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A Grounded Theory Approach To Defining Emotional Infidelity Among Mid-Career Women In Monogamous, Cross-Sex Relationships

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A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH TO DEFINING EMOTIONAL INFIDELITY AMONG MID-CAREER WOMEN IN MONOGAMOUS, CROSS-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

by

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This dissertation submitted by Lindsey M. Morrissey in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Lindsey Morrissey
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“To Josh”

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to examine what factors are involved in defining emotional infidelity among professional women who are in monogamous, cross-sex, romantic relationships. Constructivist grounded theory (CGT; Charmaz, 2014) was the qualitative methodology used within this study to capture participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and worldviews. Eight partnered, self-identified women, between the ages of 30 and 50, who were established in their careers engaged in semi-structured initial interviews and follow-up interviews. Seven participants identified as heterosexual and one participant identified as bisexual. Race and ethnicity represented included White (6), Latino (1), and Black (1).

During the interviews, participants were asked about how they would define emotional infidelity, how it was differentiated from other relationships, such as a close friendship, and how technology might play a role in understanding this concept. There was also exploration of possible boundaries or agreements that were established within the primary relationship, such as in the context of work and through technology interactions. All semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed through CGT procedures. Through data analysis and integration of participants' perspectives and experiences, four main categories emerged including (1) defining emotional infidelity, (2) how emotional infidelity occurs, (3) relationship safeguarding, and (4) factors influencing relationship boundaries.

Furthermore, a substantive, though preliminary, definition of emotional infidelity was developed in this study and involves an emotional connection to an outside individual of potential or actual romantic interest that goes against the stated or unstated agreements of the primary relationship. Emotional connection includes intentional investment of time (physically and/or cognitively) and placing trust into a specific individual (sharing personal, vulnerable information about self and/or primary relationship) while withholding information (regarding nature of interactions with outside individual) from the primary partner. After immersion into previous theories and literature on close relationships and intimacy, two amended definitions were also proposed, one that is informed by the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) and one that is informed by the sound relationship house theory (Gottman, 1999, 2011).

A literature review is included, which highlights relevant theories and prior research on infidelity, close relationships, work relationships, and intimacy. Limitations are also highlighted with recommendations for future research. Finally, there is a discussion of possible clinical implications, including ways in which practitioners can incorporate the findings of the current study into their work with couples that are in presumably non-abusive, non-violent romantic relationships.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Relationships provide a sense of fulfillment and value for the vast majority of people. More specifically, individuals gain a great deal of satisfaction when they connect to others, whether it is with a coworker, a friend, or a romantic partner. Nonetheless, differentiating between these various relationships can become convoluted and the boundaries may seem unclear. What may be perceived as a relational boundary violation to one person in a romantic relationship may be perceived as acceptable to another. The literature up to this point has not focused on identifying where friendship boundaries exist, especially emotional boundaries, when someone is in a romantic relationship (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Moller & Vossler, 2014).

The term *infidelity* is often used to describe different types of non-platonic behaviors or activities that take place outside of one's romantic relationship. Infidelity has been an important area of study for social science researchers for decades (Blow & Harnett, 2005a; Glass & Wright, 1992; Moller & Vossler, 2014; Rosoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1999; Thompson, 1983; Whitty, 2003). One complication that continues to be evident even after years of studying infidelity is the lack of a clear, operationalized definition (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Thompson, 1983). There are commonly two different forms of infidelity identified by researchers—emotional infidelity and physical/sexual infidelity (Blow & Harnett, 2005b). Up to this point, much of the focus

has been on physical/sexual infidelity, due in part to the fact that the definition of emotional infidelity is vague, especially in comparison to definitions provided for physical/sexual infidelity (Buss et al., 1999; Sabini & Silver, 2005; Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000). For that reason, the focus of this study is on qualitatively exploring the definitions and issues related to *non-sexual emotional infidelity*.

When examining infidelity as a whole, there are possible sex differences that have been explained in terms of evolutionary theory. Specifically, research has found that men tend to experience more distress over their partner's sexual infidelity while women may experience more distress over their partner's emotional infidelity (Buss et al., 1999). Additional attention has been focused on how individuals of different sexual orientations respond to hypothetical acts of their partner engaging in infidelity. Heterosexually identified individuals as a whole tend to become more jealous of infidelity as compared to gay or lesbian-identified individuals, and this difference is particularly evident when looking at heterosexual women's responses as compared to lesbian women and gay men (Dijkstra, Barelds, & Groothof, 2013).

One ongoing flaw in this area of research is the way in which these terms are defined, regardless of the population. The majority of scenarios presented to participants use terms such as "falling in love" or "emotional involvement" without a specific definition provided (Buss et al., 1999). This makes the definition of emotional infidelity open to interpretation across participants. At this point, we do not know how people perceive the difference between close friendships and emotional infidelity (Jeanfreau, Jurich, & Mong, 2014). This is even less understood when considering the various ways in which people might communicate virtually through technological means whether that

be within a professional working setting or within their personal lives. Therefore, further exploration of how emotional infidelity is differentiated from a close friendship or relationship formed at work is needed to better understand potential boundaries that may exist.

Verkuyten and Masson (1996) conducted a study examining individual, ethnic, and gender differences in how friendships are perceived. Participants were comprised of diverse cultural backgrounds including Turkish, Spanish, and Moroccan nationalities, among others. When examining rules in a friendship through an open-ended format, women endorsed a significantly higher importance of trust and confidence compared to men. Additionally, women shared more intimate information with their best friend and endorsed more "rules" regarding interactions with third parties (i.e. "do not be jealous or critical of other relationships") compared to men (Verkuyten & Masson, 1996, p. 215). These differences were found across all ethnic groups included in the study, potentially suggesting a gender difference in how friendships are perceived (Verkuyten & Masson, 1996). What remains to be known at this point is how close friendships are understood or accepted across groups of different ethnic identities, gender identifies, and sexual orientation identities when in committed, monogamous relationships.

The current study focused primarily on heterosexual identified women, a decision based on prior research demonstrating a heightened response to emotional infidelity among this population. Dijkstra, Barelds, Hinke, & Groothof (2013) also found that with regards to infidelity in general, heterosexual identified women responded with more jealousy related to anger and betrayal compared to lesbian identified women. Therefore, focusing on primarily heterosexually identified women is considered a starting point to

address what boundaries or rules are in place with emotional infidelity. It is important to note that inclusion criteria were not limited to any specific sexual orientation and the research team remained cognizant of the possibility of group differences throughout data analysis.

More specifically, professional working women were chosen as the professional environment commonly requires men and women to regularly interact and socialize as part of their workday. Blue-collar trades, such as construction, continue to be more male-dominated, and training opportunities for women who wish to enter into these occupations are still lacking (Bergmann, 2011). Alternatively, professional work settings, such as a university, often have more integration across genders. Thus, individuals with established careers often interact and form relationships with coworkers and supervisors due to the frequency of their communication (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Furthermore, many companies are altering the way employees communicate and complete their work, especially with recent technological advancements. In a work setting, frequent correspondence over email or cell phones is one of the easiest ways to communicate, especially if the work is done outside of the office (Diaz, Chiaburu, Zimmerman, & Boswell, 2012). This method of communication can become blurred if individuals in committed relationships are using technology to form deeper connections with colleagues that are beyond work-related concerns. (Hertlein & Webster, 2008). What remains unclear at this point is how and if interactions through technology may impact the occurrence of emotional infidelity.

Therefore, the first aim of this study was to qualitatively explore the experiences and perceptions that professional women have regarding emotional infidelity, as well as

their perceptions of the line between acceptable cross-sex close friendships and emotional infidelity. The second aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of how and if communication through technology plays a role in defining non-sexual emotional infidelity for professional women who are in committed, cross-sex relationships.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

As an attempt to fill the current gap that has existed for several decades in the area of infidelity, the purpose of this study was to investigate how women in a committed, monogamous relationship define non-sexual emotional infidelity. In order to further understand the background and research related to this issue, an overview of that literature is provided here. The literature review begins with a focus on infidelity in general. The discussion includes a background on how the term 'infidelity' has evolved over time, a broad description of infidelity and then a focus on more specific forms of infidelity. Methodological concerns in infidelity research up to this point are also outlined. Following that, there is a discussion surrounding sex differences as it relates to jealousy and infidelity. Finally, the influence of the workplace and impact of technology on emotional infidelity are explored.

The Etymology of Infidelity Terms

There has been a wide array of terms used by researchers who have studied the concept of infidelity over the course of several decades. One of the first terms used was *adultery*, which is defined as "sexual relations with anyone other than one's spouse, arises from legal usage" (Thompson, 1983, p. 2). Over time, the focus on heterosexual individuals who are married continued, and sexual relations outside of that marriage were termed *extramarital involvement*. Extramarital involvement included a variety of

behaviors that occur outside of the marriage, from flirting to oral sex to intercourse (Edwards, 1973). Thompson (1982) extended the area of focus by using the term *extra-dyadic relations* as a way to include not only married couples, but individuals who are cohabitating and are not married. Throughout the current research, there are a variety of terms that are used ranging from betrayal to affair to infidelity. The lack of a clear definition creates ambiguity in the research and difficulty in comparing findings across studies (Thompson, 1983). For the purposes of this study, the term *infidelity* (defined more specifically below) is used.

Defining Infidelity

In reviewing prior studies in the area of infidelity, it is clear that there is no one universal definition of the term. Several prior studies focus on sexual infidelity specifically, including behaviors such as vaginal or anal intercourse, or a sexual relationship (Charny & Parnass, 1995; Choi, Catania, & Dolcini, 1994; Forste & Tanfer, 1996). In this case, it might be expected that these interactions would most likely occur in person. Other researchers define infidelity on a spectrum ranging from sexual intercourse to falling in love (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Glass & Wright, 1985; Harris, 2002), the latter of which encompasses emotional as well as sexual components and may not be as limited to face-to-face interactions.

Thompson (1983) addressed the definitional concern in his review and provided suggestions on how to improve. He explained three important descriptors that should comprise a definition of infidelity including: 1. Whether or not there is consensus within the relationship. 2. The type of "extra" relationship occurring (i.e. extramarital, extracohabitating). 3. The type of behavior taking place (Thompson, 1983).

Unfortunately, while these suggestions may have been helpful in forming a more operational definition of infidelity, they were not implemented in the subsequent research (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). This is especially evident when examining emotional infidelity definitions, which are explored below.

Blow and Hartnett (2005a) provided a broad definition of infidelity that includes "a sexual and/or emotional act taking place outside of one's primary relationship that somehow violates the trust and/or norms that have been established between those individuals" (p. 191-192). This definition provides some clarity in areas that have been problematic, such as the use of the term "primary relationship". By using that term, infidelity is not only limited to individuals who are married, but can include those who are cohabitating and dating as well as those of various sexual orientations. Alternatively, this definition is still quite vague, using the phrase "somehow violates the trust and/or norms", which is open to interpretation across individuals on what behaviors or actions that might include. However, because this definition was formed off of a review of prior research, it is unknown how this definition is understood by individuals in the general population who are in committed relationships. Perhaps one way to better understand this concept is through categorization of different forms of infidelity.

Categories of Infidelity

A lack of consensus among researchers is evident with regards to how infidelity is categorized. Buunk (1980) provided a continuum as a way to explain infidelity, ranging from flirting to prolonged sexual relationships. Other researchers have traditionally separated infidelity into two categories: sexual and emotional (Buss, Larsen, Westen & Semmelroth, 1992; Shackelford & Buss, 1996) while still others have added an additional

category that includes the combination of both sexual and physical infidelity (Glass & Wright, 1985; Thompson, 1984). There appears to be at least some agreement about physical and emotional as two components of infidelity, although the definitions remain unclear at this point, especially with regards to emotional infidelity.

Physical/Sexual Infidelity

This category of infidelity includes engaging in sexual intercourse with someone outside of the primary relationship (Whitty & Quigley, 2008). Beyond sexual intercourse, there are a wide variety of sexual behaviors that would fit under this category such as kissing, petting, pornography, and oral sex (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Randall & Byers, 2003; Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). The actual behaviors that individuals would consider to be physical/sexual infidelity varies greatly across studies. Similarly, the meanings of these behaviors across different populations and cultures may be different. Due to this, the prevalence rates of physical/sexual infidelity may be questionable, especially when there are different opinions on what the term actually means (Moller & Vossler, 2014). However, it seems that there is a slightly better understanding of what physical/sexual factors shape this definition as compared to emotional infidelity factors.

Emotional Infidelity

The definition of emotional infidelity remains broad at this point, including phrases such as "falling in love with another individual" (Whitty & Quigley, 2008, p. 461) or "emotional connections beyond friendships" (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a, p. 186). In an early study, Thompson (1984) emphasized the importance of considering infidelity as both emotional and sexual, instead of grouping them into one overarching term.

Thompson (1984), along with other early researchers ((Buunk, 1980; Spanier & Margolis, 1983), began differentiating emotional infidelity from physical/sexual infidelity in studies being conducted. Emotional infidelity was defined as subjective "in love" experiences (Thompson, 1984, p. 36). The way in which a distinction was made between forms of infidelity with participants in Thompson's (1984) study was by asking them to respond with "yes" or "no" if their extradyadic involvement and expectations were (a) emotionally (in love) only, (b) sexually (intercourse) only, or (c) emotionally (in love) and sexually (intercourse). Although this study attempted to distinguish emotional infidelity as a separate concept, there seems to be an assumption that emotional infidelity is defined as being "in love" only. This leaves little room for inclusion of other behaviors, thoughts, or actions that may be considered more emotionally-based infidelity. For example, flirtatious behaviors via technology or in person among coworkers who are in separate, committed relationships would not be considered emotional infidelity unless it was determined that they are "in love" with one another according to Thompson's (1984) definition.

Glass and Wright (1992) conducted a study among heterosexual married individuals, seeking to determine what the major justifications were for extramarital relationships. To measure extramarital emotional involvement, participants were asked about the degree of their involvement on a five-point scale. Responses ranged from "no emotional involvement" to "extremely deep emotional involvement". Although findings demonstrated that emotional dimensions were considered justifications for extramarital involvement, there is room for interpretation on what that means. One clear limitation that is evident in this study is how the term "emotional involvement" is defined. It is

assumed that participants all have the same definition of emotional involvement, although that may be inaccurate. Although these early studies began to address the need for differentiating physical/sexual infidelity from emotional infidelity, there are still questions that remain currently regarding how to accurately define these terms. This is especially relevant to emotional infidelity, a concept that is much more vague and less understood than physical infidelity.

It is important to outline the emotional components of infidelity as prior research has started to do (Glass and Wright, 1992; Thompson, 1984). There are behaviors outside of the primary relationship that are more emotionally-based, but they are quite abstract, such as falling in love (Whitty & Quigley, 2008). Therefore, we do not know what these phrases actually mean and what factors are involved when emotional infidelity is present. Similarly, we do not know what it means to have an "emotional connection". Within a work setting, it might be considered appropriate to form a strong connection with a colleague whom you work closely with. Another area discussed in research is when a "boundary has been crossed" that goes beyond a friendship (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). Not only are we unsure of when a boundary has been crossed, but how one knows that has occurred, such as with a colleague in a work setting or a close friend. Further, technology provides ample opportunities to form connections with various individuals, making it more difficult to determine where those boundaries exist through that mode of communication. These are important areas that raise questions, which need to be answered in order to further understand this concept. Depending on the individual, these vague definitions can be interpreted in several different ways, making it difficult to accurately measure emotional infidelity through research.

Prevalence Rates of Infidelity

The prevalence of infidelity is another component that has wide variation across studies, due in part to the lack of a specific and consistent definitions. Hunt (1974) surveyed a large sample of adults that was considered to be representative of the United States population at the time and found that 41% of married men and 18% of married women were involved in extramarital intercourse. Similarly, Hite (1981) also studied a representative sample of 7,239 men in the United States and found through the use of a survey that 66% of men admitted to engagement in extramarital sex. There is a clear pattern in these earlier studies relating to the type of infidelity being studied. Specifically, participants of these studies were married and the prevalence of sexual infidelity (not emotional infidelity) was the focus. Emotional infidelity was almost entirely disregarded.

Other research studies present very different findings regarding the prevalence of infidelity. Wiederman (1997) found that 78% of men and 88% of women denied ever being involved in extramarital sex. With the apparent discrepancies in prevalence rates, it is estimated that in the context of a heterosexual marriage, extramarital sex occurs less than 25% of the time (Blow & Hartnett, 2005b). It is disconcerting that there is such wide variation in prevalence rates of extramarital sex, a concept that is relatively clear in how it is defined. Given the significant ambiguity in defining emotional infidelity, there is even a larger concern over how accurate prevalence rates in this area are. Moller and Vossler (2014) noted that based on prevalence rates across prior research (Hertlein, Wetchler, & Piercy, 2005; Lou, Cartun, & Snider, 2010), the lifetime prevalence rate for infidelity ranges from 1.2% to 85.5%, depending on how the term is defined. Up to this point, there does not appear to be any prevalence rates specifically for emotional

infidelity. To address this concern, a more formal definition needs to be developed and applied across studies to create a more accurate picture of how often incidences of emotional infidelity are occurring.

Methodological Concerns in Literature

Throughout the literature related to infidelity, there have been several concerns identified relating to the methodology of studies. These concerns are worth noting because they may have important implications, such as how to appropriately interpret and understand the results and overall progress in this area of research. The following section outlines two specific categories of concern, including limitations to the participants being recruited for studies and the overall design of the studies.

Participants

Infidelity research has often focused on a variety of different samples both within the United States and in other countries. One common population that is often included in these studies are undergraduate students who are unmarried and primarily heterosexual (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988; Whitty & Quigley, 2008). The more representative samples that do exist are recruited through national survey procedures that include diverse sexual orientations, ethnicities, and geographical locations (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Harris, 2002). However, these nationally based samples often lack specificity in the survey items. For example, the emphasis is often on relationships in a broad sense instead of focusing on specific aspects of infidelity (i.e., infidelity is not the primary focus of the study). Among all of the questions asked in a national survey, there is typically one question regarding infidelity, often in reference to sexual intercourse only (Blow & Hartnett, 2008a). When there is such a large pool of

individuals to collect data from, the individual experiences and opinions of the participants are almost entirely lost. Alternatively, when qualitative studies are conducted, they usually include very small samples of convenience and, due to the nature of this research approach, the participants are limited in how representative they are of the general population (Blow & Harnett, 2005a). However, a qualitative analysis can be a necessary approach in order to begin understanding a concept such as emotional infidelity.

As an example of a qualitative study, Moller and Vossler (2014) conducted an exploratory study in the United Kingdom to determine how practitioners define infidelity based on their work with clients in this area. Using this type of methodology seems appropriate when the definition of infidelity is not well understood and therefore, a very small sample is included as a way to collect rich information directly from the participants. However, the seven practitioners included in the study were from one counseling center in one small area of Britain, all were Caucasian, and all work primarily with heterosexual couples (Moller & Vossler, 2014). The ability to generalize the findings of this study are therefore limited, especially outside of the United Kingdom.

In order to continue learning about what factors are important in defining infidelity, diverse populations need to be examined in qualitative analyses until there is a better understanding. A specific focus on different types of infidelity as a way to break down this concept can help move this area forward. Once it is understood what is being studied, quantitative researchers can expand to larger samples of individuals using a definition that is consistently applied across research studies. This approach will further strengthen the methodology of this topic.

Disclosing Infidelity

Infidelity is often difficult to research because of how sensitive the topic is for many individuals. There is discomfort in being open about infidelity and with that comes a concern about confidentiality breaches. For some individuals, these types of experiences may not have been shared with anyone before and there is a fear of that information being revealed. It seems logical to have concern over what types of consequences that may have on someone's life and therefore be resistant to fully disclose details related to infidelity (Blow & Harnett, 2005a). That can help explain some of the apparent discrepancy in results depending on the research design.

Vignettes

Another design concern related to the study of infidelity is the common practice among researchers to use hypothetical scenarios or vignettes as a way to continue exploring across a variety of individuals who may or may not have any experiences related to infidelity (Buss et al., 1992; Harris & Christenfeld, 1996; Whitty & Quigley, 2008). The use of vignettes can raise the question of how applicable the findings are to real life, especially if the participants have not ever had any experiences related to infidelity. In a study where the reactions of a hypothetical situation was compared to a reaction of a realistic situation related to infidelity, there were no correlations found, providing further support for the inability to make broad generalizations based on vignettes (Harris, 2002).

The discussion up to this point has focused on understanding infidelity as a broad concept, including definitional and methodological concerns in the research. Another important component in defining emotional infidelity is understanding what boundaries

exist, if any, in separating this term from other types of interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the difference between close friendships and emotional infidelity can become especially unclear for many individuals. The following section explores how close friendships are particularly relevant to the discussion of emotional infidelity.

Close Friendships and Emotional Infidelity

A review of the related literature demonstrates that we do not fully understand what factors are involved in emotional infidelity. We also do not know how prevalent emotional infidelity is due to the abstract behaviors and definitions provided in the literature. When considering close friendships and the emotional component that exists within friendships, it becomes apparent the line between close friendships and emotional infidelity may not be well-defined. Prior research in this area is very limited, demonstrating the need to further investigate how close friendships differ from emotional infidelity.

A friendship has been described in the literature as an "informal tie between people who support each other in various ways" (Pedersen & Lewis, 2012, p. 466). There is often instrumental and emotional support within friendships. Instrumental support includes practical assistance and sharing of information while emotional support is evident when empathy and care are expressed (Pedersen & Lewis, 2012). Although friendships can vary in how they look across individuals and the amount of support provided, they often fall on a spectrum of intimacy, immediacy, and stability (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Intimacy demonstrates how close people are in a friendship and the amount they share with one another. This could range from working for the same company to viewing one another as lifelong partners. Immediacy relates to how often individuals see

one another or are in some form of contact (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). For some, contact with a friend may be on a regular (daily or weekly) basis while for others, it may be more irregular contact. Finally, the amount of stability in a friendship may be considered fixed, progressive, or variable. Therefore, friendships seem to vary over the course of one's life and the context in which they exist (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). When examining a friendship along these different spectrums, it seems plausible that some friendships may cross a boundary into more romantic involvement.

In an earlier study conducted by Glass and Wright (1992), heterosexual married individuals completed questionnaires in which they rated how justified they would feel in engaging in an extramarital affair. There were two emotional dimensions that emerged in the results, including romantic love and emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy specifically included several reasons that might justify an extramarital affair such as intellectual sharing, companionship, understanding, respect, and enhancing self-esteem (Glass and Wright, 1992). These factors describing emotional intimacy may be closely aligned to qualities of a close friendship for some individuals, highlighting the complexity of the emotional component in any relationship, romantic or otherwise. The researchers noted that emotional intimacy may serve as a source of denial for individuals involved in extramarital emotionally-based affairs, indicating that it is "just a friendship" (Glass & Wright, 1992, p. 377). Further, Glass and Wright (1992) noted that an emotionally intimate friendship that becomes sexual has clearly crossed a boundary between friendship and an extramarital affair. This raises the question about how that boundary is understood between a close friendship and emotional infidelity, where sexual

involvement may not be present. Furthermore, how that boundary is understood across different cultures or sexual orientations is another important question to consider.

Close Friendships and Jealousy

In order to further explore how a close friendship varies from emotional infidelity, it is important to understand how jealousy can play a role. Jealousy has been defined in the literature as "a protective reaction to a perceived threat to a valued relationship, arising from a situation in which the partner's involvement with an activity and/or another person is contrary to the jealous person's definition of their relationship" (Hansen, 1991, p. 213). Jealousy is considered to be a complex emotion that includes more basic emotions such as sadness or anger. How jealousy is experienced varies for each individual and depends on the situation taking place (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004). Buunk and Dijkstra (2004) found that there were different types of jealousy depending on the type of infidelity. Following emotional infidelity of one's partner, responses included high levels of anxiety, worry, suspicion, distrust, and threat. For situations in which sexual infidelity occurred, feelings included hurt, rejection, anger, sadness, and betrayal. For emotional infidelity, it seems that there are increased feelings of anxiety and insecurity that "colors" the experience of jealousy. This form of jealousy is called "suspicious" jealousy (Parrot, 1991) and is associated with the presence of threat (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004). Alternatively, for sexual infidelity, the jealousy experience is colored by feelings of betrayal and anger (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004) and is called "fait accompli" jealousy (Parrot, 1991). Therefore, there may be a variety of emotions experienced that all encompass feelings of jealousy, such as being upset, distressed, or angered.

For individuals who are in committed relationships, there are many situations that may elicit jealousy. One common reason that jealousy arises is because of the amount of time being spent with a close friend, which can take away from attention being focused on the romantic partner (Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2011).

Worley and Samp (2011) advanced a model of friendship-related jealousy which specifically pertains to individuals who are in committed relationships but have extra-dyadic friendships. There are four different dimensions including sexual jealousy, intimacy jealousy, power jealousy, and companionship jealousy. Sexual jealousy relates to an individual's worry that a partner may become sexually involved with a close friend. Intimacy jealousy refers to the deeper emotional connection that is formed with a friend and one that is often based on a high level of trust and personal disclosure. Power jealousy involves the fear of losing influence over one's partner because of another close friend. Finally, companionship jealousy relates to concerns about the benefits that a partner may be gaining in a close friendship such as forming a companionship with another person (Worley & Samp, 2014). Each of these dimensions are considered distinct from one another on a conceptual level, but it is possible that an individual can experience more than one of these dimensions of jealousy at any given time. Worley and Samp (2014) found that individuals are less likely to verbalize their jealousy concerns to a partner when it relates more to companionship jealousy as compared to sexual or intimacy jealousy. Typically, when a partner verbalizes a concern, it is justified because there are clear rules or boundaries in place (Newell & Stutman, 1988). Therefore, it may be that the rules are more ambiguous when there are not sexual or intimate components present in a friendship even though it may still be impacting the romantic relationship.

Culture and Friendships

Understanding how friendships vary across cultures is relevant to this discussion, as a more Western view is frequently adopted in the literature. Research specifically examining multiculturalism and friendships is rather limited. However, culture plays a particularly important role in shaping how we interact with others interpersonally. Areas in which culture distinctions have been made relates to individualism and collectivism within societies. Individualistic societies often emphasize personal identity, independence, autonomy, and privacy (Hofstede, 1980). Alternatively, collectivistic societies often place more importance on dependence, group solidarity, and sharing. Across almost all cultures, there are individuals who identify as allocentric, individuals who select mostly collectivistic behaviors, and idiocentric, individuals who are more individualistic. However, many individuals are likely to align with their cultural norms of being allocentric or idiocentric (Verkeytun & Masson, 1996).

Verkeytun and Masson (1996) conducted a study examining same-sex friendships among adolescents from several different backgrounds including Turkish, Moroccan, Spanish, Italian, and others. The researchers highlighted that adolescent friendships often involve more stability, trust, and loyalty, (Verkeytun & Masson, 1996) which may be extended to adult friendships as well. Results showed that females endorsed trust and confidence as important components of a friendship more than males, suggesting increased intimacy (Verkeytun & Masson, 1996). Females also had more rules regarding relations with third parties compared to males, such as not becoming jealous and maintaining confidences. Additionally, low idiocentric individuals endorsed more "rules" for intimacy than high idiocentric individuals, such as trust and confidence in each other.

When examining level of closeness with one's best friend, women and individuals high in allocentrism perceived their relationship with their best friend to be closer as compared to men and individuals low in allocentrism. Finally, allocentrism demonstrated a greater attentiveness and sensitivity to one's friends compared to idiocentrism (Verkeytun & Masson, 1996).

Together, the findings discussed above may suggest that depending on the culture that an individual identifies with, there may be a difference in values that is extended to friendships. Those who are from collectivist cultures may experience a higher level of intimacy or closeness within their friendships, potentially blurring the boundaries between friendships and romantic relationships. Understanding the potential differences and similarities in how friendships are understood in our Westernized society as compared to other cultures is necessary in order to understand how close friendships are differentiated from romantic relationships. Further research is needed in order to examine how individuals in collectivist cultures in particular may form boundaries with friendships when in a committed, monogamous relationship.

Lesbian Identified Women and Friendships

Most of the literature related to infidelity, particularly emotional infidelity, focuses on heterosexual relationships. However, a limited amount of research has looked at the experiences of individuals who are in same-sex relationships. For example, based on prior qualitative studies of lesbian relationships (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2011; Degges-White & Marszalek, 2006/2007), Degges-White (2012) discussed the development of lesbian friendships and explained that the blurring of a friendship and romantic relationship boundary becomes more common. She explained that young

lesbian identified women often experience their first sexual encounters with someone who would be considered a close friend (Degges-White, 2012). The researcher noted that lesbian identified women deeply valued their friendships before entering into a romantic relationship. One participant described her friendship as "being best friends without limits. Intimacy is both sexual and nonsexual" (Degges-White, 2012, p. 20). Another potential unique aspect among lesbian identified women is that because the community is much smaller, many of them know each other or are friends before becoming romantically involved. If a romantic relationship ends, it is not uncommon for lesbian identified women to remain friends or become friends again (Degges-White, 2012).

Harkless and Fowers (2005) also examined post breakup connectedness among lesbian identified women and other sexual orientations and found that lesbian identified women (in addition to gay identified men) reported higher levels of post-breakup connectedness. This seems to demonstrate potentially unique experiences of lesbian identified women when investigating the boundary between close friends and romantic partners. It highlights the need for further exploration among individuals of different sexual orientations. Specifically, investigation of same-sex and cross-sex friendships is necessary to gain more insight into how boundaries may differ among individuals in committed relationships.

Gay Identified Men and Friendships

Friendships can serve a particularly important role for gay identified men and perhaps this extends to other sexual minority groups as well. Gillespie, Frederick, Harari, and Grov (2015) suggested that gay identified men may seek out more friends than heterosexual identified men because it is necessary to have individuals in their lives who

affirm their sexual identity in order to offset the adverse effects of belonging to an oppressed group. However, it was hypothesized that as there is a shift toward increased acceptance of gay identified men and other sexual orientations, a greater reliance on friendships may not be as evident in future studies (Gillespie et al., 2015).

These same researchers (Gillespie et al., 2015) conducted a large study examining different types of friendships and friendship patterns among GLB (gay, lesbian, bisexual) identified men and women and heterosexual identified men and women. The three types of friendship explored were (1) instrumental, which refers to tangible help, (2) expressive, which refers to emotional expressiveness and intimate disclosure of information, and (3) companionate, which refers to sharing positive events, such as one's birthday. The researchers found that young, gay identified men showed no evidence of homophily (i.e., associating with same gender). However, other results outlined very small, almost nonexistent, differences across sexual orientations with regards to number of friends and overall satisfaction with friends (Gillespie et al., 2015). This finding contradicts prior research (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) outlining that friendships may serve a unique role for gay identified men (and other sexual minority groups). The researchers (Gillespie et al., 2015) suggested that the small, almost nonexistent, differences found across sexual orientations may be explained by increased acceptance of GLB individuals in U.S. society.

In a study examining personal communities and friendships, Wilkinson et al. (2012) recruited participants primarily via the internet, who identified as sexually active gay men. Results demonstrated that gay identified men may have more flexibility in their friendships (Wilkinson et al., 2012), suggesting a potential blending of sociability and

sexuality (Denizet-Lewis, 2004). Wilkinson et al. (2012) found that "66% of respondents reported developing friendships from casual sexual encounters" (p. 1170), highlighting the potential for intimacy, support, and care to exist in friendships of gay identified men. Furthermore, there may be nontraditional boundaries in which there is movement between friendships and sexual relationships (Nardi & Sherrod, 1996). Another important finding of this study (Wilkinson et al., 2012) was that gay identified men tended to befriend women for emotional and practical support. Over half of the participants identified that they could disclose "almost anything" to female friends (Wilkinson et al., 2012). However, these studies, along with others, have not specifically investigated what rules or boundaries are in place for gay identified men who are in committed, monogamous relationships. It is not known what type of friendships are considered acceptable within the context of a romantic relationship, or with whom.

Bisexual Identified Men and Women and Friendships

There is virtually no research up to this point that has examined same-sex and cross-sex friendships among individuals who identify as bisexual. Gillespie et al. (2015) hypothesized that bisexual identified individuals may have fewer friendships compared to those who identify as gay, lesbian, or heterosexual due to a term called "biphobia" (p. 2). The researchers explained that biphobia provides a "unique situation regarding friendships, given that many gay men, lesbians and heterosexual men and women regard the bisexual identity as an unstable one compared to more "legitimate" identities" (Gillespie et al., 2015, p. 2). Therefore, it is possible that there may be more stigma experienced by bisexual identified individuals in the context of friendships. This is an important area for researchers to examine because there may be implications related to

emotional infidelity for this group of individuals. Specifically, understanding what rules or boundaries are in place for bisexual-identified individuals who are in committed, monogamous relationships could contribute to this discussion. It may be that bisexual-identified men and women in committed, monogamous relationships have different rules or boundaries in close friendships.

Heterosexual Identified Men and Women and Friendships

Galupo (2009) conducted a study examining cross-orientation and cross-sex friendships among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual identified individuals. Results showed that heterosexual men and women tend to form friendships with individuals who are similar in sexual orientation whereas lesbian, gay, and bisexual identified individuals tend to form friendships with individuals from different sexual orientations. Furthermore, heterosexual men reported fewer cross-sex relationships than gay or bisexual identified men, although men in general in this study reported more cross-sex relationships as compared to women, regardless of their sexual orientation (Galupo, 2009). These findings may demonstrate that it is less acceptable for heterosexual identified individuals to have cross-sex relationships than it is for lesbian or gay identified individuals to have cross-sex relationships.

In a study discussed earlier by Gillespie et al. (2015) examining different types of friendships and friendship patterns among GLB identified men and women and heterosexual identified men and women, results demonstrated that heterosexual participants reported more same-gender friendships than cross-gender friendships. These findings were extended across all three types of friendships including instrumental, expressive, and companionate. (For a more detailed explanation of these friendship types,

refer to page 16). Gillespie et al. (2015) explained that there is an ongoing challenge present for heterosexual identified individuals in cross-gender friendships to manage sexual attraction. It may be that it is considered threatening to one's romantic partner for a heterosexual identified individual to have a cross-sex, close friendship. However, societal attitudes in the U.S. may also be an important factor to consider. There may be a societally-based assumption that heterosexual individuals in cross-sex friendships are sexually attracted to one another when that may not always be the case. Although relationship status was not a focus of either of these studies, the findings may have important implications for potential boundaries or rules that are in place for heterosexual identified individuals in committed, monogamous relationships.

Sexual Orientation and Jealousy

The preceding sections have outlined potential differences in how friendships are experienced across different sexual orientations. One area that has not yet been discussed is how friendships or extra-dyadic relationships are understood when individuals are in a committed, monogamous relationship. Specifically, how jealousy is experienced within the context of romantic relationships across various sexual orientations has received limited attention by researchers. In one study based in the Netherlands, Dijkstra et al. (2001) found that lesbian identified women were more distressed by their partner's sexual infidelity than gay men were. Alternatively, gay identified men were more distressed by their partner's emotional infidelity than lesbian identified women were. Furthermore, prior research has shown that gay identified men tend to have a lower jealous reaction to their partner's infidelity (Sheets & Wolfe, 2001). One explanation that has been

suggested is that gay identified men more often have open relationships, so extra-dyadic sexual relationships are more accepted (Dijkstra et al., 2001).

Dijkstra, Barelds, and Groothof (2013) presented infidelity scenarios to individuals who identify as heterosexual, gay, and lesbian to determine if there were differences present based on sexual orientation. Results demonstrated that there was more jealousy among heterosexual identified individuals as compared to gay and lesbian identified individuals when extra-dyadic sex took place, both online or offline. Additionally, lesbian identified women reported less jealousy than heterosexual identified women, which may be explained by how jealousy is experienced within relationships. In heterosexual identified women, jealousy may be related to relationship quality whereas in lesbian identified women, it may be not considered to determine relationship quality (Dijkstra, Barelds, & Groothof, 2013). Specifically, heterosexual identified women may experience more jealousy if the quality of their relationship is lower whereas lesbian identified women may experience jealousy that is unrelated to the quality of their relationship. Although these findings were limited to hypothetical scenarios, heterosexual identified individuals and heterosexual identified women specifically appear to experience more distress surrounding infidelity compared to other men and women of other sexual orientations. Therefore, exploring the factors involved in emotional infidelity with heterosexual identified women may be a logical place to begin this investigation. Furthermore, through semi-structured interviews, a deeper understanding of the participants' personal opinions and experiences can be taken into account instead of asking them to place themselves into situations that may or may not have realistically occurred in their own lives.

Evolutionary Theory and Sex Differences

Although there appear to be differences across sexual orientations regarding jealousy in the context of romantic relationships, there may also be differences evident across different sexes. Evolutionary theory has been discussed in the literature as a possible explanation of why there are sex differences regarding infidelity (Buss et al., 1992). This theory suggests that men become jealous of sexual infidelity because it can disrupt their paternity due to another male interfering with his partner. Alternatively, it is hypothesized that females develop jealousy when the level of commitment or emotional involvement from men is in jeopardy due to the interference of another woman. This does not mean that men and women are not distressed by both types of infidelity, but instead that depending on sex, the level of distress is heightened for either sexual or emotional infidelity (Buss et al., 1992). This finding was replicated by Buss et al. (1999) when participants were asked to respond to various scenarios about sexual and emotional infidelity. Seventy-six percent of men and 32% of women reported more distress regarding sexual infidelity as compared to emotional infidelity, displaying a clear discrepancy between the sexes.

In another component of this study, Buss et al. (1999) found that 65% of men and only 31% of women reported being more upset about pure sexual infidelity as compared to pure emotional infidelity. In the situation where both sexual and emotional infidelity occur, 33% of men and 21% of women reported more distress over sexual infidelity (Buss et al., 1999). These feelings of jealousy and distress experienced by the sexes are thought to be a type of solution that was used to resolve adaptive problems experienced throughout evolutionary history. Therefore, these differences are considered universal

across men and women and not limited to a particular culture or region of the world. This finding was confirmed through a series of studies conducted by Buss et al. (1999) who found that there were strong sex differences across participants in America, Korea, and Japan that can be explained by evolutionary theory (Buss et al., 1999).

Buss and Schmitt (1993) suggested in their research that men and women have evolved different sex strategies that have been carried down over several generations. They hypothesized that women who engaged in casual sex or a one night stand without any emotional involvement put themselves as risk for becoming pregnant without a male present to take on child-raising duties such as protecting the mother and child. That would be considered a great risk to take, especially in more historical times. Alternatively, men were able to reap more benefits from a casual sex encounter because there was minimal risk. As a result, it was believed that men are able to engage in sexual activity that lacks emotional involvement compared to women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In a study examining this hypothesis, Buss et al. (1999) found that both men and women reported that men would be more likely to have a sexual encounter without any type of emotional involvement. These findings highlight a consistent difference between men and women and how evolutionary theory can provide one perspective on why this difference exists. However, the definitions of emotional infidelity provided in the evolutionary literature make it difficult to further investigate what components make it more distressing for women in particular. In the studies mentioned above, the term "emotional involvement" was used within the scenarios, but no formal definition was provided, making it open to interpretation among participants. Additionally, it was a forced-choice method in which participants were asked to select either emotional or

sexual infidelity scenario as more distressing. It is necessary to begin exploring this area in a deeper manner to gain a better understanding of what emotional infidelity entails, especially for women.

Needs in Friendships/Relationships

Drigotas and Rusbuilt (1992) identified six needs that are commonly met in relationships, including sexual, intimacy, companionship, emotional involvement, security, and self-worth needs. If an individual is in a romantic relationship and one or more of these six needs are not being met, it is possible that there is a desire to try and have the need(s) met through others while still maintaining the romantic relationship. It does not necessarily mean that the relationship as a whole will end due to a particular need not being met (Drigotas & Rusbuilt, 1992). Therefore, depending on the unmet need, there may be an increased risk for infidelity to take place. Although sexual needs may be considered more of a clear boundary crossing for many, other needs such as emotional involvement, companionship, and intimacy appear to be less straight-forward and understood.

Particularly relevant to this study is the concept of emotional involvement. Emotional involvement was described by the researchers as "feeling emotionally attached to each other; feeling good when one's partner feels good; feeling bad when one's partner feels bad" (Drigotas & Rusbuilt, 1992, p. 67). This explanation is quite vague and is open to interpretation across individuals. At this point, we still do not know what emotional involvement actually looks like. Furthermore, we are unable to determine what, if anything, is considered to be emotional infidelity when someone seeks out emotional

involvement with a close friend. These are areas that the current literature cannot answer because there is not a clear definition of emotional infidelity among researchers.

Social Support in the Workplace

One specific setting where these boundaries between close friendships and emotional infidelity can become ambiguous is in the workplace. For individuals who work within an office or as part of a larger organization, there is a significant amount of interaction with coworkers and/or supervisors throughout the course of a work week. Over time, it becomes natural to build relationships with these individuals and get to know them on a more personal level. Most people do not form relationships at work for the sole purpose of completing their tasks, but because of other intrinsic rewards that come from friendships, including increased job satisfaction (Morrison, 2009). Additionally, social needs are commonly met in a work setting, especially with regards to social support. Social support in such a setting is considered to be a critical component of a positive environment. There are multiple sources at work that can provide social support including colleagues and supervisors (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011).

Prior research indicates that what makes relationships close and meaningful seems to vary depending on one's gender. Specifically, men tend to portray relationships as valuable when there are shared interests and activities that they engage in with another person. On the other hand, women tend to find more value in their relationships when they have the ability to express their feelings and emotions to another person, regardless of gender (Odden & Sias, 1997; Wood & Inman, 1993). Furthermore, women are more

likely to seek and give emotional as well as social support during stressful or unhappy times and these findings are extended to workplace relationships (Morrison, 2009).

In a society where individuals, both men and women, are frequently working alongside one another or within the same company, it raises the question of how relationships are developed and how boundaries are formed. Although workplace relationships are not the main focus of this study, this type of environment can provide insight into how emotional infidelity is separated from other relationships. Therefore, this study will include women that are currently established in their careers due to the workplace being a common source of social support and relationship formation, potentially with the opposite sex as well. This can serve as a starting point in understanding how these relationships are managed for individuals who are in committed relationships.

Technology

Another component related to the workplace and well beyond that setting is communication through technology means. Recent advancements in technology have altered the way in which we communicate and even work with others. Due to the nature of interactions that take place through technology, this is especially important to examine in the context of emotional infidelity. Emotional infidelity definitions, although broad and vague up to this point, have typically focused on behaviors such as "falling in love" or "a deep emotional connection". With that in mind, it seems plausible that these types of behaviors can occur without the need to meet face-to-face. Technology makes that possible, and especially convenient. For that reason, the discussion below highlights

advantages and disadvantages of technology followed by an exploration of internet infidelity and other relevant research relating technology to infidelity.

Advantages of Technology Use

Researchers have identified several advantages of technology use for those who are in committed relationships. Technology provides the opportunity for couples to stay connected throughout the day when they are physically separated. Whether it be through email, text, or a phone call over lunch, they are able to remain in communication which would not be possible without technology advancements (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014; Pettigrew, 2009).

The internet and other forms of technology have been known to connect people who have not previously met in person. For individuals who are looking for someone that shares similar interests, hobbies, and beliefs, the use of technology can be especially beneficial in that way. Similarly, for individuals who may struggle in social situations, technology makes it less intimidating to meet someone and get to know them without initially meeting face-to-face. There is emotional support that can come from communicating with someone through technology. This type of communication allows individuals to be more intimate and open (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014) because there is less pressure through a computer or cell phone, for example.

In addition to communicating throughout the day, there are other benefits to technology that can help with maintaining relationships. When there are conflicts that arise, being able to express yourself through words instead of face-to-face can relieve some of the pressure, making it easier to admit wrongdoings and apologize. Similarly, if one partner is upset and needs time, there is not an expected urgency to respond as there

might be in person. Partners can take time to gather their thoughts and appropriately address the situation (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014).

Relationship commitment can also be demonstrated through technology (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011). For example, if a partner is more public about their relationship through social media, it can show a strong sense of commitment. Through social media websites such as Facebook, you are able to publicly display photos as well as your relationship status, which can be comforting for some partners to have that information known to others (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014).

The advantages up to this point have dealt primarily with relationship maintenance. Technology use can also promote relationship enhancement, including as a way to improve a couple's sexual life. Through technology, couples can exchange photos, text sexually, engage in sexual acts over video messaging, or watch pornography together (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). There can also be conversations about sexual topics that may be more uncomfortable to have in person, such as personal concerns that one partner may have. Finally, technology can greatly enhance a relationship that is long-distance. Communication through technology can help the couple feel closer when they are physically distant (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). Without technology, long-distance couples would likely feel more disconnected from one another, both emotionally and physically.

There are definite advantages of technology use among those in romantic relationships especially. Whether technology is used for relationship development, maintenance, or enhancement, it is clear that many couples value this way of connecting and communicating. However, the advantages that have been discussed have the

assumption that technology is being used to maintain and further develop the primary relationship only. Although that may be the case for many individuals in a committed relationship, technology can also provide the opportunity for behaviors related to infidelity. Specifically, emotional infidelity is particularly relevant because communication through technology makes it more difficult to be detected, even in the absence of sexual infidelity. A discussion of this and other disadvantages of technology in relationships is considered next.

Disadvantages of Technology Use

There are several different ways in which technology use can interfere with one's romantic relationship. One of the most common concerns with technology is communication being lost in translation. When there are not voice to voice interactions taking place, it becomes easy to misunderstand what was intended through words (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). It can lead to unnecessary conflict because of one partner interpreting a message incorrectly.

Another common complaint of technology is distrust. Electronic devices provide a significant amount of privacy, making it easy to add passwords to access the device or delete exchanges with another person altogether (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). This can become problematic if one partner is hiding something from the other partner. Similarly, another component of distrust that can be present through technology is how individuals portray themselves (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). When communicating with someone via an electronic gadget, there can be deception in who is on the other end.

When there is constant interaction through the use of technology, there is a risk for physical intimacy to be impacted negatively. If partners are constantly engaging in

more intimate conversations with each other through technology means, that can take away from the experience face-to-face (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). In addition, there are concerns over the ease in which these conversations can occur with others outside of the primary relationship, especially through technology. Furthermore, if a couple is spending time together and there are constant distractions by electronic devices or one partner is attempting to multitask by using his/her cell phone and engaging in conversation, this causes severe interference in the intimate connection (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). This type of interaction refers to the concept of being "alone together" where the couple is physically in the same room, but there is not undivided attention being given to one another due to constant distractions from technology (Turkle, 2012).

By living in a world that is constantly interrupted by buzzing, ringing, and beeping from electronic devices, it raises concern about how dependent people have become on technology and how that dependency might impact relationships. When someone receives text messages or emails on a regular basis, it can bring about positive emotions and the sense that they are needed or wanted. Quickly responding to one message turns into two messages and so on. It becomes difficult to fully unplug without the temptation to look at electronic devices. At that point, even though all devices may be put away, it is possible that there is still a mental focus on how many messages, emails, texts, etc. there are waiting (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). This may impact one's romantic relationship because of an inability to be emotionally and physically present with that person. Meanwhile, this increased connection with electronic devices can lead to a decrease in face-to-face interactions that could provide those same emotional and intimate connections, especially in the context of a romantic relationship.

Although there are several disadvantages of technology that have just been discussed, there is one aspect that seems to be greatly overlooked in this area of research. The risk of infidelity may be much higher when it requires a click of a button instead of going through great efforts to meet someone in person. It takes very little effort to engage in emotionally-charged conversations while sitting in the comfort of your own home. There may be a sense of thrill or excitement through this method of communication that is less frequently experienced in a more long-term, committed relationship. Although it may seem harmless, it can become ambiguous when trying to determine when that line has been crossed on an emotional level especially. This highlights the need to further explore non-sexual emotional infidelity as a way to gain a better understanding of what those boundaries are.

Internet Infidelity

Internet infidelity is a new concept that has been receiving increased attention by researchers as the internet has become a common part of many people's lives. As more individuals are becoming plugged into the internet, there is often less of a focus on the primary relationship. One of the most important factors in the development of infidelity relates to less time being spent with the primary partner and more time being dedicated to another individual (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006). The internet may assist in this concern, especially with the ease in which individuals can communicate with others in a virtual world.

Defining Internet Infidelity

There is not a single definition used to describe internet infidelity at this point. Hertlein and Piercy (2008) define it 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). Although there is wide variation among researchers and the general public as to what constitutes internet infidelity, one consistent component that is present in such behaviors is secrecy. Secrecy can occur by not informing the primary partner about an extradyadic relationship or in other forms such as closing out of a conversation window when a partner walks by or deleting computer history (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Hertlein & Piercy, 2006; Schneider, 2000). This component of secrecy becomes even more of a focus through internet infidelity because of the nature of the communication taking place. There is the ability to permanently delete information within seconds, which adds to the complexity of this form of infidelity.

Characteristics of Internet Infidelity

Internet infidelity has often been considered to be separate from traditional forms of infidelity that take place face-to-face. Cooper (2002) has identified three aspects that help to distinguish internet infidelity that he termed "triple A". The first factor is accessibility which refers to how easily an individual can access the internet. For people who have more limited access, the likelihood of internet infidelity is much lower. The second factor is affordability and that relates to the cost of internet. Specifically, the cost of using the internet is relatively low and is seen to have many rewards, making it a worthwhile investment for many. The third and final factor is anonymity which relates to one's identity that is formed through the internet (Cooper, 2002). Because there is usually interaction through words on a screen, it is easy to establish a different identity online that does not match who a person is realistically. Therefore, a person can choose to be perceived in a more idealistic way without fear of being judged or rejected by who they

are communicating with on the other end (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006). These characteristics of infidelity provide insight into why the internet may be more attractive as a method of engaging in these behaviors.

Young et al. (2000) explain the ACE Model of Cybersex Addiction which was created and adapted from Cooper's (2002) triple A concept (Parker & Wampler, 2003). ACE stands for anonymity, convenience, and escape, which are three variables that are believed to lead to infidelity. Although the first two components have been discussed earlier, escape has not been emphasized up to this point. Escape refers to the mental or emotional "vacation" that an individual can take by engaging with others in the virtual world. This especially applies to those who are unsatisfied in their primary relationship and communication with a secondary partner can provide fulfillment in ways that the primary relationship does not (Young et al., 2000).

The models outlined above provide important information about what separates the internet from more traditional forms of infidelity and why it may be more attractive to some. They provide a broad understanding of the unique features of internet infidelity. However, they appear to be primarily focused on computer-based internet activity. Other forms of technology have not been explored in depth, such as access through one's cell phone, iPad, or other devices that provide additional ways to interact with others. Looking at the cell phone specifically, there are a variety of ways to communicate whether it be through downloaded applications (apps), texting, picture messaging, video chatting, or visiting websites. More research needs to be done to understand how other forms of technology are relevant to this discussion.

Types of Internet Infidelity

Similar to traditional infidelity, internet infidelity is characterized by different forms including sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity, and pornography infidelity (Whitty, 2003). For the purposes of this paper, only physical/sexual and emotional infidelity have been discussed up to this point, so pornography infidelity will not be discussed further because it is not the primary focus of this study.

In a study conducted by Whitty (2005) exploring online infidelity through hypothetical story stems, a majority of the participants viewed internet infidelity as having a large impact on the primary relationship. Parker and Wampler (2003) concluded that internet infidelity was perceived to be more emotional as compared to sexual, although there seems to be a presence of both. One major limitation of Parker and Wampler's (2003) study was that college undergraduates were studied and hypothetical scenarios provided. Additionally, it was unclear as to how emotional involvement was actually defined, so its meaning may have varied across participants and produce different responses. These studies highlight two important factors that are relevant for researchers. First, there is value in examining how technology plays a role in infidelity because it has the ability to impact individuals who are in romantic relationships. Secondly, there is a need for exploration of emotional infidelity specifically because it seems to be especially relevant when interactions do not take place in person, as is commonly the case when technology is involved.

Gender Differences and Internet Infidelity

Gender differences are not limited to acts of infidelity that take place face-to-face but are extended to the online world of infidelity as well. In a study by Whitty (2005),

women were more likely to mention emotional betrayal compared to men when discussing experiences in which internet (cyber) infidelity occurred. Groothof, Dijkstra, and Barelds (2009) took a closer look at sex differences in internet infidelity compared to offline infidelity discussed earlier. These researchers adapted scenarios from Buss et al. (1992; 1999) and found similar findings for online infidelity as for offline infidelity. Specifically, in the internet infidelity scenario where both sexual and emotional involvement are present, the sex difference was also evident. Eighty one percent of men and 52% of women found sexual internet infidelity to be more distressing than emotional infidelity. Interestingly, despite the significant differences in numbers between men and women, it is still noteworthy that about half of women endorsed that sexual infidelity was more distressing (Groothof, Dijkstra, & Barelds, 2009). In a follow-up study by the same researchers on an older population, the sex difference was less pronounced for both online and offline infidelity, leading the authors to hypothesize that older women (in 40's and 50's) may develop more masculine traits including assertiveness and self-confidence. Therefore, they may become more masculine in how they respond to jealousy, finding sexual infidelity to be more distressing (Groothof, Dijkstra, & Barelds, 2009). One limitation of their study is the use of a forced-choice method which has been previously discussed as a flaw in this area of research. Further examination is necessary, especially with regards to internet infidelity, an area that is just beginning to receive attention among researchers.

Infidelity and Sexting

The term "sexting" is relatively new and refers to the "sending and receiving of sexually explicit photos and/or text using cell phones with digital cameras" (Wysocki &

Childers, 2011, p. 220). Thus far, it appears there is only one study that specifically focuses on sexting in the context of infidelity. Wysocki & Childers (2011) recruited participants from a website called AshleyMadison.com, designed for married individuals seeking out someone for a secondary relationship or sexual encounter outside of the primary relationship. The website has over six million followers and the motto of the website is "Life is short…Have an affair" (p. 223). The results showed that over half of the participants have engaged in sexting as well as infidelity through the internet and even more admitted to traditional infidelity. Furthermore, participants were more interested in meeting secondary partners face-to-face instead of the internet only (Wysocki & Childers, 2011). This study is one of the first to expand to include other forms of technology. The higher prevalence rates of infidelity may be due to the fact that participants were recruited through a website specifically designed for marital infidelity. Wysocki and Childers (2011) focused primarily on sexual encounters, so there needs to be more attention placed on the emotional aspect of infidelity through cell phones, among other technology devices. That can guide researchers to a better understanding of what interactions are considered to be emotional and when it crosses over to sexual infidelity.

Current Study

Much of the research up to this point has focused on the categorization of infidelity into physical/sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity (Blow & Harnett, 2005b; Buss et al., 1992; Glass & Wright, 1985; Shackelford & Buss, 1996; Thompson, 1984) with little attention placed on defining and understanding what these terms mean. Although there has been some progress in the area of infidelity over the past several decades, there needs to be even more attention focused on emotional infidelity in

particular. Definitions related to emotional infidelity remain vague and inconsistent across research studies (Blow & Harnett, 2005a; Whitty & Quigley, 2008). Furthermore, we still do not know what emotional infidelity actually *is* to men and women, nor do we know the "rules" that separate close friendships from emotional infidelity. Taking one step back to investigate how to appropriately define emotional infidelity can begin to shed light on understanding infidelity as a whole.

There is some agreement among researchers (Moller & Vossler, 2014; Shackelford & Buss, 1996; Thompson, 1984) about different categories of infidelity, broadly separated as physical/sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity. Within these two categories, emotional infidelity definitions are especially vague and inconsistent across studies. For that reason, the current project will focus on non-sexual emotional infidelity only. Until there is an operationalized definition, the question remains as to how generalizable the findings in the current literature are. Additionally, when different definitions are used across studies, there is a concern with comparing across research to better understand this concept.

Another component that adds to the complexity of defining this term is the use of technology as a way to connect with others. Because the use of technology has increased so rapidly in such a short amount of time, researchers are beginning to explore how that might impact infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006; Whitty, 2003). Internet infidelity has been a concept receiving attention more recently, but the inclusion of other forms of technology has not yet been looked at. Additionally, research seems to support that emotional involvement is an important component of internet infidelity, yet a clear definition remains to be seen. This is important to investigate because technology

provides multiple ways of communication. In the context of emotional infidelity, communication may not be face-to-face, outlining the possible importance of technology.

The relevance of technology is extended to the workplace, as more companies are incorporating ways for individuals to communicate via technology with supervisors and colleagues (Diaz, Chiaburu, Zimmerman, & Bowell, 2012). Examples of communication in the workplace that may take place beyond face-to-face might include email, video chatting, phone calls, and text messaging. The workplace, along with technology, provides a way for individuals to connect with one another, even on a more personal level potentially. Social support is often seen as an added benefit in the work setting, especially due to the amount of time spent with fellow employees (Sias & Cahill, 1998). As a result, the boundary between being a coworker, a friend, or a romantic partner can become complicated between individuals in a company or organization.

The workplace is often a setting where both men and women frequently work together on projects or interact on a regular basis (McKinnish, 2004). Therefore, to begin understanding how emotional infidelity is defined among individuals in a monogamous, committed relationship, it seems appropriate to begin this qualitative investigation with heterosexual women who are currently established in their careers, as the workplace seems to provide the opportunity for relationship formation and blended boundaries within those relationships.

One way to explore what factors need to be in place in order for emotional infidelity to occur is a grounded theory qualitative research methodology. Through this qualitative method, data can emerge directly from participants' lived experiences to help form a working definition of emotional infidelity.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory (GT) is a qualitative approach that was developed by two sociologists in the 1960's, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. Glaser and Strauss suggested looking at research differently, by developing theories that are grounded in the data, which was quite different from the quantitative culture that dominated at the time (1967). Quantitative researchers, based in a positivistic philosophy, sought out one objective reality via structured approaches to scientific methodology. In contrast, Glaser and Strauss defended the GT qualitative approach, claiming that it would allow researchers to examine complex and abstract concepts and work toward theory development from a constructivist philosophy (Charmaz, 2014).

One critique of qualitative research is that there is a lack of structure in how studies are conducted. In one of their writings, more specific procedures and strategies for conducting GT were outlined by Glaser and Strauss, making it much more credible and accessible by other researchers to apply to their own studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). They argued for the co-occurrence of data collection and analysis, constructing codes and categories from the data instead of hypotheses, engaging in constant comparison, memo writing, advancing the development of a theory throughout the research process, sampling for the purposes of theory construction instead of representativeness, and becoming familiar with the literature upon completion of data analysis. By adopting these procedures of GT, the analytic power could be increased as well as control over the research process (Charmaz, 2014).

As time went on, Glaser and Strauss became divided on their views of the GT approach. Glaser continued to consider GT as a "method of discovery" including

categories that were “emergent from the data” while Strauss began moving toward more technical procedures that made GT a “method of verification” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 11). Glaser argued that this went against the original tenets of GT. Even though GT was originally introduced as an approach that went against the positivistic moment that was dominating at the time, it had taken on many of those characteristics by the 1990’s (Charmaz, 2014).

As the 1990’s progressed, GT continued to move away from positivism and more toward constructivism. Constructivism takes an inductive instead of a deductive approach and focuses on emergence from the data, which was how GT was originally introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Positivists emphasized conducting research that was able to be generalized and replicated as well as the ability to falsify theories. Researchers were considered passive observers that were collecting facts instead of imposing their own values and biases. From a constructivist standpoint, GT is not limited to seeking out one objective reality that is unbiased. Instead, there is flexibility and acknowledgement that realities are multi-faceted and unique across individuals based on their own experiences and perspectives. Additionally, the researcher brings their own experiences, biases, and opinions to the table and therefore are not ignored through a constructivist GT approach (Charmaz, 2014).

The current study will be conducted using a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) method outlined by Charmaz (2014). Through this approach, there is recognition of subjectivity and how the researcher may shape the research process. Instead of working to minimize the impact of the researcher, the researcher’s involvement will help to construct a reality through her own lens and interaction with the data. Through her book,

Charmaz (2014) provides a detailed yet flexible approach to conducting a study using CGT with the goal of having ongoing awareness of where the researcher is going and why throughout the research process. This is congruent with Glaser and Strauss (1967) who originally meant for GT to be adapted for a variety of topics and individuals. Charmaz (2014) notes that we as researchers are a part of the world we are studying, and the data we are collecting and analyzing. Therefore, the unique perspectives and experiences of both the researcher and participants are constructions of reality, not a discovery of any kind. In the method section, a more detailed outline of Charmaz' (2014) methodological approach to CGT is discussed, including data collection and analysis procedures.

Constructivist grounded theory has been chosen for this study in particular due to the lack of a theoretical framework to work from relating to emotional infidelity. There is limited research on this area as a whole and the definitional concerns are noteworthy across several decades of literature. Due to several methodological concerns across previous literature, there is a need to begin exploring on a deeper level what factors need to be in place for emotional infidelity to be present. Constructivist grounded theory provides the opportunity for the data to emerge directly from participants' lived experiences. In order for researchers to construct a working definition of emotional infidelity, it is necessary to begin with a small, relatively homogenous sample of participants who can share their unique perspectives and experiences regarding this important area of research. Through this in-depth exploration using GGT methodology, a theory can begin to be constructed and expanded upon as other samples are investigated beyond this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to investigate what monogamous, mid-career women in committed, cross-sex relationships (of one year or more) define as emotional infidelity through a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory approach. Examination of other groups, such as individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or male seems just as important to this area of research, and further study must be done in these areas as well. In addition, technology was also addressed, both in the workplace and beyond, in order to understand what influence it had on this topic. The workplace is one setting in which there is the opportunity for the development of relationships (Morrison, 2009), enhanced through communication via technology (Diaz et al., 2012), so it was used as a starting point for exploration.

Due to the lack of research in this area addressing how individuals define emotional infidelity, a grounded theory approach allowed for participants to respond more openly in a semi-structured interview format. This format assisted the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of what emotional infidelity meant to each person through their own perspective and experiences (Charmaz, 2014) Through ongoing interaction with the data and continual modifications being made based on what was being provided by participants, understanding what formed the definition of emotional infidelity and what factors are present in such an occurrence emerged. Furthermore, themes relating to safeguarding one's relationship and cultural and community influences that shape one's relational boundaries also emerged in this study. By extending relevant theories within the area of intimate relationships, a more succinct and substantive, yet preliminary, definition of emotional infidelity shaped by participants' own perspectives

was developed which can eventually be applied to research and practice in the future. Furthermore, this study provided a better understanding of how emotional infidelity may be differentiated from other types of relationships, such as a close friendship.

Therefore, the questions that were explored in this research study included 1. What factors need to be present in order for non-sexual emotional infidelity to take place? 2. How is a close friendship different from emotional infidelity for individuals who are in a committed relationship? 3. What, if any, role does technology play in factors associated with emotional infidelity? Exploration of these questions provided theoretical development on *what* emotional infidelity is and it is hoped that these preliminary findings can provide a greater understanding for *how* and *why* it takes place.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

The present study sought to understand what factors are involved for non-sexual emotional infidelity to occur utilizing a grounded theory methodology. Additionally, how technology influenced those factors was also examined. To explore this area, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants and focused on determining the boundaries of emotional infidelity and close friendships, what agreements exist in this area within romantic relationships, and how this is impacted by technology. The primary goal of this study was to construct a working definition of what non-sexual emotional infidelity is and how it is differentiated from other important relationships. By using a grounded theory methodology, data emerged directly from the participants' lived experiences and perspectives. The following sections discusses the methods of conducting this study including participants, measures, procedures, interviewing, and data analysis.

Participants

Individuals eligible for study inclusion identified as cisgender female, between 30-50 years of age, and were established in a professional career. For this study, professional career was defined as "inclusion of occupations concerned with the study, application, and/or administration of physical, mathematical, scientific, engineering, architectural, social, medical, legal statute, biological, behavioral, library, and/or religious

laws, principles, practices or theories…requiring educational preparation" (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Participants also needed to be in a committed relationship for one year or more. Focusing on mid-career women provided a more homogenous sample in following constructivist grounded theory (CGT) recommendations (Charmaz, 2014) and provided a starting point for beginning to understand the factors involved in non-sexual emotional infidelity.

Participants also needed to reside in the United States and have access to a phone to engage in an interview lasting one to two hours. Recruitment of participants was *not* limited to any one cultural group. It was determined that if group differences began to emerge based on culture, theoretical sampling would be used to further explore, refine, and develop the categories, per grounded theory guidelines (Charmaz, 2014). Though the research team remained open and cognizant of this possibility, theoretical sampling based on group cultural differences was not necessary in this study. Through the informed consent process, participants were asked to release a method of contact should there be any need for clarification or follow-up after the interview. All participants engaged in short follow-up interviews via phone to clarify emergent categories. They were also informed that they could discontinue participation at any point throughout the study and it would not negatively impact them in any way.

The research team also remained open to group differences surrounding personal experience with emotional infidelity. Although participants' experience with emotional infidelity was not explicitly asked about during interviews, a total of five women disclosed that they had experienced emotional infidelity in some capacity. Some identified that they had engaged in emotional infidelity themselves while others noted

that their partners had. After further analysis, the research team determined that the emerging definition and other contributing factors relating to emotional infidelity had little variation overall among participants. When there was variation, it did not appear to be related to group differences surrounding participants' personal experiences with emotional infidelity. Therefore, theoretical sampling based on these potential group differences was not necessary.

The number of participants included in this study was not decided at the outset. Instead, in following a CGT approach, data collection in the form of interviews continued until saturation had occurred which is when there is no additional information or patterns emerging (Glaser, 2001). In the current study, the research team determined that saturation occurred at the eighth interview.

To recruit participants, a flyer was created and after being granted approval from the Institutional Review Board, it was sent to colleagues with the intention of recruiting acquaintances that were once removed from the researcher. Included in the flyer were the details of the study and information regarding compensation, which was a $30 electronic gift card for each participant. Following the initial recruitment, a snowball technique was used. Additional participants were recruited through current participants' acquaintances and others they knew who met the inclusion criteria. Through this method, it was hoped that women representing different geographical areas and backgrounds were included. It is worth noting that there was one prospective participant who initially expressed interest, but did not follow up and as a result, was not included as part of this study.

Informed consent occurred via email following approval of the Institutional Review Board. Participants were required to provide an electronic signature on the consent form and attach it in an email to the researcher prior to beginning the study.

Measures

There was a demographic questionnaire created by the researcher that was administered via a secure Qualtrics link to each participant. The questionnaire asked about information regarding their sex, gender, sexual orientation, employment position, race, ethnicity, age, relationship status, length of relationship, and number of children (see Table 1). This information was also collected about their partner to the best of their ability. Geographical location was also collected on the demographic survey. Seven participants reported that they were located in the Midwest region and one participant was located in the Southeast region. Due to the nature of a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach, no other formal measures were used.

Research Team

For this study, there was one researcher, one peer debriefer, and one inquiry auditor. The researcher is the principal investigator (PI) and is a Counseling Psychology doctoral student. The researcher's duties included conducting and transcribing the interviews, coding, and analyzing the data. The inquiry auditor is an associate professor and co-training director in a Counseling Psychology department at a Midwestern university. Her duties were to provide ongoing feedback throughout the entire research process and especially during each step of data analysis. She has extensive research experience in qualitative methodology, relationships, and counseling. The peer debriefer is a male colleague of the researcher and holds a Master of Science degree in Counseling.

He has experience working with college students on a variety of relationship concerns. His duties included critically reviewing transcripts, coding, analyzing data, and consulting on the interview protocol and questions. There was ongoing discussion among the team members regarding varying opinions and perspectives as well as possible power differentials throughout the research process.

The researcher is a white, 27-year-old heterosexual, married, cisgender female. She has prior research and clinical experience related to romantic relationships. She is from Wisconsin where she has resided for most her life. The researcher has completed her Master of Arts degree in Counseling and Student Personnel Psychology and is currently enrolled as a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at a Midwestern university.

Procedure

The researcher began by recruiting participants through sending the flyer to colleagues, which included details of the study, requirements for participation, the researcher's contact information, and an indication that all participants would be compensated with a $30 electronic gift card via their email address they used to respond to the flyer (see Appendix A). After some participants were recruited through that method, a snowball technique was used to recruit the remainder of the participants. When a prospective participant expressed interest, an email was sent outlining the requirements for participation, what was to be expected, and a request for availability to schedule an interview. Also included in this email was an informed consent document, which explained all potential costs and benefits of participation and the ability for them to withdraw at any point (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to return the informed

consent document with their electronic signature as well as their availability. Once an interview time was scheduled, the researcher sent an email three days in advance asking the participant to confirm the scheduled time. Between the scheduling of the interview and when the interview was actually conducted, a demographics questionnaire (see Appendix C) Qualtrics link was sent out via email. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire about themselves and their partner in an honest manner.

All interviews were conducted by phone, audio-recorded following consent from the participant, and immediately transferred to the researcher's laptop, where they were encrypted and secured. After the interview was completed, the researcher emailed the electronic gift card to the participant within the same day. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and de-identified. The demographic questionnaire was stored in a separate password-protected folder on the researcher's laptop so there was not any connection between the interview material and the demographic information. To ensure accuracy, transcripts were emailed to the participants in a password protected document and feedback was welcomed. When it was deemed necessary by the research team to receive clarification or to follow-up on portions of the initial interview to clarify emerging categories and subcategories, the researcher contacted each participant to schedule a brief interview as previous permission was granted to do that during informed consent. The same process was followed for follow-up interview scheduling, audio recording, transcription, coding, and seeking feedback from participants. Participants were compensated with a $10 electronic gift card for the follow-up interview, which was sent on the same day of the second interview.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Relationship Status	Relationship Duration	Children	Field of Work	Education Level
1	33	F	Bisexual	White	Committed	3 years, 5 months	None	Finance	Bachelor's
2	41	F	Heterosexual	Latina	Married	21 years	2	Finance	Bachelor's
3	40	F	Heterosexual	White	Married	17 years	2	Marketing	Bachelor's
4	32	F	Heterosexual	Black	Married	6 years	2	Business	Master's
5	40	F	Heterosexual	White	Married	21 years, 3 months	3	Medical	Bachelor's
6	40	F	Heterosexual	White	Married	9 years	None	Legal	Doctorate
7	49	F	Heterosexual	White	Married	22 years, 7 months	2	Business	Bachelor's
8	39	F	Heterosexual	White	Committed	5 years, 8 months	None	Mental Health	Doctorate

Data Collection

In order to work toward the construction of a theory, the collection of rich data is imperative in a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach. Rich data signifies thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the participants. It provides a full picture that has depth and detail

surrounding a particular topic. Grounded theorists can collect several different kinds of data including interviews, field notes, historical records, or anything else that may be important to obtain (Charmaz, 2014). One of the greatest advantages to qualitative research is the ability to adapt and modify the data being collected as you go. Specific to CGT, there is the flexibility to follow up on the data you are receiving. While data collection is taking place, the researcher is also analyzing and coding it at the same time. Therefore, as the researcher is increasing knowledge through analysis, the data collection procedures can be refined and additional information can be collected from either new or prior participants.

When deciding on how to collect data, the research question(s) should inform the methods that are used, instead of the other way around (Charmaz, 2014). Ongoing assessment of how the emerging data is a fit with the original research question(s) may lead the researcher to alter the method of data collection. For example, if the research question is not being directly addressed, the researcher can either adjust the way in which data is being collected or go in another direction of interest based on what is emerging in the data. Additionally, there is variation among grounded theorists as to what is considered “forced data” and what is not. Glaser (1998) states that the use of interview guides, specific rules for memo writing, and other strategies or tools should not be used.

However, Charmaz (2014) argues that the use of an interview guide, for example, can help a novice interviewer to have guidance on the appropriate wording of open-ended questions surrounding a particular topic.

Method of Data Collection. Although there are multiple ways to collect data, one of the most common ways grounded theorists collect data is through semi-structured interviews with participants. This was the primary method of data collection for the present study. Charmaz (2014) refers to this method as "intensive interviewing" and it entails in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings with a goal of understanding the participants' unique perspectives and worldviews. One particularly exciting part about this method is that there was no way of knowing what might come up during an interview or the directions it might take (Charmaz, 2014). The interviews were guided by open-ended questions and there was flexibility in that further exploration took place immediately and also during a follow-up interview at a later date. Throughout this process, the participant was seen as the expert on the topic and the researcher was there to learn and listen (Charmaz, 2014). It is important to note that interviewing through a GT approach is not standardized and therefore, the structure of the interview may change as data collection progresses, which is unlike other qualitative methods (Hill et al., 2005).

The researcher outlined the areas to be covered in an interview guide as a helpful way to organize the general flow of the conversation that took place. Although the areas were expected to change, the interview guide provided a way of shaping questions appropriately as well as welcoming more detailed discussion. Bringing an interview guide to the interview is optional in CGT, especially depending on level of experience

with interviewing (Charmaz, 2014). For this study, the researcher followed a general guide during interviews, but remained open to where the interview went.

When actually conducting the interview, the researcher was aware of how sensitive topics were addressed given the nature of the topic. There was a focus on building rapport with the participant at the outset and keeping in mind that it was truly a privilege for someone to share their perspectives and experiences. Throughout the interview, the researcher clarified comments, revisited certain areas, requested more detail, validated thoughts and feelings, monitored the pace, and showed respect toward the participant (Charmaz, 2014). That placed a lot of control and responsibility in the hands of the researcher, although the experience was generally much more fluid. Once the interview began with an open-ended question from the researcher, the control began to shift toward the participant based on the direction they decided to go with their responses. The researcher tailored the questions to fit the participants' language style (Charmaz, 2014). Based on cultural backgrounds, gender differences, or a possible power differential, the way in which an interview progressed was impacted by components such as culture, gender, race, perceived power differentials, and many others (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher continued to have an awareness of these factors and worked to anticipate how they may impact rapport and especially the level of the participant's disclosure within the interview.

Pilot Interviews. Two pilot interviews were conducted with friends of the researcher who were willing to provide feedback on the interview process. The two volunteers met all inclusion criteria for the study and were currently working within finance and education fields. These pilot interviews were recorded and discussed with the

inquiry auditor who has extensive experience in conducting semi-structured interviews. This process revealed particular reactions, thoughts, and attitudes toward the participant group, which increased awareness of potential biases that are present. Interview questions were refined based on the pilot interviews and throughout the data collection process. It was also deemed appropriate to adjust the wording of questions to ensure respect toward all participants. During the pilot interviews, there was also the opportunity to become more familiar with the technology being used for audio recording and transferring data to an encrypted laptop file. This helped eliminate possible technological difficulties during actual interviews with participants.

Interview Protocol. The present study used a semi-structured interview format, which included the use of open-ended questions and the ability to modify the process along the way (Charmaz, 2014). Through this type of interviewing, the participant does a majority of the talking and the researcher seeks to understand his/her perspective and meaning through the experiences being shared (Charmaz, 2014).

The interview questions in this study began with a goal of understanding the boundaries of emotional infidelity. For example, initial questions focused on differentiating emotional infidelity from sexual infidelity and where that line is. On the opposite end, the researcher sought to understand how emotional infidelity differs from a friendship and the boundaries that may be in place there. Furthermore, exploration of how gender and sexual orientation may influence these boundaries were also discussed. Once there was an understanding of how emotional infidelity fits along this spectrum, the participant was asked to explore how it is different for her and her partner, if at all. Finally, there were questions asked surrounding how this concept intersects with her

career life and technology with regards to potential boundaries or agreements in place when interacting with others. Through this approach, the researcher intended to begin broadly by understanding where emotional infidelity fits into the picture and then moving into potential agreements or boundaries with regards to gender, sexual orientation, work environment, and through technology. Please see Appendix D for the semi-structured interview protocol, which continued to be modified based on pilot interviews, feedback from the inquiry auditor and peer reviewer, and what emerged through data collection.

Through data analysis, it was deemed necessary by the research team to receive clarification or to follow-up on portions of the initial interview to clarify emerging categories and subcategories. Questions that were asked during the follow-up interviews related to attraction, relationship satisfaction, number of children, cultural and community factors influencing relational boundaries, and reasons for establishing agreements within the primary relationship, among others. For a full list of questions that emerged during initial data analysis, please see Appendix E.

Transcription

Following completion of the interview, audio was transcribed by the researcher. Two interviews were transcribed by a secure transcription service, VerbalInk. Charmaz (2014) encourages transcription of the entire interview instead of certain parts so there is access to all of the data. If there was any identifying information revealed through the interviews, that information was left out of the transcription. There were not any names attached to the transcriptions; only a code as a way for the researcher to organize the data. After transcription was complete, a copy was emailed in a password protected document to the participant for review. Participants had the opportunity to provide feedback,

changes, elaboration, and clarification on the transcription. This procedure is known as member checking in qualitative research and a way to increase validity of the data (Patton & Cochran, 2002). None of the participants provided any changes or modifications to their transcripts, although all participants acknowledged the opportunity to provide feedback. As mentioned previously, all participants agreed to follow-up communication. When it was determined that a follow-up interview would be valuable in the data analysis process, a follow-up interview occurred to gain a better understanding of emergent categories. Because transcription took place in conjunction with data analysis, the inquiry auditor and peer reviewer looked them over to refine the interview protocol for future interviews.

Data Analysis

Initial Coding. The first step in the data analysis process is initial coding, which is when the researcher examined the data (i.e. interview transcriptions) and attempted to provide a code that was action-based. During this stage, the researcher wanted to stick as close to the data as possible. Because this was only the beginning, it was important to remain open to the possibilities of where the data may take the researcher. This process helped to identify where there were gaps and what additional information was needed as the researcher compared across various codes, either within the same transcript or across more than one. Additionally, the language used within these codes was modified at times to better explain the data later on. Overall, the initial codes were intended to be simple, comparable, accurately reflect the data in the form of actions as much as possible, and allow the researcher to move quickly (Charmaz, 2014). It was recommended that coding in this stage be done line by line which meant that every line of the transcript received a

code. This helped the researcher notice nuances or patterns in the data as well as new directions to pursue through data collection.

Constant Comparison. Constant comparison is an ongoing process in CGT data analysis. Regardless of what level of coding is taking place, there is constant, ongoing comparison within interviews and across interviews. Comparison began in the current study by looking at similarities and differences within a single interview. Then, comparison expanded to examine one participant at the beginning and that same participant in a follow-up interview to determine if any similarities or differences were evident. Finally, there was comparison across different participants (Charmaz, 2014). When this occurred alongside data collection, the information obtained through comparison allowed the researcher to refine the categories that were developing to begin shaping a theory.

When the researcher's ideas about a particular topic are not evident through the data, it is important not to ignore that and to have an awareness of what that might mean. It may be that those ideas have not surfaced yet in the interviews and may be something to further explore. It becomes problematic when the researcher believes that her ideas are truth and then imposes that on the data and misinterprets what is being said by the participants. When that occurs, the data cane become severely limited. In light of this, the researcher sought to avoid this issue by seeking to truly understand the worldview of the participant and remain aware of personal biases (Charmaz, 2014).

Focused Coding. The second step in the data analysis process involves focused coding, where the codes are used to organize and sort through large amounts of data. This is the point where the researcher decides which codes to focus on and others to set aside

for the time being. The primary task involves critically reviewing and analyzing the initial codes to determine which are most frequent and/or significant for the particular topic of interest. When making this decision, working toward the construction of a theory was kept in mind because this step helped to advance that process. During this step, constant comparison of the emergent data revealed new information that was not evident during the initial coding comparison. A more detailed discussion of constant comparison was discussed in a preceding section.

Axial Coding. The third step of data analysis involved the re-integration of the data after piecing it apart through the coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding forms a connection between subcategories with categories and helps the researcher to see how they are related. It provides an analytic frame to apply to the data, although some argue that this can severely limit what the researcher can learn and construct from the data. Through this structured process, questions regarding how, when, whom, and why can be answered (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Charmaz (2014) does not use a formal axial coding approach as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and instead has analytic procedures that are emergent instead of applied to the data. Therefore, the subcategories that she has constructed are based on how she has been able to make meaning of the data. To this day, there is a debate on whether or not applying more structured procedures to the data during the axial coding stage is more effective than Charmaz' approach. There are some critics who believe it is easy to become lost in the procedures and unable to focus on making sense of the data (Charmaz, 2014). For the purposes of the present study, the process outlined by Charmaz (2014) was used for this

portion of data analysis to link findings relating to emotional infidelity with existing theories of close relationships and love.

Memo-Writing. Memo-writing is a valuable method in the CGT analytic process. It provides an informal way for the researcher to write thoughts, questions, and experiences related to the data throughout the entire process of conducting a study (Charmaz, 2014). Memos may include reflection, new ideas, questions, or thoughts related to the coding process and what is emerging. Memo-writing records the journey taken toward the construction of a theory (Charmaz, 2014). There are not specific rules regarding memo-writing or what notes should look like. Charmaz (2014) recommends keeping all of the memos in one place in order to refer back to earlier writings. Similarly, Glaser (1978) believes memo writing should be spontaneous and free-flowing, so keeping a notebook easily accessible at all times can be helpful to record thoughts and ideas that come to mind unexpectedly. Several forms of memo writing occurred within the current study, including freewriting before and after interviews, notetaking during research meetings, and formal and informal writing during the transcription and coding processes. As the researcher progressed through data analysis, the memo-writing became increasingly theoretical and analytic because there was more depth and emergence with the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Theoretical Sampling, Saturation, and Sorting. Theoretical sampling is what sets CGT apart from other qualitative approaches. This is used to gain more information and refine the categories to construct a theory. It is not used as an initial sampling method but instead, after data has already emerged in a category. However, theoretical sampling can be used in the earlier stages of data collection as well as further along, although some

initial categories should be evident first (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling is "strategic, specific, and systematic" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 199). The overall goal is to further develop and strengthen a particular category and it can involve follow-up interviewing with existing participants, interviewing with new participants, seeking out a new setting, or any other approach that may be necessary. By engaging in theoretical sampling, there is more depth in answering the question and similarities as well as differences can be discovered and better understood (Charmaz, 2014). In the current study, follow-up interviewing with existing participants was used as a form of theoretical sampling due to identified gaps within the emerging data.

Saturation refers to the point at which data collection will end. It means that there are not "any new properties of a pattern emerging" (Glaser, 2001, p. 191). Instead of providing a particular number of participants that are necessary to terminate data collection, saturation is the preferred method in CGT. There is not a goal of large sample size, representativeness, or generalizability, but instead a goal of sampling adequacy (Bowen, 2008, p. 140). In the current study, it was determined by the research team that saturation was reached at the eighth interview. The following step is sorting which refers to comparing your categories to find how they are related and ordered. This step also involves creating diagrams of how you are organizing the categories for more of a visual representation (Charmaz, 2014).

Constructing Theory. The ultimate goal of CGT is the construction of a theory. Theories "offer accounts for *what* happens, *how* it ensues, and may aim to account for *why* it happened" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 228). There are multiple ideas about what a theory should entail and how it should be developed, especially with regards to different

philosophical approaches to research. From a constructivist standpoint, a theory is dependent on the researcher's point of view and cannot be separated (Charmaz, 2014). Through the CGT process, both the researcher and the participant are constructing meaning which comes together to shape a theory. Therefore, it is crucial that there be ongoing reflection and awareness of how the researcher's values and assumptions play role in this process. "The construction of a theory is not a mechanical process" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 245). Charmaz encourages analyzing actions as a way to detect sequences and relationships instead of seeking to categorize individual participants. Finally, keeping an open mind is also crucial because there may be theoretical possibilities that emerge through the data that were not initially considered (Charmaz, 2014). The current study resulted in the extension of two existing theories on close relationships that define and conceptualize the factors involved in the occurrence of emotional infidelity. It is hoped that this study laid the initial groundwork for further theoretical development within the area of emotional infidelity.

Auditing. Auditing is an important part of the data analysis process because it allows for other viewpoints to be taken into account aside from the primary researcher. There are two different levels of auditing including a peer debriefing and an inquiry auditing (Fassinger, 2005). Peer debriefing involves reviewing and checking data analysis conducted by the researcher including coding, categorizing, and theorizing of the data. This is done with a critical eye and this individual has deeper interactions with the raw data. On the other hand, the inquiry auditor evaluates the overall process that has taken place. This auditing process allows for ongoing monitoring of individual biases and

values as well as different perspectives throughout the research process (Fassinger, 2005).

Data analysis for the present study used a constructivist grounded theory approach outlined by Charmaz (2014) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Before initial coding began, the research team reviewed transcripts. Following that, the primary investigator applied codes to all of the transcriptions, line by line. Throughout this process of applying codes and also collecting new data through interviews, there was constant comparison taking place to determine how the codes were categorized based on the emerging data. As this was taking place, memos were written by the primary investigator to provide a written record of thoughts, feelings, questions, and insights that came up. The peer debriefer reviewed the codes and emergent categories that were being constructed by the primary investigator. Another task of the peer reviewer was to document questions, comments, or other observations. This was shared with the rest of the research team and discussed in person and via phone during meetings with the researcher. This entire process was monitored by the inquiry auditor, who provided feedback during regularly scheduled meetings. Memos were created by the primary investigator following each meeting that took place with another member of the research team. Any areas of difference among members of the research team regarding coding were verbally discussed to determine the best way to proceed. As data analysis progressed, there was continual work toward refining and improving the categories, so construction of a theory could begin to take form. Once saturation had taken place, there was ongoing discussion among the research team and a second literature review was conducted following the completion of data

analysis. This helped shape and make sense of what had emerged through the data, leading to the extension of two existing theories on love and close relationships.

Use of Self-Reflection

The researcher has an active role throughout this process and as a result, may have a large impact on how the data is shaped. Therefore, it is encouraged that there be ongoing self-reflection and awareness of biases, values, and assumptions. Charmaz (2014) encourages the use of a journal as a way to avoid placing your own experiences on the data and interpreting it based on your narrow perspective. Without reflection throughout this process, there is little flexibility and openness in what could emerge from the data. Additionally, through memo-journaling, which is separate from the journaling mentioned above, this allows the researcher to have a free-flowing space to write about ideas and questions that come up through the data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). By engaging in these practices and committing to it on a regular basis, there is less risk that assumptions and biases will go unnoticed.

The researcher committed to engaging in reflective journaling and memo-journaling on a weekly basis throughout the entire research process. The researcher was continually aware of her bias in how she views technology, among others. In regards to technology, she is certainly able to see the benefits of it, especially with regards to long-distance relationships and maintaining communication with romantic partners throughout the day. However, she believes that it has negatively contributed to how individuals interact and communicate. Along those same lines, she thinks it has especially impacted romantic relationships and provides the opportunity to develop hidden relationships. Therefore, the researcher worked to be especially aware of how her more negative view

of technology may impact what emerged through the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Including the perspectives of the research team, who all held different views about technology, allowed the researcher to remain open to other ideas regarding how technology was considered within the context of emotional infidelity. From a value standpoint, the researcher was aware at the outset of how she viewed emotional infidelity in the context of a committed relationship. She believes it is not congruent with her values and that it can be just as detrimental as physical/sexual infidelity. Although that provides a rationale for studying emotional infidelity, the researcher remained open to other perspectives that emerged, including those that went against her views in this area. Through ongoing journaling, self-reflection, and openness with the research team, biases were brought to the surface and discussed to ensure they were not being forced onto data collection or analysis at any point. Through ongoing awareness, the researcher allowed herself to move with the data, even in unexpected directions. This was an exciting journey for everyone involved and the intended goal of ultimately gaining a better understanding of what factors are involved in non-sexual emotional infidelity and extending theoretical conceptualization of this concept, although preliminary at this point, was achieved.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter provides an overview of the results including emergent data from transcribed interviews. The purpose of this qualitative analysis was to gain a better understanding, from the perspective of adult professional women, of how emotional infidelity is defined, how it is differentiated from other relationships such as a close friendship, and whether technology plays a role in this topic. Eight partnered, self-identified women, between the ages of 30 and 50, who are established in their careers were interviewed.

Throughout this section, the term "partner" will be used to refer to the participants' significant other. Some participants reported being in a marriage while others reported being in dating relationships. All participants reported being in a romantic, committed relationship with an identified male for one year or more. In addition, the term "outside other" will refer to an extra-dyadic individual of romantic interest outside of the current relationship. The term "primary relationship" will be used to refer to the participant and her current romantic partner. To honor participant confidentiality, all identifying information has been altered or removed and participants will be referenced by numbers (e.g. Participant 3). Finally, an ellipsis (i.e. series of three dots) will be used within participant quotes to indicate that some portion has been removed, such as word repetitions, but has not altered the meaning or value of the statement.

Four main categories emerged from the data and several subcategories. The following sections discuss the findings in more detail. Using direct quotes is strongly encouraged in grounded theory methodology to capture lived experiences, perspectives, and values of participants (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, inclusion of participant quotes is included below in italics to define and provide context to the emergent categories and subcategories. Although the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.) provides guidance on how to appropriately format block quotations, there are no such guidelines provided specifically for presentation of verbatim quotes through qualitative methodology (APA, 2009). Corden and Sainsbury (2006) presented findings on reporting qualitive social research, which will be used as an additional guide when providing participants' direct quotations within this section.

The four main categories that developed through data analysis were (1) defining emotional infidelity (2) how emotional infidelity occurs (3) relationship safeguarding, and (4) factors influencing relationship boundaries. In the first category of defining emotional infidelity, subcategories include feelings toward outside other, acting on an attraction toward outside other, putting time into outside other, keeping information from primary partner, putting trust into outside other, individual time with outside other, and vagueness of term. In the second category of how emotional infidelity occurs, subcategories include emotional needs met by outside other, shared interests with outside other, one-sided awareness, partner's lack of familiarity of outside other, communication via technology, and importance of perception. The third category of relationship safeguarding includes subcategories of trust within primary relationship, primary relationship as priority, sharing information with partner, boundaries within friendships,

boundaries at work, and boundaries with technology. Finally, the fourth category of factors influencing relationship boundaries includes subcategories of modeling from important others, spiritual affiliation as a guide, and childhood upbringing. For an outline of the categories and subcategories, please refer to Table 2.

The final chapter outlines the axial coding process where categories and subcategories are further analyzed to form a theoretical basis that integrates participant experiences and relevant literature within this area.

Table 2. Main Categories and Subcategories.

Category	Subcategory
1. Defining Emotional Infidelity	1.1 Feelings toward outside other
	1.2 Putting time into outside other
	1.3 Confiding in outside other
	1.4 Acting on attraction
	1.5 Keeping information from partner
	1.6 One-on-one
	1.7 Vagueness of term
2. How Emotional Infidelity Occurs	2.1 Emotional needs met by outside other
	2.2 Shared interests with outside other
	2.3 One-sided awareness
	2.4 Partner less familiar with outside other
	2.5 Importance of perception
	2.6 Communication via technology
3. Relationship Safeguarding	3.1 Trust within primary relationship
	3.2 Primary relationship as priority
	3.3 Sharing information with partner
	3.4 Boundaries within friendships
	3.5 Boundaries at work
	3.6 Boundaries with technology
4. Factors Influencing Relationship Boundaries	4.1 Modeling from important others
	4.2 Childhood upbringing
	4.3 Spiritual affiliation as guide

Main Category 1: Defining Emotional Infidelity

The first main category of defining emotional infidelity explores how participants defined emotional infidelity based on their own perspectives and experiences. Participants also discussed how physical infidelity differed from emotional infidelity to further clarify the definition of this term. Within this main category, subcategories include vagueness of term, feelings toward outside other, acting on an attraction toward outside other, putting time into outside other, confiding in outside other, keeping information from partner, and individual time with outside other. By and large, for the participants in this study, the outside other was a cross-sex individual that they are potentially romantically attracted to.

1.1 Feelings Toward Outside Other

Nearly all participants discussed the importance of having *"feelings"* toward an outside other as a factor when asked how they would define emotional infidelity. Participants were queried further during the interview and elaborated on the types of feelings they were referring to. Identified feelings toward an outside other included attachment, romance, and intimacy. Participants expressed difficulty in finding the right words to define various emotions that were identified. Some noted that it is a *"gut feeling"* or *"you just know".* Overall, participants seemed to describe a (oftentimes) romantic connection or establishment of a *"non-platonic relationship"* with an outside other that is *"emotionally intimate"* due to the nature of the interactions, personal disclosures, and depth of feelings that are occurring. For example, Participant 4 discussed the feeling of attachment:

I would say it's an attachment maybe. Because like, with the physical, there's not necessarily an attachment. You can walk away and not even think about that person anymore. But with emotional infidelity, it's like you start thinking about that person. Like, you have some type of attachment to them with emotional infidelity.

Participant 3 and 6 highlighted romantic feelings by noting that emotional infidelity entails *"desiring or looking to someone in a romantic way".* The feeling of intimacy was discussed by Participant 5 when sharing her definition of emotional infidelity as *"developing an emotional type intimacy, a trust-based relationship, with someone."*

Three participants discussed the idea of having feelings that produced a physical reaction when defining emotional infidelity, but were not necessarily acted on in a physical manner. The experience of emotions without physical contact seemed to be a defining factor when differentiating emotional infidelity from other forms of infidelity. For example, Participant 2 shared *"whereas the other way it's … more towards how I feel and how that person makes me feel physically. But not necessarily leading to any physical stuff, just the emotions of that."*

Six participants identified feelings that may be experienced in a physical manner, such as excitement and desire toward an outside other, as important in defining emotional infidelity. Participant 5 discussed the similarity between the physical feeling of excitement within an emotional infidelity realm and dating by putting it into these words:

Yeah, like I think about when you're dating, right, and you get that fluttery feeling like 'I can't wait to be there or think about this or be with that person'. Just that excitement to be around that person.

Participant 8 shared a personal experience of feeling excited about a coworker and compared it to having a crush as a young child:

I can't lie, I look forward to seeing him at work or you know, it feels like a stupid school girl, you know like when you have a crush on somebody and you see them and you're like 'Oh' and you get excited.

1.2 Putting Time into Outside Other

When participants were asked an open-ended question about what emotional infidelity means to them, a factor of putting more time into something else outside of the primary relationship emerged across seven of the eight interviews. Participants shared that it was a *"red flag"* and *"asking for trouble"* if it was determined that a person was putting more time into an outside other than a romantic partner. The way in which the time was spent did not necessarily need to be in the physical presence of an outside other. As discussed above, it can involve time spent having thoughts of another person, being reminded of something that person likes, or engaging with them via technology. Participant 6 reflected on a personal experience with emotional infidelity where time with an outside other was an important factor:

As my first marriage started to disintegrate and I was spending more time, both in work and after work, with my current husband, you know, then that tide kind of started to shift. Then, the romantic feelings, the sexual attraction, more of a

deeper emotional attraction had the chance to develop because I was spending way more time with him than my first husband.

She further elaborated on the time component when discussing how she knows the emotional infidelity has been crossed:

Yeah, and you're just spending, you know, they're in your thoughts all the time. You see something in a store and you think 'oh, this person might like that or enjoy that' as opposed to your primary relationship partner - having that person and what they like come to mind.

Alternatively, three participants shared about the possibility of spending time with an outside other face-to face instead of being limited to mental engagement. Participant 7 highlighted this in the context of her work setting:

I guess if you're finding ways to spend more time with the person. I come to work relationships … because that's primarily when I would be around more people on a regular basis. I think if you're seeking out ways to spend more time around that person, that would be a red flag. … If I was spending inappropriate amounts of time with the guys I work with or looking for ways to see them outside of work, then I think that would be a line that's been crossed.

As the initial interviews progressed, three participants explored the idea of spending time with another person in a non-romantic way, such as with a close friend, as a defining factor in emotional infidelity. Therefore, spending more time with another person that is of romantic interest is not a requirement for a line to be crossed. Participant 3 reflected on people in her own life and discussed her realization of how spending a

significant amount of time with a friend in a non-romantic way falls under the definition of emotional infidelity:

> *So, they spend a lot of time talking, being with their other [platonic] girlfriends, but are they romantically attracted? No. Even though they may think about their other friends and spend a lot of time with their other friends, they're not romantically pursuing them. [Pause] Oh, my gosh. Again, here's another thing I hadn't even thought about. Because I had said I feel bad for their husbands because … it's a whole other side of things that I haven't even thought about. Infidelity, it doesn't have to mean romantically. I think sometimes people can be - I think it's unfair they spend so much time with their [platonic] girlfriends and don't give that attention to their spouse.*

Two participants highlighted an exception of spending time with a coworker, which is considered a "forced relationship". Due to the nature of that relationship, this was not considered to be crossing a boundary into emotional infidelity. Instead, as one participant explained it: *"it's what you are choosing to do versus what is required of your job".* Therefore, intentionally spending time on an outside other based on a personal choice is differentiated from time that is required to be spent within a work setting to earn an income.

1.2a Putting Time into Something Else. Another theme that emerged was in relation to time being spent on something else, where it was not necessarily a specific outside other. Although most participants discussed time being spent on a single person more the primary partner as an important factor, there were also possible concerns about time being spent using technology. The main factor in this instance was that more time

was being voluntarily spent on something else to a greater degree than the primary relationship, even if there was minimal threat about romantically connecting with an outside other. This included virtual interactions with others, such as text messaging and social media, in addition to those that do not involve much interactions with others, such as browsing the internet. Participant 4 shared her perception of her partner's concerns over social media usage:

> *... I would say for him, I think he gets a little concerned about the amount of time I might spend scrolling on Instagram or something like that, but that's probably the only difference. ... Yeah, and I think it's less of him being concerned about any infidelity and more that I'm not spending time with him.*

Participant 1 reflected on the possibility of technology usage taking away attention from her primary relationship as a factor in defining emotional infidelity:

> *Committing infidelity is such a loaded phrase, but is Pokémon Go and my relationship with my friend in New York or my mismanage[ment] of those things causing my partner to consider me committing emotional infidelity because of my inattention to his needs or inattention to the time that he believes we should be spending together? Or, does he believe that when I'm with him and possibly he's in the same room and I'm doing these things that I'm not really present with him?*

1.3 Confiding in Outside Other

When discussing how participants would define emotional infidelity, confiding in an outside other emerged as an important factor. Five participants identified that placing trust into or confiding in an outside other about personal information was considered crossing a boundary into emotional infidelity. Participant 6 shared about her personal

experience with infidelity and confiding in an outside other: *"... when I caught my first husband the second time, I really ended up going to my current husband and ... he was my sounding board and my biggest confidant"*. She noted that a line of emotional infidelity would be crossed when *"... something really great or really bad happened and they're the first person you want to call"* instead of a primary partner.

Additionally, going to another individual about personal details of the primary relationship was particularly concerning among participants and considered a defining factor in emotional infidelity. This included sharing about conflict, sexual details, or personal struggles occurring for a partner within the relationship. A distinction was made between going to a close friend or family member for guidance or advice versus disclosing information that was expected to remain within the primary relationship. For example, Participant 4 shared about the different intentions behind confiding in an outside other:

> *So, if they're going to somebody else to ask for advice or maybe to see and gauge if they are in line, that's one thing, but if they are just going to talk about it just to talk about it, then that's when I would consider it emotional infidelity. I would even say with me and my husband, we don't really have an issue with each other going to get, like going to talk to our parents or a friend about issues, but there are certain things that we say we aren't going to talk about with those people. So, as long as we don't cross the line of that set of things that we said we would only keep with each other, then I think it would be okay.*

Participant 8 shared a personal example of her partner confiding in an outside other about personal details of the primary relationship:

So then ultimately, he did end up saying 'I was talking to her about our relationship and you know, how we're having a hard time right now and we're not really happy and whether or not to stay in the relationship' and I was very upset that he had talked to this friend, a woman, about our personal relationship.

She went on to discuss the reason that her partner confiding in an outside other felt like a *"betrayal"* within their relationship:

Well, yeah, it felt like a betrayal. Like, you're talking about our personal relationship and our sexual relationship or whatever it is with this woman that I don't even know. Even if I knew her, it wouldn't matter. Those are our intimate, personal details and to me, that shows you're having some type of emotional connection to her.

1.4 Acting on Attraction

During the initial interviews, a subcategory began emerging relating to an attraction being differentiated from emotional infidelity. When follow-up interviews were conducted, this was an area of further exploration to gain a better understanding of participants' perspectives on where the line existed, if at all, between an attraction and emotional infidelity. All participants discussed attraction being a universal human experience and one that *"you can't control".* Similarly, participants voiced that having an attraction to someone was *"not a big deal"* and did not fall within the definition of emotional infidelity. Instead, all participants highlighted the critical component of acting on an attraction in a non-physical manner as a factor in emotional infidelity. Examples of action involved mental preoccupation, such as *"imagining the two of you together in some capacity"* (Participant 1) or *"deciding in your head to pursue them romantically"*

(Participant 3) where there is a lack of physical interaction occurring. Participant 3 outlined the differentiation between an attraction and emotional infidelity that was echoed by all other participants:

> *Well, I think an attraction is something that you really can't control and so you could be attracted to someone but you don't have to act on it. Emotional infidelity is something that you're acting on.*

Participant 1 noted that a crush is more closely related to emotional infidelity than an attraction. Like other participants who referenced an attraction specifically, she also highlighted the importance of *"mentally getting there"* as an example of acting on a crush in a non-physical manner.

1.5 Keeping Information from Partner

Participants were asked how they would know a line had been crossed into emotional infidelity to gain a better understanding of how they define this concept. Nearly all participants identified a boundary crossing occurring if there was information being kept from a primary partner. This included intentionally withholding and hiding information or deceiving and lying to a partner about some sort of interaction with an outside other. Two participants reflected on the idea of withholding information and *"not feeling right"* about doing so. Participant 6 shared a personal example that involved keeping information from her partner as a point of concern about a boundary crossing:

> *I think when I knew we crossed the line is when we started lying to our spouses about why we were staying late. Because it's one thing like we're working on a project or a case together and we have to get something done for next week. Like yes, we have to stay late, we have to order food, we will be home at midnight, just*

deal. But, when we were … calling our spouses like 'oh we'll be home, I have to work late' but we're actually just going to a bar around the corner. Or even, maybe we legit did have some work to do, but we were making it out to be more than it was as an excuse to stay out later and then having to answer a lot of questions when we got home. … Because if it wasn't a big deal that we were going to go get a beer after work, why wouldn't I just say that to my first husband?

Participant 8 discussed a personal example of withholding information from her partner about an interaction with an outside other and reflected on how she might feel if her partner did the same:

I actually don't feel right and nothing happened, but I didn't tell my partner. I don't feel right about it. I haven't told my partner and probably will not tell him. But, if I knew that my partner even went to lunch with a woman at work that he was attracted to, I would be pissed. So obviously, me not telling him means that there's a sense to me that it's not right and it was after he had already questioned me because he was like, 'Who's this guy that's always commenting or liking your posts?' I'm like 'oh he's just a coworker, it's nothing'.

1.6 One-on-One

Three participants considered emotional infidelity to be *"focused on one person"* and occurring by spending *"individual time"* with an outside other. Within this subcategory, there was less focus on the amount of time being spent, which was discussed earlier in a separate subcategory. Instead, participants emphasized the more private, isolated interactions occurring outside of the primary relationship. Interacting within a group setting was considered less concerning and not crossing a boundary into

emotional infidelity. Participant 5 discussed this difference within the context of her own primary relationship and close friendships:

> *I think I define it, as far as what's the boundary, by not spending individual time with just that person. So, we spend time in groups but again, a boundary is just not seeking individual time with a specific person.*

1.7 Vagueness of Term

Many participants reported difficulty when asked to define what emotional infidelity meant to them and reiterated this throughout the course of the interview. Specifically, five participants noted that compared to defining the term physical infidelity, emotional infidelity was more vague, abstract, or difficult to put into words. For example, Participant 2 shared:

> *That is actually a lot harder to define because there's really no act, you know, whereas you have sex, yes, there you go. But, if you're emotionally connected to someone, it's hard to tell, well, that was infidelity because I'm connected to this person. Like, that is definitely a harder thing to define.*

Participant 1 also shared about the difficulty in defining this concept: *"I think it's probably more of a gray area. Like you can have sex or not, like that's not very gray"*.

Main Category 2: How Emotional Infidelity Occurs

The second main category investigates what factors may be present that contribute to the occurrence of emotional infidelity. Based on their own perspectives and personal experiences, participants did not identify a linear process of how emotional infidelity occurs. Participants were not explicitly asked how emotional infidelity occurs. Instead, the factors outlining how emotional infidelity might occur emerged through

open-ended questions about defining emotional infidelity and understanding the boundaries. Within this second main category, subcategories include emotional needs met by outside other, shared interests with outside other, one-sided awareness, partner being less familiar with outside other, importance of perception, and communication via technology.

2.1 Emotional Needs Met by Outside Other

All participants reported that having emotional needs met by an outside other is an important factor when understanding how emotional infidelity occurs. Emotional needs that might be fulfilled elsewhere include feeling *"validated, supported, and valued"* as well as *"being complimented, loved, and comforted".* The desire to have these emotional needs fulfilled through an outside other relates to *"a gap"* or *"a void"* within the primary relationship. Participant 7 differentiated emotional infidelity from a close friendship and described it in these words: "*I feel like emotional infidelity starts with something that's missing in your primary relationship. Whereas with friends, I'm not searching for something to fill a hole that's a gap in my primary relationship".* Although Participant 7 gets at this general idea of something missing within the primary relationship, Participant 6 discusses the specific types of needs not being met and how one can differentiate the needs being met in a friendship from the needs being met through emotional infidelity:

> *I don't spend a lot of time outside of their presence thinking about them, but when I'm with them, I enjoy their company, they're supportive, I support them, but I think it's just when I'm not with them, am I wanting to be with them? Am I wanting to sit close to them and hold hands and hug and snuggle and kiss and makeout*

and have sex and that whole thing? And I don't fantasize about what our life would be like if we were a couple. And I think with an emotional affair, all those things are true.

Participant 6 shared about the importance of "basic needs" being met as a possible reason for engaging in emotional infidelity:

... I think an emotional affair - you're missing something. You're not getting something in your primary relationship that you need, ... but you really need it. You need someone to think you're cool and want to spend time with you and think you're a valuable person. If you're not getting that in your primary relationship, and it's not right necessarily from a moral perspective by any means, but it's still a very basic need for people. So, if you aren't careful, it can happen pretty easily I think.

Participant 8 discussed an emotional need that was being fulfilled by a coworker because of a potential gap within her primary relationship:

Yeah, and being a female, it's not like I need to be showered with compliments all the time, but it would be nice to hear every once in a while. So, I haven't heard any compliments or gotten any validation from him in forever and practically through our whole relationship. Then, ... here's this guy liking my pictures and kind of making a compliment that's not outward, not super obvious like 'oh, you're hot or whatever', but basically implying you still look good or whatever. ... That may be one way that I'm trying to get a need for validation fulfilled. I post a picture of myself and he likes it. Well, you know, that makes me feel good whereas my partner doesn't even pay attention.

Alternatively, Participant 8 reflected on another perspective of not being able to meet her partner's needs:

> *There's something that I'm not providing. Like, there's a lack in our relationship or he's not getting his needs met, so he's seeking this outside woman to talk to. So, I felt betrayed and then also kind of like, I don't know how to describe it, but inadequate. Like, I must be doing something wrong or I'm not good enough for him or he needs more and I can't provide. You know, basically kind of leaving me to feel like I was inadequate I guess and not meeting his needs.*

2.2 Shared Interests with Outside Other

Several participants shared about having more in common with an outside other as a risk for the occurrence of emotional infidelity. Specifically, when there was a lack of shared interests within the primary relationship that created room for the possibility to connect with an outside other beyond what might be considered within the boundaries of a friendship. This is particularly evident in the work setting where there is a stronger likelihood for shared interests simply due to working within the same field or industry. Participant 6 discussed her personal experience of having more shared interests with a coworker at the time, who is now her primary partner:

> *My ex-husband and I had absolutely nothing in common. We shared no friends, well, we didn't share a lot of friends, we didn't really care to spend a lot of time together. However, my current husband and I have a ton in common. We're very much kindred spirits in things we enjoy in terms of what we do in our free time, things we read, tv shows, that kinda stuff. We genuinely just enjoy being in each other's company and that was true – we were just regular, normal, plain-old*

friends at work before any of this ever happened. We just went out for lunch and we'd talk about football and we would say 'oh did you see this movie'. We work in the exact same industry. We used to work together. We still have the same job, we just work for different companies now.

Similarly, Participant 8 reflected on a personal example of how shared interests with a coworker progressed into developing an attraction:

In the beginning when I first started working with him [coworker], I didn't think anything of it. I didn't find him physically attractive, so it was like whatever. After we worked together for a while, we chatted quite a bit and obviously, we have quite a bit in common because we're in the same field of work. Then, I started kind of becoming more - I have become attracted to him - definitely on an emotional level because we have a lot in common and we have a lot to talk about. He's really smart and really interesting and he has different interests than my partner and they match my interests more. So, that's kind of - I mean I'm not going to lie, I'm attracted to him.

Alternatively, Participant 8 also discussed the possibility of having shared interests within the context of work with less risk for the occurrence of emotional infidelity:

So, say there's some woman at work that my boyfriend is - there's no attraction, similar to me with a guy friend, and they have some kind of connection over something they have in common. I wouldn't consider that infidelity, that's just human beings having connections. Like I have connections with coworkers, with

male coworkers, because of shared experiences, but it doesn't mean that anything would ever happen or that I'm attracted to them or want something to happen.

2.3 One-sided Awareness

Four participants discussed how there is a possibility for emotional infidelity to be *"completely one-sided".* Unlike other forms of infidelity that often involves an in-person interaction, emotional infidelity can occur when one individual is acting on feelings *"without those feelings being mutual"* or are perhaps misinterpreted. Participant 3 explained it in these words: "…*Well, emotional infidelity. I think that could be completely one-sided. The other person may not know that the other person's thinking and working their day around that other person. The other person may not have any idea.*

Participant 2 reflected on a personal experience within a work setting where the intentions were not mutually understood:

But, I've had that in the past … in my previous work, I actually had a gentleman who I thought we were just friends that had approached me and said, "Hey, would you like to take this further?" I'm like, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "Well, we could be completely discrete." I was like, "No". So, it could be where one person doesn't even know that the other person feels like that.

Participant 8 shared an example of how she may be misinterpreting her coworker's intentions:

You know, I kind of minimized it because technically, there's nothing going on and I don't even know what the guy is thinking. He's probably thinking nothing, so I didn't want to be like 'oh, it's this guy that I kind of am attracted to', you know?

So, I kind of minimized it and downplayed it like 'oh, it's just a coworker and we have a lot in common'.

2.4 Partner Less Familiar with Outside Other

Several participants shared about having less familiarity of an outside other as increasing concern about emotional infidelity occurring. Specifically, women highlighted that the concern related to *"not knowing the person"* and feeling uncertain about the nature of the relationship between their partner and an outside other. Engaging with someone who is considered a mutual friend or a long-term friend posed less of a risk for crossing a boundary. For example, Participant 1 shared how the level of concern would vary depending on the level of familiarity:

I think my first question how long have they been friends, because if this is a neighbor that he's had since he was five or, you know, a step sister that married into the family when they were 14 or if this is someone that I didn't realize that they were that close and I don't ever see her, you know, then I think that becomes more of what is this.

In addition to increased concern about not knowing an outside other, participants also reiterated the factor of individual time being spent with this individual. (For a more detailed discussion about individual time with an outside other, please see Subcategory 1.7). Participant 5 explained a personal example with her partner that involved a lack of familiarity with an outside other and one-on-one interaction in the context of work:

He had mentioned to be that he had connected with some friend from through his work, like just to get together and stay connected. This was when … he was starting to build his LinkedIn connections. He made mention that he was going to

lunch with this particular person, just a female. Which, now all of a sudden, a year and a half has gone by and he's met every 8 months or whatever it is kind of thing and that's where it started the conversation of like 'okay, I don't know if I'm that comfortable because this is one individual female'. ... And I don't have a clue who the person is so that's another thing too.

2. 5 Importance of Perception

An individual perceiving the line of emotional infidelity differently from their partner is an important factor when seeking to understand how emotional infidelity might occur. When a partner feels that a boundary crossing has taken place, all participants acknowledged that it is necessary to *"address it*" in some way to demonstrate *"respect"* for them and *"to validate"* their concerns. It is worth noting that all participants were, by and large, in reportedly satisfied, healthy relationships without a presence of violence or abuse. The importance of validation was highlighted by Participant 5 who differentiated this from agreeing with a partner:

But, the important part ... is to make sure you're validating the other person if you don't agree. Validation doesn't mean agree, it means respect. I mean, because if you can't do that, then that's where the breakdown is usually in any area.

Participant 2 also reflected on the importance of taking her partner's concerns into consideration with these words: *"... Because that's how my husband perceived it, like wait – you always have to think about how there's a reason the person feels that way".* It was agreed among all participants that continuing to engage in a behavior that has been identified as concerning by a partner is considered emotional infidelity. As Participant 5 stated, *"Because ... now I've told you what I think and feel and now you're breaking my*

trust". Participant 7 discussed how a concerning behavior would likely be addressed within her relationship: *"That doesn't seem to be a problem in our marriage, but I mean I think we would just talk through it. I think if I realized that it was concerning for him, then I wouldn't do it".* Participant 4 shared about a personal experience where her partner had a different perception of crossing a boundary:

> *I'm planning an event for the church and I have to work with one of the ministers who is a male, so we have to communicate logistics and stuff for the event. Some of that communication made my partner uncomfortable. … I thought it was fine because we were conducting business. … I would say he [partner] wouldn't view it as emotional infidelity at that point. Now, if I would have just continued as is without addressing his concerns, then I think he would probably qualify it as emotional infidelity.*

2.6 Communication via Technology

Five participants shared about technology as a vehicle through which emotional infidelity could occur. Participant 3 put it into these words: "*Emotionally infidelity to me would be having a relationship on social media or texting that would be more than platonic".* Participant 6 shared specific examples of technology that might be involved with emotional infidelity: *"To me, that is looking for … attention and/or affection with texts and emails, … and phone calls".*

Given the nature of emotional infidelity and the other emergent categories discussed earlier, engagement via face-to-face interactions is not a requirement. When discussing examples of emotional infidelity during initial interviews, Participant 1 noted that she was *"having a really hard time coming up with examples of nonsexual emotional*

infidelity that do not include technology. … So, basically all I'm going to is either I'm calling, instant messaging, snap chatting, texting". Other participants shared personal examples of emotional infidelity that occurred via technology, such as emailing or social media. Participant 8 reflected on one situation with her partner that involved text messaging with a coworker:

> *… As far as the emotional or the respect and the trust issue, we did have an incident, … probably 8 months ago, where I discovered that my boyfriend was texting. I don't know if they were talking in person, but they were texting quite frequently. I don't know what all of the content was, but I do know that it was related to our relationship because we were having some issues at the time. … Basically, it came out that it was a woman that he works with and he kind of tried to downplay it at first, but there was a lot of texts and so I was like 'there's no way that you're texting this person that much if there's nothing there or you are just having a work conversation'.*

Main Category 3: Relationship Safeguarding

The third main category of *"relationship safeguarding"* explores several ways that participants work to protect their primary relationship to minimize the risk of emotional infidelity occurring. Participants were asked in an open-ended format about possible agreements and boundaries regarding interactions with close friends, coworkers, and technology that have been established within their own relationships and how they came to be. Under the third main category, subcategories include trust within the primary relationship, making the primary relationship a priority, sharing information with partner, boundaries within friendships, boundaries at work, and boundaries with technology.

3.1 Trust within Primary Relationship

All participants discussed the importance of having trust within their primary relationships as a safeguard from emotional infidelity, which often included a sense of mutual *"openness"* and *"communication".* Although there were no specific questions asked about trust during the initial interview, several women explained that they *"choose to trust"* because it is *"impossible"* to know what takes place during each moment of their partner's day. In this context, trust is referring to participants' conscious decision to depend on their partner's fidelity. Participant 5 discussed the possibility of being unaware of infidelity and how trust is an important factor in her relationship: "*Now, could more than that be going on? Absolutely, but I have to choose to trust too and it's just, again, that open communication we have in our relationship I guess".*

Several participants discussed the lack of awareness of what takes place during their partner's work day as a specific example of where "choosing to trust" is particularly relevant. Participant 4 talked about having trust towards her partner who is in the fitness industry:

> *And being in fitness, it can get physical just because trying to show people how to do the correct workouts. So, it was a conversation that we had to have … ahead of time just to say 'I'm going to trust you to do your job and it won't go beyond that'.*

Several participants also identified the importance of trust due to traveling and being away from one another for work. Participant 1 shared about this within her own relationship:

> *I would like to think that my partner and I have potentially, due to my strange job, a slightly higher trust level than people that see each other every day and sleep in*

the same bed every night. Not that we are any more or less likely to commit any form of infidelity, but just because it is in our face every week that we have to – like from the beginning, we had to have a really high trust level in this relationship.

Two participants identified the lack of trust within their relationship due to possible concerns of emotional infidelity as bothersome. Participant 8 reflected on her concern about trust in these words:

Also, I think it indicates a bigger problem in our relationship that I even wonder or would feel the need to check [his phone]. I mean, that means I don't trust him. So, since that happened when he was texting that woman and also because he is really closed, he doesn't communicate a lot with me, he doesn't share a lot of his feelings with me. So, I feel like I don't know what's going on with him a lot of the time and he shuts me out, so then I was like well I'm going to look at his phone. … but then that bothers me because it means I don't trust him and to me, that's not good in a relationship.

3.2 Primary Relationship as Priority

Five participants highlighted the importance of making the primary relationship a *"top commitment"* or *"priority"* compared to other relationships as a safeguard from emotional infidelity. As this theme began to emerge during initial interviews, participants were asked about how their partner was differentiated from or prioritized over other relationships, if at all, during follow-up interviews. Putting the primary partner first was discussed in terms of time spent with them, which was outlined in detail earlier (see Subcategory 1.4) and is only discussed minimally here as it relates to this subcategory.

Overall, it was emphasized that *"investing"* in a primary partner was a critical component of protecting the primary relationship and reducing the risk of emotional infidelity. Participant 7 shared her perspective on concerns arising when the primary partner is no longer a priority:

> *Yeah, I'm going to go back to the time thing again. You know, I think when you seek out ways to be with the primary relationship - when that no longer is the priority, then I think you've got something to deal with.*

Participant 3 explained a visual representation of how she believes time should be spent and noted the importance of one's partner being the main focus as a way of prioritizing the primary relationship:

> *Yeah, so if there was a pie chart of where I spend my time with people, my spouse should make up a majority of that time. … If I had to break it down per person, my partner definitely should be getting the majority of the time. … I spend a lot of time with other people, but they are a fraction. If I added up all the time with that one person, it's a fraction of what I would spend with my partner.*

Participant 5 talked about a personal example of how she invests in her primary relationship while also maintaining other important relationships:

> *I would say a big thing just from what I know about, again I have a lot of friends that struggle with a lot of things, but part of the way we keep our relationship potential is we put each other first. … So, … if I'm going to go spend time with friends - like I'm going away this weekend with some [platonic] girlfriends. I'm putting a ton of time into my relationship prior to that. I'm checking in with my*

relationship, checking if that's okay. We have good, equal understanding that I have time away, he has time away.

Putting the primary partner as a priority was also discussed when making decisions that may influence the relationship, such as communication with outside others that might pose a threat for the occurrence of emotional infidelity. Participant 4 spoke about how she prioritizes the care she has for her partner when deciding whom to interact with:

... It helps us to care so much more about the other person that we wouldn't want to do anything that would hurt them. So, even if it's something as small as I'm not going to communicate with this person, that shows my spouse that I do care for you more, you're worth more to me than being able to communicate with somebody else.

3.3 Sharing Information with Partner

During the initial interview, participants were asked about how much of their social life they share with their partner and how much they perceived their partner to be sharing with them. Seven participants reported that they are *"very open"* and share *"virtually all"* of their social interactions with their partner that occur at work, with friends and family, and via technology. If they do not share something with their partner, which tended to be specifically about technology interactions, it is *"not to be malicious"*. As Participant 1 stated who works out of town each week, *"it would take hours to give [my partner] a rundown on everything that happened".* Participant 5 also highlighted that she may not share about all technology interactions with her partner, but has *"no problem with him knowing anything and everything that was on any accounts of mine".* Nearly all

participants reported feeling comfortable sharing openly with their partners and not hiding information regarding their social lives. Participant 2 shared about the open communication she has with her partner:

> *Well, and I have a very open relationship with my partner obviously and I talk to him and we discuss various aspects and various things that happen throughout our day and our feelings and stuff like that and just have open lines of communication, being very forthright and honest with him.*

She elaborated further on the level of openness her partner appears to demonstrate with her:

> *Of his [social life] – everything. He has a friend in Michigan that comes to visit and he tells me what he's going to do with him and all that stuff and wherever he goes. If he goes out with friends, he's very open and on a more trusting – like potential infidelity route, he has told me 'oh hey, this woman approached me' and stuff like that. So, he's very open with me as well.*

Although several participants felt that their partners were mutually open and forthcoming about their social interactions, two women explained that their partner's *"personality style"* might lead them to be less open. One participant attributed this to her partner being *"introverted"* and *"needing to recharge"* after work. Participant 8 works out of town each week currently, but reflected on the differences in sharing between her and her partner during a time when she worked locally and her desire for more open communication:

> *Even when we did live in the same town throughout the week and I'd work in town and then come home, because of some of his traits of how quiet he is and he has*

some issues with depression, … so he tends to withdraw. So, I'll come home and I'll be like - I'm almost always in a pretty upbeat mood and I'm like 'oh I want to talk about what happened at work'. Like … 'oh, can you believe this person did this' or 'this happened and it was funny'. I'll want to talk about that stuff and he kind of just doesn't really show a lot of interest. So, it just kind of shuts me down and I'm like 'eh whatever, he doesn't care'. … Like I see other couples that sit there and talk on and on about stuff and I'm like 'oh we're not like that', which kind of sucks.

Most participants reported having openness about their social lives or expressed a desire for more communication within the primary relationship. However, one participant reported that she shares *"hardly any"* of her social interactions with her partner. She explained her perspective about a lack of sharing with her partner and discussed a personal example with an individual who expressed romantic interest via private messaging on a social media site:

We don't talk about it at all unless it's something that's bothering me and I have to emotionally work it out by venting. Unless it's like venting, he just gets to hear me venting, and he'll do the same thing with stuff that's going on with work or whatever. As far as interaction with technology, it's most of my day, so unless it's something that is affecting me, no. I didn't like tell him about my brother's friend, like no. I'm not going to talk about that stuff because it's not beneficial to our relationship and it made me uncomfortable. So yeah, it's going to raise other questions, you know? So, I'm like, no. I don't need unnecessary distractions when

that's exactly what it was, was just a distraction. … We don't talk about it really at all.

3.4 Boundaries within Friendships

Participants were asked in an open-ended format about their close friendships and how they were differentiated from emotional infidelity and the primary relationship, if at all. Specific areas that were explored included possible boundaries related to gender and sexual orientation. Further investigation of how boundaries, or lack thereof, were established within the primary relationship occurred during follow-up interviews with all participants. It is important to reiterate that the majority of participants in this study (all but one) identified being primarily attracted to cross-sex individuals.

3.4a Presence of Cross-Sex Friendships. Seven participants identified having mostly, if not all, of their close friendships with women. This was considered a way to *"protect the relationship",* demonstrate *"respect"* toward one's partner, and *"avoid confusing situations"* by having a close friendship with an identified male. For three participants, there was a conscious decision made early in the primary relationship to *"cut off"* or *"get rid"* of cross-sex friends. A previous experience where a boundary crossing occurred was a common reason for establishing friendship boundaries. Participant 4 shared about ending cross-sex friendships to protect the primary relationship:

For us, we both had friends of the opposite gender when we were dating, but we also had issues with friends who, you know, start developing feelings for us. So, we just had to talk about it and lay it out on the table. From that, we figured it would be safer if we just didn't even open the door for anything like that to

happen. So, that's when we just decided to kind of cut off that type of communication with people of the opposite gender.

Participant 3 discussed the point in her life where she made the decision to discontinue long-term, male friendships to maintain her primary relationship:

So, this has been ongoing with us and he knows that I've had relationships with guys my whole life and he knows that I've also not been faithful, you know. So, it's tricky for him to know which is which and I don't blame him for that, but we had to talk about trust and say hey, we're making a commitment right now if we're going to be together. Okay, fine, I'm getting rid of all of my guy friends, they were not invited to my wedding, and it was hard for me because we've been lifelong friends but I couldn't invite them to my wedding.

There were some identified exceptions to having friends that are *"primarily women".* Four participants discussed one of those exceptions as having cross-sex *"couples friendships"* where she and her partner have established a platonic relationship with both individuals. It was highlighted that there is a boundary of spending time together as couples instead of individually and across genders. Participant 4 shared this distinction in these words: *"We have couples that we hang out with as well but I wouldn't hang out with the male without hanging out with his wife or his girlfriend too".*

There were also two participants who reported having one close male friend amongst other female friends, but considered this a possible exception because as Participant 3 stated: *"He's kind of like one of my [platonic] girlfriends".* Therefore, the level of closeness with this male friend felt different and perhaps less threatening due to the overlapping similarities with the participants' close female friendships. In addition,

there was slightly less information shared with a male friend, *"about 90%"* (Participant 6), compared to close female friends.

One final exception that emerged with regards to gender and friendship boundaries was noted by a couple participants. For Participant 2, she has always had close friendships with men and women and therefore, had fewer boundaries surrounding gender: "*I've always had more close friends that are males than females. So, I mean, I do have some really close female friends, but I've just always been able to get along better with males than females".* Additionally, Participant 6 identified a boundary based around the time of day she was interacting with a cross-sex friend: *"I would go to lunch, like middle of the day lunch one-on-one with a male friend, gay or straight. But, something after work, I wouldn't go".*

3.4b Sexual Orientation and Friendships. When asking participants about the importance of sexual orientation with close friendships, there were mixed responses provided. Five participants reported that sexual orientation is a factor when establishing boundaries within close friendships. Specifically, there was an increased concern about the occurrence of emotional infidelity for women who were close friends with lesbian-identified women and for their male-identified partners who were close friends with gay-identified men. Participant 1 explained the importance of sexual orientation in these words:

> *My instinct says no, whatever, it doesn't matter, but I guess I probably fall under that same social expectation. Especially in a way that if it was a gay guy hanging out with my partner, like if his BFF [best friend forever] was a gay dude, I'm really not worried about that. But, if Brad's best friend was like a hard core*

lesbian woman who had no interest in dudes, I think it would change because I would not be concerned about that female as I would be potentially with like a straight woman who is, you know, attractive and my partner is seeing even just socially.

Two participants shared that *"it shouldn't matter"* or they *"don't like to admit"* that sexual orientation matters when establishing close friendships, but felt that it ultimately did have an influence. Participant 5 reflected on this when sharing about a friend's recent disclosure about identifying as a lesbian:

"So, if I'm honest with myself, yeah, I probably would be a little bit more guarded again with how much I'm sharing. Like, I wouldn't want to be too comfortable. … I don't like to think that's because of how it's changed, but I probably am, yeah".

Alternatively, three participants spoke about how they did not believe that sexual orientation mattered when establishing close friendships with others. There was not an expressed need to safeguard the primary relationship by setting boundaries regarding sexual orientation and instead, participants were open to having *"all kinds of friends".*

3.5 Boundaries at Work

Participants were asked about the level of emotional closeness they have with people at work. They also shared about their perception of emotional closeness that their partners have at work. For most participants, the level of openness they had at work was similar between themselves and their partners. Responses provided by women demonstrated that the majority had established firm boundaries to minimize the risk of emotional infidelity occurring, but a limited number of women demonstrated less rigid

boundaries. Exceptions regarding level of closeness and disclosure at work were also noted.

Six of the eight participants reported having established boundaries at work that were set from the beginning of their careers without any specific precipitating events. Three of these participants shared about a firm boundary of *"not communicating with coworkers after [work] hours"* unless it involved a work-related activity. As Participant 7 shared, *"Honestly, most of the work relationships I keep as work relationships. ... Occasionally, there's work dinners or something like that, but nothing really beyond that".*

Some topics were identified by several participants as being off-limits to discuss with coworkers, such as *"finances", "family issues", "anything sexual",* or *"emotional aspects of my [primary] relationship".* These were subjects that participants would feel more comfortable sharing with a close friend or keeping within their primary relationship, but not extending those conversations to work. Some described work relationships as being *"superficial"* and *"surfacey"* compared to other close relationships in their personal lives. Participant 5 shared an example of a family concern and her thoughts on disclosing that to coworkers:

> *As far as coworkers and closeness, you know like I had a scenario with my mom. My mom made me feel very upset. I didn't really feel like a lot of my coworkers I could talk to them about it because I'm not as close and I didn't really… It was a scenario that I talked to some of my close friends about, but I didn't feel like I'm as close with these people [coworkers] that I need to share more intimate, personal details kinda thing.*

Two participants discussed boundaries pertaining to the nature of conversations with coworkers, regardless of who was sharing the information. For example, Participant 4 discussed a boundary she has set about not sharing or hearing about details of romantic relationships with coworkers: *"I wouldn't want them to share aspects of their marriage and I wouldn't share aspects about my marriage and those kind of romantic relationships. I wouldn't feel comfortable discussing that kind of stuff."* Participant 6 discussed her boundary at work in terms of how much information she shares about herself:

> *I do not share anything much about myself and my personal life with people at work. … So, I'm kind of the queen of small talk and current events and I ask a lot of questions about 'how are your kids' and 'how's this hobby' and whatever. I just don't reciprocate a lot and people don't really notice because you know, if you get someone talking about themselves, they'll usually kind of roll with it (laughter). So, I don't think it's fair to call that a true friendship because, you know, I'm not really reciprocating.*

Additionally, there were two of the six participants who reported having boundaries, but they appeared to be less firm. For example, Participant 1 shared about how her interactions with coworkers are minimal outside of business hours, but noted a willingness to interact with some on weekends:

> *"…I generally don't talk to my coworkers on the weekends very much because I spend like 40 hours a week three feet away from them. I think it's more like we just kind of respect that we just spent 40 hours three feet from each other. I*

probably have, you know, a couple coworkers that I'm more likely to, especially technologically, interact with on the weekends."

Alternatively, there were two participants that did not have any identified boundaries with coworkers regarding the level of emotional closeness they have. They reported feeling comfortable with sharing openly about personal details and establishing close friendships with them. Participant 3 shared about how her work and close friendships collide in a way that she appreciates:

... Some of my very closest friends happen to be my business partners. ... I think that's awesome and so great because what better way to spend time with your friends when you can hit two birds with one stone. You can have a super close best friend that's also working with you in your business.

Participant 2 also spoke about her level of disclosure with two coworkers:

I have two very close male friends at work and I talk to them about my relationship with my mom. I talk to them about my stresses in my life, the kids, and even sometimes when I'm having an argument with my husband and all that stuff.

3.5a Exceptions to Boundaries at Work. Given the work boundaries that were identified by several participants and discussed above, it is important to note that there were clear exceptions in relation to age and gender. Five participants highlighted that if a coworker identified as a woman, there was increased comfort in discussing topics that may have otherwise felt like a boundary crossing with an identified male coworker. Participant 5 spoke about being more aware of the boundary when interacting with a male coworker:

I mean, we might have a conversation, but in my head when I'm talking to someone at work especially of the opposite sex, the majority of the time, it's about whatever we need to talk about as a scenario and we're never alone. Like he's at my desk. We're not going into offices, closing doors, that kind of thing.

Participant 4 discussed how gender influences the boundaries she has at work: *"It varies by gender because I did have a female coworker who went through a divorce, so I did talk to her, you know, when she asked for different things".*

Similarly, if a coworker was similar in age and identified as a woman, there was also a tendency to share more openly. Participant 1 shared about gender and age as exceptions:

I think that age and gender definitely come into play. … So, if I have a female coworker who's within five years of my age, I'm more likely to just open up about, you know, how my day was or how my relationship with my father is or whatever than with like a dude that's twice my age that I work with, generally speaking. I tend to be pretty open especially with my female coworkers who are my age just about, let's say, my emotional wellbeing in general.

Participant 8 reflected on how a male coworker is less threatening if he is not close in age:

I think the age and the gender. So, like the current doctor [coworker] - I think he's like 65. We get along great, we chat a lot and whatever, but I think if it was a male closer to my age, I would probably be more guarded or have firmer boundaries. I don't want to say I don't have boundaries with him, but I would be more like there's a potential that something could develop if it were a male closer

to my age. I wouldn't want to encourage one way or the other whereas now it's like they are so much older, there's absolutely no possibility. So, it's like eh whatever, may as well be a woman (laughter).

The length of the work relationship, in addition to identifying as a woman, was another exception that was highlighted by two participants. If they had a history with this coworker or had worked with them for several years, there was a tendency to develop a closer relationship. Participant 7 discussed a prior history with one of her female coworkers as an exception to the boundaries she has in place: "*Aside from the one girl that I've known since high school, I would obviously share more family joys or sorrows with her than I would other people. Most of my work relationships are work relationships".* Participant 5 spoke about coworkers that become friends over time:

I definitely have some friends that I've been - I mean, I've worked at the same hospital for 18 years. So, I have some people that I've worked with for 18 years and I'd say yeah, they are good friends.

The final exception was voiced by Participant 6 in relation to her role as a supervisor. While she typically enforces strict boundaries within her work, there is one coworker that she considers an exception because *"she does not report to me. She reports to somebody else. I think that's the biggest part of it".*

3.6 Boundaries with Technology

Participants were asked in an open-ended format about their technology interactions in the context of work and within their personal lives. There was also exploration of possible agreements and boundaries that have been established surrounding technology use to safeguard the primary relationship. Nearly all participants

spoke about exercising some level of caution about their technology interactions and there was little variation regarding how these boundaries came to be. Specifically, nearly all participants reported that boundaries were established due to personal experiences that were negative or witnessing that in someone else.

Four participants identified *"technology as being permanent"* and thus, having caution about *"what is being put out there".* This included *"explicit photos"* and *"crude messages",* in addition to *"communicating feelings".* Participant 1 discussed her boundary about communicating via technology when she is upset:

> *I also try really hard not to text anything really nasty to anyone, like if I'm pissed at someone, I try not to text that because that doesn't ever go away; you know? … I mean, you could screen shot that and put it on the internet. You could screen shot and use it as emotional blackmail for the rest of other person's life. Like, I have texted some nasty things to people, but I try not to be a jerk because I know that that's never going away.*

All participants who established a boundary of censoring what they send via technology noted that this was due to *"seeing it go really bad"* for other people, or hearing about some type of negative consequence happening, such as in *"news stories".* Participant 2 shared about how this boundary came to be for her:

> *You can even go as far as hearing stories that relate to not sending nude pictures and stuff. I've seen and heard a lot of news stories about 'oh this person got caught sending this or that' kind of stuff. So, there's that as well. It could be observing that issue. There's a couple folks that I have known that have gotten in trouble for that so it could be that as well.*

In addition to being cautious about what is sent via technology, two participants also discussed limiting most of their technology use to coordinating plans with friends and family. The communication was occurring for a particular reason, which tended to involve a goal of meeting face-to-face. This was also due to seeing it become a negative influence in other people. Participant 4 shared about this boundary and how it came to be:

> *... Usually when I talk to my friends, it's via text messages or phone call. I guess, we usually like to just talk in person and so the communication via text is just arranging the time to get together to actually talk about things. ... The reason that we don't use technology for the communication is because we've seen it in other people's relationships where it's caused things to get messy unnecessarily. So, that's just a reason why we use technology the way that we do.*

Another boundary that was identified by two participants relates to limiting technological interactions with certain people to a certain time of day. For Participant 4, a formal rule of not communicating with cross-sex individuals during the late evening was established within her relationship due to previous experiences:

> *Oh, and we also have a rule too where we won't do certain communications after a certain time. So, usually after dinner time, like 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening, anything after that, we see that as crossing a line. So, we won't communicate with somebody of the opposite sex after that time. ... Just experience too. So, it's really because we do a lot of work at our church and so we're often both getting contacted for different reasons so we just kind of made that the rule.*

Similarly, Participant 6 discussed a more unstated agreement of not contacting anyone aside from her partner and three close female friends late in the evening due to it

feeling more intimate. She identified the reason for this being related to a prior experience that was negative:

> *I think I am pretty cognizant of not sending texts very late. You know, if it's getting to be 10 or 11 and people are probably getting into bed, I don't. … It's okay if my partner or my three best [platonic] girlfriends do that or I do it back to them, but beyond that, it's too intimate or something, if that's the right word, to text at midnight. … I think because my ex-husband would get - his phone would ding and light up at weird times and he would be really secretive about it. So, I just always assumed the worse until I, in fact, confirmed the worst.*

An *"unwritten rule"* that was identified among three participants was *"unplugging"* to intentionally focus on the primary relationship or family. This included putting phones away while at the dinner table, out to dinner with one's primary partner, or spending time as a family. Participants spoke about this as being *"unwritten"* because there was never a formal boundary set and they *"never talked about it",* but it naturally began occurring within the household. Participant 5 outlined that *"we have unwritten rules like if we go on a date night, we unplug. When we have family nights, we unplug".* Most participants informally established this boundary due to witnessing others being distracted by technology when in the company of another person. Participant 2 reflected on this:

> *… When we go out to restaurants and we see people texting on the phone when they have people right in front of them and they're not talking to them at all, we had conversations saying, "Yeah, we can't do that. That's just not – you want to be present with the person you're with." So, I guess that's how – it wasn't a*

stated rule though, but … I guess that's how it came to be. … It's pervasive, it's more kind of taken over and we just didn't like how it was doing that.

3.6a Accessing Partner's Devices and Accounts. Mixed valence responses were especially evident when discussing boundaries or agreements about accessing each other's devices and accounts, such as email and social media. Three participants reported having no boundaries regarding accessing each other's devices. It was okay to go on each other's phones, laptops, and accounts. Participant 5 shared that *"it sounds bad, but … we both know each other's passwords. Our kids know our passwords. So, it's kind of an open book which in some ways is bad".* Similarly, Participant 7 highlighted that *"we both get on each other's phones and there's no, I don't know, there's no privacy weird things with that with us".*

Three participants spoke about knowing each other's passwords for technology devices and accounts. This was often established for practical purposes, such as for *"paying bills"* or *"responding to text messages"* or *"to use GPS"*. An unstated agreement was identified by these participants of *"respecting"* one another by not *"checking up on"* them despite knowing passwords and having the ability to do so. Participant 4 shared about this boundary within her relationship:

We both have access to each other's emails and phones and all of that, but we will still respect each other's space. Like we won't answer each other's phone unless we're asked to. Sometimes, we'll ask each other to respond to people's text messages if they're looking for an answer, but we're very open about that. So, we can both access everything. We don't use it unless we're asked to though.

Participant 8 discussed the unstated rule of accessing one another's devices and accounts:

> *We have a separate bank account, but he sometimes will use my debit card, I'll sometimes use his, so we know each other's passwords and they are the same as on our computer pretty much. So, the access is there and it's more of an unspoken rule of why would you need to check up on me?*

Two of these participants expressed *"feeling gross"* and *"horrible"* about briefly checking their partner's phone without their knowledge at a point when there were concerns within the relationship. For one woman, concerns related to her partner's alcohol usage and for another, it was a prior occurrence of emotional infidelity. This went against their unstated agreement of respecting each other despite having access to each other's devices. Participant 1 reflected on a personal example of this:

> *I can guiltily confess times that there have been - I think two or three times that I can remember ever that I have looked at his phone when he did not know. … There was one time - I think I was trying to tell myself that maybe if he was just cheating on me, that would be easier to deal with (laughter) than alcoholism. So, I did flip through some of his text messages then and I found absolutely nothing. Like, not even anything remotely interesting. It's not like I dug through it for an hour. This was like 30 seconds.*

Two participants reported a firmer boundary of not knowing passwords on each other's phones and not accessing them at any point. The reason for establishing a strong boundary had a slight variation for both women. For Participant 3, it was considered a *"huge breach of trust"* and she shared her perspective in these words:

... There's a big boundary of don't touch my phone. Don't go through it, don't touch my phone. And I feel uncomfortable going through his phone because it's very personal. Even if the phone is ringing and I pick it up and look at who it is, I don't even do that. It's literally like let me page through your brain. Like, no. I guess we never talk about it, but it's just kind of an unwritten rule. ... It's more like, you know, opening somebody's mail or someone's mailbox. You know, that's illegal, so it's along those same lines.

She also highlighted the potential for misinterpretation if reading messages that could be taken out of context:

... The communication can be very misunderstood depending on who it's from and who it's going to because there's internal dialogue that's already happening typically with texting or whatever. So, for somebody to get a glimpse of one text can be very misleading ... versus having the person it was intended for. I could see how things could be unnecessarily blown out of proportion.

There was a similar reasoning discussed by Participant 6 about the possibility of misinterpretation. However, a prior negative experience was another important aspect of her reasoning:

... Because that's how I found my first husband being unfaithful because I did have his email password and of course, I snooped. ... If you go looking for trouble, you ... are going to frame anything you find with the worst intention. Sometimes unnecessarily and that just causes more conflict and you know, I'm not with my partner 24 hours a day. I just had to make the choice that I wasn't going to have the same kind of relationship again. And until I have some other solid

reason to not, I'm just going to choose to trust. … I don't need to go dissecting any texts or emails from his female friends looking for something that's probably not there.

For two participants who had not established any specific or formal boundaries surrounding technology use in their primary relationship, they noted that *"it's a good idea"* to consider that in the future. One participant reported that there *"likely will be after this conversation"* when discussing the lack of formal boundaries currently in place. During follow-up interviews that occurred one to two months following the initial interviews, nearly all participants reported *"more awareness"* and *"paying more attention"* to their technology usage while around important others in their lives.

Main Category 4: Factors Influencing Relationship Boundaries

The final main category explores several factors, identified by participants, that have an impact on how they view relationship boundaries in their own lives. During the initial interviews, various community and cultural influences emerged when participants spoke about where they viewed the emotional infidelity line to be and established boundaries that had been established. When follow-up interviews were conducted, this topic was explored further across all participants. Within this main category, subcategories include modeling from important others, spiritual affiliation as a guide, and childhood upbringing.

4.1 Modeling from Important Others

Several participants discussed the influence of modeling when exploring the boundaries of emotional infidelity. *"Good"* and *"solid"* modeling was identified by five participants and one participant shared about more negative modeling. Three participants

also spoke about their partners having poor modeling from their parents. For most participants, parents were the most common source of modeling. Participant 4 spoke about parents as a strong model for her primary relationship:

> *I think too, just because both me and my husband, both of our parents have been married for over 30 years. So, we've had some really good influences just coming into a marriage and also since we've been married, we've had resources that we could go and talk to. So, we've learned a lot from them. … I think that's why we're able to communicate the way that we do which has been really helpful for us and us not allowing external influences in our relationship.*

Alternatively, Participant 6 shared about poor modeling from her parents and a desire to have a romantic relationship that was different from what she witnessed:

> *Well, I grew up in a very chaotic household. My parents were miserably married. They both cheated on each other constantly and made very little effort to hide it from anybody. So, I kind of grew up, … even still, it wasn't as devastatingly frowned upon as what normal people would think. But, I definitely grew up like you guys are the worst and I don't want to be anything like you. So, when I found myself in that situation, I was really disappointed in myself and thought I was just as bad as those losers.*

Although most participants specifically referenced their parents as role models, one participant also highlighted other important sources of influence, such as friends. Participant 5 shared about the different sources of modeling within her primary relationship:

… We have been influenced definitely by relationships that have been successful. Our parents, even friends. Like, my partner has a few coworkers or even a boss has been married for a long time. Watching other people that are doing things the way we hope to be and striving to be like that.

4.2 Childhood Upbringing

How participants and their partners were raised emerged as an important consideration in terms of boundaries set within significant relationships. Five participants discussed childhood upbringing in relation to *"emotional closeness"* and level of *"openness"* with others. Participant 7 highlighted how her upbringing has influenced expectations about openness within her primary relationship:

Yeah and I think for me too, a lot of it was just the way I was brought up. My parents are still together and have been together, goodness gracious, almost 60 years and have a very open and honest relationship as well. I just think that that's what I expect of myself and of my spouse.

Three participants spoke about the differences in upbringing between themselves and their partners. For example, Participant 8 discussed how her partner's upbringing has influenced his level of emotional openness:

So, our childhoods and upbringing are completely different. … He had a difficult childhood. … His biological family didn't want anything to do with him. He was adopted. His adoptive dad he was really close with, died when he was 9 and then his adoptive mom was … really kind of indifferent, almost rejecting of him. She didn't pay a lot of attention to him and wasn't nurturing at all. So, … he's kind of emotionally stunted. We've talked about this, like he has a very hard time

expressing how he feels and telling you how he feels and he's very quiet and very much keeps things to himself. I'm very much not like that.

Participant 2 also shared about how the differences in childhood upbringing between her and her partner impacts their level of openness in relationships:

I think we were raised differently because my mom and my dad have talked to me about everything and therefore, I am open because I'm comfortable with talking about that. Whereas his parents didn't really – there's some things you just don't talk about and a lot of things where you're kind of hinting around so we were just raised differently. So, he's probably I would say less apt to share more emotional, more personal stuff to other than his very, very, very close friend.

4.3 Spiritual Affiliation as a Guide

Seven participants reported their *"faith"* or *"spirituality"* to be an important community factor when discussing their views on relationship boundaries. One participant reported that she and her partner *"are not religious or spiritual or any of that".* Some participants spoke about this factor in terms of a more personal *"relationship with God"* whereas others identified with a specific denomination. For example, Participant 2 shared her views in these words:

I have my faith, but it's not really the church that is guiding me. It's more God. I have some thoughts on how the church is and how it's very man-made, so I don't know if I can say it's church as much as God and how He would want me to behave.

Participant 7 also discussed how religion shapes her perspective on her relationship:

... We're religious people, but I wouldn't say we're deeply religious. We're both Presbyterian. But, you know, our wedding vows meant something to us. ... I guess more from the fact that we did marry in the church and we took our vows in the church. ... We also attend church together every week and that kind of stuff.

Two participants spoke about their Christian faith being a priority within their lives. For example, Participant 4 shared that *"we follow our faith first and then everything else. So, I think that's also been a big influence".* Finally, two participants spoke about *"not strictly practicing"* religion, but utilizing their identified Christian faith as a guide for *"how to behave"* and to *"be a good person"*.

Summary of Results

Eight partnered women between the ages of 30 and 50, who are established in their careers, participated in semi-structured interviews aimed at addressing the main research question of what factors need to be present for emotional infidelity to occur. Other areas of exploration during the interview included differentiating emotional infidelity from other important relationships, such as a close friendship, and how technology may play a role in this topic.

In following a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 2014), several focused codes emerged that were identified as significant in meaning and/or frequency. Follow-up interviews were conducted with all eight participants to further elaborate on emerging categories and subcategories. All subcategories were grouped into four main categories including defining emotional infidelity, how emotional infidelity occurs, relationship safeguarding, and factors influencing relationship boundaries.

In line with CGT, axial coding is the next phase of data analysis, which is outlined in the following chapter. This step integrates and connects emergent themes leading to a theoretical framework, or story of the data, that is representative of participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Relevant literature and application of findings to the current study are also discussed in the final chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how emotional infidelity is defined among middle-aged, professional women who are in monogamous, cross-sex, romantic relationships. A second goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of how emotional infidelity was differentiated from a close friendship. Eight women between the ages of 30 and 50, who are established in their careers, participated in semi-structured interviews about the boundaries of emotional infidelity and how they would define the term. Additionally, participants were asked about their work relationships and close friendships to understand how they were differentiated, if at all, from their primary relationships. Finally, there was exploration of how technology may play a role in understanding emotional infidelity. Due to the lack of clear, operationalized definitions within this area of research, grounded theory was the qualitative methodology utilized in the current study to form a theoretical groundwork based on participants' rich perspectives and experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) allows for data analysis to become increasingly abstract and theoretical as the researcher seeks to interpret meaning that is rooted directly in the lived experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2014). An important role of the researcher is to "exist in a world that is acted upon and interpreted – by our research participants and by us – as well as being affected by other people and circumstances" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 241). Through my role as the primary investigator, I

sought to identify and understand participants' meaning within a greater social context while reflecting on and acknowledging my own assumptions and preconceptions throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2014). Give this, it is important to note that the findings of this study are most applicable to middle-aged, heterosexual, partnered women who are established in their careers.

A total of four main categories were revealed through data analysis including defining emotional infidelity, how emotional infidelity occurs, relationship safeguarding, and factors influencing relationship boundaries. Within the category of defining emotional infidelity, subcategories that emerged included having feelings of romance or attachment, investment of time whether physically or mentally, and confiding in an outside other. In addition, acting on an attraction in some capacity, withholding information from the primary partner, and spending one-on-one time with an outside other were also subcategories that helped shape the definition of emotional infidelity. Finally, emotional infidelity as a vague and abstract term was also highlighted by participants when sharing their perspectives.

Under the category of how emotional infidelity occurs, subcategories included emotional needs being met by an outside other, shared interests with that individual, and one-sided awareness of intentions. The primary partner's perception of boundary crossings and having less familiarity with the outside other were also emergent subcategories. Finally, communication via technology was identified as a possible medium through which emotional infidelity could occur.

The relationship safeguarding category included making the primary relationship a priority, establishing trust, and sharing information openly with one's partner. Forming

boundaries at work, within close friendships, and with technology were also emergent subcategories. The final category of factors influencing relationship boundaries included subcategories of modeling from important others, spiritual affiliation as a guide, and childhood upbringing.

In light of this summary, it became important to review modern theories of love and intimacy. Grounded theory (GT) encourages researchers to delve into previous literature after initial data analysis has ended to reduce the impact of preconceived ideas on emergent data (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, this chapter begins with a review of relevant theories followed by application of findings to the current study.

Review of Relevant Theories

The triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), sound relationship house theory (Gottman, 1999), and adult romantic attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Johnson, 2004) are briefly outlined below. Although not a formal theory, relationship maintenance strategies (Stafford & Canary, 1991) are also discussed. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive review of each theory. Therefore, only aspects of the theories that are considered relevant to the current study are highlighted.

Triangular Theory of Love

The triangular theory of love was introduced by Robert Sternberg to conceptualize different variations of love that exist within close relationships. Sternberg (1986) discussed three components that provide a better understanding of the factors involved in love including intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Each of these components also forms the vertices of the theoretical triangle he used to represent his theory.

The intimacy component of the triangle refers to "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119). Based on prior research by Sternberg and Grajek (1984), there were ten feelings identified, among many others, that fall under the category of intimacy including (a) desire to promote the welfare of the loved one, (b) experienced happiness with the loved one, (c) high regard for the loved one, (d) being able to count on the loved one in times of need, (e) mutual understanding with the loved one, (f) sharing of one's self and one's possessions with the loved one, (g) receipt of emotional support from the loved one, (h) giving of emotional support to the loved one, (i) intimate communication with the loved one, and (j) valuing the loved one in one's life. Sternberg (1986) highlights that experiencing all of these is not a requirement but instead, may vary on an individual basis when determining what amount is sufficient. Furthermore, there might be overlap of feelings experienced instead of occurring in isolation from one another (Sternberg, 1986).

The passion component of the triangle refers to "the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119). This component is not evident across all relationships, but is most commonly seen in romantic relationships. Sternberg (1986) also discusses passion as being "reciprocally interactive" with intimacy in that passion may ignite intimacy within a relationship or intimacy might lead to the presence of passion. Although they may be influenced by one another, it is not necessary for both to exist simultaneously.

The final component of the triangle is decision/commitment, which refers to "in the short term, the decision that one loves someone else, and in the long term, the commitment to maintain that love" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119). It is important to note that

the short-term decision does not necessarily lead to a long-term commitment and therefore, should not be viewed as occurring together. Similarly, an individual may remain committed to a partner that they do not love. Throughout the duration of a relationship, Sternberg (1986) highlights how there may be times where the decision/commitment component is the only factor keeping the relationship going, such as when intimacy and passion are not present.

Sternberg (1986) also discussed eight different types of love, depending on the importance and presence of each component. This was suggested to vary by relationship length, with short-term romantic relationships having a greater presence of passion, a moderate emphasis on intimacy, and even less of a focus on decision/commitment. Alternatively, there tends to be more intimacy and decision/commitment within long-term relationships and a moderate level of passion that declines more over time (Sternberg, 1986).

Lemieux and Hale (2002) investigated the assumptions regarding changes in intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment over the course of a relationship using a cross-sectional design. Participants in their study were casually dating, exclusively dating, engaged, or married. Significant negative correlations were evident between intimacy and relationship length as well as passion and relationship length. Additional analyses revealed the lowest scores on intimacy and passion were among those who were casually dating. The next lowest scores were evident for participants who were married and the highest scores were found in those who were engaged. Scores on decision/commitment increased from participants who were casually dating to those who

identified as married (Lemieux & Hale, 2002). Therefore, findings demonstrated that these assumptions of the triangular theory of love were supported.

Sternberg (1986) also discusses the shape of the triangle as providing important information about the balance of love. For example, an equilateral triangle would demonstrate balance across all three components of love whereas an isosceles triangle shows intimacy as more present than passion and decision/commitment. Although this visual representation provides clarity regarding the balance of love, there should be caution when interpreting this. For example, by looking at an isosceles triangle, it may appear that passion and decision/commitment are equal, which is not always the case. Therefore, Sternberg (1986) recommends using the shape of the triangle to conceptualize love while also considering other factors beyond geometry.

Finally, the level of overlap between the individual and their partner's triangles can provide important information about relationship satisfaction. Sternberg and Barnes' (1985) prior research demonstrates that the more mismatched two triangles are between self and partner, the more dissatisfaction there is within the relationship. Lemieux and Hale (1999) also found that all three components of the triangle were highly associated with relationship satisfaction. Mismatched triangles may occur due to both area and shape of the triangle being different. Therefore, the amount of love may be different, which would represent the area, and the shape of the triangle could also vary depending on which components of love are present for each person in the relationship.

The Sternberg Triangular Love Scale was developed as the first test of the theory (Sternberg, 1988). Results demonstrated notable overlap among the items that were intended to represent the three vertices of intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment.

More recently, the psychometric properties of a shortened version of the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale were investigated separately with adolescent and adult participants (Sumter, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2013). Results revealed a three-factor structure with high internal consistency among all subscales in both samples. In addition, there were moderate inter-correlations, suggesting that the shortened version seems to accurately represent the three components of love outlined in the triangular theory of love.

Due to measurement concerns initially evident in the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale, Lemieux and Hale also (1999, 2000) validated a new scale based on the triangular theory of love called the Intimacy, Passion, and Commitment Scale. In both validation studies, "the scale exhibited high reliability and factor analysis providing evidence that the theory's three components are statistically distinct" (Lemieux & Hale, 2002, p. 1009). Although there were initial concerns noted, it appears that recent modifications of the original scale (Sumter et al., 2013) and development of a new scale (Lemieux & Hale, 1999, 2000) have successfully measured the basic assumptions of the theory, making it a valuable contribution to the field of love and relationships.

Sound Relationship House Theory

Another theory that provides a framework for building closeness in relationships was developed by John Gottman, an expert in the field of romantic relationships and couples therapy. It is worth noting that Gottman's theoretical developments are directly informed and validated by descriptive, observational research with couples of diverse backgrounds (Gottman, 2011; Gottman & Gottman, 2015). Because of this approach, empirical support from other sources is lacking.

Through laboratory research with couples, two "staples" of maintaining a healthy romantic relationship were identified by Gottman and expanded to become what is now called the sound relationship house theory (Gottman, 1999). The first necessary component is an overall level of positive affect and the second is an ability to reduce negative affect during conflict resolution (Gottman, 1999). For the purposes of this study, the main focus is on the first component.

One of the essential elements of the sound relationship house theory includes building a foundation of friendship in the romantic relationship. To establish a friendship, there are three levels of positive affect that need to occur. The first level is building a love map, which refers to "the importance of partners knowing each other's psychological worlds well enough to map them" (Gottman, 2015, p. 22). This involves showing interest in your partner's needs, values, goals, and stressors and feeling that your partner reciprocates that same level of interest. To build roadmaps within the primary relationship, Gottman (2011) notes that asking open-ended questions is particularly important.

The second level is sharing fondness and admiration, which "creates a culture of appreciation that supplies a relationship's emotional bank account with assets" (Gottman, 2015, p. 22). This involves looking for ways to show appreciation, offer compliments, or express admiration for the primary partner instead of pointing out mistakes. Another necessary component is not only feeling moments of gratitude or kindness, but expressing them often to one's partner (Gottman, 2011).

The third level is turning toward (rather than away), which includes "those small moments when partners make a bid for each other's attention and connection" (Gottman,

2015, p. 23). Through these "bids", individuals are seeking out attention, support, and affection to connect on an emotional level with the primary partner. Gottman (1999) highlights an important aspect of turning toward is increasing awareness of bids being made by one's partner and responding in a way that will continue adding to the emotional bank account.

Taken together, the first three floors of the sound relationship house demonstrate how well couples can "maintain their friendship, intimacy, and passion" (Gottman, 2015, p. 24). Gottman's (2011) prior research showed that when couples form a strong friendship, it makes them more equipped to navigate disagreements or other difficulties within the relationship. Further, an established friendship based on these three levels allows for more humor, affection, romance, and passion during conflict, leading to a more effective repair among romantic partners.

Several years after the initial development of the sound relationship house (Gottman, 1999), trust was highlighted as a possible "missing" aspect of the theory. It was not until further research was done with couples that the importance of trust within the sound relationship house was realized (Gottman, 2011). Based on this prior research, trust was defined as "each partner knowing that the other partner will be there for them in a host of ways: When they are sad, angry, frightened, humiliated, triumphant, joyous, broken, … and so on. Trust is erected by one partner choosing to show up for the other – not perfectly, not every time, but as much as one can" (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 26). Gottman (2011) explained that a foundation of trust led to feelings of safety, security, and openness within the primary relationship. Couples reported more vulnerability within the relationship and establishment of a deeper, mature love. Gottman (2011) noted that

building trust in a romantic relationship included friendship, romance, and emotional and sexual intimacy. For couples who were lacking trust, they reported feeling like they could not count on their romantic partner in times of need. Over time, this led to increased emotional distance with a greater possibility for infidelity to occur (Gottman, 2011).

Gottman (2011) explained that the process of developing a strong relationship occurs simultaneously with building a foundation of trust through the first three levels discussed above. It was not until more recently that the sound relationship house theory incorporated trust as an explicit component (Gottman & Gottman, 2015). Specifically, it is now considered one of two walls that support all levels of the sound relationship house.

The other wall that has been included as part of the sound relationship house is commitment. As Gottman noted, "Commitment is about loyalty, cherishing one's partner above all others, not scanning the horizon for who might be better. … With or without a legal document, *commitment* means a life-long promise of devotion and care. When there is commitment, there is no worry of being replaced if someone "better" comes along (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 26-27). When the two walls of trust and commitment are stable and strong, they help support the levels of the sound relationship house. Several randomized clinical trials were conducted utilizing the Gottman's approach to couples therapy with diverse populations ranging from couples with a new baby to those experiencing domestic violence. Results were promising, with couples experiencing increased relationship satisfaction, greater intimacy and friendship, and better conflict management skills compared to controls (Gottman, 2015). It is evident that the two walls and three levels of the sound relationship house provide the building blocks of a healthy, satisfying relationship.

Adult Attachment

Attachment theory was first introduced by John Bowlby (1969) several decades ago to help understand the bond between a parent and child. He highlighted that attachment was an important human desire "from the cradle to the grave" (Bowlby, 1994, p. 129) and was therefore important to consider well beyond childhood. Since its original development, attachment theory has been applied to adults (Shaver & Mikulincher, 2002; Johnson & Whiffen, 2003) and more specifically, to romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Some researchers began investigating and conceptualizing adult love and loneliness through the lens of attachment theory (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). However, there was no theoretical framework for adults until Hazan and Shaver (1987) introduced romantic love as an attachment process that mirrors the bond experienced between a parent and child.

One of the central tenets outlined by Hazan and Shaver (1987) is "the emotional and behavioral dynamics of infant-caregiver relationships and adult romantic relationships are governed by the same biological system" (p. 133). There is an innate motivating force to maintain safety and security which occurs when an attachment figure is in physical or psychological proximity (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). In adults, the need for an emotional connection with a partner can act as a buffer against stressors and uncertainty. Further, adults are more effective at resolving conflict and offering support to others when there is a secure base (Johnson, 2004).

Another tenet highlighted by Hazan and Shaver (1987) is that the patterns of attachment outlined by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) are similar to those observed in adults (Lee, 1988). Secure attachment in adults often involves an ability to form close

relationships with others and seek reassurance more effectively. For adults with an anxious attachment, separation from one's partner is highly distressing and leads to more anger. Finally, avoidant individuals tend to avoid seeking or offering support when they have emotional needs that need to be met. They also tend to demonstrate more hostility towards one's partner. Based on these two insecure attachment styles of anxiety and avoidance, the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ECR) was developed to measure these dimensions of adult attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000) found that the ECR had the best psychometric properties among three other measures of attachment. Fraley et al. (2000) worked to improve measurement precision through a revised version of the questionnaire (ECR-R) that is commonly used to this day as a self-report measure of adult attachment.

A third insecure form of attachment was later identified that is "a combination of seeking closeness and then fearful avoidance of closeness when it is offered" (Johnson, 2004, p. 28). This type of attachment is marked by chaos and occurs when an attachment figure is simultaneously the cause of and solution to the fear (Johnson, 2002). In adult attachment, this is often referred to as a fearful avoidant attachment pattern (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Each of these attachment patterns have specific behavioral responses to protect the individual from feeling rejected or abandoned in some way by the attachment figure (Johnson, 2004).

Prior research has demonstrated that an individual's romantic attachment pattern is influenced by several factors, including beliefs about relationships and earlier attachment experiences (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Therefore, attachment patterns can

remain moderately stable throughout one's relationships, but there is also the possibility for them to be modified by new relationships (Johnson, 2004).

Attachment style has also been shown to impact romantic relationship satisfaction in adults. Lussier, Sabourin, and Turgeon (1997) found that adults with insecurely attached partners reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction. In couples where both partners are securely attached as adults, a higher level of relationship satisfaction was reported compared to couples with at least one of the partners that is insecurely attached.

A final tenet outlined by Hazan and Shaver (1987) is that in addition to attachment, other behavioral systems of caregiving and sexuality are included in romantic love. The researchers explain that within adult romantic relationships, caregiving and attachment are more difficult to separate because it is expected that both partners experience distress or feel threatened at some point, leading to a need for support and emotional responsiveness (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In addition, sexuality is also considered an attachment behavior, and differentiates adult attachment from attachment between parent and child (Johnson, 2004). An adult with an insecure attachment style may withhold sexual desires and needs being met due to feeling distressed or threatened in some way (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

An ongoing criticism in the adult attachment literature is the assumption that all romantic partners are attached to one another as might be expected within a parent-child relationship. It is suggested that it may take longer to progress from a friendship to an emotional attachment in adulthood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Prior research has also shown that securely attached individuals were more likely to use their romantic partners

as attachment figures than individuals who were insecurely attached (Fraley & Davis, 1997).

To differentiate an attachment relationship from another close relationship, there are three distinguishing factors to consider. More specifically, as compared to a close relationship, the attachment figure is used as a (a) target of proximity maintenance, (b) a safe haven in times of distress, and (c) a secure base for exploration (Ainsworth, 1991; Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). However, it is imperative to consider that attachment from a Western perspective may not be applicable to other populations. Although attachment to a primary individual may be evident among Europeans, more individualistic groups, it is suggested that attachment within collectivistic groups may be viewed differently. Specifically, Berg (2009) highlighted that primary attachment may occur with a family or a tribal community instead of a specific person among aboriginal-identified individuals. Therefore, considering one's cultural context is a critical step when seeking to understand attachment relationships among adults.

Relationship Maintenance

Although not a theory, it also bears noting that studies on relationship maintenance behaviors may highlight factors relevant to the current study. More specifically, there are a series of empirically designed studies that have examined behaviors associated with "maintaining a satisfactory relationship" (Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 227). Initially, data analysis revealed a Relational Maintenance Strategies Measure (RMSM) with five factors (Stafford & Canary, 1991), though this has since been extended to include seven factors (Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). There was an assumption in the five-factor model that all maintenance behaviors were strategic, which

refers to “behavior that is consciously and intentionally enacted to meet a particular goal” (Stafford et al., 2000, p. 307). However, it was later realized that relational maintenance behaviors included those that are both strategic and routine (Dainton & Stafford, 1993).

More recently, Stafford (2010) developed the Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure (RMBM) due to several item construction and conceptual concerns noted in the RMSM. The seven factors included in the RMBM included positivity (pleasant and cheerful interactions), understanding (demonstrating cooperation and patience), assurances (about future of relationship), self-disclosure (emotional expression and vulnerability), relationship talk (direct discussion about relationship), sharing tasks (working together to perform necessary responsibilities), and involvement with social networks (support from family and friends; Stafford, 2010; Stafford et al., 2000; Wettersten, Schreurs, Munch, Faith, & Sell, 2015).

Nearly all research in this area has demonstrated that relational maintenance behaviors consistently predict relationship satisfaction (Stafford et al., 2000), with some exceptions where no relationship was found (Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Ragsdale, 1996). In the original study by Canary and Stafford (1991), results demonstrated that the five-factor model of relational maintenance behaviors accounted for 56% of the variance in relationship satisfaction. In the most recent seven-factor model of RMSM, the relational maintenance strategies accounted for even more of the variance in relationship satisfaction as well as other characteristics of commitment, liking, and love (Stafford, 2010). Finally, prior research has also shown possible sex differences in that females tend to use relational maintenance strategies more frequently than males (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Ragsdale, 1996). However, after further investigation, Stafford et al. (2000) found

that biological sex did not predict any relational maintenance behaviors. It is worth noting that caution must be used when generalizing the findings within this area of relational maintenance as most samples up to this point have been relatively homogenous, especially in regards to ethnicity and sexual orientation (Canary & Stafford, 1991; Stafford, 2010; Stafford et al., 2000).

Integrating Theories and Qualitative Data Results

The theories and empirical support discussed in the preceding sections provide a brief overview of how intimacy and love are conceptualized within the field of close relationships. It is evident that significant progress has been made in regards to theoretical development, but there is much more that needs to be done. The following section discusses how the results of the current study can be applied to and extend existing theories to gain a better understanding of how emotional infidelity is conceptualized within a theoretical framework.

Definition of Emotional Infidelity in Literature

As mentioned in the initial literature review, prior research in the area of infidelity provided vague definitions of the term, ranging from sexual intercourse to falling in love (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Glass & Wright, 1985; Harris, 2002). When infidelity was later separated into different categories, emotional infidelity became even less understood. Some of these vague definitions that were outlined in the literature included "an emotional connection beyond friendship" (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a, p. 186) and subjective "in love" experiences (Thompson, 1984). In their comprehensive review of infidelity literature, Blow and Hartnett (2005a) established a definition of infidelity as "a sexual and/or emotional act taking place outside of one's primary relationship that

somehow violates the trust and/or norms that have been established between those individuals" (p. 191-192). Through these definitions, we do not yet know what it means to have an emotional connection or what is considered an emotional act that would fall under the category of infidelity.

Definition of Emotional Infidelity in Current Study

The primary research question in the current study was to determine what factors were present in emotional infidelity to form a substantive definition of the term. In and of itself, considering participant responses in the current study, the research team came to the following definition of emotional infidelity: an emotional connection to an outside individual of potential or actual romantic interest that goes against the stated or unstated agreements of the primary relationship. Emotional connection includes intentional investment of time (physically and/or cognitively) and placing trust into a specific individual (sharing personal, vulnerable information about self and/or primary relationship) while withholding information (regarding nature of interactions with outside individual) from the primary partner.

In support of this definition, participant words play a validating role. For example, Participant 5 summarized some aspects of this substantive definition by noting that emotional infidelity was *"developing an emotional type intimacy, a trust-based relationship, with someone."* In regards to the time component of emotional infidelity, Participant 6 put it into these words: *"... the romantic feelings, the sexual attraction, more of a deeper emotional attraction had the chance to develop because I was spending way more time with him than my first husband."* The importance of confiding in another

person was discussed by Participant 8 who shared that it "*felt like a betrayal".* She explained further:

> *You're [partner] talking about our personal relationship and our sexual relationship or whatever it is with this woman that I don't even know. Even if I knew her, it wouldn't matter. Those are our intimate, personal details and to me, that shows you're having some type of emotional connection to her.*

In light of this, the primary difference between a close friendship and emotional infidelity is in relation to the presence of a romantic component that goes against the unstated or stated agreements within the primary relationship. Although romantic feelings are commonly evident within emotional infidelity and considered overstepping a boundary, a close friendship is not necessarily romantically based and therefore, not considered a boundary crossing.

Participants in the current study used similar language as previous researchers (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Fife, Weeks, & Gambescia, 2008) when describing their definitions of emotional infidelity, especially in regards to establishing an emotional connection with another person and breaking of trust within the primary relationship. However, the current study provides further clarification on what it means to establish a connection with an outside other. Specifically, this connection occurs with an individual that is of potential romantic interest and includes investment of time in another person, whether in their physical presence or through mental energy being spent on them. This was consistent with previous literature noting that emotional infidelity was defined as being in love with another person (Thompson, 1984; Whitty & Quigley, 2008). Furthermore, prior research has highlighted that infidelity involves less time focused on

the primary partner and more time dedicated to an outside individual (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006). Connection with another individual also includes confiding in them by sharing vulnerable and personal information about oneself or the primary relationship. At the same time, there is a withholding of information from the primary partner about the nature of the interactions in the outside relationship.

Taken together, confiding more in an outside other and a lack of honesty with the primary partner results in a breach of trust within the primary (monogamous) relationship. While this seems to closely align with the vague definitions provided above, the current findings provide an elaborated and clear description of what it means to form a connection with a person outside of the primary relationship. The establishment of a connection and the potential for romantic feelings, in violation of agreed upon relational boundaries, appear to be core components in defining emotional infidelity.

Triangular Theory of Love and Defining Emotional Infidelity

Taking into consideration the theories that were reviewed earlier, the definition of intimacy provided by Sternberg (1986) seems to closely parallel how participants in the current study defined emotional infidelity, except that it is within an extra-dyadic relationship that contains potential or actual romantic feelings. Sternberg's notion of intimacy is particularly evident in terms of establishing a deeper connection and closeness with another person. Furthermore, Sternberg's (1986) definition of passion relates to physical attraction, romance, and sexual consummation which aligns with the feelings discussed by participants. Specifically, most women considered romantic and sexual feelings for another person, without physically acting on those feelings, as a critical component of defining emotional infidelity.

Although decision/commitment (the third vertex of Sternberg's triangular theory of love) was not explicitly highlighted by participants, there may be an unstated assumption that the commitment to one's partner is altered through emotional infidelity. Specifically, the commitment to the primary partner may be in question given the withholding of information and breaching of trust as important factors that were identified by participants. Furthermore, there is, in the very least, a short-term decision to establish an intimate connection with an outside other that was highlighted by participants to be intentional. In light of these similarities, emotional infidelity, in terms of Sternberg's (1986) theory, would represent a second, extra-dyadic triangle in which the intimacy vertex is strong, the passion vertex is present (though not acted upon physically), and the decision/commitment vertex is potentially weaker.

Given the significant parallels highlighted above, it is possible that a Sternberg-influenced, amended definition of emotional infidelity may be relevant. More specifically, integrating Sternberg's (1986) theory with the current study findings, emotional infidelity may be defined as the development of intimacy (closeness and connectedness) and probable feelings of passion (romance and attraction; without having acted on that passion in sexual terms) toward another person outside of the primary relationship and against the stated or unstated agreements of the primary relationship. In this case, intimacy involves intentional investment of time (physically and/or cognitively) and placing trust into a specific individual (sharing personal, vulnerable information about self and/or primary relationship) while withholding information (regarding nature of interactions with outside individual) from the primary partner.

This revised definition fits with previous definitions of emotional infidelity discussed above, but provides greater theoretically grounded clarity when seeking to understand what it means to form an "emotional connection" or engage in an "emotional act" with another person that goes beyond a friendship (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). Up until this point, scholars were unsure of what those terms actually meant, and definitions were left up to individual interpretation--leading to a myriad of methodological concerns. By contextualizing the definition of emotional infidelity in both the words of our participants, and in the theoretical assumptions of Sternberg, we have stronger construct parameters and better understanding of the system the definition might fit in.

The Theoretical Extradyadic Triangle. As has been demonstrated, Sternberg's (1986) descriptions of intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment assist in shaping how emotional infidelity is defined given the findings of the current study. The theoretical triangle also seems to provide a framework for what occurs within the extradyadic relationship during emotional infidelity.

According to Sternberg's theory, the shape of the triangle outlines the balance of love within a relationship, which may vary based on individual perception (Sternberg, 1986). However, in the context of emotional infidelity, it might be expected that in an extradyadic relationship, some vertices of the theoretical triangle are more present than others, altering the overall shape. Visually speaking, this may look more like an isosceles triangle, with intimacy as the most pronounced vertex of the triangle given the importance of developing an emotional closeness with an outside other. In addition, feelings that are sexually and romantically based are often experienced toward an outside other during emotional infidelity which are described as passion within the triangular

theory of love. Therefore, it would be expected that following intimacy, there would be a presence of passion followed by decision/commitment. It is not that the other two vertices are entirely absent (indeed, by definition, passion would need to be present), but that there is less of an emphasis within the extradyadic relationship compared to intimacy.

The Primary Relationship Theoretical Triangle. Within the current study, participants noted that emotional infidelity often occurs due to an apparent *"gap"* or *"void"* in emotional needs being met. Specifically, several women highlighted that there is a desire to feel *"supported", "wanted", "appreciated"*, and *"validated"* by the primary partner that is potentially sought out elsewhere when that is missing in the primary relationship. Drigotas and Rusbuilt (1992) highlighted that if one's needs are not being met, there may be a desire to have them met elsewhere while remaining within the primary relationship.

In a healthy romantic relationship, it would be ideal for an equilateral triangle to be represented, with all three vertices of love in balance (Sternberg, 1986). However, during the occurrence of emotional infidelity, it might be anticipated that the triangle representing the primary relationship is unbalanced, with decision/commitment more present than the intimacy and passion components.

Extending Prior Research. As mentioned previously, a shortened version of the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale (Sumter et al., 2013) and the Intimacy, Passion, and Commitment Scale (Lemieux & Hale, 1999; 2000) have successfully measured the basic assumptions of the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986). The original intent of this theory was to conceptualize different types of love with important others. However, it seems plausible that these scales could be extended to measure emotional infidelity

similar to the theoretical conceptualization of two different triangles outlined in the preceding section. Specifically, individuals who are engaging in emotional infidelity could respond to items in regards to the extradyadic relationship to determine the presence of each component. The same could be done in understanding the presence of each vertex of intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment within the primary relationship during emotional infidelity, allowing researchers to compare and contrast the extradydic and primary representations of these important relational components.

In addition to testing such a revision with a representative sample of individuals in monogamous relationships, it would be important to alter the language so it is applicable to an extradyadic relationship and a primary relationship, as both scales currently reference "my partner" across items (Lemieux & Hale, 1999; Sumter et al., 2013). Furthermore, items measuring the vertex of passion would also need to be altered to reflect how it is defined from an emotional infidelity perspective, with the presence of romantic and sexual feelings without physically acting on them. Given that perception is an important factor in Sternberg's (1986) theory and individual variation is expected in the presence of love, it would be interesting to administer the items to both primary partners. This could provide insight into possible emotional gaps within the primary relationship that may be fulfilled within the extradyadic relationship.

Critiques of Triangular Theory of Love. Although there are several ways that the triangular theory of love aligns with the findings of the current study, there are also some aspects of the theory that appear to be lacking. First, this theory seems to be focused on heterosexually identified individuals given the nature of the language outlined by Sternberg (1986). Although the items within the two scales note the word "partner",

which could be open to various sexual orientations, there is no information provided about demographics relating to sexual identity. In fact, there is minimal information provided about demographics beyond sex, age, and education level. Therefore, it appears that further research needs to be conducted to determine how this theory may or may not be applicable across individuals of diverse identities.

The triangular theory of love also does not explicitly mention trust as a component within the theoretical triangle (Sternberg, 1986). This was an important factor noted among participants in the current study in terms of understanding emotional infidelity and seems to be an important aspect of close relationships across diverse populations (Gottman, 2011; Verkeytun & Masson, 1996). After taking a deeper look, it could be argued that trust is included as part of the intimacy component of the triangle, although the theory could become more robust with an overt discussion and definition of this concept.

A final critique worth noting is that Sternberg's (1986) theory does not account for other factors that may influence the presence of love within any given relationship. For example, there is little to no mention of how earlier experiences, such as attachment with caregivers, trauma, or previous romantic relationships might impact what vertices are most present and which may be lacking within a relationship. Attachment theorists have identified the critical influence of earlier experiences on close relationships for several decades (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Johnson, 2004). The impact of earlier experiences, such as through modeling, was also identified as an important factor in how individuals view relational boundaries in the current study, which is discussed in more detail beginning on page 155. Therefore, it seems that the triangular theory of love

overlooks an important consideration that could alter the overall balance of the theoretical triangle, which could also be extended to an extradyadic relationship in emotional infidelity.

Sound Relationship House Theory and Defining Emotional Infidelity

Interestingly, the sound relationship house theory (Gottman, 1999; 2011; Gottman & Gottman, 2015) also seems to overlap greatly with how emotional infidelity is defined given the findings of the current study. Specifically, within the first level of building a love map (Gottman, 2011), this seems to involve the establishment of an emotional connection and a foundation of emotional-based trust given the vulnerability that might be expected to share about one's needs, values, goals, and stressors. It could also be argued that developing this type of connection with another person involves investment of time in some capacity. Although not explicitly discussed as building a love map, this first level is consistent with findings of the current study in that women shared about confiding in an outside other about more personal, vulnerable information as a component of emotional infidelity. Furthermore, participants also highlighted the investment of time, whether physically or cognitively, into another individual as an important factor.

The second (sharing fondness and admiration) level of Gottman's (2011) theory also fits with building an emotional connection. More specifically, the second level involves showing appreciation and admiration for one's partner instead of pointing out their flaws or mistakes. This seems to align with how women in the current study discussed how they would define emotional infidelity. Specifically, participants outlined that feeling *"connected"* to an outside other could occur due to feeling *"appreciated"*

and being *"complimented"* when that is missing within the primary relationship. Additionally, the third level (turning toward) refers to making bids and responding to bids from one's partner to facilitate connection, attention, and support within the relationship. Over time, these bids build up an emotional bank account (Gottman, 2011). The idea of increasing an emotional bank account was also highlighted during interviews when women spoke about emotional needs of being *"supported"* and *"validated"* which might be met by an outside other in the context of emotional infidelity.

Taken together, the first three levels of the sound relationship house form a foundation of emotional closeness and positive affect that increases the friendship, intimacy, and passion experienced within romantic relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2015). Positivity has also been considered an important relational strategy to maintain satisfaction between romantic partners (Stafford, 2010). When individuals are not engaging in behaviors that shape the first three levels of the sound relationship house, there is increased conflict, negative affect, and decreased relationship satisfaction within the primary relationship (Gottman, 2011). It seems plausible that this could lead to seeking out emotional intimacy elsewhere, perhaps leading to an increased risk of emotional infidelity.

Another aspect of the sound relationship house is the two walls that support it; one of those being (emotional-based) trust. Given the definition of trust provided by Gottman and Gottman (2015) that was outlined earlier, this seems to align with emotional-based trust which has been identified within previous literature. Specifically, through development and validation of the Specific Interpersonal Trust Scale, Johnson-George and Swap (1982) note that emotional-based trust is the belief that an individual

can confide in and self-disclose to another person with freedom from embarrassment and criticism. Furthermore, among women specifically, included in this type of trust is the degree to which the other person demonstrates honesty (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). Prior research has demonstrated that a foundation of (emotional-based) trust led to couples feeling increased safety and security within the relationship (Gottman, 2011), which is a central tenet of attachment theory applied to both children and adults as well (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Johnson, 2004). This type of trust was also a critical component mentioned by participants within the current study. Specifically, women noted that keeping information from the primary partner and confiding in an outside other were important factors in the occurrence of emotional infidelity.

The other wall in the sound relationship house, commitment, is discussed in terms of loyalty to the primary partner and placing them above all others (Gottman & Gottman, 2015). This seems to align with dependability trust (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 1985), a topic that will be defined more clearly in a later section. Within an emotional infidelity context, this level of commitment may be lacking within the primary relationship given the presence of an extradyadic relationship. Therefore, it may be that the walls of trust and commitment that form the sound relationship house are weakened within the primary relationship during emotional infidelity, making it difficult to sustain a strong friendship as represented by the first three levels. Furthermore, it also seems plausible that a weaker friendship could reduce the strength of the two walls representing trust and commitment. Although not explicitly discussed in terms of commitment, participants in the current study identified the idea of intentionally seeking out another individual to fulfill an apparent *"void"* or *"gap"* within the primary relationship as a possible piece of

emotional infidelity. Thus, there seems to be an implied understanding that the commitment to the primary partner is likely altered in some way during emotional infidelity, especially when there is an intentional decision to engage with an outside other.

Given the overlap between the results of the current project and the writings and work of Gottman, it seems important to consider how emotional infidelity might be defined in the context of the sound relationship house theory. Specifically, integrating the findings of the current study with Gottman's (1999; 2011) theory, emotional infidelity may be defined as the development of a relational friendship (building knowledge of their inner psychological world, sharing fondness and admiration, and making "bids" for their time and attention) with an extradyadic individual, with probable feelings of passion (romance and attraction; without having physically acted on those feelings in sexual terms), that goes against the stated or unstated agreements and commitment within the primary relationship. A relational friendship includes making bids for another person's time (physically and/or virtually) and confiding in them (sharing personal, vulnerable information about self and/or primary relationship) while withholding information (regarding nature of interactions with outside individual) from the primary partner, resulting in a breach of emotional-based trust and a diminishing emotional bank account within the primary relationship.

Similar to the Sternberg-influenced definition outlined in a preceding section, this revised definition incorporating the sound relationship house theory provides a better understanding of what specific behaviors are included when understanding emotional

infidelity. Additionally, it provides another theoretical groundwork for studying emotional infidelity, which has not been in existence up to this point in the literature.

Extradyadic Relationship Sound Relationship House. In light of the possible explanatory power Gottman's (1999, 2011) theory holds in regard to emotional infidelity, it is proposed that there could be two visual representations of the sound relationship house; one of those houses would represent the relational friendship within the extradyadic relationship and the other would represent the relational friendship within the primary relationship during the occurrence of emotional infidelity. As highlighted above, there is notable overlap between the first three levels and two walls of the sound relationship house and the findings of the current study in regards to defining emotional infidelity. Although not the original intent, the sound relationship house theory seems to provide a framework that can be applied to an extradyadic relationship. Specifically, it would be expected that the first three levels of the sound relationship house, which involve the establishment of a strong relational friendship rooted in positive affect and emotional closeness, would be present with an outside other in the context of emotional infidelity. More specifically, one of the core components of emotional infidelity that was identified among participants was an emotional connection being formed with an outside other that was potentially romantically-based. Another critical element that women in the current study noted was the development of an emotional-based trust with another person. Therefore, it seems plausible that the wall of trust that supports the three levels of the sound relationship house would also be present within an extradyadic relationship.

Due to the nature of emotional infidelity and the presence of a primary partner during such an occurrence, the level of commitment to an outside other may be

questionable. Given this, the other wall of commitment in the sound relationship house is likely rather weak. Visually speaking, the sound relationship house might appear unstable, with three main levels and one wall that represent the extradyadic relationship within the context of emotional infidelity.

Primary Relationship Sound Relationship House. Within a healthy, romantic, monogamous relationship, Gottman (1999; 2011) would suggest that the first three levels of the sound relationship are strong and also supported by the two walls. However, during the occurrence of emotional infidelity, the primary relationship may not be as stable. As Participant 7 noted, "*there's something that's missing in your primary relationship",* which was echoed by all other participants. Specifically, women suggested that feeling *"validated, supported, and valued"* as well as *"being complimented, loved, and comforted"* were important emotional needs that could be met by an outside other if they were not being met within the primary relationship. In light of this, it seems plausible that the first three levels of the sound relationship house, which emphasize emotional vulnerability, support, and appreciation, might be lacking within the primary relationship during the occurrence of emotional infidelity, either consequent to the infidelity or as a pre-cursor to the infidelity.

As mentioned previously, a breach of emotional-based trust (the belief that an individual can confide in and self-disclose to another person; Johnson-George & Swap, 1982) was another noteworthy element of emotional infidelity mentioned by participants. Specifically, this included confiding in an outside other about vulnerable information while also withholding information or deceiving the primary partner about interactions with an outside other. This is consistent with prior research which has highlighted that a

violation of trust is an important component of defining infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). Therefore, the wall that seems to represent emotional-based trust in the sound relationship house would be rather weak or absent in such a situation.

Given the definition of commitment provided by Gottman and Gottman (2015) (noting the importance of loyalty and cherishing one's partner), a Gottman-informed definition of emotional infidelity might suggest that commitment is more often diminished in the primary relationship when emotional infidelity occurs. However, given that the primary relationship is still in existence, it might be argued that there is a commitment in some form, despite the lack of loyalty to the primary partner. In light of this, a visual representation of the primary relationship might include one unstable wall representing commitment with the first three levels and the wall of trust being quite worn down or even absent in the context of emotional infidelity.

Extending Prior Research. Although the original intent of the sound relationship house theory was to help couples become more equipped to effectively manage disagreements and conflict to improve the quality of romantic relationships (Gottman, 1999), it appears that it can also assist in providing a framework for understanding emotional infidelity. As noted previously, the sound relationship house theory was informed and validated based on Gottman's prior research with couples of diverse backgrounds (Gottman, 2011; Gottman & Gottman, 2015). Up to this point, there does not appear to be any specific research done by Gottman that specifically focuses on emotional infidelity. Given his approach up to this point, it would be interesting to observe couples experiencing emotional infidelity to determine what aspects of the sound relationship house theory are most impacted within the primary relationship, and which

are most present within the extradyadic relationship. Specifically, it might be predicted that the emotional intimacy conceptualized as the first three levels and two walls of the sound relationship house are lacking within the primary relationship and are instead more evident within the extradyadic relationship.

Establishment of a scale that could specifically measure the different components of the sound relationship house could also be beneficial. Specifically, this could provide insight about how the basic tenets of Gottman's (1999) theory hold up when they are operationalized in the form of subscales. Thought the Gottmans (2015) have created such scales, they have not been formally normed and or peer-reviewed. Such scales would allow individuals within the primary relationship to increase their awareness of what emotional needs might not be present as well as what needs might be met within an extradyadic relationship in the context of emotional infidelity. This would be a valuable extension of the sound relationship house theory, as it could be utilized among researchers within this area and provide clinically relevant information for professionals working with couples.

Critiques of Sound Relationship House Theory. There have been several parallels noted between Gottman's (1999; 2011) sound relationship house and the findings of the current study, although there are some critiques of the theory that are worth noting. First, while not necessarily a critique, it is important to highlight that there were four additional levels of the sound relationship house that were not discussed in this paper. This was because it was not considered relevant to the current study and that these components focused more on how to manage conflict and create shared meaning within a romantic relationship. Therefore, the first three levels and two walls of the sound

relationship house seem to be most applicable to descriptions of emotional infidelity. Undoubtedly, the presence of emotional infidelity would impact the remaining components of the Sound Relational House, though it's beyond the scope of this data to speculate how.

Another noteworthy critique is how Gottman (1999) developed and validated the sound relationship house theory. Instead of developing hypotheses and testing them through research on couples, the opposite approach was taken where prior observational research directly informed theory development (i.e., empiricism). Due to this, nearly all research support provided by Gottman (1999; 2011; Gottman & Gottman, 2015) was done within his own research lab. An important step that needs to be taken in light of this critique is to expand research on this theory with other diverse samples and by other researchers.

Finally, Gottman (1999, 2011) does not mention much in regards to romantic feelings or sexuality when outlining what shapes the sound relationship house. His prior research demonstrated that sexual intimacy and friendship increased among couples when there was a presence of trust and acceptance within the relationship (Gottman, 2011). It seems that increasing passion or sexual intimacy is considered an added benefit instead of an intentional area of focus. In the current study, nearly all participants spoke about attraction in addition to romantic and sexual feelings (without physically acting on those feelings) as important in defining emotional infidelity. Therefore, it seems that this is an important component to address if this theory were to be extended to conceptualize emotional infidelity in the future.

How Emotional Infidelity Occurs

In addition to developing a working definition, emergent data in the current study also revealed specific elements that help explain how emotional infidelity might occur. The main factor that was noted by participants and has been highlighted previously was in regards to emotional needs being met by an outside other. Therefore, it is not necessarily the identified *"void"* within the primary relationship by itself. Instead, it is having those emotional needs of attachment and perhaps romance being met by an outside other that constitutes a boundary crossing. This is consistent with prior research which has noted the importance of seeking an emotional connection or intimacy with another person outside of the primary relationship due to missing that in some capacity with the primary partner (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Gottman, 2011).

Another factor that assists in explaining how emotional infidelity might occur is through an awareness of shared interests with another person. Specifically, participants in the current study noted that a lack of shared interests with the primary partner and more overlapping interests with an outside other could contribute to the occurrence of emotional infidelity. Elsesser and Peplau (2006) found that within a work setting, overlapping professional and personal interests is a common reason for establishing friendships with coworkers. Therefore, it seems plausible this would allow for a greater opportunity to emotionally connect and engage in conversation about a mutually enjoyable topic, perhaps leading to a potential boundary crossing. Participant 8 had an experience with a coworker related to this: *"... I have become attracted to him - definitely on an emotional level because we have a lot in common and we have a lot to talk about. He's really smart and really interesting and he has different interests than my partner*

and they match my interests more." Therefore, a boundary crossing might be even more likely if there is a lack of overlapping interests within the primary relationship.

The potential for emotional infidelity to be *"completely one-sided"* was identified by several women in the current study. Specifically, an individual may be entirely unaware of how the other person is feeling or what the intentions may be, leading to a possible occurrence of emotional infidelity. Prior research has cited this a common concern evident within professional work settings in that what one person considers a friendship may be perceived by another person as developing a deeper emotional intimacy that oversteps a boundary (Elsesser & Peplau, 2006). Similarly, the importance of perception was another important element that contributes to how emotional infidelity might occur. It is well-known that what constitutes emotional infidelity varies across romantic relationships and even across individuals within those relationships (Blow & Harnett, 2005b). As a result, participants highlighted that it was important to take into account what a partner might view as a boundary crossing and work to adjust one's behavior. Without addressing and acknowledging a partner's concern, in the context of a non-abusive, non-violent romantic relationship, all participants agreed that this would be considered emotional infidelity.

Finally, a primary partner having less familiarity with an outside other was another element that helps explain how emotional infidelity might occur. Several participants explained that *"not knowing the person"* (with whom the partner is interacting) contributed to an increased concern for emotional infidelity. Although this does not appear to be explicitly addressed in the literature up to this point, it seems that having less familiarity of an outside other could contribute to the secrecy component of

infidelity where information may be withheld or deceived in some way. In fact, one precaution that couples have been known to take is engaging with friends of the couple instead of individual friends, especially if discussing emotionally vulnerable information such as one's romantic relationship (Glass & Staeheli, 2003). The workplace in particular is a good example of where this might occur given that it is not unusual for individuals to establish relationships with coworkers that are relatively unknown to the primary partner.

Taken together, it is evident that there are specific elements that might contribute to the occurrence of emotional infidelity. Specifically, these factors included emotional needs being met by an outside other, shared interests with an outside other, one-sided awareness, and the primary partner having less familiarity with the outside other. In light of these findings, it is not surprising that the participants of this study also discussed ways in which a relationship can be safeguarded or protected from such incidences. This was another emergent category in the current study and is addressed next.

Safeguarding the Primary Relationship from Emotional Infidelity

Protecting the primary relationship from the occurrence of emotional infidelity is an area that has received more limited attention within the literature. Instead, there appears to be more of a focus on how to appropriately treat or overcome infidelity after the fact. It is interesting to note that this was also evident among current participants, who noted that most safeguards that had been established were due to a prior negative experience with some sort of boundary crossing. By implementing some of the treatment suggestions that have been highlighted by researchers, one could argue that this could also be considered a form of safeguarding the relationship before any form of infidelity occurred in the first place.

In light of this, relationship safeguarding seems to refer to the establishment of "ground rules" (Gottman, 2011, p. 383) that minimizes the risk of emotional infidelity and cultivates increased trust, emotional openness, and commitment within the primary relationship. This aligns with participants in the current study who described safeguarding as the establishment of boundaries and rules, stated or unstated, that prioritize the primary relationship with a presence of trust and emotional openness.

Dependability trust was noted as a critical component of protecting the primary relationship. This type of trust refers to a belief that one's partner is honest, reliable, and will not engage in acts of infidelity (Rempel et al., 1985). This aligns with the perspectives of women in the current study, who highlighted that *"choosing to trust"* one's partner was important given that there are countless interactions throughout the day that occur outside of a partner's presence. By having a foundation of trust and more specifically, dependability toward one's partner, this seems to serve as a safeguard from emotional infidelity.

Prioritizing the primary relationship was another safeguard noted among the majority of participants. This was discussed in terms of *"investing"* and putting more time into the primary partner. Gottman (2011) also identified a similar idea when outlining ways to heal from the occurrence of infidelity. He notes that increasing investment and sacrificing for the relationship are critical components of maintaining a strong commitment. When there is less of an investment within the primary relationship, this can lead to less commitment to one's partner and a greater risk for emotional infidelity.

Several women identified the importance of openly sharing information with one's partner, especially in regards to social interactions with others. By having open communication with one another and a lack of secrecy, this acts as a safeguard within the primary relationship (Glass & Staeheli, 2003). Oftentimes, a lack of communication can lead to less emotional intimacy within the primary relationship, making individuals more vulnerable to the possibility of infidelity (Fife et al., 2008). This was also echoed by Gottman (2011) and Glass and Staeheli (2003) who suggest greater openness and honesty with one's partner when repairing a relationship from infidelity. Therefore, it seems plausible that this could be considered a preventative measure taken to reduce the risk of emotional infidelity from occurring at all.

The importance of setting boundaries with others, such as coworkers and close friends, to protect the primary relationship was also highlighted by women in the current study. This establishment of boundaries is consistent with prior research in this area as well. For example, Gottman (2011) discusses that establishing "ground rules" is a necessary step following the occurrence of infidelity, which could be fitting as a preventative step as well. Glass and Staeheli (2003) also emphasize the establishment of boundaries in platonic friendships and within the work setting as an imperative step to take in safeguarding the primary relationship. Furthermore, in regards to gender and sexual orientation, Galupo (2009) and Gillespie et al. (2015) found that heterosexually identified men and women tended to have less cross-sex friendships than gay and lesbian identified individuals. Within the current study, most women reported that their closest friendships were with other women. Several participants either ended or never had cross-sex friendships as an established boundary within their romantic relationships. In

addition, over half of participants reported feeling less comfortable having a close friendship with a woman who identified as a lesbian than a heterosexual identified woman—though it was not clear whether this was due to relational safeguarding or discomfort with individuals who identified as a sexual minority. Whatever the reason, the this finding fits with previous research that heterosexual identified individuals tend to form friendships with others who are similar in sexual orientation (Galupo, 2009). However, an exception was noted in that three participants shared that they have close friendships with people of various sexual orientations.

Most participants highlighted that they tend to establish a boundary surrounding amount of disclosure with friends as well, noting that they tend to share less about personal and vulnerable information with friends than with their primary partner. Self-disclosure has also been cited as an important behavior for maintaining relational satisfaction among romantic partners (Stafford, 2010). It seems plausible that engaging in significant personal disclosure with an outside other might increase the risk of emotional infidelity. This seems to be particularly relevant when sharing details about one's romantic relationship, as several participants noted that as an important boundary with friends. However, an exception was identified by two participants who shared that they disclosed the same level of information to their close friends as they did to their primary partner.

In regards to established work boundaries, many participants explained that they tended to keep some level of emotional distance with coworkers, especially in regards to the level of disclosure about their personal lives. If these participants had coworkers whom they had known in another setting previously, were similar in age, and identified

as women, there tended to be exceptions with the level of emotional closeness. This was consistent with prior research which found that participants (whose sexual identities were not reported) felt more comfortable with same-sex friendships in the workplace and were also more likely to develop a friendship with a coworker if they had known them previously (Elsesser & Peplau, 2006). Therefore, while there are exceptions to these boundaries, it appears that establishing some level of emotional distance in regards to the amount of personal disclosure may serve as a common safeguard against emotional infidelity.

Alternatively, some participants in the current study identified less boundaries in place, especially in regards to work relationships. For example, one woman spoke about her closest friends also being her business partners and appreciating the level of emotional closeness that was present. This aligns with previous research on "work-spouse relationships", which is defined as "a special, platonic friendship with a work colleague characterized by a close emotional bond, high levels of disclosure and support, and mutual trust, honesty, loyalty, and respect" (McBride & Bergen, 2015, p. 502). These types of relationships tend to have great overlap with close friendships, especially in regards to the level of emotional closeness, personal disclosure, and lack of romance. Furthermore, work-spouse relationships are often made up of cross-sex individuals (McBride & Bergen, 2015), although that is not necessarily always the case. Participants in the current study primarily referenced women with whom they were emotionally close within the work setting. However, although not explicitly labeled as a work spouse, one participant noted having more emotionally close relationships with male coworkers with a high level of personal disclosure: *"I have two very close male friends at work and I talk*

to them about my relationship with my mom. I talk to them about my stresses in my life, the kids and even sometimes when if I'm having an argument with my husband and all that stuff."

Taken together, these findings highlight the individual variation that is increasingly evident on the topic of establishing boundaries with important others. What may feel appropriate and uncomfortable to one person may be drastically different from another person. Therefore, as emphasized by Gottman (2011) and Fife et al. (2008), it is important for couples to discuss and determine a mutually agreed upon definition of boundaries, and of emotional infidelity, in addition to an establishment of norms within the primary relationship. It is worth noting that this suggestion is presumably applicable to couples that are capable and eager to communicate in a healthy, effective way with the goal of establishing equal and fair guidelines. As is discussed below, very different guidelines may be suggested for romantic relationships that are characterized by the presence of power, control, and abuse concerns. For healthy couples, not only can such a discussion enhance connection between partners, but may also minimize the risk of emotional infidelity; in abusive relationships, the discussion will often only serve to reinforce the power and control of the abusive partner (Carlson & Jones, 2010). A final theme of establishing boundaries with technology emerged as another relationship safeguard, which is considered in the following section.

Technology and Emotional Infidelity

One of the research questions in the current study was to determine how technology may play a role in understanding emotional infidelity. An emergent theme within the current study was technology as a vehicle through which emotional infidelity

could occur. Several women noted examples that involved some form of communication via technology with an outside other or explicitly stated technology as an important factor. Given the findings highlighted up to this point, it has been established that emotional infidelity does not necessarily require face-to-face interaction to develop an emotional intimacy with another person. Therefore, technology provides the opportunity for such engagement with individuals outside of the primary relationship. Although previous research in this area has been lacking, Parker and Wampler (2003) found that internet infidelity was perceived to be more emotionally-based, highlighting the possibility for interactions to occur virtually. It seems plausible that this could be extended to other forms of technology, such as through smart phones and social media.

Being cautious about what is sent via technology was a boundary that was discussed among women due to the risk of misinterpretation or being unable to take back what was sent due to the permanence of technology interactions. This is consistent with prior research which has noted that a disadvantage of technology is the potential for communication to be lost in translation (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014).

Participants also discussed established boundaries or agreements surrounding technology to protect the primary relationship from emotional infidelity. Nearly all women noted that they felt comfortable sharing openly with their partners about interactions through technology and perceived the same openness from their partners. However, boundaries about accessing each other's devices varied among participants. For example, some women discussed complete openness about accessing devices and others spoke about an *"unstated rule"* of having respect for each other despite knowing passwords to their partner's devices and accounts. In addition, two women identified a

strict boundary of not accessing each other's devices or accounts and not knowing passwords. Previous research has highlighted how technology provides a significant amount of privacy with the ability to add passwords and delete messages, emails, or photos at the click of a button (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). From an emotional infidelity perspective, this may provide an opportunity to withhold information or deceive a primary partner about interactions with an outside other. Participants in the current study noted that the main reason for established boundaries or agreements about technology with one's primary partner, whether stated or unstated, was due to a previous negative experience of their own or witnessing that in someone else.

Prior research has also discussed the possibility for technology to distract from the primary relationship (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). This concept was labeled as being "alone together" where partners are within the same room, but focused on technology instead of each other (Turkle, 2012). Concerns about this were voiced among participants and several noted that an agreement, whether stated or unstated, of *"unplugging"* during dinner time, date night, or family nights was established to avoid distractions and prioritize the primary relationship. The main reason for such a boundary was due to witnessing others becoming distracted while in the company of another person.

In light of these findings from the current study and prior literature, it is apparent that technology is important to consider in the context of emotional infidelity. Specifically, technology seems to serve as a medium through which emotional infidelity can occur, especially given the virtual communication that can occur with outside others. Furthermore, establishing agreements and boundaries surrounding technology among

romantic partners appears to be an important way that participants safeguarded their primary relationship.

Factors Influencing Relational Boundaries

The final main category that emerged within the current study was in relation to cultural and community influences that shape relational boundaries with important others. Most women identified modeling from parents, whether positive or negative, as an important factor in establishing their own boundaries in relationships. Specifically, it was noted that participants learned how to communicate more effectively and had access to parents as resources should they need additional guidance. Alternatively, one participant spoke about how her parents' recurrent engagement in infidelity was motivation to be *"nothing like them"* in her own romantic relationship.

Another related factor identified by participants was childhood upbringing. Specifically, women shared that *"emotional closeness"* and *"openness"* during childhood had an impact on how boundaries were established within relationships with others of varying closeness. For those who grew up in a family that was rather open and expressive, this appeared to extend into adult relationships. The same pattern appeared to occur for those who grew up in a family that was more emotionally restrictive and less open.

Given the importance of parental role models and childhood upbringing, it seems that adult attachment could be an important consideration in understanding how this influences one's relational boundaries. Although prior research in this area is limited as it relates to infidelity, there is evidence that attachment styles may have an impact on seeking out emotional needs with an outside other. Specifically, those with an anxious

attachment style have been demonstrated to seek out greater emotional intimacy in extradyadic relationships whereas those with an avoidant attachment style tend to have less emotional investment with outside others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Feeney & Noller, 1992). Therefore, if one's emotional needs were met by a primary attachment figure during childhood and led to a secure attachment style, it seems plausible that there may be less of a risk for emotional infidelity in adulthood. However, up to this point, there does not appear to be any research demonstrating that those whose parents engage in infidelity are more likely to engage in that themselves. It is also worth reiterating that while attachment style remains moderately stable, there is the possibility for that to be modified through other important relationships throughout one's life (Johnson, 2004).

A community influence that was noted among seven participants was their spiritual affiliation, which served as a guide when establishing relational boundaries with important others. Most participants discussed this in terms of their *"relationship with God"* while some noted a specific Christian-based denomination that shaped *"how to behave"* with others in their lives. One participant shared that she had no religious or spiritual affiliation. Up to this point, there is no known research addressing the impact of spirituality on emotional infidelity or establishing relational boundaries. However, prior research on primarily married individuals has demonstrated that religious affiliation reduces the risk of infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007). Burdette and colleagues (2007) noted that two religious groups (nontraditional conservatives and non-Christian faiths) as exceptions to these findings. Furthermore, attending religious services is significantly inversely related to infidelity in that attendance may serve as a protective factor against the occurrence of

infidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008; Burdette et al., 2007). Other religious factors, such as faith and prayer, were not shown to have a significant relationship with infidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008).

One possible explanation for these findings is that attendance at religious services involves increased exposure to a community that dissuades the occurrence of emotional infidelity through various programming, counseling, and social support available to couples (Burdette et al., 2007). Another explanation is that by attending religious services, there are ongoing messages condemning infidelity and promoting moral behavior (Blow & Hartnett, 2005b; Liu, 2000). In light of this, it seems plausible that establishment of relational boundaries might also be guided by moral principles for those who have particular religious or spiritual affiliations.

Limitations

Although the current study addresses a significant gap in the literature and provides a greater understanding of emotional infidelity and, most importantly, how it is defined, there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample was homogenous across several identity factors. Most participants identified as White (six of the eight) heterosexual (seven of the eight) women, and all were in committed, monogamous, long-term, presumably healthy relationships with men. Furthermore, nearly all participants reported a spiritual affiliation of some sort and all had a minimum of a bachelor's degree due in part to the recruitment focus on professional women. In addition, nearly all participants were from the Midwest region of the United States. Due to the homogeneity of this sample, caution must be exercised regarding generalizability of the findings. In following constructivist grounded theory (CGT), a homogenous sample is encouraged to

capture the lived experiences of participants while working toward the construction of theory. Therefore, seeking to generalize the findings is not a primary goal of CGT (Charmaz, 2014). Given that the current study was focused on establishing a working definition of emotional infidelity, it was necessary to begin with a small, homogenous sample with the intention of expanding to larger, more diverse samples in future studies.

A second limitation was that participants' partners were not directly interviewed. Specifically, participants were asked about their partners' work interactions, friendships, and boundaries but could only speak based on their own perception given that partners were not present during the interview. Although perception was an important component in the current study given the focus on defining emotional infidelity specifically among women, understanding how partners might respond to the same questions could shed light on possible gender differences. It would be strongly encouraged that this be further investigated in future research on emotional infidelity.

A third limitation was that the variation in experiences with infidelity may have altered responses. Specifically, there may have been variation in boundaries and how emotional infidelity was defined based on prior experiences or lack thereof with infidelity. Furthermore, a limited number of participants had either engaged in infidelity or reported they had a partner who had engaged in infidelity while in relationship with the participant. Therefore, it seems plausible that this could influence one's perceptions about this topic. In addition to this limitation, the sensitivity of this topic could have also altered responses. Although confidentiality was thoroughly discussed with all participants during initial and follow-up interviews, there may have been hesitation to fully disclose information relating to such a personal, vulnerable topic. To address this, it was not a

requirement nor expectation for individuals to disclose whether or not they had any experience with infidelity. Furthermore, questions during the interviews addressed emotional infidelity in a broad way instead of asking about personal experiences.

Another limitation was in regards to the unintentional exclusion of individuals given that interviewing occurred via phone. Although CGT strongly encourages semi-structured interviewing as a way of exploring participants' perspectives (Charmaz, 2014), this can limit participation for individuals who may not have access to a phone, may speak another language, or may have other physical or verbal limitations that impact their ability to participate.

Given the significant involvement of the primary investigator throughout data collection and analysis, it is likely that personal bias impacted the overall progression of the interview despite the development of a clear protocol that was followed to the degree possible. CGT acknowledges the researcher as an important part of the research process instead of seen as set apart from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, during the semi-structured interview, it seems plausible that how the primary investigator responded in the moment could have impacted the data. To remain aware of personal biases, the primary investigator engaged in regular memo writing and collaboration with the research team (Charmaz, 2014). Although this limitation could be addressed by having other research team members conduct interviews, it is encouraged to have one interviewer to maintain consistency across interviews (Charmaz, 2014).

A final limitation worth noting is that the research team was comprised of individuals within the counseling psychology field. All team members have worked in clinical settings where relational concerns, such as infidelity, have occurred. Although the

research team remained in regular communication, reviewed coding, provided feedback, and discussed varying opinions as to ensure participants' perspectives and experiences were accurately captured, team members still had an influence on the development of the interview protocol and overall data analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Research Implications and Future Directions

In light of the current study's findings and prior research outlined previously, there are several suggestions for future research that could expand our understanding of this important topic and contribute to an emergent theory. The current study laid the initial groundwork in establishing a substantive definition of emotional infidelity and identifying other factors that assist in understanding this concept, such as a possible definition, conjecture regarding precipitating factors, discussions of relationship safeguarding, and factors influencing relational boundaries. To expand upon this, it is necessary that future studies expand to include larger, more diverse samples of men and women. Specifically, including men and women of various ethnicities, sexual and gender identities, socioeconomic statuses, education levels, and spiritual beliefs would all be important to consider.

In addition, it is strongly encouraged that there be investigation of other groups in future studies, such as those who have personally engaged in emotional infidelity, those whose partners have engaged in infidelity during their relationship, those who have had no experience with emotional infidelity, those in open (non-monogamous) relationships, and those in polyamorous relationships. This could provide valuable information relating to group differences that emerge surrounding potential boundaries and how the proposed definition of emotional infidelity may vary or remain consistent.

Another suggestion is to conduct research on emotional infidelity with women of various sexual orientations and those who are in same-sex romantic relationships. Prior research has demonstrated that it may be more common for there to be components of a friendship and a romantic relationship among lesbian-identified women, suggesting a more fluid boundary (Degges-White, 2012; Diamond, 2002). This highlights the need for a better understanding of how this may be understood when seeking to define emotional infidelity among this population. Additionally, many women who identify as gay or lesbian, or who are involved in same-sex relationships, have close friendships with other women (Galupo, 2007). Consequently, there may be different methods of relational safeguarding within this community as compared to the women in this study.

As was identified previously, there are significant methodological concerns within this area of research. Specifically, participants in prior students have frequently included undergraduate students who are primarily unmarried and identify as heterosexual (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988; Whitty & Quigley, 2008). Prior studies that have investigated individuals of diverse identities are often broadly focused on relationships instead of specifically investigating infidelity (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Harris, 2002). Therefore, it is critical that future studies begin by expanding to diverse samples of women to strengthen the applicability of the current study's findings with the intention of expanding to other genders. Not only could this determine how the definition in the current study holds up across different samples, but may also increase generalizability of the findings. The current study proposed an extension (specific to emotional infidelity) of two theories on intimate relationships, including the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) and the sound relationship house

theory (Gottman, 1999). After further exploration in other samples, perhaps research that validates an extension of these theories could be considered.

More specifically, it was proposed in a preceding section that the shortened version of the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale (Sumter et al., 2013) and the Intimacy, Passion, and Commitment Scale (Lemieux & Hale, 1999; 2000) be revised and validated to measure the presence of each component within the extradyadic relationship and primary relationship during the occurrence of emotional infidelity. The extradyadic relationship and primary relationship responses could be compared and contrasted to determine apparent discrepancies and provide insight into possible gaps within the primary relationship that are being sought out within an extradyadic relationship.

To determine how the Sternberg-influenced definition of emotional infidelity might hold up, several hypotheses could be considered and investigated in future studies. First, one would predict that extradyadic relationship responses would score significantly higher on intimacy than primary relationship responses (assuming higher scores represent more intimacy). A second hypothesis would be that extradyadic relationship responses would score slightly higher on passion than primary relationship responses. Third, it would be predicted that extradyadic relationship responses would score lower on decision/commitment than primary relationship responses. It is suggested that these hypotheses be explored with individuals in monogamous relationships, but also those who are in open (non-monogamous) relationships and polyamorous relationships. Furthermore, investigation among populations of various ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, ages, and education levels would also be important to consider to determine

how the definition of emotional infidelity remains consistent or varies across different groups.

Implications for Practice

The results of the current study provide a substantive, though preliminary, definition of emotional infidelity for professional women in monogamous cross-sex relationships. Such a definition has been nonexistent up to this point within the literature, not to mention that this form of infidelity is not always considered separate from sexual infidelity (Glass & Wright, 1985). For example, several researchers have considered infidelity as a broad category that ranges from sexual intercourse to falling in love (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Glass & Wright, 1985; Harris, 2002). More recently, Blow and Hartnett (2005a) provided a definition of infidelity that includes a "sexual and/or emotional act taking place", highlighting the possibility for them to occur separately, but continuing to define infidelity as a broader concept. Although some researchers have begun to distinguish emotional infidelity from physical/sexual infidelity, the definitions continue to remain vague using phrases such as "falling in love" (Whitty & Quigley, 2008) or being "deeply connected" with another person (Sabini & Silver, 2005). Although it is evident that this area of research has made some important steps forward, the need for a clear, operationalized definition cannot be overstated. The current study laid the groundwork for such a definition. Eventually, it is hoped that practitioners will feel more knowledgeable when seeking to identify this type of infidelity among clients presenting with relationship concerns, especially if there is a clear, operationalized definition provided as the current study has proposed.

An emergent theme within the current study related to specific emotional needs not being met within the primary relationship as a risk for emotional infidelity. This is consistent with previous research outlining that infidelity often involves something missing within one's romantic relationship (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a; Gottman, 2011). Fife et al. (2008) explain that infidelity often occurs in conjunction with some type of relational concern. For example, they note that emotional distance within the primary relationship can lead to seeking out emotional intimacy in an outside individual to have that need met. Emotional needs that were highlighted among participants in the current study included feeling *"supported"*, *"validated"*, *"appreciated"*, and *"wanted"*, to name a few. However, it is important to note that researchers have also highlighted the potential for emotional infidelity to occur in healthy, satisfying romantic relationships as well (Glass, 2002; Glass & Staeheli, 2003).

Within a clinical setting, practitioners can assist couples with identifying specific emotional needs they might have within the primary relationship and how to effectively communicate to one's partner about the degree to which they are being met. This could allow for greater understanding of how a breakdown occurred (if applicable) and ways that the couple can continue building emotional intimacy within their relationship, perhaps reducing the risk of emotional infidelity occurring.

Intimate partner violence is an important consideration in light of the current study's findings. Although there have been a variety of terms used, Coercive Controlling Violence is referenced here, and defined as a "pattern of emotionally abusive intimidation, coercion, and control coupled with physical violence against one's partner" (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). This form of intimate partner violence is characterized by

control tactics of intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimizing, denying, and blaming (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Kelly and Johnson (2008) explain that these tactics may not all be used, but only those that an abuser believes will be most "successful". They also note that this form of intimate partner violence does not always involve violence, but that there does tend to be more frequent and severe levels of violence than in other forms. Many survivors report having greater psychological harm, such as a presence of fear and anxiety, than physical effects of Coercive Controlling Violence (Ferraro, 2006; Kirkwood, 1993). In addition, within heterosexual identified relationships, both men and women may be perpetrators, although prior research has found that an overwhelming majority are men (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Johnson, 2006). Similar control tactics have also been identified in same-sex relationships and lesbian identified relationships (Renzetti, 1992).

Given these findings, it is important to highlight the possibility for safeguarding the primary relationship, a main category in the current study, to broach the line of intimate partner violence. More specifically, setting boundaries within one's relationship regarding interactions with important others could become a concern of power and control by one or more individuals within the primary relationship. Although the participants in the current study were in presumably healthy, satisfying relationships without a presence of intimate partner violence, the findings relating to protecting one's relationship should be considered with caution given that it may not be applicable to relationships that have a presence of power, control, and jealousy. Furthermore, practitioners who may be working with couples who are presenting with concerns relating to infidelity need to be cognizant of how such recommendations might be

applicable depending on the nature of the relationship and the individuals within that relationship. Given this, the implications that follow should be considered in the context of a non-abusive relationship, where there is no marked coercion or issues of power and control.

Prior research has indicated that infidelity is the most common reason that couples seek out counseling, yet one of the most difficult to treat (Glass & Wright, 1997; Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson, 1997). Gottman (2011) outlines that when treating infidelity, it is essential that both individuals establish a strong commitment to one another and create a "new relationship, with new ground rules" (p. 383). Although not the primary focus of this study, factors relating to safeguarding one's relationship also emerged as important findings within the current study, which seems to align with Gottman's idea of establishing new rules. It was demonstrated by participants that the main reason for establishing boundaries, especially surrounding technology and emotional closeness with important others, was due to a previous concern that had occurred. Therefore, it seems fitting that a common component of treating infidelity involves a collaborative process between partners to form new boundaries or rules within the relationship (Gottman, 2011; Hertlein & Piercy, 2012).

Practitioners can assist couples in reducing the likelihood of a boundary crossing by incorporating interventions into their work with couples, perhaps even prior to the occurrence of emotional infidelity as a preventative approach. This has been suggested in previous research regarding treatment of traditional forms of infidelity and internet infidelity in particular (Gottman, 2011; Hertlein & Piercy, 2012), but could very well be extended to emotional infidelity given the relevance of technology as a vehicle through

which emotional infidelity may occur. Specifically, practitioners can encourage and facilitate open communication about how each partner defines emotional infidelity. This can provide clarity between partners given the wide variation that has been evident in understanding this concept (Hertlein & Piercy, 2012). Furthermore, discussion about what feels comfortable and uncomfortable with regards to interacting with others and collaboratively establishing possible boundaries or agreements within the primary relationship could be particularly beneficial within a therapeutic context.

Additionally, establishing ways to invest in the primary relationship could be another intervention that practitioners could utilize with couples as part of their treatment plan within counseling if this was an area that was perhaps lacking in the primary relationship. This was an emergent theme in the current study where women highlighted the need for making one's relationship a priority, especially in regards to investment of time into the primary partner. Doherty's (1999) prior research has demonstrated that romantic relationships are strengthened by ongoing "rituals" that assist in building connection. Rituals include behaviors that are considered predictable, frequent, and intentional. They may be brief, such as displaying affection through a hug or kiss, or of longer duration, such as scheduling date nights or reuniting at the end of a day (Doherty, 1999). Incorporating rituals of connection have also been outlined by Gottman and Gottman (2015) as an important component of "cherishing" the primary relationship and establishing new norms, especially following the occurrence of infidelity. Therefore, it seems that incorporation of such behaviors within a therapeutic setting might assist couples in building emotional intimacy within the primary relationship while reducing the risk of emotional infidelity.

Finally, offering psychoeducation to couples on the existence of emotional infidelity can be an important step in creating more awareness among those in romantic relationships. Since emotional infidelity has not always been considered independently from sexual/physical infidelity (Glass & Wright, 1985), there can be a misconception that without sexually engaging with another person face-to-face, infidelity has not occurred. The findings of the current study, in addition to more recent literature (Fife et al., 2008; Gottman, 2011; Moller & Vossler, 2014; Whitty & Quigley, 2008), suggest otherwise.

Although emotional infidelity does not involve sexual acts with an outside other, the emotional distress is often just as significant within the primary relationship. Fife et al. (2008) note that the development of an emotional intimacy with someone else often results in "deep pain, uncertainty, and loss of trust" (p. 316). This has been especially evident among women in previous research. Specifically, women tend to report more distress regarding emotional infidelity compared to men, who often view sexual infidelity as more distressing (Buss et al., 1992). This does not mean that men are not distressed by emotional infidelity, but that the concern is perhaps less heightened than it is for women. In light of these findings, practitioners have an important opportunity to educate couples on the impact of emotional infidelity and assist them in building and maintaining emotional intimacy with the primary partner.

Conclusion

The current study investigated how emotional infidelity was defined among middle-aged professional women who are in monogamous, cross-sex, romantic relationships. Grounded in participants' experiences and data, a substantive definition of emotional infidelity was developed in addition to two amended definitions. Based on the

participants' responses, the definition of emotional infidelity proposed in this study involves an emotional connection to an outside individual of potential or actual romantic interest that goes against the stated or unstated agreements of the primary relationship. Emotional connection includes intentional investment of time (physically and/or cognitively) and placing trust into a specific individual (sharing personal, vulnerable information about self and/or primary relationship) while withholding information (regarding nature of interactions with outside individual) from the primary partner.

The first amended definition of emotional infidelity was informed by the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), and involves development of intimacy (closeness and connectedness) and probable feelings of passion (romance and attraction; without having acted on that passion in sexual terms) toward another person outside of the primary relationship, that goes against the stated or unstated agreements of the primary relationship. In this case, intimacy involves intentional investment of time (physically and/or cognitively) and placing trust into a specific individual (sharing personal, vulnerable information about self and/or primary relationship) while withholding information (regarding nature of interactions with outside individual) from the primary partner.

The second amended definition was informed by the sound relationship house theory (Gottman, 1999, 2011), and involves the development of a relational friendship (strong knowledge of the outside other's inner psychological world, sharing fondness and admiration, and making "bids" for their time and attention) with an extradyadic individual, with probable feelings of passion (romance and attraction; without having physically acted on those feelings in sexual terms), that goes against the stated or

unstated agreements and commitment within the primary relationship. A relational friendship includes making bids for another person's time (physically and/or virtually) and confiding in them (sharing personal, vulnerable information about self and/or primary relationship) while withholding information (regarding nature of interactions with outside individual) from the primary partner, resulting in a breach of emotional-based trust and a diminishing emotional bank account within the primary relationship.

This study also shed light on how emotional infidelity might occur, descriptions of safeguarding behaviors within the primary relationship, and cultural and community factors influencing relational boundaries with important others. A review of prior literature revealed that investigation of emotional infidelity is lacking. More specifically, a clear, operationalized definition of this concept does not currently exist and those provided up to this point are vague at best, leading to an array of methodological concerns. The current study sought to address this significant gap and took a critical step in gaining a better understanding of this topic by developing a substantive, though preliminary, definition of emotional infidelity. These findings begin to lay the initial groundwork in gaining a better understanding of emotional infidelity and provide the opportunity for further investigation within future research as well as incorporating useful interventions in clinical settings with couples.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT

Earn $30-$40 to participate in a study exploring relationship definitions!

Hello, my name is Lindsey Morrissey and I am conducting a dissertation study that is exploring various relationship definitions such as close friendships and emotional infidelity.

I am inviting women who meet the following criteria to participate:

- 30-50 years of age
- Currently established in a career
- Living with romantic partner for one year or more

Participation in the study will involve:

- A short electronic survey
- A 1.5 - 2 hour phone interview in which you will be asked about your experiences and/or views related to:
    - Close friendships
    - Emotional infidelity
    - Interactions with others (e.g. work colleagues)
    - Your relationship dynamics (e.g. established rules)
- A possible short follow-up interview

As compensation for your participation you will receive:

- $30 Amazon e-gift card to be emailed immediately following the initial interview
- An additional $10 Amazon e-gift card for any follow-up interviews
- An emailed transcript of the interview

If you meet criteria and are interested in sharing your experiences and/or perspectives, please email me at **lindsey.m.morrissey@gmail.com**. I will then send you a consent form which will provide you with more detailed information about the study. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me.

It is hoped that the current study can ultimately inform practitioners in their work with clients presenting with relationship concerns.

If you know someone who might be interested in this study, I would sincerely appreciate you passing along this information.

Gratefully,
Lindsey

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE: *An Investigation of Relationship Definitions*

PROJECT DIRECTOR: *Lindsey Morrissey, MA*

PHONE # *715.222.2509*

DEPARTMENT: *Counseling Psychology and Community Services*

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH
A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY:
You are invited to participate in a study that is exploring relationship definitions. This study is being conducted by Lindsey Morrissey, MA under the supervision of Kara Wettersten, PhD., from the University of North Dakota Department of Counseling Psychology and Community Services.

The purpose of this research study is to explore relationship definitions. It is hoped that the current study can ultimately inform practitioners in their work with clients presenting with relationship concerns.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?
Approximately eight to fifteen participants will participate in this study in-person, via telephone, or via Skype.

DURATION OF STUDY:
Your participation in the study will last approximately 2-3 hours. You will be asked to fill out an anonymous, secure, online demographics form that will take about ten minutes to complete and to participate in an initial interview that will last one to two hours.

Following this, you may be asked to participate in a shorter follow-up interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be done via Skype, by phone, or in person.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?
You will be asked to complete a demographics form via a secure link provided via email. Upon meeting study criteria, an interview will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. During

the interview(s), the interviewer will ask you to explain your views on relationship definitions. Examples of topics that you will be asked about include emotional infidelity versus physical/sexual infidelity, close friendships, established rules in your relationship, how emotional infidelity intersects with your career, and the impact of technology. During any time, you are free to let the interviewer know if you would prefer not to answer a question, or if you would like to withdraw from the study. You will be sent a copy of the interview transcript and invited to contact the researcher with any questions you have. You will then possibly be asked to participate in a shorter follow-up interview.

RISKS OF THE STUDY:
There is minimal risk anticipated for participating in this study. Some questions may be uncomfortable for you due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

If, however, you become upset by questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings about this study, you are encouraged to call the National Suicide and Prevention Lifeline which is available at any time of day at 800-273-8255.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY:
Possible benefits of the study are that you will have the opportunity to share your personal views on areas related to relationships. In addition, reflecting on the topics discussed in the interview may increase your awareness about your own relationship and the dynamics that may or may not be present. In addition, we hope that others may benefit from this study because we will have a better understanding of how to define different types of relationships.

COSTS TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY:
You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

COMPENSATION:
You will be paid $30 total for being in this research study. You will be emailed a $30 Amazon e-gift card upon completion of the initial interview. There is a possibility that you will receive an additional $10 e-gift card if a follow-up interview is conducted. If you leave the study before or during the initial interview, you will not be eligible to receive compensation. If you leave the study following the interview, you will be eligible to receive the $30 compensation.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Your information will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. The only people that will have access to your interview are the research team and those who assure that researchers abide by the rules (Institutional Review Board). Additionally, we will remove all identifying information from your transcripts to further protect your confidentiality. However, please note the confidentiality cannot be guaranteed via email communications. The interviews will be audio-recorded, but your name will not be on the recording, nor will it be associated with the study material in any way. We will ask for your email address for the purposes of sending your Amazon

e-gift card. This information will be stored separately from and not linked to your transcripts and audio recording.

The interviewer will be in a private office during the interviews and we encourage participants to also be in private locations during the interview in order to protect your privacy. After the initial interview, the audio recordings will be transcribed by VerbalInk through a secure and password-protected server.

Your data will not be stored in the same file as your consent form and will not include any identifying information. All materials will be kept electronically in password protected files. You will be provided with a transcribed, electronic file of the interview which you may review and you can ask the PI to remove or alter anything you wish. One of the key features of a qualitative study is the use of direct quotes so we are able to illustrate the experiences of the participants without revealing the identity of participants. In a written report about this study, we will include selected quotes from interviews which highlight significant experiences. However, you will be able to review the transcript prior to using any direct quotes and you may contact the researcher to ask that any information be removed.

Following data analysis, the electronic audio recordings will be deleted, as will any email correspondence. Electronic data such as transcribed interviews will be deleted after three years and any hard copies of data will be shredded after three years. Consent forms will be deleted and/or shredded after seven years.

It is important for you to know that the researchers in this study are required by the state of North Dakota to report child abuse. If the information you give us suggests that child abuse is occurring, we are required by law to make an appropriate report to Child Protective Services. Likewise, if we believe you are in imminent danger of harming yourself or someone else, we are required to seek help on your behalf.

WHO IS FUNDING THIS STUDY?
The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:
Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

If you decide to leave the study early, we ask that you contact the researcher at 715-222-2509 or lindsey.morrissey@und.edu.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS:
The researchers conducting this study is Lindsey Morrissey, M.A. under the supervision of Kara Wettersten, Ph.D. At any time, if you have questions or concerns, please contact Lindsey at 715-222-2509 or lindsey.morrissey@und.edu, or Dr. Wettersten at 701-777-3743 or kara.wettersten@und.edu.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at **(701) 777-4279** or **UND.irb@research.UND.edu.**

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking "Information for Research Participants" on the web site: http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study.

Please initial: ____ Yes ____ No

I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however I <u>will not</u> be identified.

Please initial: ____ Yes ____ No

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's Name: _____

_____ _____
Signature of Subject Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative.

_____ _____
Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent Date

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

1. What is your gender?
MALE
FEMALE
TRANSMAN
TRANSWOMAN
OTHER

2. Are you in a committed relationship?
YES or NO

3. What is *your partner's* gender?
MALE
FEMALE
TRANSMAN
TRANSWOMAN
OTHER

4. Are you living with a romantic partner?
YES or NO

5. How long have you lived with your partner? (e.g., 1 year and 6 months) *Please type answer below.*

6. How long have you been in a relationship with your partner? (e.g., 1 year and 6 months) *Please type answer below.*

7. What is your age? *Please type answer below.*

8. What is *your partner's* age? *Please type answer below.*

9. What is your occupation, if applicable? *Please type answer below.*

10. If applicable, what is *your partner's* occupation and/or employment status? *Please type answer below.*

11. What is your sexual orientation? *Please type answer below.*

12. What is *your partner's* sexual orientation? *Please type answer below.*

13. Please select the ethnicity you most closely identify with:

_____ Black/African American
_____Asian/Asian American
_____ White/Caucasian
_____Latino/Hispanic
_____ Native American/American Indian
_____Other (please specify)
_____

14. Please select the ethnicity *your partner* most closely identifies with:

_____ Black/African American
_____Asian/Asian American
_____ White/Caucasian
_____Latino/Hispanic
_____ Native American/American Indian
_____Other (please specify)
_____

15. What is your level of education?

_____ 8th grade or less
_____ Partial college
_____ Partial high school
_____ College degree
_____ High school degree/GED____
_____ Some graduate training
_____ Business/technical school graduate
_____ Graduate degree

Display this question if 'college degree' is selected.
16. Please list your college degree below. (e.g. Bachelor of Arts in Marketing)

Display this question if 'graduate degree' is selected.
17. Please list your graduate degree below. (e.g. PhD in Clinical Psychology)

18. What is *your partner's* level of education?

_____ 8th grade or less
_____ Partial college
_____ Partial high school
_____ College degree
_____ High school degree/GED____
_____ Some graduate training
_____ Business/technical school graduate
_____ Graduate degree

Display this question if 'graduate degree' is selected.
19. Please list *your partner's* college degree below. (e.g. Bachelor of Arts in Marketing)

Display this question if 'graduate degree' is selected.
20. Please list *your partner's* graduate degree below. (e.g. PhD in Clinical Psychology)

21. What state do you currently reside in? *Please type answer below.*

22. What type of area do you currently live in?
RURAL
SUBURBAN
URBAN

23. Please use the slider below to indicate how likely you are to interact with men at work.

Extremely Unlikely	Moderately Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	Slightly Likely	Moderately Likely	Extremely Likely

---

24. Please use the slider below to indicate how likely you are to interact with women at work.

Extremely Unlikely	Moderately Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	Slightly Likely	Moderately Likely	Extremely Likely

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APPENDIX D

INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Sample Interview Questions

Physical/Sexual Infidelity – Starting Point

I'm wondering what physical/sexual infidelity means to you.

How would you know physical/sexual infidelity has taken place?

Introducing Emotional Infidelity

Sometimes people see infidelity as having an emotional component and sometimes people don't. Tell me about how you understand it.

Tell me what emotional infidelity means to you.

How would you know emotional infidelity had taken place?

Understanding the Possible Differences between Emotional and Other Relationships

What makes emotional infidelity different than physical/sexual infidelity, if at all?

How is emotional infidelity different than a close friendship?

Does it matter if the friend is male or female? Explain.

Does the friend's sexual orientation matter? Explain.

Understanding the Workplace Boundaries

Tell me about where the close friendship/emotional infidelity line is at work.

Are there different rules for men vs. women?

What are you okay with and what aren't you okay with in terms of emotional closeness with people at work?

How would you know a line has been crossed?

How much of your social life at work do you share with your partner?

(Same sort of questions asked in regards to how she perceives her partner and his interactions at work. This is to understand her perception of her male partner).

Transition to Technology Component

Tell me about the boundaries you have with technology when communicating with people from work, if you have any.

Are the boundaries different if it is a male vs. a female you are communicating with?

How about when you're connecting with other important people in your life (close friend, partner) through technology, what is considered okay? What is not considered okay?

Does it matter if the person you are communicating with is male or female?

How much of your interactions through technology with other people do you share with your partner?

(Same sort of questions asked in regards to her perception of how technology is relevant to her partner's work and social life).

Tell me about the agreements you and your partner have surrounding technology use, if you have any. Are they the same? Different?

How did these agreements come to be in your relationship?

APPENDIX E

ARISING QUESTIONS DURING INITIAL DATA ANALYSIS

How is an attraction different from emotional infidelity, if at all?

How is the primary relationship set apart from a close friendship, if at all?

Are there any cultural or community factors that influence how you view the boundaries of infidelity?

How many children do you have?

On a scale of 1 to 10, one being that you are completely unsatisfied and 10 being extremely satisfied, how satisfied are you in your current romantic relationship?

If you and your partner view the boundary of emotional infidelity to be different, how is that addressed or navigated within your relationship?

If boundaries with important others are identified: How did that boundary come to be?

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