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Investigating experiences of the infidelity partner: Who is the “Other Man/Woman”?

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ABSTRACT

Little research has explored infidelity relationships from the perspective of the infidelity partner (i.e. the other man/woman to an exclusive romantic relationship) or explored the personality profiles of these individuals. Participants ($n = 180$) completed an online survey. Our findings indicate that most infidelity partners initially do not know they are engaging in infidelity but less than half ended the relationship upon learning of the infidelity. Low agreeableness appears to be a core trait to help explain why some individuals are willing to be an infidelity partner and conceal the transgression. Individuals higher on anxious attachment and an unrestricted sociosexual orientation appear to be more likely to be infidelity partners, although this finding must be cautiously interpreted. As a third party is necessary to engage in infidelity, knowing more about the infidelity partner is essential to furthering the infidelity literature.

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1. Investigating experiences of the infidelity partner: Who is the “Other Man/Woman”?

Infidelity is common among dating relationships as 49% of male college students and 31% of female college students have engaged in sexual infidelity (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999), and 22–25% of married men and 11–15% of married women having engaged in sexual infidelity (Allen et al., 2005). Researchers have amassed a broad and informative literature about the nature of infidelity, experiences of the infidelity victim, and qualities of the transgressor. One glaring gap in the infidelity literature is that there is virtually no research conducted from the perspective of the infidelity partner. We define the infidelity partner as the individual who is the third party to a primary romantic relationship (i.e. the individual with whom a person in a committed, monogamous relationship is cheating with, commonly referred to as the other man or the other woman). In television shows and movies we see infidelity partners' varied experiences and the internet is awash with personal stories from individuals who either knowingly or unknowingly were an infidelity partner. Yet in the vast infidelity literature, little attention is paid to the infidelity partner. The current paper aims to describe infidelity relationships from the

perspective of the infidelity partner as well as explore the personality profiles of individuals who find themselves in the role of infidelity partner.

Sociologist Laurel Richardson collected qualitative data about the experiences of women who knowingly entered into relationships with married men. Richardson (1979) found that these relationships lasted from 1 to 17 years and ended due to a variety of external (e.g. the wife, relocation, or a new lover) and/or internal (e.g. disillusionment with relationship, distress) factors. These single women were often involved with married men due to a perceived lack of desirable single men as well as a way to explore their sexuality, and gain professionally and personally (Richardson, 1985, 1988). Most of the women expressed regret about the affair but there were notably a few who seemed to negotiate the liaison with little remorse or regret (Richardson, 1985, 1988). This work is somewhat outdated, focused only on women, and little attention is given to traits about the infidelity partners themselves.

2. Personality traits as predictors of infidelity

Researchers have found a number of personality traits related to the likelihood of being an infidelity transgressor. For the current study, we will explore the personality traits most consistently found in transgressors, and how such traits may also be found in aware infidelity partners and be associated with relationship outcomes. One trait commonly linked to infidelity is attachment style, as securely attached individuals are less likely to cheat on romantic

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partners compared to those with insecure attachment styles (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Allen and Baucom (2004) found that avoidant individuals were more likely to engage in infidelity as a way to gain space, freedom, and autonomy from a relationship partner whereas individuals with an anxious attachment style reported engaging in infidelity as a way to receive intimacy as well as a way to enhance their self-esteem.

The Big Five personality model has also been associated with the likelihood of engaging in infidelity. Consistently, researchers find that individuals who engage in infidelity tend to be lower on conscientiousness (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Schmitt, 2004a) and agreeableness (Schmitt, 2004a). There is some evidence that individuals higher on neuroticism are more likely to engage in infidelity (Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007) although Schmitt (2004a) only found this relationship among women. Researchers have also found that extraversion is positively associated with engaging in infidelity (Orzeck & Lung, 2005; Schmitt & Buss, 2000). There is also mixed support that individuals high on openness are more likely to engage in infidelity (Orzeck & Lung, 2005) although Schmitt (2004a) only found this relationship among men. The mate poaching literature also highlights how the Big Five personality traits may be associated with the infidelity partner experience. According to Davies, Shackelford, and Hass (2007) mate poaching is when an individual knowingly attempts to lure an individual away from an exclusive relationship. Schmitt (2004b) found that individuals high on extraversion and low in agreeableness and conscientiousness were more likely to mate poach.

Associated with lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness, the Dark Triad of personality consists of three overlapping but unique personality traits (psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) which are prone to engaging in deceitful and malevolent behavior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). At the core of the Dark Triad is a proclivity for manipulation and callousness (Jones & Figueredo, 2013), and all three traits are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Jones & Weiser, 2014). Individuals high in Machiavellianism tend to be cautious and strategic about infidelity in order to not ruin their relationships (Jones & Weiser, 2014) whereas individuals high in psychopathy and narcissism are less likely to be calculating in their actions (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). Further, individuals high on the Dark Triad traits are also more likely to mate poach (Jonason et al., 2010).

Finally, sociosexual orientation is an important trait to consider in infidelity relationships. Individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation are more comfortable having sex outside the bounds of a committed romantic relationship and in fact tend to enjoy casual sex (Simpson, Wilson, & Winterheld, 2004). In contrast, individuals with a restricted sociosexual orientation require emotional closeness and commitment prior to entering into a sexual relationship. Individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation are more likely to engage in infidelity and have more favorable attitudes towards infidelity (Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991).

3. The current study

As transgressors knowingly and willingly engage in a behavior which may be harmful to others, we expect a similar personality profile for infidelity partners who are aware they are engaging in a relationship transgression. Additionally, these personality traits may be related to infidelity outcomes such as continuing with the relationship and revealing the infidelity to the primary relationship partner (the infidelity victim). Essentially, we believe that the same traits which predispose individuals to act in a

self-focused manner and cheat on an infidelity victim, will be traits found in aware infidelity partners as well. Aware infidelity partners will possess a personality profile that is self-focused and will show little regard for the infidelity victim. Specifically, we expect infidelity partners who are aware they are engaging in infidelity to be higher on attachment avoidance and anxiety, extraversion, openness, neuroticism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism, and have an unrestricted sociosexual orientation. We also hypothesize that these individuals will show lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness. Additionally, we expect that individuals with this personality profile are more likely to continue with the infidelity relationship even after learning their partner's true relationship status. It is also expected that such individuals will be more likely to keep the infidelity hidden and not inform the infidelity victim of the transgression.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

A total of 180 individuals participated in the current study (53 males, 116 females, M age = 26.44 years, SD age = 8.95). Participants were Caucasian (60.7%), Latino (19.0%), African American (6.5%), Asian American (6.0%), and multi-ethnic (6.5%). Most participants identified as heterosexual (89.9%). Participants were recruited through social media. The first author posted a recruitment invitation on Facebook, and friends and colleagues then shared this invitation with their networks. Participants were also recruited through the electronic listserv at the first author's university which is distributed to faculty, staff, and students. Participants were purposefully recruited who had the experience of being the infidelity partner ($n = 145$) although others elected to participate in the survey ($n = 34$). These individuals saw the recruitment invitation and despite their ineligibility for the study, chose to participate. Their data was used in an exploratory analysis comparing the personality traits of those who were and were not infidelity partners.

4.2. Measures

All questions were presented online in an anonymous format and in the following order. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations among personality traits. In all cases, higher scores indicate the person reports the specific personality trait at a higher level. Attachment style was assessed with the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). The AAQ is a 17-item scale that measures two dimensions of avoidance and anxiety which uses a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items for each dimension are averaged and scores calculated for Avoidance and Anxiety. To assess the Big Five personality traits, participants completed the MINI-IPIP questionnaire (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006). The MINI-IPIP is a 20-item inventory in which participants rate to what degree statements accurately describe themselves using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very inaccurate, 5 = very accurate). Items for each trait are averaged and scores calculated for Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness.

The Dark Triad was measured using the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The Short Dark Triad is a 27-item assessment using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Items for each trait are averaged and scores calculated separately for Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and Narcissism. To assess sociosexuality, participants completed the Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R; Penke &

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