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# Attitudes, Attachment Styles, and Gender: Implications on Perceptions of Infidelity

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ATTITUDES, ATTACHMENT STYLES, AND GENDER: IMPLICATIONS ON  
PERCEPTIONS OF INFIDELITY

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Science – Marriage and Family Therapy

Marriage and Family Therapy Program  
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## **Thesis Approval**

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entitled

Attitudes, Attachment Styles, and Gender: Implications on Perceptions of Infidelity

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## **Abstract**

Understanding the impact infidelity has on individuals, couples, families, and societies has increasingly become a topic of interest over the last few decades. In recent years, scholars have sought to increase understanding of infidelity through investigating the relationship between infidelity and attachment theory. This research study examines the impact attitudes about infidelity, attachment styles, and gender have on the way in which individuals perceive infidelity. Data was gathered from 310 participants recruited from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and social media. Participants were 18 years of age and older and were, at the time of the study, either in a committed romantic relationship or had previously been in one. Results from a multiple linear regression, using stepwise selection, indicate that permissive sexual attitudes significantly predict permissive perceptions of infidelity. Results also indicated that anxious attachment significantly predicted less permissive perceptions of infidelity. These results provide marriage and family therapists with insight into important factors to attend to when treating infidelity.

*Keywords:* infidelity, attachment, attitudes, sexuality, family of origin

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Infidelity is studied because of its unfavorable effects on individuals, couples, and families (Norona, Khaddouma, Welsh, & Samawi, 2015). Researchers have attempted to determine its prevalence (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; 2005b; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004; Weiderman & Hurd, 1999; Whisman & Snyder, 2007), correlates (Weeks, Gambescia, & Jenkins, 2003), risk factors (DeMaris, 2009; Jeanfreau, Jurich, & Mong, 2014), effects (Sharpe, Walters, & Goren, 2013), and impact (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a; 1999b; Williams & Hickie, 2011). Yet, infidelity is a challenging concept to study and is difficult to define. Perceptions and definitions of infidelity are idiosyncratic, depending on one’s social-cultural background and personal experience.

Unlike the broad availability of literature on infidelity, empirical research on adult attachment and intimate relationships has more recently gained momentum (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Feeney, 2002; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson & Rholes, 1998). Attachment theory suggests that humans tend to attach to caregivers, and different people develop different styles of attachment (Dubá, Kindsvatter, & Lara, 2008). Attachment theory also proposes that attachment styles influence romantic relationships in adulthood (Simpson, 1990). Owen, Rhoades, and Stanley (2013) also state that attachment plays an important role in explaining links between relationship decision-making and functioning. Thus, attachment theory provides a helpful framework for understanding and predicting infidelity (Russell, Baker, & McNulty, 2013), yet, relatively little is known about the relationship between adult attachment and infidelity.

Therefore, a primary purpose of this study is to increase understanding of how attachment influences individuals’ perceptions of infidelity. Understanding how attachment influences perceptions of infidelity will facilitate greater awareness of the impact of infidelity as well as a

conceptualization of treatment after its occurrence. Equipped with this understanding, practitioners in the marriage and family therapy field may develop more systemic and integrative treatment approaches for infidelity.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Infidelity

**Definition.** Throughout history, infidelity has been known by several different names as researchers have endeavored to define it. In the literature, the terms extramarital involvement (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon, & Glass, 2005; Epstein, 2005), extradyadic involvement (Allen & Baucom, 2004), cheating, and affairs are used interchangeably. Blow and Hartnett (2005b) define 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” (p. 192). They also conclude, after a thorough review of the literature on infidelity, that no singular definition has been identified or entirely accepted as an end-all definition (Blow & Hartnett, 2005b).

Comparatively, Fife, Weeks, and Gambescia (2008) define infidelity as a betrayal of the commitment or fidelity between partners who are intimately exclusive with each other. Other researchers offer that infidelity involves a broad range of behaviors that constitute a violation of the trust and commitment established in the primary relationship (Bird, Butler, & Fife, 2007).

It is important to acknowledge that there are various types of infidelity. The term infidelity is generally synonymous with having a sexual relationship with someone other than the person with whom they have a committed relationship (Hertlein, Wetchler, & Piercy, 2005). However, throughout the contemporary literature, three types of infidelity are suggested: physical or sexual, emotional, and cyber or Internet. Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan, and Schofield (2012) suggest that a primary focus in the literature has been to understand why couples have affairs and the typology of those affairs. Although one may engage in a single type of infidelity,

individuals may become involved in extradyadic relationships that combine any of the three types.

***Sexual or physical infidelity.*** Engaging in intimate behaviors with another person when one is in a committed relationship is infidelity (Boekhout, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012; McNulty & Brineman, 2007). Holding hands, hugging, and even some forms of kissing may not be perceived as sexual in nature, yet may represent behaviors of physical intimacy. Thus, a differentiation between physical and sexual intimacy must be explained. Intimate behaviors that may be perceived as sexual are petting, fondling, oral sex, and sexual intercourse (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). Yet not all research is consistent in identifying or differentiating these two types of intimacy and the role they may play in better understanding infidelity. As a result, when considering infidelity, it is important to note that the definition of infidelity is somewhat subjective and may be defined differently from one individual to another. To one person certain behaviors may be indicative of infidelity, and to another those same behaviors may not be defined as being infidelity.

***Emotional infidelity.*** Another type of infidelity, in addition to physical and sexual, is emotional infidelity. Shackelford and Buss (1997) offer that the channeling of emotional resources, including time, attention, and romantic love to someone that is not one's romantic partner is considered emotional infidelity. This type of infidelity is also specified as any interaction with another individual other than a spouse or romantic partner that involves emotional intimacy, sexual attraction, and secrecy (Allen et al., 2005). Hertlein and Piercy (2008) expound that emotional infidelity involves building a close emotionally intimate relationship with another person, specifically excluding one's primary partner. Emotional

infidelity includes behaviors or activities that may appear harmless at first. However, when behaviors such as emotional intimacy, sexual attraction, and secrecy happen with someone other than one's committed partner or spouse, emotional infidelity has occurred. Henline, Lamke, and Howard (2007) found that about two thirds of participants considered emotional infidelity to have a greater negative emotional impact than sexual infidelity.

***Internet or cyber infidelity.*** Since the advent of the Internet and social media, ways in which people communicate have changed dramatically. From personal computers to laptops, cell phones to tablets we are becoming a constantly connected society. With this increase in connectivity, occurrence and prevalence rates of cyber or Internet infidelity have also increased. Sexual behaviors online are not, by definition, physical but are virtual (Henline, et al., 2007). Researchers have yet to reach a consensus on what specific behaviors constitute Internet infidelity. Hertlein and Piercy (2008) offer the following operational definition: "Internet infidelity is defined as a romantic or sexual contact facilitated by Internet use that is seen by at least one partner as an unacceptable breach of their marital contract of faithfulness" (p. 484). Individuals have an ability to engage in an affair with someone whom they will never have to meet but are able to provide whichever imaginary façade suits them (Hertlein, et al., 2005). Behaviors that are indicative of an Internet affair include such things as pornography use, visiting online chat rooms and websites, as well as any use of a computer or the Internet for sexual gratification, including cybersex and hot chatting, which is erotic talk that goes beyond flirting (Henline et al., 2007; Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Whitty, 2005).

**Prevalence.** Identifying types of infidelity leads to a better understanding of the prevalence and impact of infidelity. The occurrence of infidelity has been studied extensively over the past few decades with results differing from study to study. Blow and Hartnett (2005b)

explain that prevalence data varies because each study varies in its definition of infidelity as well as the population of interest. In their comprehensive review of infidelity literature, they suggest that lifetime prevalence rates are between 20% to 40% (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). However, as Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2004) note, rates can be as high as 40% to 60%. Equally poignant, Wiederman and Hurd (1999) found an occurrence of 69% of a sample of undergraduate students engaged in extradyadic involvement activities. However, one of the limitations with research that reports the prevalence and rates of occurrence is that infidelity may be defined in various ways across different studies. To aid in understanding prevalence rates of infidelity it is necessary to consider the following key demographic factors.

**Gender.** Several researchers have looked at the relationship of gender and infidelity. Based on their review of infidelity literature, Allen and associates (2005) concluded “that men are more likely to engage in extramarital involvement (EMI) or have more extramarital partners than women” (p. 105). More recent research suggests that in long-term, exclusive dating relationships, men were up to 18% more likely than women to engage in both physical and online infidelity (Martins et al., 2016). This could possibly be explained by examining how adolescents’ understanding of infidelity differs by gender. Norona and colleagues (2015) found that older adolescent boys indicated infidelity to involve physical behaviors that were defined as heavy (e.g. sexual intercourse and oral sex), whereas older adolescent girls understood infidelity to involve light and affectionate-type behaviors (e.g. holding hands, overly friendly hug, and dancing).

**Age.** Some researchers suggest that age has a nonlinear relationship with infidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008; Atkins et al., 2001; Wiederman, 1997). Several findings support this assertion. Allen’s research team (2005) suggest that cumulative prevalence rates generally

increase with age. Those aged 18-30 have a higher infidelity rate than any other age range (Allen et al., 2005; Atkins & Kessel, 2008). In support of this, Atkins and Kessel (2008) offer that “the likelihood of having had an affair reaches a peak in approximately the late 40s, early 50s, and drops off on either side of this” (p. 412) and found that later life rates of infidelity decrease significantly. Perhaps an influencing factor of infidelity earlier in life is sexual exploration and experience with intercourse among younger cohorts. These experiences are generally considered casual sexual relationships with partners not considered romantic (Feldman, Turner, & Araujo, 1999; Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, 2003; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006). Further, younger generations under age forty report greater frequencies of infidelity than older cohorts (Leeker & Carlozzi., 2014).

**Education.** A factor that is illustrated in the research as being influential is the level of education of those who engage in infidelity. There is an association between having a higher level of education and being more accepting of infidelity, while the likelihood of engaging in infidelity increases at both extreme ends of the education spectrum (Allen et al., 2005; Treas & Giesen, 2000). The relationship between education and infidelity may also be related to gender, in that women and men engage in infidelity at a similar rate when they are accomplished in lower levels of education. As the level of education increases, men become the more predominant gender to engage in an affair, with the peak being a college education. Women report higher levels of infidelity around the time of a graduate level education, with men’s levels of reporting infidelity decreasing the higher the educational level they achieve (Atkins & Kessel, 2008; Atwood & Seifer, 1997).

**Race.** A study found that the probability of infidelity was positively and significantly associated with race (Whisman & Snyder, 2007). Atkins and associates (2005) report “race has



been included as a demographic factor in several studies of EMI and has typically indicated that African Americans and Hispanic Americans report higher rates of extramarital sex relative to whites” (p. 106). However, DeMaris (2009) concludes that the reason for such differences in ethnicity is not clear.

**Religion.** Whisman and Snyder (2007) found that there was a significant and negative correlation between infidelity and religiosity. For example, Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, and Gore (2007) found that merely having an affiliation with any religion reduces the odds that infidelity will occur compared to those that have no affiliations. Specifically referring to extramarital infidelity, religious cultures such as Christian or Islam condemn sex outside of marriage (Parker, Berger, & Campbell, 2010). After infidelity has occurred, one may feel alienated or ostracized from one’s religion (Allen et al., 2008). Atkins and Kessel (2008) tested indicators of personal religiousness and their correlation with infidelity. Their findings revealed that only religious attendance was significantly associated with infidelity, with lower levels of infidelity being associated with higher religious attendance.

**Impact of infidelity on individuals and relationships.** Infidelity affects individuals, couples, and families in various ways. Participating in and experiencing a partner’s infidelity is detrimental to individual and couple functioning (Allen et al., 2005; Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a, 1999b; Norona et al., 2015; Williams & Hickle, 2011). As such, clinicians will work with the individual impact and traumatic aftermath of affairs. Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2005) suggest the impact of any psychological trauma on an individual involves hurt, anger, or anger along with a sense of disbelief or numbness. Hertlein and colleagues (2005) suggest that infidelity may lead to physical ramifications for individuals,

including chronic stress, agitation, and exhaustion. There may even be a threat to one's life, through the transmission of HIV, herpes, and other dangerous conditions (Hertlein et al., 2005).

In a relational context, infidelity impacts not only both individuals in the relationship, but also the relationship itself. Infidelity leads to many negative effects for both partners in the committed relationship. Some researchers found that unfaithful partners generally expressed or experienced guilt, shame, and confusion and the aggrieved partner became upset, withdrew, or insulted their partner (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999). For marital relationships, infidelity has been noted as one of the most common factors involved in the dissolution of the marriage (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Cherny and Parnass (1995) investigated the impact of extramarital relationships on the continuation of marriages and found that 34% of participants reported that after an extramarital relationship occurred, the marriage ended in divorce, whereas 43.5% of participants reported that the marriage continued but was in a state of overall dysfunction.

In their review of other sources, Kachadourian, Smith, Taft, and Vogt (2015) found the following points to be relevant. The experience of infidelity may lead to increased conflict and communication constraints between partners, eventually leading to problems such as relationship dissolution, parenting strains, and job stress. An exacerbation of preexisting mental health problems may occur. Ostracizing and isolation may occur for individuals of unfaithful partners due to embarrassment of the infidelity.

The impact of infidelity goes far beyond the dissolution of a committed relationship. Utley (2011) suggests that the consequences of infidelity are highly pervasive and expand into many areas of one's life and interpersonal connections, including the breaking up of family life and coping with the social stigmas associated with it. Infidelity has been suggested to be one of the most difficult problems to treat (Fife et al., 2008). Further, Thornton and Nagurney

(2011) suggest, “experiencing an act of what one considers to be infidelity within the confines of a committed relationship is without argument a personal and often traumatic event” (p. 51). The trauma associated with the betrayal has been considered to have the second-most damaging impact on committed relationships, compared with physical abuse (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997).

Infidelity in one’s family of origin may consequently impact both attitudes toward infidelity as well as forgiveness in one’s romantic relationship (Olmstead, Blick, & Mills, 2009). Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, and Wetchler (2008) suggest that parental infidelity may impact a child’s view of others, which may impact future romantic relationships. Children of parents who engage in infidelity may tend to have a negative view of others based on untrustworthiness (Platt et al., 2008).

**Perceptions.** Infidelity does not always have to be thought about in terms of after its occurrence. The way which individuals perceive infidelity can also be important to clinicians. Perceptions do not necessarily lead to action. Rather, they are part of one’s foundational worldview. A focus of this study is to understand how individuals perceive infidelity and the way in which attachment influences perception. Thus, infidelity becomes an entirely unique experience to individuals and couples. Couples tend to have differing perceptions and expectations of what infidelity is and isn’t (Parker et al., 2010). One study examined discrepancies between attitudes about infidelity and subsequent behaviors and found that perceptions and definitions of what is considered infidelity varied substantially (Mattingly, Wilson, Clark, Bequette, & Weidler, 2010).

## **Attachment**

One factor that may influence perceptions, definition, and behaviors regarding infidelity is attachment. Attachment theory suggests that when babies are born, they form a close emotional bond with their main caregiver, usually the mother, which eventually expands to include close family members (Ainsworth, 1979; Berger, 2001; Bifulco & Thomas, 2013; Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton, 1992; Honig, 2002). Attachment theory not only applies to infants and children but to adults and romantic relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazen & Shaver, 1987). The most basic tenet of attachment theory is the drive to find safety, security, and protection in close relationships (Benoit, 2004). However, not everyone has the same level of need for closeness. For some, it may be difficult to feel secure with someone else. For others, there may be a level of indifference towards needing to be close to others.

**Attachment styles.** Attachment scholars have delineated a few distinct/specific styles of attachment. Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, and Holland (2013) define attachment styles as enduring patterns involving feelings, thoughts, and behaviors within close relationships. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) were the first to define three basic attachment styles in infants: secure, anxious-resistant or ambivalent, and avoidant. Main and Solomon (1986) added to the work of Ainsworth by including disorganized as an additional style. After this, many researchers began to see evidence of attachment styles in other contexts throughout the lifespan, such as in adulthood and romantic relationships. As a result, four adult attachment styles are identified as secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997).

A secure attachment style is generally described as having adopted positive depictions of self and others both in regards of deserving support and providing comfort (Gillath, Selcuk, &

Shaver, 2008). Benefits of having a secure attachment style include relationship satisfaction, well-being, higher levels of stress management, and resiliency (Gillath et al., 2008). Others found that those with a secure attachment style are confident, have trust in intimate relationships, are able to be close, are stable, and rarely worried about abandonment (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002).

Those with an anxious-preoccupied/ambivalent attachment style are more likely to want a relationship that is highly committed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In romantic relationships, jealousy, emotional highs and lows, and obsessive preoccupation with one's partner also indicate anxious-preoccupied attachment (Collins & Read, 1999). These may also appear to be more attached with their partners if duration of disruption and intensity were used as an attachment index (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

The third and fourth attachment styles are dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) offer that a dismissive-avoidant attachment style leads individuals to view themselves as un-distressed and other people as unsupportive. They also suggest that indicators of a fearful-avoidant attachment styles include being fearful of intimacy as well as being socially avoidant (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Hazan and Shaver (1987) identify the key element of avoidant attachment as defensiveness. Attachment avoidance is characterized by a discomfort with psychological closeness and intimacy, whereas attachment anxiety is classified by experiences of ambivalence and a strong desire for closeness and avoidance of rejection (DeWall et al., 2011). Avoidant attachment is also characterized by negative and passive behaviors, as well as by a suppression of needs and emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012; Solomon, 2009). Interestingly, Levy and Kelly (2010) note that more men than women have an avoidant attachment style.

**Attachment and infidelity.** Attachment is the emotional bond formed primarily between caregiver and child, which also carries through on to adulthood and manifests in romantic relationships. According to attachment theory, as these intimate relationships develop, each partner seeks to get certain attachment needs met. Essentially, attachment needs are close contact, security, protection, and comfort. Johnson, Makinen, and Millikin (2001) provide a basic description of attachment needs as being proximity seeking, the creation of a secure base, the creation of a safe haven, and a protest to separation. They also provide the following descriptions for each need. They explain proximity seeking as being an attempt to maintain close contact with someone who one is attached to; a secure base consists of a basis where one can feel safe returning to after exploration; a safe haven is described as using the person to whom one is attached as a source of security and relief; a separation protest is defined as an attempt to resist any form of separation (Johnson et al., 2001). When these attachment needs are not met in the primary relationship, individuals will generally seek out others with whom their needs can be met, thus increasing the risk of infidelity occurring.

Some researchers found that individuals come to view romantic partners as better able than parents to meet these attachment needs (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). Infidelity is a prime example of when attachment needs are threatened and security is diminished. Johnson (2005) explains that infidelity is a threat to attachment security, which hyper-activates attachment needs and fears in the offended partner, resulting in an undermining of the attachment bond between partners. Deteriorating relationships are a cause of stress and feelings of emptiness; infidelity may be an attempt to relieve this stress (Pereira, Taysi, Orcan, and Fincham, 2014). In addition to this, Russell and colleagues (2013) found that attachment anxiety may not only be a contributing factor in whether individuals in relationships engage in

infidelity, but that each partner's attachment anxiety may mutually influence the other's. Those with avoidant attachment may be more careful in trying not to disrupt their current relationships (Lemay and Dudley, 2011).

## **Gender**

In addition to earlier discussion of the relationship between gender and prevalence of infidelity, some scholars have also investigated the various attitudes and perceptions men and women have as well as the types of infidelity they engage in. However, the literature is surprisingly scant when searching for gender specific attitudes and responses about infidelity. De Stefano and Oala (2008) suggest that men and women differ in their reasoning and justification to engage in infidelity. Regarding gender-specific responses to infidelity, women find emotional infidelity more upsetting in contrast to men who find sexual infidelity more upsetting (Donovan & Emmers-Sommer, 2012). A possible explanation of this is expounded in the literature. Some women believe that men are able to engage in sexual relations with women, other than their committed partner, and not share feelings of love or commitment with them. Research by Donovan and Emmers-Sommer (2012) found that men became more distressed by their female committed partners engaging in sexual relations with other men, rather than other situations, such as just spending time with them. In support of this, others have also found a direct connection between gender and infidelity (Cann, Magnum, & Wells, 2001; Cramer, Abraham, Johnson, & Manning-Ryan, 2001/2002; Harris & Christenfeld, 1996).

Some research suggests that there may be a biological component to gender-specific leanings toward engaging in unfaithful behaviors. Bravo and Lumpkin (2010) offer that males with higher mate value engage in short-term mating strategies, more than their female counterparts. Mate value is genetic fitness or quality of an individual and their potentiality of

being a prime sexual partner (Kirsner, Figueredo, and Jacobs, 2003). Another component of note is that of one's culture. McCarthy and Wald (2013) suggest that most cultures' norms about infidelity are incongruent, with different sexual expectations for men and women. An example of this is when males engage in affairs that offer higher opportunity and lower involvement their acts are more commonly accepted by their culture, in stark contrast to instances where females who engage in infidelity, looking for emotional needs, are met with less acceptance (McCarthy & Wald, 2013).

In establishing the correlation between gender and types of infidelity, Oberle, Dooley, and Nagurney (2016) report that distress plays a vital role in understanding this correlation, as is evidenced by their review of several studies. Accordingly, men experience more distress when sexual infidelity has occurred, while women experience more distress when emotional infidelity has occurred. However, Oberle and associates (2016) contrast these findings by offering a closer examination of recent studies that found that women are more distressed than men by both emotional and physical infidelity. Another example suggests that women prefer to engage in types of infidelity or behaviors that are relationally focused, such as sexual chat rooms online, in contrast to solitary behaviors sought after by men, such as pornography (Jones & Hertlein, 2012). Coincidentally, little research illustrates evidence that there is a statistically significant difference in gender and perceptions of infidelity.

### **Family of Origin and Attitudes about Infidelity and Sexuality**

A defining characteristic of humanity is our ability to possess individualized attitudes and opinions about the world around us. This ability allows us to formulate hypotheses that lead to experimentation. The way we feel about something, the attitudes we develop are essential to our experience in life. What this means is that if attitudes contribute to our perceptions, these



perceptions may lead us to behave or act in a certain way. One such example of this is that of the family of origin's possible influence on our attitudes regarding romantic relationships. Fife et al. (2008) highlight that infidelity may be related to learned attitudes and behaviors from one's family of origin. Some researchers posit that negative attitudes in one's family of origin influence future romantic relationship development (Knapp, Norton, & Sandberg, 2015). Interestingly, Levesque (2012) suggests that an expressive atmosphere in a family of origin is highly important for development of social and emotional confidence throughout life. Echoing this sentiment, some researchers highlight that the relationship with our family of origin is an influential one, which may very well color the lens of individuals' worldviews (Dennison, Koerner, & Segrin, 2014).

Regarding sexuality, Bridges (2000) suggests that positive attitudes about sex in the family of origin increase rates of higher sexual satisfaction in adulthood. As such, the influence the family of origin has on forming one's attitudes about sex and infidelity is significant. As asserted by Hunyady, Josephs, and Jost (2008) even knowing about a parent's infidelity can trigger unconscious conflict surrounding sexual infidelity later on in adulthood and also affects subsequent attitudes about infidelity. Another perspective offered by Shimberg, Josephs, and Grace (2016) suggests that lenient attitudes of individuals who commit infidelity may be more about those individuals' personality characteristics and development. Having lenient or permissive attitudes about infidelity may contribute to perceiving infidelity with leniency. As of yet, research tying family of origin attitudes and individual perceptions of infidelity together has not been studied.

### **Aims of this Study**

As mentioned above, there are several factors that contribute to a broad understanding of infidelity. Research has looked at the relationship between infidelity and a number of different variables; however, deficiencies in the literature suggest that there is a need to study whether variables such as family of origin attitudes, attachment styles, and gender may indeed influence the way which people perceive infidelity. As a result, the purposes of this study are to examine the relationships between family of origin attitudes, individual attitudes, attachment styles, and gender and perceptions of infidelity and to identify any predicted contributions these variables give in how individuals perceive infidelity.

### **Research Question**

*Do family of origin attitudes regarding sex and infidelity, individual attitudes regarding sex and infidelity, attachment styles, and gender predict perceptions of infidelity?*

### **Hypotheses**

*Hypothesis 1: Individuals who received messages about infidelity from their family of origin which reflect permissiveness or indifference will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale.*

*Hypothesis 2: Individuals who have sexual attitudes which reflect permissiveness or indifference will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale.*

*Hypothesis 3: Individuals who have an insecure attachment style (avoidant or anxious) will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale.*

*Hypothesis 4: Individuals who identify as male will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale than those who identify as female.*

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Participants**

Convenience sampling was used to obtain the present sample. Participants who volunteered to take the survey were 18 years old or older and lived in the United States of America. A web-based survey was designed using Qualtrics, a survey development software. Participants were primarily recruited through social media (e.g. Facebook), e-mail announcements, and undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

### **Procedures**

Participants were asked to complete an online survey that included demographic questions along with three additional measures. The demographic section asked questions about gender, age, sexual orientation, education, religious affiliation, and experience with infidelity (see Appendix A). The Messages Received from Family of Origin (Weiser, 2012) questionnaire measured family of origin attitudes regarding infidelity; the Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reich, 2006) measured individual attitudes regarding sex and infidelity; the Experiences in Close Relationships (Brennan et al., 1998) inventory assessed for individual attachment styles; the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale (Mattingly et al., 2010) measured how individuals perceive various behaviors as either indicative of infidelity or not. The survey took participants an average of ten minutes to complete.

### **Measures**

The Messages Received from Family of Origin (Weiser, 2012) questionnaire was administered to assess for attitudes regarding sex and infidelity within the context of the family of origin. Weiser (2012) found that the experience of a parental infidelity was positively related

to children's reports of having received negative messages about fidelity and faithfulness, and positive messages about infidelity from their family of origin. She goes on to offer that these family communications were then positively associated with more permissive infidelity beliefs, which in turn were associated with higher levels of infidelity behavior (Weiser, 2012). In conducting her study, Weiser (2012) identified five statements from the questionnaire that have more to do with infidelity than any other statement. Likewise, these five statements were found by the members of the current research team to focus on family of origin attitudes regarding infidelity and were subsequently used as part of the analysis within this study. The following are these five statements which represent messages received from family of origin which participants felt were either more similar or less similar to the messages they received from their own family of origin: *people cheat on their partners; relationship partners should always be faithful; in order to have a successful relationship individuals should only be involved with their relationship partner; it is not acceptable to become romantically and/or sexually involved with the individuals besides your romantic partner; and infidelity has negative consequences.* Participants indicated whether they felt these messages were either more similar or less similar to the messages they received from their own family of origin.

The Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS) (Hendrick et al., 2006) is a revision of the Sexual Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987). It consists of four subscales: permissiveness, birth control, communion, and instrumentality. It is made up of 22 items on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e. strongly agree...strongly disagree). This brief scale offers higher reliability scores than its original template. For the purposes of this study, only the permissiveness subscale was used. This is due, in part, because of the subscale's high alpha

level ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Furthermore, the permissiveness subscale most closely aligns with the aims of this study.

The Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) inventory (Brennan et al., 1998) is a 36 item self-report, 7-point Likert scale (i.e. strongly disagree...strongly agree). The measure focuses on attachment styles within the context of close relationships. This measure has two subscales: avoidance ( $\alpha = .95$ ) and anxiety ( $\alpha = .93$ ); due to these high alpha levels, this measure is more reliable than other single-item response formats (Brennan et al., 1998).

The Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale (PDIS) (Mattingly et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2011) is a 12-item scale (i.e. 0 = never cheating...6 = always cheating), designed to rate individuals' perceptions of what they consider to be behaviors related to infidelity. This scale also assesses three factors or elements of perceptions: ambiguous, deceptive, and explicit. Wilson and colleagues (2011) suggest that this scale is potentially useful in predicting likelihood of infidelity, and as such it may demonstrate predictive validity. Cronbach's alpha indicates strong internal consistency reliability (explicit = .83; ambiguous = .81; deceptive = .72). Pearson correlations found positive and significant relationships throughout (e.g.  $r = .46, p < .01$ ). Lower scores on the PDIS represent perceiving certain behaviors as less indicative of infidelity, whereas higher scores represent perceiving those same behaviors as being more indicative of infidelity.

## **Analysis**

In order to ensure a robust dataset, cases that contained incomplete data were excluded from the analysis. The total number of surveys initiated was 406, with 310 of these surveys being completed. A multiple linear regression was used to answer the research question: *Do family of origin attitudes regarding sex and infidelity, individual attitudes regarding sex and infidelity, attachment styles, and gender predict perceptions of infidelity?*

To weigh the predictive power of each variable, a regression model using stepwise selection was tested via SPSS (version 22.0). Predictor variables were identified as family of origin attitudes, participants' attitudes about infidelity, attachment style, and gender. The criterion variable was perceptions of infidelity. The means of each measure were calculated. The regression model evaluated the means of each predictor variable and either included or excluded these variables based on their overall contribution to the variance. Those variables which contributed significantly to the variance were included. To also facilitate a broader understanding of the potential relationships within and between the variables, various Pearson correlations were performed.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Demographics**

Participants were asked to respond to a series of demographic questions about their age, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship status, religious identity, and experience with infidelity. Tables 1-8 illustrate these demographics.

Table 1

*Age and Gender of Participants*

<u>Age</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-Binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
18-24	90	8	3	4
25-34	75	18	2	0
35-44	57	5	2	0
45-54	22	5	0	0
55-64	14	2	0	0
65-74	1	0	0	0
75-84	1	0	0	0

Out of the 310 participants who completed the survey, 260 identified as female (84%), 38 identified as male (12%), eight identified as non-binary (3%), and four identified as other (1%), with 94% of the participants under the age of 55.



Table 2

*Gender and Race of Participants*

<u>Race</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
Caucasian or White	185	26	7	2
Hispanic or Latino	25	7	0	0
Asian or Pacific Islander	20	2	0	1
African American or Black	9	0	0	0
Native American or American Indian	2	1	0	0
Mixed Heritage	14	0	1	1
Unknown	5	2	0	0

Participants self-identified as Caucasian or white (71%), Hispanic or Latino (10%), Asian or Pacific Islander (7%), African American or black (3%) Native American or American Indian (1%), mixed heritage (5%), and unknown (2%).

Table 3

*Gender and Sexual Orientation of Participants*

<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
Heterosexual	214	26	1	2
Gay	0	10	1	0
Lesbian	11	0	1	0
Bisexual	28	1	2	0
Asexual	1	0	1	0
Other	6	1	2	2

The study predominately consisted of participants who identify as heterosexual ( $n = 243$ ). However, 22% ( $n = 79$ ) identify as either Bisexual (10%), Lesbian (3.87%), Gay (3.55%), Asexual (0.64%), or other (3.55%).

Table 4

*Gender and Religious/Spiritual Identities of Participants*

	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
Religious	134	14	3	1
Spiritual	48	7	3	1

Forty nine percent ( $n = 152$ ) of participants hold a religious identity and 19% ( $n = 59$ ) hold a spiritual identity.

Table 5

*Gender and Religious Affiliation of Participants (n = 151)*

<u>Religious Affiliation</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
Christian	88	11	2	0
Non-denominational Christian	25	1	0	0
Jewish	5	0	0	0
Muslim	1	0	0	0
Buddhist	3	0	0	0
Other	11	2	1	1

Those who hold a religious identity were asked to choose between the following religious affiliations: Christian (67%), Non-denominational Christian (17%), Jewish (3%), Buddhist (2%), Muslim (1%), and other (10%).

Table 6

*Gender and Education Level of Participants*

<u>Education Level</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent training (e.g. GED)	6	1	0	0
Some college credit, no degree	60	10	2	2
Trade/technical/vocational training	6	0	0	0
Associate degree	24	7	0	0
Bachelor's degree	99	10	5	1
Master's degree	49	6	0	0
Professional degree	2	0	0	0
Doctorate degree	13	4	0	0
Other	1	0	1	1

Participants were asked to identify the highest level of education completed. Two percent chose high school graduate, diploma or the equivalent training (e.g. GED); 24% chose some college credit, no degree; 2% chose trade/technical/vocational training; 10% chose associate degree; 37% chose bachelor's degree; 18% chose master's degree; 1% chose professional degree; 5% chose doctorate degree; and 1% chose other.

Table 7

*Gender and Relationship Status of Participants*

<u>Relationship Status</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
Single	61	14	3	2
Married	102	12	3	0
Cohabiting	20	2	1	1
In a committed relationship	72	9	0	1
Separated	1	0	0	0
Other	14	3	1	1

Seventy four percent of the sample indicated they were partnered in a relationship at the time of the study. Of these, 48% identify as being married, 34% identify as being in a committed relationship, and 18% identify as either cohabitating, separated, or other. Of those currently in a relationship, 51% ( $n = 123$ ) have been in their current relationship for 5 or more years, 19% ( $n = 46$ ) have been in their current relationship for 2-5 years, and 30% ( $n = 71$ ) have been in their current relationship for less than 2 years.

Table 8

*Length of Current Relationship and Gender (n = 240)*

<u>Length</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
0-6 months	25	3	0	1
6 months to 1 year	11	1	0	1
1-2 years	22	3	4	0
2-5 years	37	8	1	0
5 or more years	111	11	0	1

## Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and values of Cronbach alpha for each variable are indicated in Table 9. Attachment styles and gender are presented in Table 10.

Table 9

*Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach Alpha Values (N = 310)*

<u>Variable</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u><math>\alpha</math></u>
Family of Origin Attitudes	4.59	.623	.637
Permissive Attitudes	2.71	.992	.897
Avoidance	2.57	1.02	.925
Anxiety	3.81	1.24	.926
Perceptions	4.20	.812	.816

Table 10

*Attachment Style and Gender Based on ECR Scores (N = 310)*

<u>Attachment Style</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-Binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
Secure	87	16	2	2
Fearful	47	5	4	0
Preoccupied	108	14	2	2
Dismissing	18	3	0	0

Within this sample, 33% of females and 42% of males received a score on the Experiences of Close Relationships scale which is indicative of a secure attachment style. Sixty seven percent of females and 61% of males received a score that is consistent with avoidant or anxious attachment styles. Table 11 presents the mean scores of the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale cross-tabulated with gender. Figures 1-2 show distribution of mean scores and gender for the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale.



Table 11

Mean Scores of the BSAS Permissiveness Subscale

Mean Score	Female	Male	Non-binary	Other
1-1.99	72	12	0	0
2-2.99	80	5	4	0
3-3.99	83	14	2	2
4-4.99	25	7	2	2

Figure 1

*BSAS Permissiveness Subscale Mean Score Distribution and Female (n = 260)*

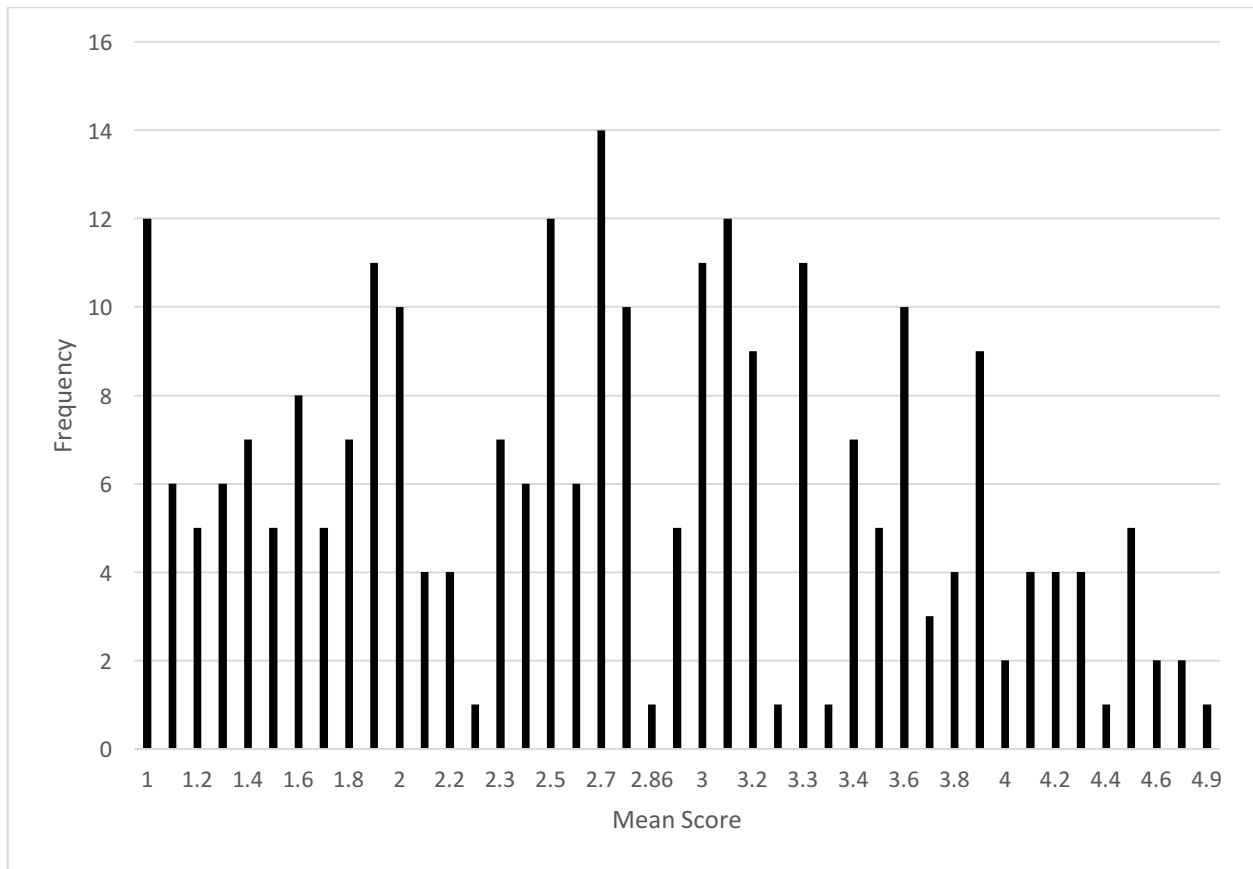


Figure 2

*BSAS Permissiveness Subscale Mean Score Distribution and Male (n = 38)*

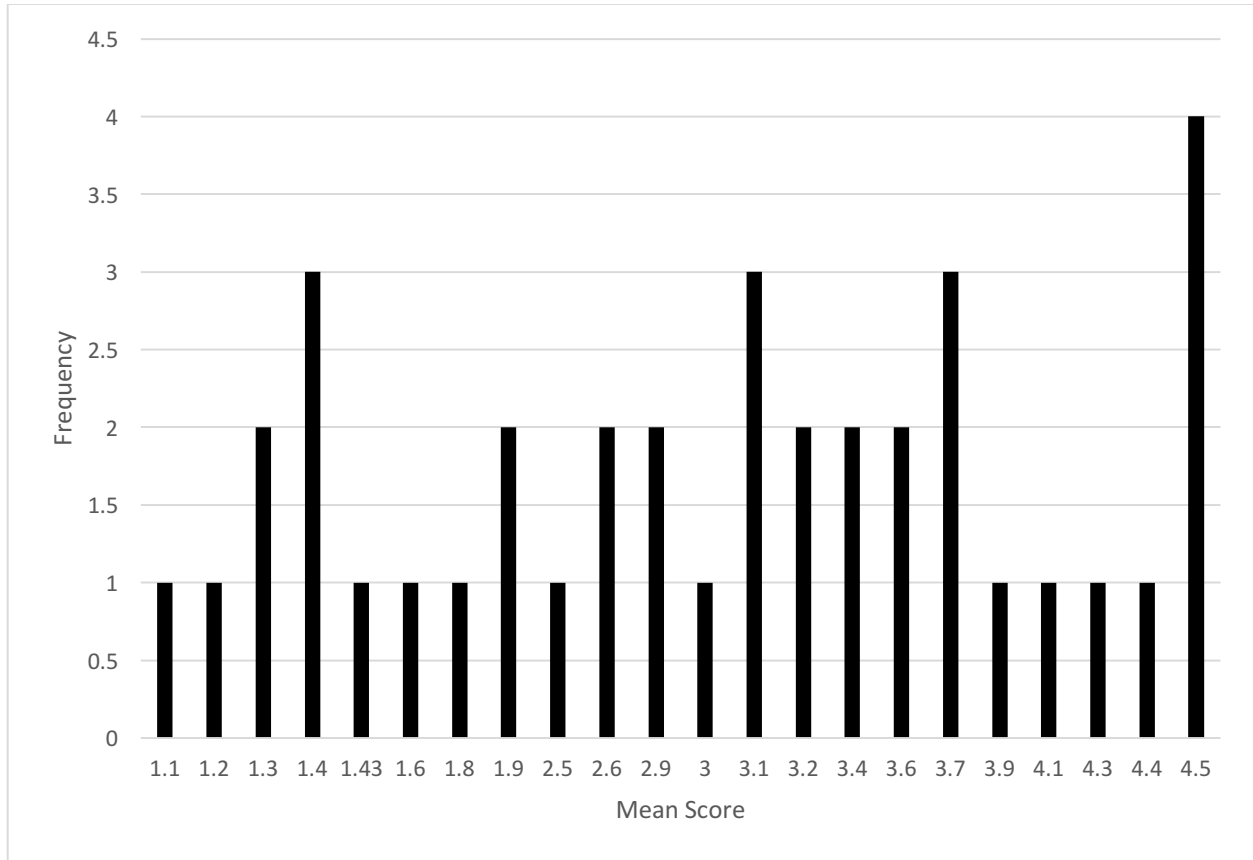


Table 12 indicates mean scores for the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale. Figure 3 illustrates distribution of mean scores for the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale.

Table 12

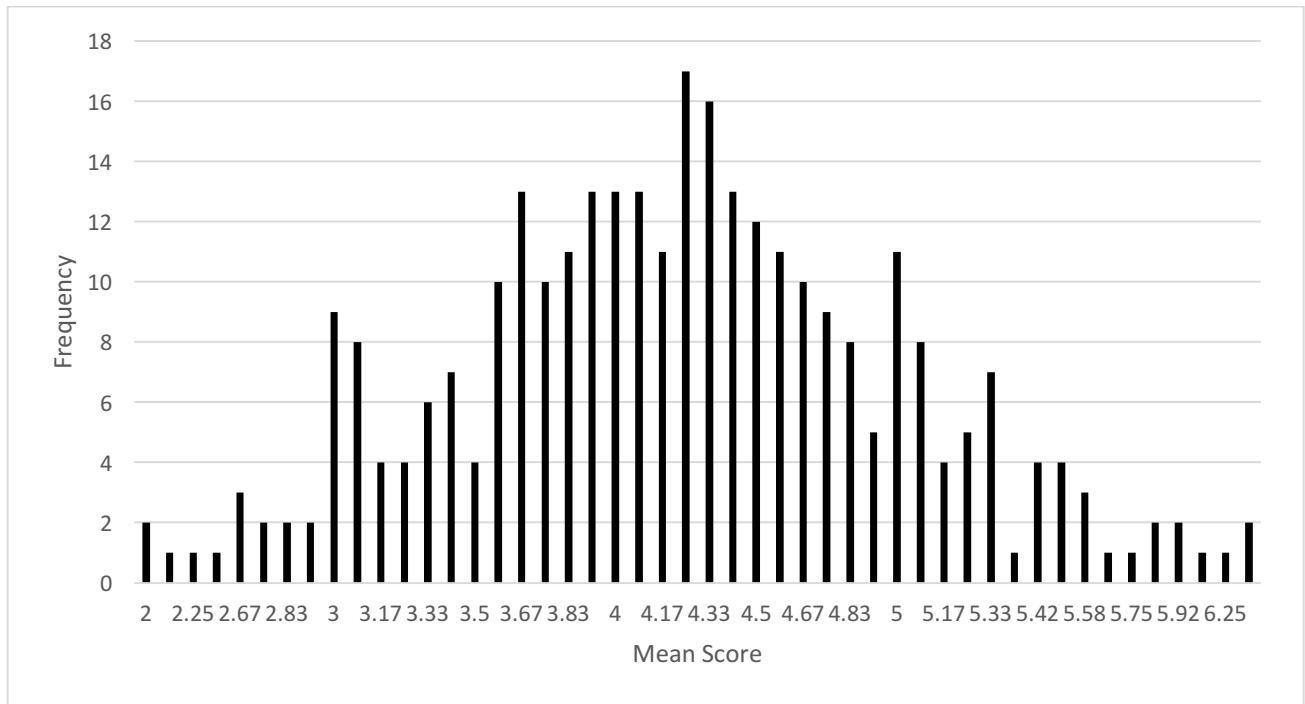
*Mean Scores of the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale*

<u>Mean Score</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Non-binary</u>	<u>Other</u>
1-1.99	1	0	1	0
2-2.99	10	3	1	0
3-3.99	81	12	5	1
4-4.99	120	17	0	1
5-5.99	45	5	1	2
6-6.99	3	1	0	0

Figure 3

*Perceptions of Infidelity Scale Mean Scores Distribution*

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## **Experience with Infidelity**

Within this study's sample, 34% ( $n = 105$ ) have engaged in what the rules of their relationship would consider infidelity, 54% ( $n = 166$ ) have been in a relationship where a significant other has engaged in what the rules of their relationship would consider to be infidelity, and 37% ( $n = 116$ ) have knowledge of one of their parents' infidelity. Eighty-nine females (34%), 12 males (32%), and four who identify as non-binary/other (33%) self-reported having engaged in what the rules of their relationship considered to be infidelity. 140 females (54%), 18 males (47%), and eight who identify as non-binary/other (66%) self-reported having been in a relationship where a significant other engaged in what the rules of their relationship considered to be infidelity. One hundred females (38%), ten males (26%), and six who identify as non-binary/other (50%) self-reported having knowledge of one of their parents' infidelity.

## **Research Question**

*Do family of origin attitudes regarding sex and infidelity, individual attitudes regarding sex and infidelity, attachment styles, and gender predict perceptions of infidelity?*

To test each hypothesis, researchers ran a multiple linear regression model using stepwise selection for the outcome variable. This analysis was appropriate to use in this study because there was a linear relationship between the predictive variables and the outcome variable, the outcome variable was normally distributed, there was no multicollinearity, and the variables were homoscedastic. Multiple regression analysis was used to test if family of origin attitudes, individual sexual attitudes, attachment style, and gender significantly predicted participants' perceptions of infidelity. The results of the regression indicated that two predictors explained 11.6% of the variance ( $R^2 = .116$ ,  $F(2, 307) = 20.235$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Table 13).

Table 13

*Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Perceptions of Infidelity*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Permissive Attitudes	-.262	.044	-.321**	-.270	.044	-.330**
Anxious Attachment				.077	.035	.117*
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.103			.116	
<i>F</i>		35.30			20.24	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$

*Hypothesis 1: Individuals who received messages about infidelity from their family of origin which reflect permissiveness or indifference will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale.*

Results showed that family of origin attitudes did not significantly predict perceptions of infidelity ( $\beta = -.027$ ,  $t = .455$ ,  $p = .281$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is not supported. However, a Pearson correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between family of origin attitudes regarding infidelity ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) and participants' perceptions of infidelity ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). Overall, there was a positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .122$ ,  $n = 310$ ,  $p = .032$ . More permissive family of origin attitudes regarding infidelity correlated with lower perception of infidelity.

*Hypothesis 2: Individuals who have sexual attitudes which reflect permissiveness or indifference will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale.*

Results support Hypothesis 2 by indicating that sexual attitudes ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) significantly predict perceptions of infidelity ( $\beta = -.330$ ,  $t = -6.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Table 14).

Participants who have more permissive attitudes are less likely to identify certain behaviors as infidelity.

*Hypothesis 3: Individuals who have an insecure attachment style (avoidant or anxious) will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale.*

Results do not support Hypothesis 3, as insecure attachment style did not significantly predict participants' perceptions of infidelity. However, when looking specifically at the two types of insecure attachment (avoidant and anxious), even though avoidant attachment was not found to predict perceptions of infidelity ( $\beta = -.027, t = -.492, p = .631$ ), those with anxious attachment rated significantly higher on the perceptions of infidelity scale, signifying that anxious attachment significantly predicts perceptions of infidelity ( $\beta = .117, t = 2.18, p < .05$ ; see Table 14).

Table 14

*Regression Coefficients and Collinearity Statistics for Predicting Perceptions of Infidelity*

<u>Model Type</u>	<u><math>\beta</math></u>	<u><math>t</math></u>	<u>Sig.</u>	<u>Tolerance</u>	<u>VIF</u>
Model 1: Permissive Sexual Attitudes	-.321	-5.94	.000	1.000	1.000
Model 2: Permissive Sexual Attitudes and Anxious Attachment	-.330 .177	-6.13 2.18	.000 .030	.994 .994	1.006 1.006

*Hypothesis 4: Individuals who identify as male will rate lower on a perceptions of infidelity scale than those who identify as female.*

The results did not support Hypothesis 4. As gender was unequally distributed between females ( $n = 260$ ), males ( $n = 38$ ), and other ( $n = 12$ ), an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare perceptions of infidelity for female and male participants. There was not a significant difference in the scores for female ( $M = 4.22, SD = 0.79$ ) and male ( $M = 4.15, SD = 0.82$ ) conditions;  $t(296) = 0.52, p = 0.60$ .



## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications**

The goal of this study was to find if family of origin attitudes, individual sexual attitudes, attachment styles, and gender predict individual perceptions of infidelity. Results of the study indicate that perceptions of infidelity can be predicted by sexual attitudes and anxious attachment. Family of origin attitudes, avoidant attachment, and gender were not found to predict individual perceptions of infidelity. It is important to note that this study deals with constructs of the mind, attitudes and perceptions, rather than actual behaviors. For this reason, attitudes are operationally defined as the way individuals or families feel about certain topics or processes, such as sexuality and infidelity. Perceptions are operationally defined as the way individuals view certain topics or processes, such as infidelity.

### **Family of Origin Attitudes**

This study originally set out to find if certain attitudes about sex and infidelity that are learned or transmitted from one's family of origin could potentially predict perceptions of infidelity. The literature suggests that attitudes learned from family of origin are related to infidelity (Fife, et al., 2008). Even though the results of this study indicate that family of origin attitudes about infidelity do not predict how individuals perceive infidelity, family of origin has been seen to be an influential factor in other areas, such as sexual satisfaction (Bridges, 2000), romantic development, and healthy sex roles. Furthermore, this study looked specifically at the influence of family of origin on perception of infidelity, not actual infidelity behaviors. It may be the influence of family of origin manifests itself more specifically in behavior, rather than perception. Future research could look at the relationship between sexual attitudes passed on from family of origin and the occurrence of infidelity behaviors.

### **Sexual Attitudes**

The results of this study indicate that permissive sexual attitudes predict perceptions of infidelity. Participant scores on the Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale that reflected more permissive attitudes were found to be statistically significant with lower scores on the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale. What this may mean is that individuals who have internalized attitudes regarding sexual permissiveness are more likely to also perceive infidelity more permissively. In other words, those who have more permissive attitudes regarding sexuality may not regard certain behaviors as inappropriate or being unfaithful, while others with less permissive attitudes might see the same behaviors as inappropriate and a violation of the relationship's commitment to fidelity. Individuals with permissive sexual attitudes may be more likely to make decisions within their romantic relationships that are less aligned with the overall goals for maintenance and security of the relationship. Individuals with permissive sexual attitudes may find it easier or justifiable to behave in such a way that facilitates personal sexual gratification rather than to take into consideration the potential ramifications those behaviors may have on their romantic relationship.

Previous literature has endeavored to provide an understanding of the role sexual attitudes play in the development of romantic relationships, however, most of this research has focused on the intertwining relationship between sexual attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Fisher, 2007; Luquis, Brelsford, & Rojas-Guyler, 2012; Moore & Davidson, 2006; Weeden & Sabini, 2007). This study provides a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between sexual attitudes and perceptions of infidelity, rather than infidelity behaviors. Those with permissive sexual attitudes perceive infidelity with more permissiveness, a relationship that has not been identified in the literature. It is possible that attitudes and perceptions regarding infidelity may

be linked to infidelity behaviors. Future research could investigate this relationship more directly.

### **Attachment Style**

Perhaps the most substantial contribution this study provides is a broader understanding of the important role attachment plays in romantic committed relationships. Although attachment theory has been studied in-depth and has become an increasingly meaningful research focus for many different fields, there are areas of study left to be explored. A major theme of this study focuses on anxious attachment, an insecure attachment style, rather than avoidant attachment. As the results indicate, those who with anxious attachment perceive infidelity with less permissiveness or acceptance, meaning that anxiously attached individuals consider certain behaviors as being more indicative of infidelity. Thus, individuals who have an anxious attachment style do not necessarily have a propensity to perceive infidelity with permissiveness or indifference. This may contrast with some literature which suggests that anxiously attached individuals will seek out extradyadic partners to gain intimacy and improve their self-esteem (Allen & Baucom, 2004). There may be a difference in the way an anxiously attached individual perceives their partner's extradyadic behaviors and their own extradyadic behaviors.

Anxious attachment is perhaps the attachment style that is least studied throughout the literature. Those with an anxious attachment style are far less likely to perceive infidelity behaviors with permissiveness, rather they are likely to perceive infidelity as destructive because it leads to a breakdown in the security and cohesion of the romantic relationship. It has long been noted that anxiously attached people have a fear of being abandoned and rejected (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Wang, King, & Debernardi, 2012). Logically, would not engaging in an affair with someone who is not one's romantic partner lead to possible rejection and abandonment by

that romantic partner? According to Davis, Shaver, and Vernon (2004) individuals who have an anxious attachment style desire constant and long-term relationships. A need to be loved, strong relationship demands, and high expectations for partners, may be a few reasons why some anxiously attached individuals do not engage in behaviors indicative of infidelity (Pereira et al., 2013). Although the relationship stability sought for by anxiously attached individuals would suggest a lower likelihood for infidelity, this is not always the case. In support of this, Allen and Baucom (2004) hypothesized that having an anxious attachment style will support greater intimacy motivations for infidelity. Interestingly, anxiously attached women were found to report to higher rates of infidelity (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Campbell & Marshall, 2011).

Several behaviors, as presented in the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale, are perhaps perceived as more indicative of infidelity for anxiously attached individuals because they represent possible instability, abandonment, and rejection from their committed partner. Some of these behaviors include engaging in sexual intercourse or oral sex with someone other than one's romantic partner, lying to or withholding information from one's romantic partner, and dating someone other than one's romantic partner. Perceiving infidelity as being harmful to the maintenance of the romantic relationship may lead individuals who are anxiously attached to remain in their current relationship, regardless of the level of dysfunction or conflict that is present, rather than seek out extradyadic relationships. Those with anxious attachment, fearing abandonment, rejection, or relationship failure, might have a heightened sensitivity to behaviors that suggest unfaithfulness in their partner. This may manifest as accusations of cheating, jealousy, or controlling behavior. When an individual with anxious attachment is partnered with someone who is not, there may be a discrepancy in what behaviors are considered appropriate and those which pose a threat to the relationship.

## **Clinical Implications**

For clinicians, understanding how permissive sexual attitudes and anxious attachment predict and influence perceptions of infidelity leads to a greater awareness of not only the impact of infidelity, but also a framework for conceptualizing treatment for when infidelity occurs. In general, individual attitudes about sex and infidelity are subjective and personal (Allen & Baucom, 2006; Broman, 2005). However, the systemic framework of marriage and family therapists will allow them to assess for sexual attitudes as they pertain to the context within which the individual is situated. In an attempt at not being judgmental, it is imperative for therapists to not assume that clients with permissive attitudes have a susceptibility to engage in behaviors that threaten the security and functioning of their romantic relationship.

Clients who hold permissive sexual attitudes about infidelity may experience problematic and maladaptive patterns of interaction within their relationship, as there may be incompatibilities with how the couple defines the boundaries and limitations of sex and infidelity. Individuals who hold permissive sexual attitudes are more likely to also perceive infidelity more permissively, thus potentially leading to a higher likelihood of engaging in infidelity behaviors. Consequently, therapists may need to help couples work through their different definitions of what constitutes infidelity and come to a mutually agreed upon understanding of what behaviors will help maintain and protect their relationships and what are inappropriate and potentially damaging. This may be applicable when therapists are working with couples who are seeking treatment for infidelity, as well as couples who desire to protect their relationship from potential problems. It is important to note that both attitudes regarding infidelity and the way which individuals perceive infidelity may invariably influence future goals for and attempts at relationship maintenance.

The way which therapists treat individuals and couples in cases where permissive sexual attitudes are creating distress or problems depends upon the theoretical/therapeutic modality from which those therapists choose to work. For example, a therapist working from an Emotionally Focused Therapy framework could walk a couple through each of EFT's nine steps aimed at deescalating the destructive cycle associated with permissive sexual attitudes, changing the patterns of interaction between the couple, and integrating what was learned through this process into their relationship to ensure that change is consolidated (Johnson, 2008). Another example could be a therapist using Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy with an individual client. A potential therapeutic intervention the therapist could use is psychoeducation. The therapist would educate the client on how his or her permissive sexual attitudes may be derived from a collection of cognitive distortions. These cognitive distortions would be challenged and new positive thought processes would be cultured and encouraged.

### **Limitations**

A few limitations exist within this study. The first is the distribution of gender within the sample. Unfortunately, since the breakdown of participants within the sample was so disproportionate, gender could not be accurately analyzed in the regression model. Possibly, if the genders were more equally distributed, gender could have provided more robust findings. Another limitation is found within the sample. Due to the nature of the sampling techniques used, participants were primarily students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. As this was a convenience sample comprised from a student population, issues arose surrounding generalizability to the greater population. Using social media (e.g. Facebook) allowed the study to be more accessible for more participants to be reached, yet the majority of responses came from within this student-based population. Due to the relatively narrow parameters (i.e. access

to a computer, knowledge of how to use a computer, and ownership of a social media profile), some groups may have not had the opportunity to participate in this study.

The process of selecting the measures which were used in this study proved to be difficult. The seemingly endless supply of available instruments made it difficult to narrow down the selection. For example, hundreds of testing instruments have been created to measure specific areas within the broad research categories of infidelity and attachment. The criteria for a measure to be selected included reliability and validity of the measure, accessibility of the measure (i.e. easily accessed, paid vs. free to use, copyright concerns), and of the length of the measure. The measures selected for this study proved to be reliable, valid, accessible, and relatively brief. Ideally, researchers would have designed and implemented a scale which would accurately assess the complexities of the variables. An idea for future research, for example, would look at designing a tool of measurement that could adequately assess both family of origin attitudes regarding infidelity and the role family of origin plays in the development of perceptions of infidelity.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Although the results provide increased understanding of certain variables that influence the perception of infidelity, there is a need for additional research on what factors influence how infidelity is perceived. For example, researchers could look at the relationship between specific demographic factors (i.e. experience with infidelity, religiosity, education, and SES) and perceptions of infidelity. Significant findings of these relationships would lead to further understanding of the importance of the individuals' life experiences as they relate to how infidelity is perceived. Another area for further research involves the rationale for researching actual infidelity experiences and not solely perceptions of infidelity. This study set out to assess

predictive variables and their influence on perceptions of infidelity. Future research could also focus on the relationship between attitudes, attachment styles, and gender and occurrence of infidelity within the population. Another example of future research direction could be running a path analysis between variables. Within this study, permissive attitudes were seen to predict perceptions of infidelity; however, family of origin attitudes did not. A path analysis could potentially view whether family of origin attitudes predict or influence permissive sexual attitudes.

### **Conclusion**

Having a greater understanding of the important role sexual attitudes and attachment style play in the development of perceptions of infidelity as well as the impact that this has on the development and maintenance of romantic committed relationships will better facilitate the conceptualization and treatment of infidelity within the context of couple and individual therapy. Clinicians can learn more about attitudes and attachment in relation to how their clients perceive infidelity. This study adds to the infidelity literature in that it supports research that has already been done as well as offers a unique perspective in the development of perceptions of infidelity and the recognition of sexual attitudes and attachment styles as influential factors in that process.



## Appendix A: Survey

### Demographic Information Questionnaire

1. Which of the following best describes your age range?

Under 18

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65-74

75-84

85 or older

2. What was your sex assigned at birth?

Female

Male

I refuse to answer

3. What gender do you identify as?

Female

Male

Non-binary

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What most closely describes your sexual orientation?

Heterosexual

Gay

Lesbian

Bisexual

Asexual

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Are you single?

Yes

No

7. Have you ever been in a committed relationship?

Yes

No

8. Do you have any interest in being in a committed relationship now or in the future?

Yes

No

9. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status

Married

Cohabiting

In a committed relationship

Widowed/Widower

Divorced

Separated

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Which of the following best describes the length of your most significant past committed relationship?

0-6 months

6 months to 1 year

1-2 years

2-5 years

5 or more years

11. Which of the following best describes how long you have been in your current relationship?

0-6 months

6 months to 1 year

1-2 years

2-5 years

5 or more years

12. Do you hold a religious identity?

Yes

No

13. Do you hold a spiritual identity?

Yes

No

14. Which of the following best describes your current religious affiliation?

Christian: \_\_\_\_\_

Non-denominational Christian: \_\_\_\_\_

Jewish

Muslim

Hindu

Buddhist

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

None

15. Which of the following best describes the highest level of education you have **completed**?

No schooling completed

Some high school, no diploma

High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent training (for example: GED)

Some college credit, no degree

Trade/technical/vocational training

Associate degree

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Professional degree

Doctorate degree

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

16. Have you ever engaged in what the rules of your relationship would consider to be infidelity?

Yes

No

17. Have you ever been in a relationship in which your significant other engaged in what the rules of your relationship would consider to be infidelity?

Yes

No

18. Do you have knowledge of one of your parents' infidelity?

Yes

No

### **Messages Received from Family of Origin (Weiser, 2012)**

While growing up, you probably received a variety of messages about romantic relationships, sex, and infidelity from your family. Some of these messages may have been clear and direct, others more subtle and indirect. Please, think about all the messages you received from your family while growing up, read the statements below and rate to what degree the messages are similar to what you learned from your family, using a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 = Not at all similar and 7 = Very similar.

1. A lack of trust is typical in relationships
2. People cheat on their partners
3. Marriage is a life-long commitment
4. You have to work through the ups and downs in relationships
5. Relationship partners should always be faithful
6. Relationship partners should stick together through adversity
7. People need to watch out for themselves in relationships
8. Divorce is not an option
9. One needs to approach relationships with caution
10. In order to have a successful relationship, individuals should only be involved with their relationship partner

11. One needs to be cautious of commitment
12. Relationships must have love and happiness
13. It is not acceptable to become romantically and/or sexually involved with individuals besides your relationship partner
14. Relationships stay strong but never last
15. There is often a better alternative to a current relationship
16. One must uphold obligations in relationships for them to succeed
17. It is okay to leave a bad relationship
18. One shouldn't become too serious in relationships too quickly
19. Relationships are partnerships
20. Infidelity has negative consequences

**Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reich, 2006)**

Listed below are several statements that reflect different attitudes about sex. For each statement fill in the response on the answer sheet that indicates how much you agree or disagree with that statement. Some of the items refer to a specific sexual relationship, while others refer to general attitudes and beliefs about sex. Whenever possible, answer the questions with your current partner in mind. If you are not currently in a relationship, answer the questions with your most recent partner in mind. If you have never had a sexual relationship, answer in terms of what you think your responses would most likely be.

1. I do not need to be committed to a person to have sex with him/her
2. Casual sex is acceptable
3. I would like to have sex with many partners
4. One-night stands are sometimes very enjoyable

5. It is okay to have ongoing sexual relationships with more than one person at a time
6. Sex as a simple exchange of favors is okay if both people agree to it
7. The best sex is with no strings attached
8. Life would have fewer problems if people could have sex more freely
9. It is possible to enjoy sex with a person and not like that person very much
10. It is okay for sex to be just good physical release
11. Birth control is part of responsible sexuality
12. A woman should share responsibility for birth control
13. A man should share responsibility for birth control
14. Sex is the closest form of communication between two people
15. A sexual encounter between two people deeply in love is the ultimate human interaction
16. At its best, sex seems to be the merging of two souls
17. Sex is a very important part of life
18. Sex is usually an intensive, almost overwhelming experience
19. Sex is best when you let yourself go and focus on your own pleasure
20. Sex is primarily the taking of pleasure from another person
21. The main purpose of sex is to enjoy oneself
22. Sex is primarily physical
23. Sex is primarily a bodily function, like eating

**Experiences in Close Relationships (Brennan, Shaver, & Clark, 1998)**

The statements below concern how you feel in emotionally intimate relationships. We are interested in how you generally experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a

current relationship. Respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

1. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
2. I worry about being abandoned.
3. I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.
4. I worry a lot about my relationships.
5. Just when my partner starts to get close to me I find myself pulling away.
6. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.
7. I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.
8. I worry a fair amount about losing my partner.
9. I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.
10. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him/her.
11. I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.
12. I often want to merge completely with romantic partners, and this sometimes scares them away.
13. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
14. I worry about being alone.
15. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner.
16. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
17. I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.
18. I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.
19. I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner.
20. Sometimes I feel that I force my partners to show more feeling, more commitment.



21. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.
22. I do not often worry about being abandoned.
23. I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.
24. If I can't get my partner to show interest in me, I get upset or angry.
25. I tell my partner just about everything.
26. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
27. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.
28. When I'm not involved in a relationship, I feel somewhat anxious and insecure.
29. I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.
30. I get frustrated when my partner is not around as much as I would like.
31. I don't mind asking romantic partners for comfort, advice, or help.
32. I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.
33. It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.
34. When romantic partners disapprove of me, I feel really bad about myself.
35. I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance.
36. I resent it when my partner spends time away from me.

**Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale (Mattingly et al., 2010)**

The following statements reflect different behaviors. We are looking for how individuals perceive or determine which behaviors are considered to be infidelity. Your responses should be based on how you react to each statement. Respond to each statement by rating (0-6) to what degree (0 = never cheating; 6 = always cheating) you think they represent infidelity.

1. Hugging someone who is not my romantic partner
2. Engaging in oral sex with someone who is not my romantic partner

3. Withholding information from my romantic partner
4. Talking on the phone or Internet with someone who is not my romantic partner
5. Dating someone who is not my romantic partner
6. Buying and/or receiving gifts for and/or from someone who is not my romantic partner
7. Engaging in sexual intercourse with someone who is not my romantic partner
8. Dancing with someone who is not my romantic partner
9. Lying to my romantic partner
10. Heavy petting/fondling with someone who is not my romantic partner
11. Eating or drinking with someone who is not my romantic partner
12. Going places with someone who is not my romantic partner

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent**

### **Informed consent Department of Marriage and Family Therapy**

**Title of Study: Attitudes, Attachment Styles, and Gender: Implications on Perceptions of Infidelity**

**Investigator(s): Stephen Fife, PhD; Christian Stewart**

For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Stephen Fife at [stephen.fife@unlv.edu](mailto:stephen.fife@unlv.edu).

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact **the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794, toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at [IRB@unlv.edu](mailto:IRB@unlv.edu)**.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to assess influences on perceptions of infidelity. Our aim is to use the data to increase understanding of what influences how people perceive infidelity.

#### **Participants**

You are being asked to participate in the study because you are 18 years old or older and you are currently in a committed romantic relationship or have previously been in a committed romantic relationship.

#### **Procedures**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an electronic survey that may take up to 20 minutes to complete.

#### **Benefits of Participation**

There may be a direct benefit to you as a participant in this study. The survey may promote insight and understanding of the topic of infidelity.

#### **Risks of Participation**

There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. This study presents the risk of some emotional discomfort while answering the questions on the survey. The researchers will make every effort to minimize these risks. If at any point in the survey you become uncomfortable or distressed, you may stop taking the survey.

#### **Cost/Compensation**

There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take

approximately 10 minutes of your time.

**Confidentiality**

All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 10 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with UNLV. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

## Appendix C: IRB Permissions

### UNLV Social/Behavioral IRB - Exempt Review Exempt Notice

**DATE:** January 31, 2017

**TO:** Stephen Fife, PhD

**FROM:** Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects

**PROTOCOL TITLE:** [1011014-1] Attitudes, Attachment Styles, and Gender: Implications on Perceptions of Infidelity

**ACTION:** DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

**EXEMPT DATE:** January 31, 2017

**REVIEW CATEGORY:** Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this protocol. This memorandum is notification that the protocol referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45CFR46.101(b) and deemed exempt.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence with our records.

#### **PLEASE NOTE:**

Upon final determination of exempt status, the research team is responsible for conducting the research as stated in the exempt application reviewed by the ORI - HS and/or the IRB which shall include using the most recently submitted Informed Consent/Assent Forms (Information Sheet) and recruitment materials. If your project involves paying research participants, it is recommended to contact Carisa Shaffer, ORI Program Coordinator at (702) 895-2794 to ensure compliance with subject payment policy.

*Any* changes to the application may cause this protocol to require a different level of IRB review. Should any changes need to be made, please submit a **Modification Form**. When the above-referenced protocol has been completed, please submit a **Continuing Review/Progress Completion report** to notify ORI - HS of its closure.

If you have questions, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at [IRB@unlv.edu](mailto:IRB@unlv.edu) or call 702-895-2794. Please include your protocol title and IRBNet ID in all correspondence.

Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects 4505 Maryland Parkway . Box 451047 . Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047 (702) 895-2794 . FAX: (702) 895-0805 . [IRB@unlv.edu](mailto:IRB@unlv.edu)



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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224540903366750>

**Curriculum Vitae**  
**Christian M. Stewart**  
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**EDUCATION**

- M.S.                      Marriage and Family Therapy  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Anticipated December 2017  
Thesis: *Attitudes, Attachment Styles, and Gender: Implications on Perceptions of Infidelity* (Chair: Stephen Fife, Ph.D.)
- B.S.                      Behavioral Science, Family Studies emphasis  
Utah Valley University, 2014  
Graduated *Cum Laude* (GPA: 3.61)

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Clinical Experience:**

- March 2017 – Present      Marriage and Family Therapy Student Intern  
Kayenta Therapy Centers  
Las Vegas, Nevada
- May 2016 – May 2017      Student Therapist  
Center for Individual, Couple, and Family Counseling  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

**Professional Affiliations:**

- 2015 – Present              American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT),  
Student member
- 2015 – Present              Nevada Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (NAMFT), Student  
member
- 2014 – Present              National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), Student member

**RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

- January 2016 – May 2017      Thesis Research: Marriage and Family Therapy Program,  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas – Quantitative research study  
focusing on predictive factors of perceptions of infidelity.
- 2014                      Engaged in research about sexual intimacy with Jeremy Boden, PhD, Nate Cottle,  
PhD, and Joyce Starks, Utah Valley University.

- Tasked with marketing of survey research and coding qualitative data.

2014 Undergraduate research experiences with Research Mentor Ron Hammond, PhD, Utah Valley University.

- Quantitative research project: “Emerging into adulthood and activity: LDS 18-25 year old UVU students.”
- Content analysis of data collected in 2013 survey of kinship caregivers-parental interference.
- Researched and developed test bank questions for 2nd edition of open courseware textbooks for Introduction to Sociology and Sociology of the Family, [www.freebooks.uvu.edu](http://www.freebooks.uvu.edu).
- Participated in the Utah’s StrongerMarriage.org website rebuild.

**Research Interests:**

Emotional and psychological well-being of children, ADHD, learning disorders, educational difficulties, family interaction and influence within school, home and social contexts, parenting, sexual education, and impact of parenting practices on educational success and self-esteem

**PUBLICATIONS**

Stewart, C., & Fife, S. (2017, September). Fathers of newborns and toddlers: A unique bond. *Parents Guide of Las Vegas*, 26-27.

Fife, S., & Stewart, C. (2017, September). Creating healthy attachment bonds with children. *Parents Guide of Las Vegas*, 22-23.

**MANUSCRIPTS IN PREPARATION**

Stewart, C.M., & Fife, S.T. (2017). Attitudes, Attachment Styles, and Gender: Implications on Perceptions of Infidelity. Manuscript in preparation.

Johnson, D.J., Farrow, B., Stewart, C.M., Hertlein, K.M. (2017). Reconciling Desire: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives on Conceptualizing the Context of Rape Fantasies in Sex Therapy. Manuscript in preparation.

Fife, S.T., & Stewart, C.M. (2017). Conceptualizing infidelity treatment working through an attachment lens. Manuscript in preparation.

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND PRESENTATIONS**

**Courses Taught:**

- 2017 Guest Lecturer – HON 401 (Undergraduate honors course)  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*
- Invited by the course instructor to teach part of the course curriculum
- 2016 Guest Lecturer – MFT 360 (Undergraduate course)  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*
- Invited by the course instructor to teach part of the course curriculum
- 2015 Strongest Link Instructor  
*Utah Marriage Commission*
- Taught relationship enhancement course to couples
- 2014 – 2015 Course Facilitator  
*Strengthening Families Program, Utah Valley University*
- Taught parenting and relationship skills to adults and emotional regulation and educational skills to children and adolescents

**Guest Panel Speaker:**

- 2017 Guest Panel Speaker – HON 401 (Undergraduate honors course)  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*
- Invited by course instructor to share personal experiences of being a graduate student with undergraduate students
- 2017 Guest Panel Speaker – MFT 428 (Undergraduate MFT course)  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*
- Invited by course instructor to share personal experiences of being a graduate student with undergraduate students

**Poster Presentations:**

- November 2017 Proposal accepted to present poster on thesis research at annual conference of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR)
- December 2014 “Marriage: Effects from the past, promises for the future.”  
*Utah Valley University Behavioral Science Fall Poster Symposium*
- August 2014 “I’ve grown tired, when Facebook relationships become too toxic.”  
*Utah Valley University Behavioral Science Summer Poster Symposium*
- June 2014 “How to avoid falling in love with a jerk.”  
*Utah Valley University Behavioral Science Spring Poster Symposium*

**Presentations:**

October 2014      “Emerging into adulthood and activity: LDS 18-25 year old UVU students”  
*Presented to the Research Division of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*

June 2014      “Marital enrichment for newlyweds.”  
*Utah Valley University Family Life Education Methodology Course*

### **VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE**

Summer 2014      Friday Kids Respite (Salem, UT)  

- Facilitated a healthy learning environment for children from a wide variety of backgrounds and developmental struggles, including ADHD, Autism, and other cognitive impairments.

Summer 2014      Kids on the Move (Orem, UT)  

- Worked with children with cognitive and physical impairments, including ADHD, Autism, and Cystic Fibrosis.