partners. Despite only portraying increase in one destructive communication behavior, these results illustrate that infidelity has a negative impact on the relationship itself, in addition to the emotional distress it brings to the individuals in the relationship.

Relationship Between Divorce and Infidelity

In 2008, the number of divorces was approximately 40% of the number of marriages, a number that, while decreasing in recent years, is still high (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2012). In one survey, a lack of commitment in the marriage was the most commonly cited reason for divorce (Johnson et al., 2002). Specifically, a nationwide study found infidelity to be the highest reported cause of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). Results from a 17-year-long study suggest that while infidelity is cited as a major cause of divorce, it appears that infidelity only has such a strong effect on already weak relationships in which thoughts of divorced have previously been

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expressed (Previti & Amato, 2004). Still, as divorce has been associated with higher levels of depression, an increase in health problems, and lowered life satisfaction (Amato & Previti, 2003), for the individuals involved, it is worth trying to prevent any major contribution to divorce.

The individuals directly involved in the divorce are not the only ones affected by it. Among the population experiencing the negative effects of divorce are the children of divorced parents. These children have been shown to be at a higher risk for divorce themselves, even when controlling for various demographics, such as income and education (Murray & Kardatzke, 2009). The impact on children is magnified when there have been multiple divorces and remarriages because the constant disruption of the family unit does not as readily allow for positive adjustment (Brody et al., 1988). Further, high divorce rates impact society, as younger individuals tend to be more open to termination of relationships after infidelity than older individuals (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). These findings suggest an overall decrease in commitment level of younger generations, which could lead to more casual attitudes about infidelity and thus, increased rates of infidelity.

Defining Infidelity

In order to assess the negative consequences of infidelity, actions that constitute infidelity must first be evaluated. While infidelity has been defined in different ways, there are several characteristics that are present in most definitions. Also consistent across studies are many of the characteristics of individuals and relationships found to predict infidelity.

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Current Definitions

While the definition of infidelity varies between studies, there are features that are common to most, if not all definitions. The basic definition of infidelity found in studies is the engagement in a sexual interaction—ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse—with an individual outside of a primary marriage relationship (Allen et al., 2008; Amato & Previti, 2003; Atkins et al., 2001; Balderama-Durbin et al., 2012). Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy (1988) extended this basic definition to also include long-lasting dating relationships. Others have changed the definition of what actions constitute infidelity to include the intention to be unfaithful (Lalaz & Weigel, 2011) and sexual interactions that jeopardize or produce a negative impact on the relationship (Mark et al., 2011). Surprisingly, only studies looking at gender differences in reactions to emotional verses physical infidelity include an emotional aspect in the definition of infidelity (Cramer et al., 2001). As the Internet provides anonymous communication that allows for more free expression of emotion, inclusion of emotional infidelity in the basic definition is increasingly important.

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Despite extensive research in the field of infidelity in marital relationships, current knowledge of correlates of infidelity is insufficient because of the impact the Internet has had on the definition of infidelity.

One of the most significant effects of the Internet on society is the opportunity it provides people to create an alternate identity. Gerson (2011) looked into how the Internet affects couples and

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found that the Internet helps individuals to express aspects of themselves that are otherwise suppressed. Expressing two different identities in different situations creates disconnect within individuals, with only certain characteristics expressed in each situation. Because of disconnect between the two identities, it is easier for individuals to form relationships online that are disconnected from the relationships in their everyday life. As the Internet has become more prevalent, dating practices and standards of acceptability for online behavior have changed as well (Gerson, 2011). Helsper and Whitty (2010) found that married partners were more likely to agree on proper online etiquette than two people not in a relationship, but this is unimportant in light of the fact that often members of the relationship do not discuss the standards to begin with (Gerson, 2011). In addition to changing standards of online behavior, the Internet has also introduced completely new ways of being unfaithful.

Pornography, Hot Chatting, and Cybersex. Pornography use is a unique form of infidelity because it does not fit in either of the two most commonly created categories (physical and emotional infidelity), but seems to be a distinct category (Whitty, 2003). While pornography is not a new form of infidelity, the Internet has increased the availability, anonymity, and affordability of pornography (Cooper, 1998). Online pornography consumption is high (Carroll et al., 2008), a fact illustrated by the social acceptance of pornography viewing evident today. Often, use of pornography is not considered by researchers to be a type of infidelity, especially when partners view it together. However, as the effects of one partner viewing pornography without the presence of the other partner has effects

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similar to those of more traditional forms of infidelity, such as decreased sexual satisfaction (Morgan, 2011; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988) and partner's feelings of betrayal (Manning, 2006), it is reasonable to include it as a type of infidelity. Specifically, when included in the model predicting sexual satisfaction, higher levels and more types of pornography used predicted lower sexual satisfaction even when controlling for traditional infidelity (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). That the partner is absent is important here because it more closely imitates traditional infidelity, as well as being the most common use of pornography.

In addition, pornography use is associated with less commitment (Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham., 2012). Replicating their results across multiple studies and methods (including cross-sectional, experimental, and behavioral), Lambert et al. (2012) found individuals who consumed pornography at high levels were less committed and more likely to engage in an infidelity. Additionally, they found commitment mediated the association between pornography and infidelity. Pornography use also increases the likelihood of participating in other types of infidelity (Wright & Randall, 2012). Stack, Wasserman, and Kern (2007) found that individuals who use pornography were more likely to participate in risky sexual behaviors, including having committed an infidelity and engaging in paid sex.

Cybersex and hot chatting are two other actions introduced by the Internet. While there are slight variations in these definitions depending on the researcher, most people define *cybersex* in terms of interacting with someone online with the purpose of gaining

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sexual gratification and *hot chatting* in terms of socializing online that goes beyond simple friendly or light-hearted flirting (Whitty, 2003). Unlike pornography, cybersex and hot chatting involve interactions with another individual and, as such, are often viewed as a greater infidelity (Whitty, 2003). However, as cybersex and hot chatting are newer forms of infidelity, more research needs to be done in order to understand their full effects.

Online Versus Offline Infidelity. To explore how the Internet has affected infidelity, Whitty (2003) had 1,117 males and females between the ages of 17 and 70 complete a survey in which they were given examples of negative relationship behaviors and were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale how much they perceived the action to be considered an infidelity. Items included both offline actions—with examples being “going to strip clubs,” “engaging in intercourse/sexual acts,” and “sharing deep emotional and or intimate information” (p. 573)—and online actions—with examples being “viewing pornographic pictures on websites”, “engaging in hot chat”, “engaging in cybersex”, and “maintaining a non-sexual relationship” (p. 573). All items specified that the behavior was done without the presence of the respondents’ partner. Situations involving cybersex and hot chatting were most agreed upon as acts of infidelity with only sexual intercourse rating higher. This finding illustrates that not only has the Internet introduced new ways of committing infidelity but that these acts have quickly usurped other, more physical infidelities in perceived seriousness. In interpreting her results, Whitty stated that this data “suggests that people at

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least perceive online acts of infidelity as authentic and real as offline acts" (p. 576).

A More Inclusive Definition of Infidelity

Because the Internet increases the opportunity and ease of engaging in infidelity, often those involved in online infidelity are introverted and lack social skills, despite previous correlates of infidelity including extroversion and openness as personality characteristics (Orzeck & Lung, 2005). The availability of the Internet has also opened the door for individuals to commit infidelity who otherwise would not have because of a lack of opportunities to engage with other individuals (Gerson, 2011), a factor that has been found to be associated with higher rates of infidelity (Atkins et al., 2001).

Based off of the results of her study, Whitty (2003) suggested that one of the reasons Internet infidelities need to be included in research definitions is that infidelity often has less to do with the physical act than with the fact that the partner feels the need to seek sexual satisfaction from someone else. Her research also suggested the need to create a unified definition of infidelity to be used in all research as the data found illustrated the differing opinions among people as to what constitutes an unfaithful act.

As argued by Zola (2007), the definition of infidelity used in research should include everything from sexual intercourse to financial betrayal. Specifically, she states that the definition should include any "act of an emotional and/or physical betrayal characterized by behavior that is not sanctioned by the other partner and that has contributed to considerable, ongoing, emotional anguish in the non-offending partner" (p. 27). While it might seem extreme to

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include financial betrayal in a definition of infidelity, using such a broad definition throughout all studies concerning infidelity would help to update and increase knowledge concerning important correlates. This knowledge can then aid in reducing the incidence of infidelity and its associated negative consequences.

The two current categories of infidelity used in research are physical and emotional, although there is a much greater emphasis placed on physical infidelity. However, many of actions that could be considered to be infidelities that are perpetrated on the Internet do not cleanly fall into the two categories. Because of the increased accessibility and types of unfaithful interactions, the individual participating in infidelity has changed with the growth of the Internet. Thus, the current predictors of infidelity are not completely valid. The possible invalidity of the current research illustrates the need for a new, standardized definition of infidelity in research.

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