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# The Betrayed Partner's Experiences with Grief and Loss Following the Discovery of an Extramarital Affair

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Running head: GRIEF AND LOSS IN EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIRS

The Betrayed Partner's Experiences with Grief and Loss  
Following the Discovery of an Extramarital Affair

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

Betrayed partners experience a great amount of changes, losses, and grief following the discovery of an extramarital affair. The following study examines the stories of two women and four men from various areas across the United States who were the betrayed partner in a marriage that experienced extramarital affairs. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain information to answer the following research question: What are the betrayed partner's experiences with grief and loss following the discovery of an extramarital affair within their marriage? Several themes arose from the findings including: 1) immediate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors such as shock, confusion, anger, and disbelief, 2) wanting to fix the relationship using counseling and salvaging the relationship, 3) life alterations caused by the affair including increase in self-esteem, not wanting to marry again, having to continue interactions with the betrayer, learning that not everyone is untrustworthy, emotional instability, and legal action, 4) grief and loss including loss of the relationship, divorce, shared custody of the children, loss of their partner's family, loss of friends, shattered dreams and expectations, physical and emotional losses, loss of trust, adjusting to being primary custody provider, and financial hardships. Participants identified several coping strategies such as: family, religion, friends, individual counseling, reading books, granting forgiveness, and attending support groups. This study provides a broad look at the losses and grief, which are often times overlooked aspects of infidelity.

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### **Introduction**

When couples enter into a committed relationship, it is typically characterized by an assumption of exclusivity and commitment regarding sexual and emotional intimacy (Fife, Gambescia, & Weeks, 2008). Being in a committed and loving relationship cultivates a sense of belonging, and the devotion associated with it creates feelings of security and stability (Fife, Filbert & Weeks, 2013). Breaking that devotion in a relationship can result in a reduction of feelings of security and stability (Fife, et al., 2013). A betrayal of sexual or emotional intimacy in a committed marriage is known as an extramarital affair (Fife, et al., 2008). Extramarital affairs are also commonly referred to as infidelity (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Infidelity is defined as “a secret sexual, romantic, or emotional involvement that violates the commitment to an exclusive relationship” (Fincham & Hall, 2006). With infidelity, emotional and/or sexual intimacy is shared with someone external of the primary relationship or marriage without the permission of the other individual in the relationship (Fife, et al., 2008).

The discovery of an affair can have devastating and lasting impact on the betrayed or injured partner (Baucom, Gordon, & Snyder, 2008). The violation of exclusivity and commitment affects the relationship on multiple levels including emotional, financial, mental, and physical (Fife, et al. 2008). The discovery of an extramarital affair often leads to uncertainty, numerous losses, and deep and lasting pain (Fife et al., 2008). The betrayed partner will often feel intense emotions of shame, depression, powerlessness, and abandonment. Feelings of rage, shock, numbness, and denial can also precipitate

(Baucom et al., 2008; Baucom, Gordon, & Snyder, 2004; Fife et al., 2008; Fincham & Hall, 2006).

Surveys have revealed that the majority of people in the United States expect monogamy and commitment in marriage, and disapprove of extramarital affairs (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon & Glass, 2005). Approximately 97% of survey respondents agreed that partners should not engage in an extramarital affair during marriage. Despite this majority disapproval, many individuals engage in infidelity within the confines of marriage (Allen, et al., 2005). In the United States, the amount of marriages that experience an extramarital affair ranges from 20% to 40% depending on age and gender (Atkins, Hahlweg, Klann, Lo, & Marin, 2010; Peluso & Spina, 2008). More specifically, approximately 22% to 25% of men and 11% to 15% of women indicate involvement in an extramarital affair (Allen, et al., 2005; Atkins, et al., 2001). Of couples that have divorced, 40% of women and 44% of men reported more than one instance of sexual deviancy during their marriage (Baucom, et al., 2008). Accurate and consistent statistics regarding infidelity prevalence are considered difficult to conclude due to the sensitive nature of disclosing extramarital affairs (Allen, et al., 2005).

Infidelity is identified as one of the leading causes of couples entering counseling (Fife, et al., 2008). Even though infidelity is a prominent reason for couples to seek help from therapists, many therapists consistently report infidelity as one of the most difficult issues to address and treat in couple's counseling (Baucom, et al., 2008; Peluso & Spina, 2008).

### **Literature Review**

Extramarital affairs are a common occurrence in marriages, however, the research literature is very limited (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon & Glass, 2005; Atkins, et al., 2001; Atkins, Klann, Halweg, Marin, & Lo, 2010; Bagarozzi, 2008; Balzi, Bandini, Corona, Fisher, Forti, Maggi, Mannucci, Monami & Smith, 2011; Baucom et al., 2004; Levine, 1998; Peluso & Spina, 2008; Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan & Schofield, 2012). Popular press and media have written a great deal about extramarital affairs, however, scientific research regarding this subject is greatly understudied (Levine, 2008).

In the existing research, multiple terms are used to refer to infidelity depending on specific aspects of the study such as whether the couples are married or whether the infidelity involves sexual and/or emotional betrayal (Atkins, et al., 2001). In varying research, infidelity is referred to as extramarital affair, extramarital sex, or extramarital involvement if the infidelity occurs within the context of marriage (Atkins, et al., 2001). Other terms to describe infidelity include adultery, nonmonogomy, extradyadic, and affairs (Atkins, et al., 2001; Allen, et al., 2005).

#### **Types of Extramarital Affairs**

In an article by Winek and Craven (2003), extramarital affairs were categorized into five subtypes including the conflict-avoidant affair, the intimacy-avoidant affair, the sexual addiction affair, the split-self affair, and the exit affair. The conflict avoidant type involves one partner in the relationship being unable or unwilling to stand up for his or her self in conflict. This can lead to unresolved conflicts due to suppressed feelings and emotions (Craven & Winek, 2003). The intimacy-avoidant affair types try to avoid intimacy, turning instead to anger and violence. Affairs can act as an obstruction for

intimacy and emphasize the couple's contempt for intimacy (Craven & Winek, 2003). The couples involved in a sexual addiction affair are dealing with one or both partners that have a compulsion to seek romance, sex, or love as a way to validate themselves or fill a feeling of emptiness. The split-self affair is usually engaged by someone who feels they have endured a lifetime of self-sacrifice and care-giving to others. This affair type can also refer to a midlife crisis or empty nest affair (Craven & Winek, 2003). The last extramarital affair type, the exit affair, is used to describe infidelity that is committed in order to end a relationship and marriage (Craven & Winek, 2003, p.252).

More recent trends point to partners unintentionally crossing the line from friendly or nonsexual friendships into romantic relationships. This seems to be more prevalent in the workplace and on the internet (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2013). These affairs are sometimes referred to as emotional affairs because there is potential for greater emotional intimacy than in the marital relationship, the couple participating in the affair keeps it secret from the spouse, and there is sexual chemistry between the extramarital affair couple (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2013).

Extramarital affairs can also refer to a continuum of sexual acting out. Levine (2008) breaks this continuum into four categories: affair, just-sex, making-do sex, and imaginary partner sex. The affair term involves a personal, emotional, and usually loving attachment between two people. This category starts with an emotional connection then develops into including a sexual relationship (Levine, 2008). An affair involves psychological intimacy and sexual consummation which lends itself to discussions about future plans for the relationship. The category of just-sex entail sexual encounters with no

emotional or social obligation to the partner. There is usually no attachment bond made when engaging in just-sex arrangements (Levine, 2008). The third category is making-do sex, also referred to as casual or convenient sex. This type includes sexual relations and little psychological connection. The ambivalence of the relationship is high and the future of the couple is limited. These making-do relations usually last until a better opportunity arises for the partners. The fourth category that Levine (2008) discusses as part of the sexual acting out continuum in extramarital affairs is the imaginary partner sex. This grouping is associated with high partner avoidance and a strong need and longing for masturbation. Imaginary partner sex also includes phone sex or sexual internet conversations with unknown participants (Levine, 2008).

### **Factors Contributing to Participation in Extramarital Affairs**

The reason for an affair is a question that betrayed partners may contemplate for a long time (Craven & Winek, 2003). Reasons that individuals engage in an extramarital affair are unique to their lives and situations; however, researchers have summarized reasons or justifications that are frequently cited. These factors include: 1) sexual attraction, 2) fulfillment of unmet sexual needs, 3) satisfaction of unmet psychological needs, 4) gratification of unmet social needs, 5) as a means to escape an disappointing marriage, 6) to satisfy a need to dominate the opposite sex, 7) issues regarding power and control, 8) fulfillment of love, 9) driven by sexual compulsions or addictions, 10) for purposes of revenge, 11) having impulse and control problems as a result of substance use, 12) having loose sexual values and morals, 13) opportunistic affairs, such as job-related travel and long periods of not seeing a spouse (Craven & Winek, 2003). Income

and employment, gender, relationship satisfaction, age when married, also affect the likelihood of infidelity (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001).

**Income and employment.** In a study conducted by Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson (2001), findings established a significant association between income and employment and the probability for engaging in an extramarital affair. Researchers found that participants earning over \$30,000 per year were positively correlated to rates of infidelity. A possible explanation for the likelihood of infidelity increasing with higher salary would be that it may be easier to hide expenses for entertainment or gifts to a third party. Additionally, someone with a higher salary job may have a higher status, opportunity to travel more, and increased interaction with more appealing individuals (Atkins, et al., 2001).

Employment status has additional influence in regards to opportunity and power in the primary relationship. Findings concluded that the marital situation with the highest chance of infidelity is when one spouse works and one spouse does not (Atkins, et al., 2001). Situations in which both spouses did not work reported the least instances of infidelity. One speculation as to this difference is that spouses that did not work and were both at home more often had less opportunity for infidelity and the discrepancy in relationship power was less significant (Atkins, et al., 2001).

**Gender.** Gender has been a frequently studied aspect of extramarital affairs in preexisting literature. Studies have shown that men are more likely to report infidelity than women (Atkins, et al., 2001). Within the gender difference, there is also a difference in age and gender. Men 55 to 65 years of age had the highest reports of engaging in extramarital affairs as opposed to men who were younger or older (Atkins, et al., 2001).

Findings for women and age were similar in that the highest reports of infidelity occurred in the cohort of women ages 40 to 45 years of age; and there was reduced likelihood for women older and younger than that cohort (Atkins, et al., 2001).

**Relationship satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction has a strong correlation to participation in extramarital affairs. Participants in Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson's study that reported being "not too happy" with their marriage were approximately four times more likely to report engagement in infidelity than participants who reported being "very happy" in their relationships (Atkins, et al., 2001). The researchers found this association to be a continuum because respondents who stated being "pretty happy" in their marriages were twice as likely to report infidelity than those respondents in very happy marriages (Atkins, et al., 2001).

**Age when married.** The age when couples are married is a predicting factor in engaging in an extramarital affair. Couples who have been married longer had more time to participate in infidelity (Atkins, et al., 2001). Additionally, individuals who were married at the youngest ages reported the most instances of infidelity. The study from Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson (2001) found that the likelihood of infidelity was greatly reduced when the age of marriage increased from 13 years to 23 years. Participants who were married at 16 years of age or younger were 4.5 times more likely to report engaging in an extramarital affair than those respondents who were married at 23 years of age or older. Respondents 23 years of age and older displayed no difference in their reports of infidelity within their marriage (Atkins, et al., 2011).

The researchers speculated that this increase in likelihood of infidelity with the couples who marry younger could be due to the circumstances of these marriages. Some

instances when couples may marry at a young age could be for early pregnancy or impulsivity in intimate relationships. This impulsivity could result in early marriage as well as impulsivity in involvement with other people. Young married couples may also have to contend with parent disapproval or other hardships that could lead to marital issues or infidelity (Atkins, et al., 2001).

### **Emotional Effects After Discovering an Extramarital Affair**

The effects of an extramarital affair can last even past the relationship where the affair occurred (Peluso & Spina, 2008). Emotional reactions to the discovery of an extramarital affair can include a vast array of emotions such as rage, pain, jealousy, lust, confusion, and grief (Peluso & Spina, 2008). One common reaction to discovering an extramarital affair may be continuously looking for additional or ongoing signs of betrayal. Someone who has been cheated on may also feel as though it is difficult to trust others (Baucom, et al., 2004; Fife, et al., 2008).

**Emotional instability.** Discovering and dealing with an extramarital affair can lead one to feel a great deal of instability in their life. It may be difficult to regulate emotions, resulting in intense reactions such as rage toward the partner who participated in the affair, feelings of shame, overwhelming powerlessness, victimization, and abandonment (Baucom, et al., 2004). Daily activities can become impaired and concentration can be challenged due to constant thoughts about the affair. The most traumatized betrayed partners tend to be those who possessed the greatest trust and were least suspecting of an extramarital affair (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2013).

**Depression.** Depression is a prevalent symptom betrayed partners may experience as a result of finding their partner engaged in infidelity (Hall & Fincham, 2006; O’Leary, 2005). There are three major negative events in marriage that are likely to result in clinical depression of wives within one month of the event. These events include physical aggression against the wife, threatening to divorce, and discovering an extramarital affair (Cano & O’Leary, 2000; O’Leary, 2005). For women without a history of depression, the probability of becoming depressed after discovering an extramarital affair was 38% (Avery-Leaf, Christian-Herman, & O’Leary, 2002). For women with previous history of depression, the likelihood of becoming depressed again after learning of infidelity was 72% (Cano & O’Leary, 2000). According to Cano and O’Leary (2000), wives were more likely to become depressed after discovering an extramarital affair than after being the victim of moderate physical aggression such as pushing, slapping, or shoving.

**Attachment injury.** Attachment theory emphasizes the human nature to create and maintain powerful emotional and affectionate bonds to significant others (Craven & Winek, 2003). Attachment theory in relation to infidelity looks at the broken emotional attachment and betrayal from a spouse to their partner. The betrayed partner is without emotional support and can be considered vulnerable if they have difficulty regulating emotions after the discovery of the affair (Craven & Winek, 2003). Even if both parties are willing to improve the marriage and try to move on, memories of the infidelity may remain and interrupt daily life. This result from the betrayal can develop into “attachment injury.” Attachment injury stems from betrayal resulting in abandonment and/or damage of trust in the relationship (Craven & Winek, 2003).

**Research Question**

This research project asked the question: What are the betrayed partner's experiences with grief and loss following the discovery of an extramarital affair within their marriage? This question was designed to build upon existing literature regarding extramarital affairs. Research participants helped to address this research question by answering open-ended questions in an interview with the researcher.

**Conceptual Framework**

The following section will describe the framework through which this study has been conducted. The conceptual framework is the lens that the researcher uses to understand the information collected throughout the research process. The conceptual framework can help to shape formulation of the research question and understanding of the themes of the data. The researcher has selected Grief and Loss Theory as well as Ambiguous Loss Theory as the conceptual frameworks for this study.

**Grief and Loss Theory**

Loss is created when individuals experience a negative event that produces long-term alterations to their relationship, thoughts and emotions, and social situations (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). A loss refers to no longer having something or someone that used to be a part of their life. Loss precedes grief, which is the instinctive and normal response to losses (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). According to Hooyman and Kramer (2006), grief is the "normal psychological, social, and physical reaction to a loss. It is experienced through our feelings, thoughts, and attitudes; our behavior with others; and

our health and bodily symptoms. When we grieve, every aspect of our lives is thrown out of balance.”

The grief task model suggests that there are set tasks that need to be accomplished before a person can complete their mourning (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). However, recent research has recognized that grief operates in a cyclical fashion rather than a straight line with fixed tasks. Researchers now conceptualize the grief process as phases. The first phase of the grief process is *avoidance*, which includes feelings such as shock, numbness, denial, and disbelief. In this phase, individuals may also feel anxiety, fear, and disorganization (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Grieving individuals in this phase may attempt to gather as much information as they can in order to gain some control and understanding of the situation. Others might try to avoid the grief by focusing on household, family, or financial tasks (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006).

*Confrontation*, the second phase of the grief process, is the phase when grief is the most intense and includes feelings such as extreme sadness, guilt or blaming oneself, helplessness, panic, confusion, and feeling powerless (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). There is a wide range of emotions that changes from anger and rage to despair, loss of faith, and a feeling of injustice or disillusionment.

The last phase of grief is considered to be *accommodation*, when the bereaving individual slowly “moves on” and learns to live with the loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). The grief process does not have a definitive end, since loss produces permanent changes and secondary losses throughout the individual’s life (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006).

People are likely to experience multiple major losses throughout life. These losses stay in our consciousness and alter people's lives, including creating a feeling of lack of control. An important part of experiencing a grief process is searching for meaning and trying to choose how we react to those losses (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Major loss refers to more than death and dying. The relationship that an individual had with someone impacts the magnitude of the loss and resulting grief process (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). For example, if someone is divorcing their partner of 30 years, that loss may be greater than the death of a distant relative (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Losing someone through divorce or separation is like losing a part of one's self. This type of loss can have consequences that are felt over and over again, and can be "regrieved" throughout life (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Hooyman and Kramer (2006) provide the example of experiencing multiple losses following divorce. After a divorce, secondary losses of friends, income, and in-laws may occur, in addition to stirring up previous feelings from losses during childhood (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006).

Grief will be a continuous companion throughout life despite how much time has passed. Part of living with that grief includes learning to be open to joy in addition to sadness (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). In today's society, many do not feel comfortable discussing loss and grief, but it is incredibly important to share one's story of loss and grief. Searching for meaning is a vital aspect of confronting loss. The challenge lies in trying to make meaning where no meaning seems to exist (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Confronting loss and creating meaning can lead to deeper awareness, sensitivity, compassion, and new wisdom (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006)

### **Shattered Dreams**

Shattered dreams refers to the loss of the idea or images that a person had in their mind of what their individual and family future would look like (Bowman, 1999). These dreams carry a great emotional investment, and when these expectations are interrupted or do not happen, grief is experienced (Bowman, 1999). Bowman (1999) offered this definition of shattered dreams, or loss of dreams: the loss of an emotionally important image of oneself, one's family, or one's situation; the loss of what might have been; abandonment of plans for a particular future; the dying of dreams. This kind of loss is usually surrounded by other losses that may be more conspicuous, including material losses, relationship losses, health losses, loss of roles, and systemic losses meaning changes in systems (Bowman, 1999).

The disruption or loss of one's future story can be considered a large part of bereavement (Bowman, 1999). One of the most difficult issues for individuals experiencing grief is the formation of a new identity (Bowman, 1999). One important aspect of facing the loss of dreams is to put a name to it. Another critical piece is to give credibility to someone's story and acknowledge that this loss is a major source of grief. If someone's story is not heard or cannot be openly expressed and acknowledged, then it is referred to as disenfranchised grief (Bowman, 1999).

The loss of one's dreams means the perceived potential for the future dies too. Therefore, individuals must pursue inside themselves the seeds for a different dream (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). In the case of extramarital affairs resulting in divorce,

individuals must let go of those dreams in addition to everything that was invested in the relationship.

### **Ambiguous Loss**

Ambiguous loss refers to a loss that entails uncertainty and challenges with the process of gaining closure (Boss, 2006). Ambiguity in conjunction with a loss can pose great barriers to coping and grieving. This can lead to psychological, physiological, and relational harm (Boss, 2006). Trauma can be brought on by ambiguous loss due to the lack of control or ability to resolve the issue. This then can lead to uncertainty, shock, pain, distress, and immobilization (Boss, 2006).

This trauma can become chronic if closure is not attained. Inability to gain closure can be difficult to accept in a modern society that values mastery. Most people are not comfortable being in a situation that is outside of their control, which is many times the case when ambiguous loss is involved (Boss, 2006). In a culture that tends to value mastery, grieving is acceptable, but it is expected that the process should be quick and people should be back to work. The process of grieving and closure with ambiguous loss is different than ordinary loss because there is no definitive identification of a loss (Boss, 2006). This long-term preoccupation with loss was defined by Freud as “complicated grief” or “melancholia” (Boss, 2006).

There are two types of ambiguous loss, one being a loved one who is physically absent but psychologically present, and the second being a loved one who is physically present but psychologically missing (Boss, 2006). In the event of ambiguous loss involving physical presence and psychological absence, people may become preoccupied with the loss. This can lead to impairment of functioning in their usual responsibilities

and relationships (Boss, 2006). With ambiguous loss, relational and emotional progression halts and daily tasks are not completed. Many times people do not know how to act or what to do (Boss, 2006).

Ambiguous loss produces immense amounts of stress. Boundaries and closure with these losses are unclear (Boss, 2006). Physical presence with psychological absence, or vice versa, can result in boundary ambiguity for individuals or families. This boundary ambiguity involved not knowing who is in and who is out of the family or relationship (Boss, 2006). An increase in boundary ambiguity is a risk factor for depression, familial conflict, and physical manifestations of stress (Boss, 2006).

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the betrayed partner's losses that are experienced after an extramarital affair and the grief process that follows. A qualitative approach was used to interview participants. Qualitative research helped to understand the meanings, concepts, characteristics, symbols, and narrative of things (Berg, 2007). In order to collect information regarding the betrayed partner's experiences with grief and loss, participants were asked to answer questions in a face-to-face or phone interview. The qualitative questions consisted of open-ended questions that addressed demographics, shattered dreams, losses, coping mechanisms, and other thoughts and feelings that have been affected by the extramarital affair. After data collection, results were transcribed and analyzed to identify themes.

### **Sample and Recruitment**

The sampling method used for this study included convenience sampling, also known as availability sampling (Berg, 2007; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011).

Convenience sampling is a nonprobability sampling strategy that relies on obtaining participants who are available. Nonprobability samples are useful when trying to access sensitive or hard-to-reach populations, such as betrayed partners in extramarital affairs (Berg, 2007; Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011).

The sample for this study included the betrayed/injured partner within a present or past marriage during which the partner's spouse was involved in an extramarital affair. Due to the difficulty in reaching participants, the criteria for the study were broad. There were no limitations on the sample in regards to gender, age, type of infidelity, or number of years in the marriage. There were no specifications as to whether the couple is still married or had divorced.

The initial plan for recruitment was to obtain a sample from support groups and mental health or marriage practitioners in the Twin Cities metro area. After reaching out numerous times to these agencies, no recruitment was allowed at these sites. Two participants were recruited from individuals who knew of the study and told their friends about it. They provided the information to their friends, who then reached out and asked to participate in an interview.

The remaining four participants were recruited from an advertisement posted on the website Craigslist. This advertisement explained the details of the study, requirements for participation, voluntary nature of the study, and that the interviews will be offered via phone only and no compensation will be provided. The four participants recruited via

Craigslist participated in phone interviews, but the two other participants opted for phone interviews due to living far away. The sample included two females and four males.

Participants lived in various areas across the country including Washington, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Washington D.C., and Michigan.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Due to the sensitive nature of asking betrayed partners to discuss their experiences with infidelity, precautions were taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Saint Catherine conducted a full review of the study in order to determine if the study was ethical and ensured protection of human subjects.

Further precautions were taken by asking the participant to read and sign a consent form (See Appendix A). The consent form provided information on the background and purpose of the study. It included potential benefits and risks associated with participation. The participants were told in the consent form that they were free to withdraw from the study or stop the interview at any point. The consent forms informed participants that interviews would be tape-recorded. Information will be kept on the researcher's password protected personal computer, and tapes and transcripts will be destroyed by May 25, 2014. The form included contact information for the researcher, research chair that oversees the study, and the chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board.

### **Data Collection**

After being unable to recruit from a local support group and local therapy offices, recruitment was conducted via Craigslist and people who referred the study to their

friends. When individuals were interested in participating, they contacted the researcher directly to receive more information and to receive an informed consent form. After completing an informed consent form, the participants were given the option of completing an in-person interview or a phone interview. The participants recruited via Craigslist were offered only phone interviews as a safety precaution. The informed consent form was filled out and emailed to the researcher's student email address.

The length of time for interviews ranged between 45 minutes to almost two hours. After completion of the interview, the participant was offered information for community resources regarding coping with an extramarital affair (See Appendix C). The resource list was compiled with the expectation that participants would be recruited from the Twin Cities area. However, since the participants lived in various states across the country, the existing resource list was not applicable. The researcher then offered to confer with the research chairperson and compile a list of resources in the participant's area. Only one participant who lived in Minnesota asked to be emailed the resource list. All other participants declined due to already having established support groups and individual therapists.

The data for this research was collected using a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews involve predetermined questions and topics that have the flexibility to change slightly depending on the participant (Berg, 2007; DeJong, Monette, Sullivan, 2011). The questions were asked in a consistent order, but there was freedom to digress or probe for further information (Berg, 2007; DeJong, et al., 2011).

The interview consisted of six predetermined questions (Appendix B) including:

- 1) What is your age and gender? How long were you and your spouse married or continue to be married?
- 2) If you are willing, please describe your experience with infidelity in your marriage.
- 3) Everyone has a different response to infidelity, and I am wondering how your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have been affected by this affair?
- 4) How have you, if at all, experienced losses or grief as a result of the infidelity?
- 5) Some betrayed partners may experience grief as a result of life expectations that you had for you and your spouse not going as hoped. How have your life expectations or dreams altered as a result of the infidelity?
- 6) What has helped you in coping with the affair?

### **Data Analysis**

Grounded theory approach was used to analyze data collected from the interviews. Grounded theory allows the theory to develop and emerge from the data collected from the participants (DeJong, et al., 2011). The interview was audio recorded then transcribed. Information gathered from the interview participants was transcribed and read by the researcher. The data was then coded by writing short descriptions to small portions of the data. Coding is the term used for breaking up the data into categories (DeJong, et al., 2011; Berg, 2007). Coding from qualitative data is different from coding quantitative data in that themes from qualitative data emerge from the data collected during the interviews, and coding from quantitative data typically includes data from preexisting theory (DeJong et al., 2011). After data was coded, the codes were reviewed to identify emerging themes within participants' experiences. The coding from all participants' data was reviewed to construct themes that were most prevalent (DeJong, et al., 2011).

## **Findings**

### **Demographics**

The sample included two females and four males, ranging between the ages of 32 and 51. The length of marriage for participants ranged from two years to 11 years. The amount of time that had lapsed since the participants had discovered the extramarital affairs to the time of the interview ranged from one month to five years. All participants pursued and attained divorce following the discovery of the extramarital affairs. Three of the six participants had multiple children with their ex-spouses. The number of partners that the betrayers had during the affairs ranged from one partner to over 50 partners. Pseudonyms are used in the findings in order to maintain confidentiality.

There was a wide array of diversity in the stories surrounding the participants' experiences with infidelity. The extramarital affairs ranged from sexual encounters with a prostitute while overseas in the military, to affairs with co-workers, to infidelity resulting from finding multiple partners online. Despite the vast array of stories surrounding the extramarital affairs, there were common themes and experiences felt by the betrayed partners. The themes that emerged from this study include: immediate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors following the discovery of infidelity, wanting to fix the relationship, life alterations caused by the affair, grief and loss, and coping strategies.

### **Immediate Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors Following Discovery of Infidelity**

This study asked participants to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors experienced immediately after discovering the extramarital affair. Many of the participants reported feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that can be described as shock, anger, disbelief, and confusion.

**Shock.** One participant, Martha, expressed shock after discovering the identity of her ex-husband's partner in the affair. She stated: *"I was shocked when I found out so it didn't matter but in the grand scheme of things he was sleeping with this woman that I thought was extremely unattractive."* Both Martha and John were shocked to find out about their partners' extramarital affairs because they believed they had a great life and great marriage. Martha, described her feelings as: *"So yeah, anger, extreme anger and shock. And I thought we had such a great marriage. I was shocked."*

John expressed a similar sentiment about the shock of discovering the affairs, despite his view of having a great life together. He provided this account:

*"On the outside and inside we had a great life together, I thought. Everything socially, sexually, and financially except for his shopping sprees. It was a great life. And his anger towards me now is that I have the audacity to leave him."*

John went on to describe the last of many verbal arguments that occurred between him and his husband after the discovery, and the shocking information that was told to him:

*"And his response was, you know I have a problem, why can't you stay out of my fucking business, it isn't any of your fucking business. I was like, seriously? What do you mean it's none of my fucking business? And his last bombshell to me was, 'by the way I'm positive, just thought I'd let you know'."*

**Anger.** John described how he is not typically a violent or angry man, but the multiple affairs in addition to finding out that he needed to get tested for human immunodeficiency virus made him angrier than he has ever felt before. He

recounted this ending to a fight: *“So he walked out the garage door and I threw my cell phone at his car and cracked his windshield.”*

Tim expressed feeling angry when he first found out about the affair, and how he continued to feel angry because he is still fighting for custody of his second child. Tim described an initial reaction of anger:

*“Well I was pissed, I mean, what do you expect. I was steaming. This bitch, I put her through college, she was on welfare when I met her. I put her through college, I adopted her son, and now this? Are you kidding me?”*

Shortly after the infidelity was revealed, Tim described how his ex-wife told their children lies to explain why they were getting a divorce. He expressed his anger and frustration with this statement:

*“She could have told the kids anything as to why mommy and daddy were getting a divorce. She chose to tell them, ‘daddy’s mean, daddy was abusive, I had to go’. So it really burned me that she could have told them anything instead she chose to fabricate a story to justify her behavior.”*

Similar to John, Martha illustrated expressing behavior that is abnormal for her upon first discovering her husband’s affair. Martha described:

*“So my first reaction was super anger [...]And, this is so out of character, but I drove to the dumpiest shithole bar and walked in at 10 in the morning and sat with like three toothless stranger[s] and ordered myself three shots of whiskey and I was so mad.”*

Martha went on to discuss the actions that she took due to her anger and hurt. She recounted driving to her husband’s company’s CEO and telling him that her husband and

a fellow co-worker have been having an affair. Following that encounter, Martha drove to her mother-in-law's house and told her this:

*“I looked at his mother and I said, ‘do you know that your son’s been getting his cock sucked off by (name removed)?’ Like, I said it just like that. Like, I was super vulgar, super mad. And she just looked at me and bawled her eyes out. I’m like, ‘and he’s been fucking (name removed)!’ I mean I was super vulgar, crazy, and like to his parent’s face. And I don’t talk like that.”*

**Intersection of confusion and disbelief.** Four of the six participants provided statements that seemed to convey confusion and some disbelief after finding out their partners were having an extramarital affair. Jane wondered:

*“You think, Why? What’s better about that person? Why would they do that to me? You’re the person they’re supposed to want to spend the rest of their life with, not seek out others. But just total numb and disbelief I think is what really goes through your head.”*

In this passage, Jane described replaying scenarios in her head and expressed some confusion as to where she and her husband stood as a couple:

*“And then it’s kind of like, you just keep replaying these things that you really don’t have any idea about but you keep replaying them. Like things they could be doing or they could have done and it’s not that you have to know the details necessarily, it’s just things you think and start weighing yourself down with their relationship and what did they do and what’s that other person like. I think a lot of it is made up in your head. But definitely the numb and replaying things over*

*and over in your head about what they're doing and where you stand as a couple."*

Additionally, Jane described her experience when she tried to confront her ex-husband to receive answers to her questions:

*"In the beginning I was trying to, asking him, 'how could you do this'. I stuck by you all this time, we have two kids. But there was no real response other than name calling. No mature conversation about what went wrong."*

John, Mark, and Joe all had similar first reactions when discovering the affairs. John's first reaction was: *"What did I do wrong?"* He also mentioned that: *"This is my fourth relationship and they have always cheated on me."* In his immediate reaction, Mark asked the question: *"What did I do wrong? It was all trying to figure out what I did wrong was the initial response."* Joe's first response is similar to Mark's and John's in wondering why the infidelity happened. Joe recalled asking his ex-wife: *"The only thing I wanted to know was, why did this happen? Why did you choose to destroy the life that we had? You know, throw away the eight years of relationship, six and a half years of marriage."*

Both Jane and Martha described some initial feelings of disbelief that their husbands would actually have an affair. Jane explained her feelings: *"Well I think initially in all cases, because to me they're all similar. But it's disbelief, you just don't want to believe it."*

Martha believed she and her husband had a great marriage and home. She expressed her disbelief: *"I thought we were such a great husband and wife, we had such*

*a great marriage. We just bought our dream home, this half million-dollar dream home on the water. Like, there's no way he would do this."*

**Wanting to fix the relationship.** All of the participants expressed desires to mend their marriages. This typically included assessing what was salvageable in the relationship, then seeking counseling to help facilitate the process of repairing the marriage.

John explained the lengths he went to in an attempt to satisfy his husband so he would remain faithful in the marriage. He explained:

*"And I guess I kept on thinking, the more I would do for him, I could make him happier, I could make him successful because I was always by his side. I never said no to him and I sold a beautiful home I had to buy this massive six bedroom, five bath, 4,000 square foot home because that's what he wanted."*

Joe knew immediately that he wanted to fix the relationship. He stated: *"I confronted her and said there's something wrong with our relationship and I want to fix it."*

**Counseling.** Half of the participants encouraged their partners to attend counseling in an attempt to rebuild the relationship. Martha decided to pursue couple's counseling after her husband told her in August, *"I just don't love you anymore."* At this point she was unaware of the infidelity. She believed it was because she was pregnant and was not as sexually active at the time. Martha stated: *"And we went through counseling and it wasn't until January that I found out."* In January, Martha discovered the extramarital affair and filed for divorce.

John described consistently encouraging his husband to seek counseling. Even after he found out about the first instances of infidelity, John said: *"Things happen, I*

*forgive, and I'm a firm believer in therapy.*" After discovering his husband's ongoing affairs with multiple people, John confronted his partner, which he describes:

*"I confronted him again and he admitted that he cheated and that was actually the first time he admitted it and also told me he was having emotional problems and was stressed out at work and that he wanted us to go to a therapist."*

John further explained that even though his partner stated he wanted to go to a therapist, John believes he only said it to appease him so he would stay in the relationship longer. John said after a year and a half, his partner never went to therapy, which was one of the reasons he decided to file for divorce. Jane experienced a similar situation of turmoil over whether to stay in the relationship or leave. She decided to seek couple's counseling. Jane stated: *"At that point we had gone through some counseling. I had really considered not staying with him but he was begging me and saying he would never do it again."*

***Salvaging the relationship.*** Some of the participants discussed wanting to stay with their partners and determine what would be salvageable with their relationship. John emphasized that he considers himself a fixer and a communicator. He explained his friends' reactions when he first started dating his partner:

*"And I had some people who warned me about him in the beginning about his past. But it was his past of many years ago. So I overlooked it. I communicated with him about it to make sure it wasn't something that was still going on. And people can change and so I believed him."*

John brought up again that he overlooked red flags such as his partner having previous affairs and still having contact with ex-boyfriends. He explained:

*“So I overlooked it and instead of it being a total red flag, because I’m a communicator, so when I get the response that I think I want to hear, I resolve it and move on and let it go.”*

John described a session with his therapist during which he spoke about what he felt he did wrong to make his partner have the affair. John commented on the session:

*“So she had to see that too and she’s like, “you did nothing wrong, why do you feel the need to blame yourself?” and I would say, ‘because I couldn’t fix it’. I’m a fixer. That’s what I do best. Most people would have left a long time ago.”*

After Jane discovered the first extramarital affair, she explained that she very much wanted to mend the marriage and keep the family together. Her ex-husband had requested to be separated, but agreed to remain married. He also demanded that she move out of the house with their children. Jane described the lengths she went to keep her family intact:

*“But he ended up sleeping with a co-worker and they didn’t have much of a relationship outside of obviously sex. But I wanted my family to work. You know, I did everything I could, asked him to just come back. And so after him sleeping with a co-worker, mind you we were separated but still married, he would come over and see me.”*

When asked what motivated her to try to fix the relationship, Jane stated:

*“I guess it was all areas: religious, family, and my own idea that things were going to get better. And the thought that, people have problems and they work through them.”*

Joe had similar feelings as John in wondering what he did wrong, and also wanting to salvage the relationship. He described his thoughts:

*“Well, it was mostly me trying to figure out what I had done that made her feel she needed to go somewhere else. And then, trying to figure out if we still had anything to salvage or not.”*

### **Life Alterations Caused by the Affair**

There were many repercussions from the infidelity that were reported by participants. Some of the common responses included: increase in self-esteem, not wanting to marry again, having to continue interactions with betrayer, learning that not everyone is untrustworthy, emotional instability, and legal action.

**Increase in self-esteem.** Both Martha and Jane stated they felt they experienced an increase in self-esteem with time. Martha felt empowered by her weight loss and independence with household maintenance. She described her experience:

*“My self-esteem actually grew because interestingly enough I lost a bunch of weight because of the divorce and affair. So I would run, I would walk, I had a fitness trainer that would come to my house. So it kind of forced me to work out and I felt I would look in the mirror and think I have a great body.*

She illustrated her feelings of empowerment with these examples:

*“I felt empowered because like, I had to redo all my kitchen counters by myself and had to go out and find people to do things around my house. I cut my own grass, I bought my own lawn mower, things I had never done before[...]And I had to learn how to do all of that, but once I did it and knew I could do it, it was like,*

*wow I don't need a man I can do it. I own my own house, I have a beautiful house, I have two beautiful kids out of it."*

Initially, Jane blamed herself for her ex-husband having the affair. With time, she realized that it was not her fault, and described her increase in self-esteem: *"In all of this, I don't think I've lost self-esteem, I think I've maybe gained more. More self-awareness of, it's not that I was a bad person or a bad wife."*

**Not wanting to marry again.** Half of the participants expressed that they do not want to get married again. All of the participants said they are open to dating, but three stated they will never marry again. At the time of interview, John was still going through divorce proceedings and described his feelings about dating: *"I have no desire to marry again right now. I just don't know what more I'm going to lose. It's like, how can I get involved with anyone when I'm going through all this drama?"*

Tim described a story about a first date he recently went on where he told the woman up front he has no intention of ever marrying or having children again. Tim said, *"It's not like I want to be alone forever"*, but these are his thoughts regarding marriage after his experiences with the extramarital affair: *"It's kind of changed my whole mind set about marriage in general. I won't get married again. That piece of jewelry and paper doesn't add anything to the relationship, at least to me, besides a lot of liability."* Martha expressed her feelings towards remarriage: *"I dated for a little bit but I said I'd never get married again."*

**Having to continue interactions with betrayer.** In Jane's situation, she had to have continued interactions with her ex-husband. Despite taking court action, her ex-husband still manages to contact her. She stated: *"I have an order for protection in place*

*which limits a lot of discussions that could happen. And he still finds a way, like with the text messages. Randomly. Whenever he's usually drunk."*

She described a text message and the circumstances surrounding it, that she unfortunately received from her ex-husband:

*"He's continued in the relationship with the co-worker that he had the affair with. She's actually pregnant and is expecting in May. I think it's harder because now the children are here and my ex is very adamant that this is their sister and so much where he just got drunk and actually sent me an ultrasound of their baby, which is inappropriate in my book. I don't need to see that, that's not benefiting me. That's obviously being done to be hurtful."*

Joe described a unique situation that forces him to have continued interactions with his ex-wife. He happens to work at the same company as his ex-wife, the man she had the affair with, and that man's ex-wife. He described how things can get awkward but he manages to remain professional. He commented about the situation:

*"I mean a lot of people when they have kids they have to stay in touch for the kids. Well we have to stay in touch because we work together and some of the things I do at work interact with her position. So I don't have a choice but to interact with her as well."*

**Learning that not everyone is untrustworthy.** Jane endured long-term physical, emotional, and verbal abuse from her ex-husband throughout their entire marriage and even to this day he sends her hurtful text messages. When asked about what has changed in her thoughts and feelings from the first discovery of infidelity until now, Jane

emphasized learning that not everyone is like her ex-husband and not everyone is untrustworthy. She described her changes in thinking:

*“There was a lot of domestic abuse in our relationship too. It was verbal, physical, emotional, all of the above. And that played a factor in my leaving too and finally be[ing] done and not stay[ing]. So for me it’s learning that there are people who are like both of my brother-in-laws, they don’t ever do that stuff to their spouses.”*

Even though Jane stated she has not dated anyone since her divorce, she recognizes that there are people in the world that won’t be hurtful. She expressed her growth and learning:

*“It’s something that you have to learn and grow and realize that if someone’s willing to do something as horrible as they’ve done, that there’s somebody next to them that’s willing to not do something as horrible. And you know, there’[re] two different types of people and you can’t view everyone as the one person who hurt you. There’s somebody out there who won’t hurt you.”*

After Mark’s experience with the extramarital affair, he described initially not trusting many people. He now says he is open to dating but remaining cautious. Mark explained: *“I think it’s learning that there’s different people and having to realize that it can be different. It doesn’t have to be the way it was.”* Initially, Martha dated men that she described as “rebound guys”, which she said helped boost her self-esteem and allowed her to have fun going out on dates and to bars, but were never going to be serious because “men are pigs”. At the time of the interview, Martha had been dating someone that showed her that she could trust again. She said: *“I’ve only been dating him for like*

*three months and in just three months and it's the first time in a long time I've felt like I can actually trust this guy."*

**Emotional instability.** Four of the six participants described going through mood changes and emotional instability after discovering their partners' infidelity. Jane explained:

*"So yeah I definitely think you go through different periods. And even now I'll call up my sister and say, 'you know, this just isn't fair and it's not supposed to be this way' and we'll go back to, 'look what it used to be'."*

One of the emotional periods Jane went through was sadness. She said, *"I think you definitely feel sadness and like someone died. And I've said before, it almost seems like it would be easier, there'd be more closure rather than knowing he's out with someone else."*

Jane went on to explain the emotional ups and downs she felt: *"It's hard [...] One minute you're happy the next you're sad and it feels like, okay, back to square one."*

Martha expressed a similar sentiment:

*"I'd reach out to different souls and things I wouldn't normally do. I think it helped but at the time nothing helped. It wasn't day by day- it was minute by minute. I mean it really was like, okay I got through the morning."*

John experienced feelings of wondering what keeps going wrong in his relationships. He stated:

*"I keep going back and wondering what is wrong with me that people keep on leaving me after three or four years. Why do they search for someone else? And I*

*think about other things that were going on in our bedroom and I'm like 'were they not satisfied and they didn't tell me?'"*

When asked about how his thoughts, feeling, and behaviors have changed since the discovery of the infidelity to now, Joe described having had complete changes with his thoughts and emotions. He commented on those changes:

*"Absolutely, 100%, my whole thoughts and feelings started out as how can I fix the situation and what did I do wrong. And now it's okay; how can I get myself through this versus how do it save it. That's how I feel like I've changed directions completely [...] Lately I've moved more towards anger. It's been a real[ly] recent, last week or so, that I get bursts of 'this is stupid, she didn't have a right to do this to me'."*

At the time when Martha discovered the infidelity, she had just given birth to her son four days prior. She reported drastic emotional instability including thoughts of suicide. Martha described her thoughts:

*"I did have thoughts of suicide initially, but my friends came over and got me out of that. And I had this little baby, and I would take good care of this little baby but I would [lie] in bed with this baby till ten in the morning. My milk dried up because I was so stressed."*

Martha explained that she started smoking regularly and consuming alcohol more frequently after the discovery of the extramarital affair. She reported that she currently does not drink alcohol and has quit smoking cigarettes. She stated: *"I made poor decisions but I knew I needed to do that and I knew it was temporary to get me through what I needed to get through at that moment."* Martha goes on to discuss her

indecisiveness about her feelings towards men: *“And who needs a man. I was anti-men big time, like big time. But at the same time, when I was out I liked the attention of men looking at me for the first time in awhile.”*

**Legal action.** Jane recalled an incident that occurred between her and her ex-husband’s mistress that resulted in police and court intervention. She recounted going to a bar/restaurant to have dinner. When she saw her ex-husband and his mistress at the same restaurant, she approached them to introduce herself to his mistress. Jane stated that at the time, she and her ex-husband were still married. This encounter resulted in a fight between the two women, involving hair pulling, screaming, and hitting. Jane described the legal action she took after the fight: *“So I ended up taking a restraining order out against her and my children are on it so that way she can’t be around my children or myself. But they’ve tried fighting it two times now.”*

After the multiple arguments between him and his ex-husband, John threw a cell phone and cracked the windshield of his ex-husband’s car. John also stated that his ex-husband is bi-polar, and he was concerned that his former partner would become violent. Therefore John took this action: *“And we got a consent order against each other; which is like a restraining order but it works both ways.”*

During the interview with Tim, he discussed two separate child abuse charges filed against him by his ex-wife, which he claimed was to gain full custody of the children for financial reasons. He stated that through years of parental alienation, his ex-wife was able to convince the children to agree with the claims. John then stated that after the court hearings: *“child support got changed to me paying her a crap load.”* He went on to describe his current situation:

*“Now we’re battling over the daughter. And the other thing is that fathers are at an extreme disadvantage in these situations. It feels helpless. I certainly don’t have the money, time, and resources to fight the court system. I work a 40-hour work week only to give my ex 30% of my paycheck while she’s unemployed.”*

### **Grief and Loss**

All of the participants discussed losses that occurred due to the extramarital affairs and the divorces that followed. These losses were often accompanied by feelings of grief. The losses described by the participants included: loss of the relationship, having to share custody of children, loss of their partner’s family, loss of friends, shattered dreams and expectations, physical and emotional losses, loss of trust, adjusting to being primary custody provider, and financial hardships.

**Loss of the relationship.** Four of the six participants described experiencing grief due to the loss of the relationship with their spouse. Joe stated: *“To me it started out as just a huge loss of my partner, my other half.”*

Tim spoke of the different emotions and grief he experienced after the infidelity:

*“You’re angry with her, angry with her actions and decisions and choices, but you’re also grieving the loss of the relationship. The family you had, the family and household that you built is suddenly gone. So certainly there was a lot of grief in the fact that my family, is not my family anymore.”*

For Martha and Jane, their ex-husbands were their best friends and love of their lives. Prior to discovering the infidelity, Jane spoke of what she was told by her husband: *“So all of a sudden now I found out, one day it was in August, and he said, ‘by the way, I just don’t love you anymore’”*. Martha explained the loss of that relationship: *“But you*

*know it was devastating. The holidays are hard and you know, losing the love of my life was huge.”*

Jane expressed a similar sentiment: *“I guess I felt bad, I mean, my ex-spouse, he knew me and just the idea that in my head we were best friends.”*

After the police were called following the fight between Jane and her ex-husband’s mistress, her ex-husband lied to police, saying Jane’s hair falls out due to an illness, not because his girlfriend pulled it out. At that moment, Jane expressed feeling of a loss of loyalty in addition to losing her husband, which was expressed through this statement:

*“And it was, it was like he put a knife through my heart. I knew that he was done trying, any loyalty was completely gone. He watched her pull clumps, I mean, I have a big bald spot on the back of my head and he watched and that was the solution, the lie that I would use, that I have lupus and I lose my hair.”*

**Divorce.** All of the participants proceeded with divorce following the discovery of the extramarital affair(s). Some individuals wanted to salvage the marriage and/or try to keep their family intact, but all participants eventually filed for divorce. John and Tim unfortunately described their divorce process as “nasty” and “ugly”.

John believed that going to couple’s therapy would save his marriage, however, his ex-husband refused to ever go. John explained: *“So it took me a year and a half and he never went to therapy. So I filed for divorce and thought, well maybe that will get him to wake up.”* Tim declared: *“Divorce is ugly by nature. People think divorce is going to solve their problems but divorce only makes new problems.”* When asked about his

experience with the divorce, Tim stated: *“She was emotionally already out, and so now everything just fell into the ugliness of the divorce and dividing up the assets.”*

He went on to discuss his view on the unfairness of the court system in regards to divorce:

*“So basically I had to file for divorce and go through the whole process just to see my kids only every other weekend. So my youngest daughter was only one when all this happened, so by the time I saw her again, 30% of her life was taken from me. Thirty percent of her life, I didn’t even get to see her. And apparently that’s just okay. The court system thinks that’s okay. But divorce is just ugly, because it’s a court of equity, not a court of law. So you can tell all the lies you want, and if you get away with them, life’s sweet.”*

**Shared custody of children.** Jane, Tim, and Martha all described having to go through the process of child custody. Jane shared this information: *“I have sole legal and physical custody and he has visits which he currently chooses to not use except for eight hours a month.”* Tim said he was fortunate because at the time of the divorce, his ex-wife did not want majority custody, which he believes is because she wanted to spend more time in her new relationship. He explained:

*“So now the custody at the time of the divorce, we didn’t fight about, and I think it’s mostly because she, well she didn’t want the kids all the time. How could she carry on this relationship when she’s got the kids all the time? So at the time we just did 50/50 custody and that was that. Now two years later she seized custody of the then 14-year old, for financial reasons, and she played a bunch of ugly games to make that happen.”*

Martha was willing to have her children stay with their father and wanted them to have a close relationship. She said most of the time though her ex-husband will not take the children because he is too busy travelling, golfing, going to sporting events, or going to parties. She described her custody agreement:

*“So the kids stay with me and live with me 90 percent of the time. So what we figured out is he would take them on Wednesday nights and every other weekend. And that works but it’s still to this day, he has them an average of two Wednesdays a month because he’s travelling or something. He’s very selfish.”*

**Loss of partner’s family.** All of the participants expressed some sadness and disappointment over losing relationships with their former partners’ families. Three stated that their in-laws were initially sympathetic regarding the infidelity, but following the divorce, all the in-law families cut off contact. Jane described the relationship with her ex-husband’s mother as being “close”, and how his mother would talk him down when he was abusing Jane. She stated:

*“She would be there when he would be popping me in the face and on the phone. [His family] knew about the affairs and they knew about the co-workers – everything. Then, when I chose to leave, contact with them completely stopped. They weren’t there, they didn’t call to ask how anything was, which was completely opposite from how it was during the whole marriage.”*

Jane felt “banished” from her ex-husband’s family, even though his parents were still her children’s grandparents. She went on to talk about the loss of the relationship with her in-laws:

*“I speculate that it’s hard being a parent of someone whose child does go off and have a new relationship and from that they have a child on the way. I guess me being different, I felt like I was banished. I don’t think I would completely not talk to the other grandchildren because of that.”*

John discussed a situation where he lost contact and relationships with his sister in-law (his brother’s wife) and two nieces due to a fight between them and his husband. John’s sister-in-law and her children had moved in with him and his husband right after her husband (John’s brother) had died. John was unaware of the context of the fight, which he found out after the divorce was because his ex-husband got into an argument with John’s sister in-law and he held her husband’s ashes over the toilet, threatening to flush them if she did not move out. John stated: *“I didn’t realize how selfish he was but everything always had to be about him.”* In addition to the story about his sister in-law, this quote also pertained to his story about his mother, whom has a terminal illness. John explained:

*“So I was taking care of my mom. So I was taking care of her with my two brothers. And the hardest part was that my husband was very jealous when I went to see my mom who lived 45 minutes away from us.”*

To sum up the losses of family that John endured, he stated:

*“So here I lose a sister-in-law after my brother died, I lose two nieces, my mom was afraid to call the house, not because she was afraid to talk to him, but she did not want to cause any problems between us.”*

John described that he always thought he had a good relationship with his ex-husband’s mother. However, during the process of divorce, he stated this was occurring:

*“His mom went on a Facebook campaign and started telling anyone that would listen that I beat her son, which never happened.”*

**Loss of friends.** John opened up about losing mutual friends due to his separation from his ex-husband: *“I lost 9 mutual friends out of this relationship that shocked me. My husband sent out a mass email to 400 Facebook friends that had mutual friends and said, ‘choose’.”*

When asked about perceived side-taking amongst mutual friends, Jane stated:

*“I would say the majority of them – I don’t really go out anymore [and] I would definitely say that there are no mutual friends that have stayed completely mutual. He actually hired a person we had graduated with as his attorney.”*

**Shattered dreams and expectations.** A prominent theme that arose was the loss of dreams and expectations for the future. Some participants talked about the difficulty of losing that life expectation of staying married forever. Tim mentioned: *“You know in my experience, prior to all this mess, till death do us part was a rule.”* Jane had similar thoughts: *“My idea was, you stay married, you don’t get a divorce, and they pushed me in the direction of choosing to move out and finding a safe area for me and the kids.”*

Jane attributed some of these thoughts about needing to stay together forever despite abuse or infidelity to her religious upbringing. She explained:

*“You know, that’s interesting because I was raised catholic, I guess the whole stigma of being catholic, that’s what they follow and you try to stay through thick and thin. And my parents are still married, have been since age 19 and 20.”*

Tim experienced similar feelings as Jane in that staying together until the day you die is the way it is supposed to be. Tim recounted his thoughts:

*“People get married. People have kids. Kids grow up. People stay together until the day you die. And that’s the goal, that’s how things are supposed to be. And to have that rug just ripped out from under you, you have no say in the matter. You know, I didn’t choose to have my wife have an affair. I didn’t choose to have her say ‘screw you. I’m running off with the other fellow’. Suddenly, your life is completely different and you had no say in the matter. No choices, no decisions, you feel like it got done to you. And so there’s a tremendous amount of grief in that.”*

When asked about expectations that she had that have changed, Jane said:

*“Definitely the loss of when we first separated and thinking, who am I going to tell everything to at night and what the kids did today and the little things with the person you thought you were going to grow old with and watch the children grow. Just the idea of having that person to share those things with and that person is supposed to want to share those things with you. And when you’re looking ahead to everything from buying a new house to new vehicles to taking family trips to Disney world, you think of that happening with the family with your significant other.”*

John stated, *“I don’t believe in forever anymore”*, when discussing what has changed about his life expectations that he had for his marriage. Joe said even though he and his ex-wife did not have children together, they had just bought motorcycles and were going to go to Sturgis and ride together frequently because that is what her grandparents did together. He emphasized his dream of just being together: *“The biggest*

*thing for me was to just be together, that was my plans lost [...] And making the house better and making our lives together and experience life together was the main thing.”*

**Physical and emotional losses.** For Martha and John, the extramarital affairs took a physical toll in addition to the emotional effects. John had a lot of physical problems in the last six months since the infidelity was discovered. He stated: *“I had a liver biopsy and found out I have Barrett’s syndrome which is pre cancer of the esophagus, which is all caused by stress.”*

*“You’re putting my life in jeopardy physically and emotionally,”* John stated to his ex-husband. In the interview he reported: *“I was becoming a cripple. And I was the strong person in the relationship! I got offered a promotion three months before we left and I turned it down because I wanted to concentrate on our marriage.”*

John went on to say, *“I became like the submissive one and I never was ever in that position.”*

Marta also experienced physical changes due to the emotional toll that the affair took. She offered this information:

*“I think the first two years I was kind of an emotional mess. I lost, I weighed like 89 pounds, I lost so much weight. I was sickly thin because I couldn’t eat because I was so upset.”* She also reported: *“I smoked a lot of cigarettes back then. I’ve quite smoking since then and haven’t had a cigarette in three years.”*

**Loss of trust.** Another recurring theme throughout the interviews was the loss of trust that resulted from the extramarital affairs. The following quote from John illustrated this theme: *“I have no trust at all. And that’s something that only I can rebuild. I need to be more aware of my surroundings if and when someone ever walks into my life again. I*

*second guess everything and everyone.*” John also discussed an issue about couples not being as trustworthy:

*“I guess this is one of the things I’m trying to learn in therapy is. Is this normal for couples to, you know, after three or four years of marriage that there’s no spark left, they’re not as devoted, they’re not as trusting.”*

When asked about his level of trust that may or may not have been affected by the infidelity, John replied, *“I should know better”*, and went on to say:

*“There’s a saying that says, ‘don’t expect the lion not to eat you, just because you don’t eat lion’. And so basically for me trying to be an honest fellow, and I foolishly thought others live by those same values but they don’t. So if your motivation is to lie, cheat and steal to get what you want, why should I believe that my ex wouldn’t do that now.”*

Martha experienced a range of emotions following the discovery of the infidelity, including losing trust in men. She explained:

*“I was like, I’m going to be this independent; I don’t need a man. And I’m going to live the rest of my life that way. Men are pigs, I can’t trust them. I had all these emotions and thoughts in my head.”*

This quote from Joe expressed the loss of trust that he experienced: *“How can I trust her to be good to me since I couldn’t trust her to keep her marriage vows?”*

**Adjusting to being primary custody provider.** For Martha and Jane, adjusting to a single parent lifestyle was difficult. Martha explained the difficulty in answering and explaining to her children why they lived with her the majority of the time. She also said she sometimes felt hurt when her children would get upset about not living in a more

lavish house like they used to have when their parents were still married. When discussing life expectations that did not go as planned, Jane expressed some grief regarding the loss of having her husband there to share stories about their children. She stated:

*“And having to realize that it’s okay that it’s not him, and I still call my mom or sisters and tell them, oh the kids did this or that. And that’s okay that it’s not the husband or their father, as long as I have the opportunity to share those things. But the first couple months I couldn’t get over the thought of what’s my life going to be like without him.”*

Jane spoke about how even though she was the one who left and filed for divorce, she is still concerned about the *“stigma of a single family and they don’t have dad and how’s that going to be with them.”* In this quote, Jane explained why not being married has impeded her ability to work outside the home:

*“My son has autism, and right now he can’t be in preschool and he does in-home therapy so someone has to be home with him, which obviously is me since I’m not married. So that limits my ability to go to work outside of being home, because it’s a 40 hour program so he’s at home or at a center doing therapy.”*

Jane expressed her frustration with her daughter’s school being less adapted for single parent homes:

*“The wordage in the things at school [is] still geared towards two parent families. So for me it’s opening my eyes up to how a lot of the school functions, like the daddy dance, but dad’s nowhere to be found [...] So, I think a lot of it is*

*learning to accept that it's going to be a little bit challenging and I'm going to get a little ticked at certain things like upset about the dance. ”*

**Financial hardships.** A notable finding that arose from the interviews was the theme of financial hardships that participants faced following the infidelity and divorce. Jane was placed in a difficult housing and financial situation after her husband decided he wanted to be separated. This quote illustrates the unfortunate position she was placed in:

*“And so I was five months pregnant and I was obviously just joyful and having my first kid. We had been married six years at that point. And he had confronted me and told me that he was not happy and he wanted me to move out of his house. I was unemployed at the time. He ended up staying in the house, I stayed with my parents. Then I found a one bedroom by myself which obviously is not the ideal situation when you're bringing home your first child.”*

Jane explained how she and her children have had to adapt to having a significantly decreased income: *“But now I'm on very limited income and so it's more like, our fun is going to consist of going to Redbox, going home, making popcorn, and just have a fun night at home.”*

She went on to say:

*“And so even though the funds he owed to me were supposed to pay for a two night hotel stay at a kiddie pool, I'm now thinking, okay have to come up with something new for spring break. So I'm trying to come up with new fun ideas for us that are obviously cost efficient at this point because he's hampering on the little bit of fun that we could have had, which really isn't much of a luxury but for us, it would be [...] It's having a different view. It's like, okay kids we might not*

*be going to Target to pick out a toy but we can go to the Dollar Store, they have lots of little things and you can pick out one or two things. It's switching going from a stable family income of two to now where it's very limited and we have to make due and have fun regardless."*

This quote from Martha's interview seemed to express the same outlook: *"I found out really quick that money doesn't buy happiness. Because I had a lot of money and then I went to not a lot of money."*

John also took a financial hit when he was going through the divorce:

*"He literally wanted half of my house, he wanted half of my furnishings, he wanted half of my jewelry, he wanted half of my retirement, he wanted the dogs. So I've given him 10,000 dollars worth of jewelry, 20,000 dollars worth of furniture that was bought together in the two years, and I have offered him 10,000 cash."*

In hindsight, Tim stated he wished he would have waited to confront his ex-wife about her affair. He stated: *"By alerting her so soon, it gave her the opportunity to do things like liquidate bank accounts."* In Tim's situation, his children may also suffer financially in the future. His ex-wife was having multiple affairs in various cities across the United States, claiming they were business trips. Tim explained in this quote how his ex-wife was able to hide the personal expenses from him:

*"For one thing all her trips were out of town, so there's no way she could get caught in town [...] Which you would expect a considerable expense with travelling and hotel rooms, but the way she hid that was she used the money we had in our children's college funds."*

### **Coping Strategies**

All of the participants discussed various coping strategies they used to help get them through the difficult times following the discovery of their partners' extramarital affairs. The most prominent coping strategies involved the use of and support from family, friends, religion, support groups, individual counseling, forgiving their partner, and reading books.

**Family.** For half of the participants, family was cited as the most influential way of coping with the infidelity and divorce. Three of the six participants had parents that lived less than a few miles away from them. Jane explained that since her ex-husband does not spend time with their children, the biggest male role model that her children have is her father, who they see almost every day. She stated that her mother is incredibly supportive and it helps that her parents live five minutes from her. Jane's family also supported her at a divorce party she held:

*“My sisters came and my mom came out and my aunt and my cousin and my dad stayed with the children. And we went out to eat at TGI Fridays and we had some cake and appetizers, but it was just talking and more celebrating all that I had gone through. Just kind of the relief that it's kind of a new beginning and I had done a lot and come a long way and if it wasn't for each and every one of them I wouldn't be where I am.”*

Jane credited much of her change in outlook to her family. She explained:

*“Every single person in my family if it wasn't for them at different points pushing me along the way or saying, it's okay you'll be okay. That I wouldn't be here right now enjoying myself, I'd probably have a different outlook.”*

Joe's situation was unique in that his parents showed love and embrace to his ex-wife as well as their son. He explained that his family is very religious and his father and brother are pastors. His parents wrote a letter to Joe's ex-wife letting her know that they still love and respect her regardless of her infidelity. Joe made clear that they do not believe he should remain in a relationship with her, but he should remain respectful and kind. Joe described his experience with family support:

*“My mom and dad, as soon as they found out they came up, they live about 45 minutes away so they came to see me right away. And they've been very supportive of me but they've also shown love and kindness to her too.”*

When asked about his level of familial support, Tim said:

*“It's no question blood is thicker than water. I mean, families stick together for the most part [...] My family was a big support, my parents were great, and they still are [...] I know there's a lot of people who have a lot less support than I do so I'm lucky.”*

**Religion.** For John, Joe, and Martha, religion and spirituality helped them cope with the repercussions of the extramarital affairs. John explained that he has always had a “*very deep faith in God*” but his ex-husband did not like John to go to church or practice his religion. But after separating, John said, “*I've started going to church every Sunday now and I don't have to feel bad that he won't go or that he's upset because I go.*”

As mentioned previously, religion is and has always been important to Joe and his family. When seeking guidance and support, Joe stated:

*“I mean, I’m a Christian, so I turn to god for answers on what I’m supposed to do and the message I received loud and clear was that I need to be kind and caring in all of my dealings with her on a go forth basis.”*

When discussing ways that she coped with the stress and hardships following the infidelity, Martha sought ways that she said were not typical for her. She explained: *“I’m not a religious person, but at the same time I would look up at the sky and pray to my grandparents that are deceased and ask for guidance and help during this time.”*

**Friends.** Similar to the theme of family, support from friends was seen as a way to cope with the infidelity and divorce. When asked about support from friends and/or family, Mark replied, *“I feel very protected by my friends and family.”* Joe also experienced help from friends, stating, *“I’ve been reaching out to friends and family a lot, talking non-stop to anyone who’s been helpful in the situation.”* Martha described an outpouring of support from her girlfriends after she discovered her ex-husband’s multiple affairs. When discussing support from friends, she explained: *“I think without all the support of my girlfriends, I don’t think I would have made it.”* Martha also gave examples of support that came from her friends:

*“One of my friends came over and let me know, she said ‘I want you to know, we all chipped in and bought you a ticket to Daisy Camp in Minnesota’. It’s right outside of Minneapolis and it’s a divorce camp for women.”*

Prior to Martha’s divorce hearing, her friends got her a new dress to help her feel beautiful and empowered. She went on to explain that after the hearing: *“My girlfriends came running up with flowers and we all went to lunch. I mean I had so much support that it’s like, I don’t know how other people do it without all the support I had.”*

**Individual counseling.** After separating from her ex-husband, Jane was able to seek group as well as individual counseling. She reiterated the advice she got from her therapist:

*“I started seeing a psychologist and just being able to talk to her and she told me that it’s important that even if I take just five minutes to myself every day to just do something I want to do, if it’s painting my nails, taking a bath, just making sure you take a little time.”*

In addition to individual therapy, Jane also sought counseling for her children. She felt it would be beneficial since both children had witnessed their father emotionally, verbally, and physically abuse their mother for many years. She explained: *“My children both for the last year have seen a therapist once a week. But it’s a lot for them to overcome things that they’ve seen or heard or had been hiding from.”*

Tim stated that he received some counseling, and that he believes it did help him cope with his anger towards the infidelity. John also had individual counseling and said, *“Talking about it and therapy has been the best thing for me.”* He stated that one conclusion he made when in therapy was: *“I am going to therapy for me and I have decided that it’s something within me that attracts people like this.”*

**Reading books.** Some of the participants reported that reading books related to infidelity, forgiveness, and independence was helpful. John recalled reading *Co-Dependent No More*, which has helped him cope with the affair, as well as his past experiences growing up with a father with alcoholism, and coping with an ex-husband with bi-polar disorder.

Martha had a unique situation in that she and her ex-husband are now good friends and take family vacations together. She explained that it took a long time for her to forgive, but now she and her ex-husband speak frequently and spend holidays together. When asked how she managed to reach that forgiveness, she stated:

*“I have a lot of books that I’ve read. And I will tell you the best book I’ve ever read, I keep it in my living room, I recommend it to everyone. It’s called ‘Forgiving the Unforgiveable’. I’m telling you I read this book and I feel it really empowered me and my forgiveness.”*

**Forgiveness.** As stated above, Martha’s ability to forgive was partially aided from the use of books. This quote illustrates her ability to forgive:

*“So that’s why I think my story is so interesting. Is that the infidelity was terrible, I was pregnant, it was so devastating from a financial standpoint. He was the love of my life; I was dating him since I was 21. I gave up my life in Madison to leave and live with him in Steven’s Point. You know and then to have him do this and then forgive him and have a great relationship again is why I think it’s kind of a unique situation.”*

Martha went on to say: *“I would love to be a speaker and coach them on how in the end it’s beneficial to forgive. I mean I know I couldn’t do it in the beginning either initially, but I don’t know.”*

Jane expressed a similar sentiment when asked about her thoughts on forgiveness regarding infidelity:

*“You can get stuck and be bitter and sad, or you can accept it, it sucks, but you have to realize that there’s so much more out there that, why get caught up in something and you have to learn to let it go.”*

**Support groups.** A major theme that stood out when participants were asked about coping mechanisms was the use of support groups. Four of the six participants sought out support groups following the discovery of the extramarital affairs. One participant wished he could have found a support group for gay couples going through a divorce.

Jane was able to receive counseling at the Harriet Tubman Center and stated, “I shared my story with the abuse, and just got to hear other people’s stories too.” She explained that this group counseling was helpful in allowing her to understand the control issues that her ex-husband had. She expressed that the group also helped her to realize that the abuse did not occur because she was a bad wife or bad mother, and that it was not her fault. Joe also appreciated being in a support group with individuals who had been through similar situations. He explained his experience with a support group:

*“I started going to a divorce support group. It’s a Christian based program, meets once a week goes through what’s happening to you. I didn’t think I’d have anything in common with these people, then we start talking and I’m like oh my goodness we all experienced the same thing, no wonder they have these groups.”*

After her friends signed her up for Daisy camp, Martha attended the divorce camp and appreciated the support and strength she received. Martha stated she would love to open a similar camp in the state that she lives in. Regarding her experience, Martha stated:

*“So I was at this camp with 25 other women, and they were all from all over the Midwest and I’d never met any of them [...] So I really did a lot of things to help me through that journey. So all those lessons and all those things I learned, it was so empowering.”*

Tim expressed that he would have been open and more than willing to attend a support group, but did not find one he would feel comfortable going to. He explained his dilemma:

*“I sure wish there were gay support groups for people going through divorce. My church has a divorce support group but it’s straight men and women, so I’m not comfortable going in there and talking about my relationship in front of them, even though they’d probably be okay with it. I was even researching it online and even in big cities there aren’t gay divorce support groups.”*

### **Discussion**

There are several similarities between the prior research and this study’s findings. One similarity includes the emotional instability and difficulty regulating emotions. The previous research cited intense reactions such as rage that could be experienced by the betrayed partner. These feelings of rage were felt by multiple participants both during the initial reactions and periodically throughout the years following the infidelity.

Previous research also stated that participants may experience impairment of daily activities, feelings of powerlessness, victimization, or abandonment after discovering an extramarital affair, which were similar to feelings expressed by the participants. Prior research cited depression as one prevalent result from the discovery of an extramarital affair. Although none of the participants used the word “depression” to describe their

feelings, one stated feeling suicidal, another participant felt “crippled” and others expressed being constantly sad. A longitudinal study would be more adequate to determine if participants experienced depression.

Grief and loss theory also discussed secondary losses that cause an individual to “regrieve” the initial loss. Many participants not only experienced grief due to the extramarital affair, but also had secondary losses including loss of relationship, roles, extended family, friends, income, housing, trust, and belief in marriage. Grief and loss theory additionally discusses psychological, social, and physical reactions to losses and how it is experienced through feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. Some of the participants experienced physical issues due to the stress that the infidelity caused. All of the participants went through changes to their feelings, thoughts, and attitudes throughout their grieving of the affairs and divorces.

Authors Hooyman and Kramer (2006) wrote about the importance of sharing one’s story. This was identified by almost all of the participants as a reason that they wanted to participate in the study. There were no monetary incentives for participation, but all of the participants stated they wanted to be a part of the study to 1) share their story and experiences, 2) potentially help others going through similar situations, and 3) help professionals better understand what betrayed partners are feeling. One participant even stated that he had been looking forward to this interview all week, and was so excited that he told his friends and family he was participating in the research.

Previous research and literature discussed grief as a consequence of shattered dreams. All of the participants discussed losing the ideas and images that they had for the future of their marriage and family. Some cited the loss of doing activities together,

fixing up their house, having children, growing old together, and staying married until “death do us part”.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

#### **Strengths**

Despite the limitations in this study, there are strengths as well. One strength being that information was collected from the betrayed partners. This first-hand account provided more detailed, raw, and personal information as opposed to asking therapists for their impressions of betrayed partners’ experiences.

The diverse population can be seen as a limitation when looking to focus on the impact of a certain aspect of individuals’ experiences, but the diversity in the sample can also be considered a strength since the study was looking at general experiences of any and all participants. Since the research did not hone in on a specific aspect such as socioeconomic status and how that affects post-infidelity experiences, it was a strength then to get a very diverse population sample. The sample included diversity in residence, culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, careers, and more, yet the participants still had some experiences that were relatable.

#### **Limitations**

This study includes numerous limitations that should be taken into account. One limitation is the undersized sample that was used for the study. There were only six participants, which makes the findings difficult to generalize to the population. One of the reasons that the sample size was small was because this study used a qualitative approach as opposed to a quantitative. Obtaining interviews for qualitative research took a longer time, but it was essential to be able to hear real-life stories. Additionally, the

number of participants also had to be limited in order to fit within the nine-months allotted to complete the whole study.

Another limitation was the difficulty in recruiting betrayed partners. Participants were anticipated to be drawn from a local support group in addition to clients from local counseling offices. An initial email was sent to the local group counselor, and she agreed to pass the study's information onto the members. She stated though that she would like to check with her supervisor first. The supervisor said she needed to check with her supervisor, who ended up being the director of the entire international organization. After two months of corresponding with the director, she said that she would not allow information regarding the opportunity to participate in the research study to be passed along to members.

Posting flyers in local counseling offices also proved to be a challenge for recruitment. Permission via phone was granted from the secretaries to be able to post flyers at the offices. However, when flyers were brought to the offices to post, the therapists did not want them to be hung up. Having barriers to both forms of recruitment was one limitation to researching this population. One reason the researcher received from the director as to why members could not be offered the chance to participate was: *“It is such an emotional, private, tender, and volatile issue all at the same time. It is my job to protect members of (name removed). I’ve also found much research is pre-biased.”* The “protection” of clients was a reason cited by one of the therapists as well as a reason to not have flyers posted in their office.

An additional limitation within this study is the broad stipulations to participate in the study. All of the participants were from very different backgrounds, so it would be

impossible to determine the effect that culture, race, gender, length of years married, shared children, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and other individual aspects have on the betrayed partners' experiences. Further limitation was discovered when trying to complete the literature review for this study. There is a lack of research regarding the betrayed partner's experiences, and even less information related to their grief and loss. Most of the research focused on causes and types of infidelity, rather than experiences following the discovery of the infidelity.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

One limitation noted above was the limited sample size. In order to be able to generalize findings to a larger population, more participants should be recruited. Future recruitment efforts might include financial incentives and increased time for the researcher to recruit. Another implication for future research could be to study individual effects of culture, religion, gender, ethnicity, age, number of years married, and numerous additional factors that influence experiences of betrayed partners. Having more criteria for participants could aid in determining specific factors and how they attribute to experiences of grief and loss. Inquiring as to how betrayed partners could have or did use services offered by a social worker could also be an issue for further research.

Future research may also want to look at how therapists can feel more comfortable and equipped to provide therapy to individuals or couples that seek help for issues regarding infidelity. Extramarital affairs are a prevalent occurrence, therefore future research may want to look at specific techniques or skills that can be taught to therapists to assist with working around extramarital affairs.

### **Implications for Social Work**

The results section illustrated participants' thoughts and experiences following infidelity. The majority of participants discussed attending support groups and individual counseling to help them, which could be led by clinical social workers. These stories can help social workers provide therapy by hearing the perspectives and struggles of betrayed partners. If a social worker is striving for closure or clarity for their clients, it is important to be aware that this would be difficult. The client may experience trust issues with new relationships, custody conflicts, and other continual losses that could cause the client to re-grieve. Additionally, social workers serving children and/or families can benefit from learning about the impacts that infidelity has on family dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to assess betrayed partners' experiences with grief and loss following the discovery of an extramarital affair. Despite infidelity being a common occurrence in marriages, the existing literature regarding grief and loss in this field was scarce. In this study, six betrayed partners offered their stories as a healing experience for themselves, to provide support and hope for others who are in similar situations, and to help professionals in the field.

Important themes arose in the findings including immediate thoughts following the discovery of the affair, grief and loss aspects, additional life changes from the infidelity, and coping strategies used by participants. Participants experienced a range of emotions, which sometimes changed minute by minute. Loss of the relationship, loss of extended family, financial hardships, physical and emotional losses, changes in child

custody, and loss of trust were identified as losses that occurred due to the extramarital affairs and resulting divorces. The losses and grief felt by the betrayed partner do not have a conclusion. Secondary losses can continue throughout their life, causing a sense of re-grieving. Although many losses were identified, some participants did note having an increase in self-esteem, and also found that they eventually concluded that not everyone is untrustworthy. Participants identified coping strategies including family, friends, religion, books, forgiveness, support groups, and individual counseling.

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## **Appendix A**

### **INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS/ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

#### **Betrayed Partner's Experiences with Grief and Loss in Extramarital Affairs**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the betrayed partner's experiences with grief and loss after discovering an extramarital affair. I am interested in changes that occurred after the affair, as well as supports and coping skills that have been helpful.

This study is being conducted by Melinda DeGroot, a Master of Social Work student at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University School of Social Work under the supervision of Lisa Kiesel, PhD, LICSW.

**Purpose of this Study:** The purpose of this study is to have the betrayed/injured partner identify and share any feelings of grief and loss experienced due to infidelity. The study will also explore changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviors after the discovery of an affair. Approximately 10 individuals are anticipated to participate in this study.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview either in person or over the phone. You will get to choose which method of interview you prefer. The one-time interview will take approximately 25-45 minutes to complete and will consist of six questions.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research. There is no compensation or other payment offered for your participation. However, this study provides a means to share your story about your experiences after discovering infidelity. Your contributions will enhance the field of extramarital affair research by providing needed information.

The study has minimal risks. During the interview you will be asked to share information about your experiences as the betrayed partner in an extramarital affair. There is the possibility that some questions may be difficult to answer or could arouse uncomfortable feelings. You can decline to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. Following the interview, a list of therapeutic resources and support services will be provided.

**Confidentiality:**

The information collected during this study will be kept anonymous. You will never be asked to provide your name. The only identifying information will be an optional question addressing demographic information including gender and age. In any written reports, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

Confidentiality will be maintained by never asking for names, and by keeping information locked and password protected on the researcher's personal computer.

Interviews will be tape recorded in order to be transcribed, and the only people that will have access to the transcribed interviews will be the principle researcher, Melinda DeGroot, and the supervisor of the research, Dr. Lisa Kiesel. We will finish analyzing the

data by May 25, 2013. We will then destroy all original reports and tape recordings that can be linked back to you.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study or stop the interview at any time without affecting these relationships.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Melinda DeGroot, at [degr5799@stthomas.edu](mailto:degr5799@stthomas.edu). You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Dr. Lisa Kiesel at (651) 690-6709, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time. I consent to participate in the study and I agree to have my answers tape recorded.

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Signature of Participant

Date

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

If at any time you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may refuse to answer and we will move on to another question.

- 1) What is your age and gender? How long were you and your spouse married or continue to be married?
- 2) If you are willing, please describe your experience with infidelity in your marriage.
- 3) Everyone has a different response to infidelity, and I am wondering how your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have been affected by this affair?
- 4) How have you, if at all, experienced losses or grief as a result of the infidelity?
- 5) Some betrayed partners may experience grief as a result of life expectations that you had for you and your spouse not going as hoped. How have your life expectations or dreams altered as a result of the infidelity?
- 6) What has helped you in coping with the affair?

## Appendix C

### Resources for Therapy and Support

#### **The Relationship Therapy Center of Minnesota: Therapy for Individuals, Couples & Families**

(612) 850-8065

<http://www.mncouplescounseling.com/>

The Relationship Therapy Center of MN provides intensive therapy for individuals, couples, or families conducted by Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists and Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers. Marriage and couples counseling can address issues such as affairs, betrayal, and continuous fights.

#### **Beyond Affairs Network**

[http://www.beyondaffairs.com/BAN\\_support\\_groups.htm](http://www.beyondaffairs.com/BAN_support_groups.htm)

The Beyond Affairs Network (BAN) is a non-profit nationwide organization that conducts support groups for individuals dealing with the impact of an extramarital affair. The groups provide a safe space for individuals to seek insight, strength, and mutual support from other men and women who are the betrayed spouse. Group members can be still married or divorced, but must be the betrayed partner in the marriage.

#### **Minnesota Mental Health Clinics**

(651) 454-0114

<http://www.mnmentalhealthclinics.com/>

MN Mental Health Clinics is a private practice association of Mental Health Professionals that provides mental health services, outpatient services, group therapy, urgent care, psychiatric services for all ages, and family counseling in the Twin Cities area.