

SURVIVING THE AFFAIR: A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF
THE STRATEGIES COUPLES UTILIZE TO REPAIR THEIR MARRIAGE SUCCESSFULLY
AFTER
THE OCCURRENCE OF INFIDELITY

by

Kimberly Youngblood

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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ABSTRACT

This research explores couples' strategies in reconstructing their marriage after infidelity, thereby avoiding divorce. The research questions provide a clear focus on the discovery process through a phenomenological design and the use of semi-structured interviews. The literature review illustrates the history of marriage, fidelity, infidelity, predictors, general reasons for infidelity, the impact on the marriage, and tools utilized by couples who successfully repair their marriage after infidelity. The methods section provides a framework for implementing the study and includes details about the process of recruiting participants, interviewing participants, transcript review, codes, and theme development. The presentation of the findings illuminates the themes that cultivate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the lens of the clinicians and married participants. Implications for further study, limitations, and implications are described in the conclusions.

Keywords: fidelity, infidelity, spirituality, forgiveness

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to my daughter Marissa. You are my inspiration to do better and be better. Thank you for waking up and checking on me at 2:00 A.M. You are my pride and joy.

I also dedicate this research to all married couples working to have a successful marriage. To all the therapists with a compassionate heart working with couples.

Acknowledgments

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List of Abbreviations

American Counseling Association (ACA)

Facebook (FB)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Infidelity is the act of engaging in a sexual or romantic relationship with a person other than one's significant other, thus breaking a commitment or promise. For this research, "significant other" refers to the husband or the wife. Most research regarding infidelity in marriage tends to focus on the reasons for fidelity or infidelity and its contribution to divorce. However, there is scarcely any information about the marriages that successfully navigate infidelity and what skill or tools they used to remain married. In an effort to fill the current gap in the literature, this case study investigated what skills married couples utilized to maintain their marriage, thus avoiding divorce. Research suggests a positive association between marital satisfaction, religion, spirituality, and forgiveness. There are few studies about faith's impact on sustaining marriages, particularly after infidelity. Religious teachings reinforce moral values, often discouraging behaviors that lead to infidelity (Jackman, 2015). Faith's practice provides a protective factor of fidelity, promoting monogamy, reliability, and marriage loyalty. Faith provides a unique quality in repair and marriage restoration. The power of a praying couple who shares similar faith practices helps maintain marital quality, building fidelity in the marriage.

According to the American Psychological Association, in the United States, infidelity is responsible for 20% to 40% of divorces; 61% of the men who had an affair remained married. Although infidelity contributes to divorce, some marriages survive infidelity, and the couples remain married. How do some marriages successfully navigate through infidelity and avoid divorce? Studies indicate that couples often seek counseling from a mental health professional, talk with peers (other married couples) or find support within their family. Within the body of research, there is no discussion of faith's role in mending a marriage after infidelity. However,

faith plays an essential role in many people's lives. There are numerous religious groups in the United States. There is 70.6% Christian, 25.4% Evangelic Protestant, 20.8% Catholic, 14.7% Mainline Protestant, 1.6% Mormon, 6.5% Historically Black Protestant, 0.5% Orthodox Christian, 0.8% Jehovah's Witness, and 0.4% Other Christian (Pew Research Center, 2014).

The couples who share faith practice as a significant part of their lifestyle have lower marital infidelity rates (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019). Practices such as attending church, shared prayer, regular Bible reading, and ministry involvement can provide a protective factor from infidelity (Mullins, 2016). Research results indicated that spirituality positively affects relationship balance (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). Additional therapeutic interventions frequently sought out to help a couple dealing with infidelity are marriage counseling as well as peer and family support. Understanding the factors that promote recovery from infidelity may introduce therapists and couples' strategies in their marital infidelity experience.

Background

The infidelity rates in marriage reflect that 15% to 20% of married couples have engaged in infidelity behaviors; only 16% successfully maintain their marriage after an affair (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although the numbers may seem discouraging, there is the potential for change. The knowledge and understanding learned from couples who have successfully repaired their marriages may be helpful to others. How did these marriages survive the affair? The lack of research and knowledge about how couples stay together represents a gap in research. The gap in research suggests a lack of solution-focused strategies to help couples dealing with infidelity. Understanding what necessitates repairing a marriage experiencing infidelity can potentially decrease the number of divorces due to infidelity.

The research findings contribute to the field of counseling, informing future studies on the importance of spiritual or faith practice to help couples repair their marriage. Religion is often associated with fidelity. Having a small sample size provides understanding and establishes possibilities related to spirituality and faith and the impact on the repair of the marriage.

Situation to Self

As a master's level clinician and a licensed independent chemical dependency counselor, and now as a doctoral candidate, I have worked with many couples over the past 30 years. I noticed that some clients seeking counseling for infidelity successfully navigated through the challenges of maintaining their marriage, while others were unsuccessful and chose to separate or divorce. Through my practice, I have observed a common theme that links the successful couple dealing with infidelity yet maintaining their marriage; that theme is spiritual belief. Observing the couples I counseled, I noticed that the couples who did not have a core spiritual belief in their commitment to marriage or did not participate in corporate worship or prayer spent a long time in therapy. Couples who engaged in corporate prayer and worship would demonstrate a willingness to forgive more quickly than the couples who did not engage in faith practices.

Problem Statement

The institute of marriage is evident as far back as 1250 to 1300 years BC, and it is a fundamental mechanism of human existence. The goal of marriage is to function as a partnership between families (Stritof, 2019). Traditionally marriage is regarded as a religious practice with inherent assumptions about faithfulness, commitment, and exclusiveness with the marital covenant. For Christian marriages, the divorce rate is lower than the general population;

37% of practicing Christians get divorced versus 41% of the general population (Appendix C), suggesting that Christian couples invest in their marriage's sacredness (Barna Research, 2019). It is estimated that up to 70% of all marriage relationships have experienced infidelity (Zapien, 2016). Infidelity in a marriage is a leading cause of divorce; however, not all couples end their marriage; instead, they commit to rebuilding their marriage despite the negative impact that infidelity created. Given the importance of faith in many societies, particularly in the United States, the belief held by many that a personal relationship with God is possible, and the importance of communication in marriage, the research will provide insight and a profound understanding of the coping mechanism couples use to repair their marriage.

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological qualitative case study research aims to understand the experiences of couples who use faith practices and other coping strategies to repair their marriage after infidelity.

Significance of the Study

There are significant implications of this research related to marriage and infidelity. Research on marriage and infidelity primarily focuses on how infidelity contributes to divorce but does not focus on strategies that help prevent marriages from ending in divorce after infidelity. I seek to remedy these gaps in the literature. This study will provide a deeper understanding of how couples restore their marriage using faith practices and other coping mechanisms. The findings may provide insight for counselors, therapists, or other married couples on what strategies can help a couple survive infidelity. Additionally, the findings may add to the body of literature that documents positive associations between faith strategies and

repairment of marriage after infidelity and provides a foundation for future research on successfully maintaining marriage after marital infidelity.

Research Questions

Research questions are formulated and tied to the purpose of this research. They shed light on the gap in research in identifying and describing coping strategies utilized by couples who recovered from the infidelity event. Marriages with a shared set of religious or philosophical beliefs help guide couples' lives, contributing to the marital relationship's success (Gottman, 1994). The research has indicated that forgiveness and spiritual beliefs help couples reconstruct their marriages during and after an affair. This research sought to answer the following overarching research question: How do couples use faith practices and other coping mechanisms to restore their marriage after infidelity?

Hypothesis: Couples who reconstruct their marriage after infidelity use spiritual coping strategies as a part of the mending process.

RQ1: What are the experiences of couples who experience infidelity and choose to restore their marriage?

RQ2: As a couple, how do faith practices impact the recovery process following infidelity? How do spiritual disciplines impact the recovery process following infidelity?

Definitions

1. *Coping strategies* – Strategies used by the couple that help a couple repair their marriage, which include but are not limited to marriage counseling, peer support, prayer, meditation, worship, fasting, and support groups (David & Stafford, 2015; Mintle, 2015; Plamondon & Lachance-Grzela, 2018).

2. *Couples* – Described in this research one man (husband) and one woman (wife) to narrow the focus to a specific group.
3. *Faith practices* – Prayer, worship, reading the bible, church attendance, and fasting (David & Stafford, 2015).
4. *Fidelity* – Involves being monogamous, honest and reflects healthy communication and high marital quality (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).
5. *Infidelity* – Described as an emotional or sexual act outside of the primary relationship and constitutes a breach of trust or of agreed-upon boundaries of that relationship (Coop, Mitchel, 2020).
6. *Marital quality* – The marriage's quality is described by healthy communication, mutual respect, and healthy conflict resolution skills (Aalgaard et al., 2016; Ziv et al., 2018).
7. *Marriage* – Committed relationship solidified by vows and sanctioned by God (Geoffrey, 2019; R. Gibson, 2018).

Summary

Research surrounding infidelity in marriage primarily focuses on the reasons for infidelity or focuses on infidelity and its contribution to divorce. However, there is limited knowledge or discussion regarding marriages that successfully navigate infidelity and what skills or strategies they used to remain married. There is even less understanding of how couples use faith practices as a role in the reparative process. This case-study doctoral dissertation investigates couples who have experienced infidelity and choose to use faith practices central to the restorative process, thus filling the current literature gap. This research will identify the specific strategies the married participants used to maintain their marriage.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This literature review provides descriptions of existing research, beginning with a historical review of marriage. The review includes a discussion on fidelity, then narrows the review to infidelity, general reasons for infidelity, predictability factors, and the effects of infidelity on the marriage and the couple. The literature review provides a foundation for the study by describing the previously conducted research regarding infidelity. The literature provides a framework for highlighting the literature gap, thus providing a rationale for the study. Also, this research provides data related to marriages and infidelity. The review concludes with coping strategies utilized in Christian marriages and secular marriages.

Historical Overview of Marriage

The institute of marriage is evident as far back as 1250 to 1300 years BC, and it is a fundamental mechanism of human existence. Markedly, marriage's goal is to function as a partnership between families (Stritof, 2019). Stritof (2019) called attention to Hebrew marriages, indicating the importance of marriage regulations and arranged marriages. Hebrew marriages established social order and developed moral systems formed upon the biblical model (Stritof, 2019). The established Judo-Christian view of marriage has its roots in the Hebrew scriptures (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010). As the Roman Catholic church became a powerful institution in Europe, it became necessary for a priest to bless a marriage before it was legally recognized (*The Week Staff*, 2007). The United States has witnessed a retreat from marriage over the past half-century. Notably, there is an increase in nonmarital childbearing adults and the age of first marriages (Wilcox et al., 2015).

Marriage expectations and motivations have evolved. During the 13th century, marriages were established on the principle that men were rulers of their wives and custodians of their property (Phipps, 2019). Marriage often included conditions based on the benefits of either family. Evidence points to the fact that women were given to the man as property within the parents' conditions of an arranged marriage. The purchase of a woman happened through dowries, based on the family's best interest (R. Gibson, 2018). Pre-industrialized societies conceptualized marriages as an economic function. The economic function served to sustain and secure life. During the pre-industrialized period, wars and plagues wiped out millions of people, resulting in marriages that served as a social and economic necessity (Geoffrey, 2019).

Through negotiations, families usually arranged marriages to increase wealth and prestige and gain political advantages or property (Little, 2014). Property law, known as coverture, was a legal doctrine whereby, upon marriage, a woman's legal rights and obligations were subsumed by those of her husband, per the wife's legal status, and stipulated that a married woman did not have a separate legal existence apart from her husband (American History USA, 2020). A married woman was dependent, like an underage child or an enslaved person, and could not own property in her name or control her earnings except under specific circumstances (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010). A woman surrendered her legal rights as an individual, becoming her husband's property. She was legally bound to obey her husband just as she would obey God (Brady & Hewitt, 2018; PBS, 2014). Treating women as property and marriage as an arrangement between families was evident as late as the 19th century (Brady & Hewitt, 2018).

Another expectation within marriage is the role responsibilities of each gender. Women traditionally take more responsibility for childcare and managing the home. A woman was tasked with oversight of the domestic attributes of the home (Hill, 2012; Oliveira, 2020). Based

on the traditional gender roles, wives stayed home, raised the children, and failed to accumulate “market-relevant” human capital, meaning they did not work (Lundberg et al., 2016). Even in an atypical marriage of the 21st century, there is no escaping the gender norms; the wife continues to have the primary responsibility of caring for the children (Lindemann, 2018), although there has begun a shift in the marriages of today toward shared responsibilities of caring for the children and managing the household.

The attitudes toward the purpose of marriage have changed over time. Modern marriages in post-industrialized societies were formed to gain romantic, passionate, and emotionally fulfilling companionship (Geoffrey, 2019). It was not until the 1800s that couples began to value marriage for providing companionship and intimacy (R. Gibson, 2018). A few traditional reasons to marry are marriage as a cultural norm and marriage that focuses on the individual partner's needs and interests in the relationship (Green et al., 2016). In the United States and other Western countries, the definition of marriage has evolved. Marriages are valued for the reproduction of children, personal fulfillment, and the privilege of companionship. Current trends regarding marriage include the delay of marrying, an increase in cohabiting couples, a growing population of singles, and childbirth outside of marriage (R. Gibson, 2018).

A study on marriage behavior indicates that since 1950 there has been a dramatic change in marriage behaviors in the United States. Men and women are marrying later in life, and there is a higher probability of a divorce. Up to now, cohabitation has become an alternative to marriage. A change in marital behavior has impacted racial and ethnic groups crossing the socioeconomic spectrum (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015). An example of the change in marital behavior is found in the incidents of cohabitation. The research indicates a decrease in cohabitation as education rises, suggesting that families with high incomes and high levels of

education have the greatest incentive to maintain the long-term relationship (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015). Marriages today are unions of equals rather than a conquest of one person over the other. Marriage is viewed as a lifetime commitment; however, there is a greater probability of a marriage ending in divorce (Grigienė et al., 2016).

In Western cultures, the current trend regarding age is to delay marriage until a person is in their late 20s or early 30s. According to the 2019 U.S. Census Bureau report, the average age for a first-time married man is 30, increasing from the age of 24 in 1949. The 2019 Census Bureau report also noted that the age of first-time marriage for women is 28, rising from age 21 in 1949 (see Appendix A; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The age of getting married has increased for both men and women, and the number of marriages has also increased. The 2019 Census data reports on the marital status by gender: The report shows that 68,504 of the male population are 15 years old and older, and 69,254 of women 15 years old and older are married (see Appendix B). Roughly 8% of the adult population will marry at least once by the age of 40. How individuals marry has changed, with many individuals cohabitating before marriage (Lundberg et al., 2016). As a social norm, the deinstitutionalization of marriages has deteriorated the value of the union of marriage. Despite the deterioration of marriage's social norms, there are yet individuals who enter the marriage covenant with reverence and honor the vows of fidelity, and marriage is still a goal for many individuals (Willoughby et al., 2015).

Detraditionalization

One transformative movement regarding the view of marriage occurred after World War II. The change in the concept of marriage became known as the detraditionalization of marriage. The detraditionalization of marriage refers to a change from the traditional reasons to marry for love (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015), with gender-specific roles to marriages based on fluid gender

roles (Green et al., 2016). Marriage pathways have changed; most individuals will cohabit with their romantic partner before marriage (Willoughby et al., 2015). It comes as no surprise that marriage, as viewed in the context of detraditionalization, is not only a union primarily for procreation but also a union for economic and social stability. Detraditionalization of marriage explicates the decline in regulative traditions of marriage and a movement intended to shift the traditional views regarding the institution of marriage and the construction of marriages (Green et al., 2016). Marriages are fundamentally governed by the same cultural and institutional rules and regulations as preceding generations (Willoughby et al., 2015). Within the context of detraditionalizing is the discussion of same-sex marriages and the insurrection of civil marriages or civil unions. The detraditionalization of marriage views marriage as one of equality between partners and their mutual sexual and emotional satisfaction (Green et al., 2016; Heaphy, 2018).

In the context of detraditionalizing, the viewpoint of marital equality is the idea known as *pure relationships*. Pure relationships are relationships premised on nothing more than the satisfaction of each partner's needs and sustained only to the extent that it provides enough return for that individual. Although detraditionalizing marriage created a movement from traditional marriage, the concept of romantic love or passionate feelings that lead to a lifelong marriage remains strong and includes monogamy in marriage (Green et al., 2016). Further exploration of the concept of romantic and passionate love can be found in the section on fidelity.

Civil Marriage

Marriage ceremonies performed by a governmental or civil officiant are known as civil marriages. Civil marriages, also known as civil partnerships, are more frequently used when referring to same-sex partners (Heaphy, 2018). There are no religious affiliations attached to civil marriages; however, civil marriages meet the legal requirements for many states in which

the union occurs. A clergy member performs the traditional marriage ceremony but does not necessarily perform the civil marriage ceremony. Civil marriages are legally binding without the traditional marriage license based upon the legal requirements of the state in which the ceremony took place. A couple can opt for a civil marriage performed by a government or civil officiant if neither partner has religious affiliations or membership, the partners are of the same sex, the couple has different religious faiths, or the couple wants to have a non-traditional ceremony that is not performed by a member of the clergy (Stritof, 2020).

Marriage Covenant

The traditional view of marriage is marriage as a form of religious practice. Included in the religious practice is the religious belief toward marital commitment. The view of marriage has been traditionally viewed as a religious practice; this view continues today. Under this premise, views about the marriage covenant include, but are not limited to, viewing marriage as a unique relationship, having faith and hope regarding marriage, and believing God as part of the relationship (Olson et al., 2016). Legal recognition of marriage does not occur until the marriage license is signed (Stritof, 2020). Additionally, the marriage covenant is established between a man and a woman, creating a partnership for their entire life, naturally instituting well-being for each spouse (Grigienė et al., 2016). There is a positive correlation between spousal values and religiosity and marital satisfaction, according to research conducted by Olson et al. (2016).

Biblical Model of Marriage

The Bible provides historical evidence and instruction on the intended covenant indicative of a Christian marriage model. Interestingly, there are no scripture references in the Bible that dictate the labor division; however, there is guidance on how the marriage should be similar to love as Christ loved the church (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010). God established

marriage as a union of one man and one woman. The design and establishment of marriage occurred when God presented Eve to Adam. It is God's will that the union should be lifelong. The marriage commences when a couple has fulfilled the state's requirements and has publicly made their vows to each other (Minnesota Pastoral Conference of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, 2018). The Bible refers to the marriage relationship as a covenant. The first covenant is the covenant between God and his people, which represents the first image of marriage. The relationship with God involves his total and everlasting fidelity toward his people. God remains faithful even when His people forsake him. God's fidelity toward his people represents marriage's fidelity between the husband and wife (O'Loughlin, 2017). In Ephesians 5:25, God provides these instructions: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017).

Religion is thought to proffer significance to the commitment of marriage. Marriage has a sacred purpose and postulates a perspective supporting couples staying together during stressful events. Believing in the sacredness of marriage is linked to diminishing the damaging effects of stressful events in a marriage, enhancing the desired marriage outcomes for marital harmony (Karimi et al., 2019; Mullins, 2016). Religious traditions often emphasize the importance of love, commitment, loyalty, mutual support, and forgiveness (Lakatos & Martos, 2019).

The consecrated (sacred) marriage includes the belief that marriage is a function of God's plan and that God is involved in marriage outcomes. A consecrated marriage demonstrates stability and unity, increased growth and motivation, and a higher level of happiness and peace, maximizing a monogamous marriage (Mullins, 2016). Ephesians 5:25-27 states,

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017)

A study conducted by Klausli (2020) found that couples who embraced a more sacred view of their marriage showed a higher prevalence of relationship maintenance behaviors, which predicted improved relationship satisfaction. For the consecrated marriage, the beliefs are symbolic interactionism, suggesting that an individual marital paradigm is partially a product of a broader cultural interpretation of marriage (Willoughby et al., 2015).

The consecrated religious couples describe four predominant social contexts that gave their marriage sacred meanings: prayer, worship services, sermons, and communion (David & Stafford, 2015). Couples who believe that marriage is sacred are also more likely to remain committed to the marriage since they have promised God. The couples desire to obey God's guidelines for marriage, and they believe their marriage is part of God's will. The couples invest in their sacred marriage, protect the sacredness of their marriage, achieve satisfaction in the marriage in the pursuit of the sacred, glean spiritual emotions from the sacred, and suffer severe consequences from the loss of the sacred (Mullins, 2016). One in four Americans (27%) are practicing Christians. For Christian marriage, the divorce rate is lower than the general population: 37% of practicing Christian versus 41% general population (see Appendix C), suggesting that Christian couples invest in their marriage's sacredness (Barna Research, 2019).

An influential factor in marital satisfaction is an individual's relationship with God (Allen, 2018; David & Stafford, 2015). Biblical references to marriage, the intention, and the purpose for marriage are found in the Bible. 1 Corinthians 7:2 states, "But because of the

temptation to sexual immorality, each man shall have his own wife, and each woman her own husband” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017). Genesis 1:27 states, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God, he created him; male and female, he created them” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017). The couple's religious communication is positively associated with high marital quality (David & Stafford, 2015).

Impact of Fidelity

The achievement of fidelity occurs with commitment, as it is of central importance to a marriage relationship and contributes to relationship satisfaction (Fincham & May, 2017a). The commitment to the marriage endorses monogamy in the marriage and to the marriage vows, which play a central role in the contemporary construction of the marriage's intimate life (Green et al., 2016). Marital satisfaction within the relationship contributes to the spouse's satisfaction, keeping them committed and loyal to their partner (Isma & Turnip, 2019). The spouse's marital promises create the bond of marriage, otherwise known as the wedding vows. Another fidelity component is trust, built by giving one's word to establish trust (Kampowski, 2015). All of the previously mentioned qualities contribute to fidelity. Fidelity is the quality or state of being faithful (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In a marriage with high fidelity, each partner believes that the other is trustworthy; they believe that the partner will endeavor to be forthright and behave in a conscionable manner. The partner further believes that marriage will be monogamous. Fidelity in marriage is possible when couples believe marriage is a religious experience. Couples who have shared beliefs about marriage's sanctification experience positive marriage outcomes and decreased hostile interactions during the conflict (Mullins, 2016).

Fidelity is a protective factor that discourages extramarital affairs. The fidelity in marriage persists with effective communication, which is an intricate part of a healthy marriage.

The couple who communicates openly and honestly has more reliable predictability of marital satisfaction and ensures a monogamous marriage (Timothy-Springer & Johnson, 2018).

Furthermore, religious teachings reinforce moral values, often discouraging behaviors that lead to infidelity (Jackman, 2015). The protective factor of fidelity promotes monogamy, reliability, and loyalty in marriages.

Promotes Monogamy

Monogamy is defined as a committed relationship between two persons who remain sexually and emotionally faithful to one another (Fye & Mims, 2019). Monogamy is a norm within many cultures; 94% to 99% of adults expect monogamy in their romantic/marital relationships (K. Gibson et al., 2016). Worldwide, 15% to 18% of marriages practice monogamy. Couples can maintain monogamy and prevent infidelity by building secure attachments, fundamentally improving the strong effects on a marriage, establishing healthy emotional bonds within the marriage, having a healthy sexual relationship, and fostering values and beliefs which support monogamy (Culver & Lundquist Denton, 2017; Fye & Mims, 2019). In addition, maintaining monogamy occurs with the married partners' establishing boundaries, thus providing another preventative measure to prevent infidelity and establish reliability (Fye & Mims, 2019).

Fye and Mims (2019) reported that the exclusivity of monogamy has existed since the beginning of humanity. Monogamy is the crucial marker of commitment (Van Hooff, 2017). Monogamy did not exist until the 13th century, with the inception of religious implications depicting monogamy as a sacrament (Fye & Mims, 2019). Couples with a normative view on marriage believe that marriages should be a completely monogamous relationship (Green et al., 2016). The normative view of marriage states that marriage and monogamy are indivisibly linked

and that infidelity behaviors are simply a violation of the foundation of a marital relationship (Green et al., 2016).

Reliability in the Marriage

A reliable person demonstrates the qualities of being trustworthy or performing consistently well (Dictionary.com, n.d.-d). Reliability and trust are part of the foundation of a marriage. A happy marriage generally involves being reliable and conscientious; the reliable partner values keeping their word and being consistent. The couple needs to keep their promises, particularly their marriage vows insulating them from engaging in infidelity. Reliability builds trust in the marriage, allowing the couple to be open and vulnerable (Tucker, 2016).

Maintaining the relationship increases when the spouses invest more time, energy, material resources, and emotions into their relationship's success. Furthermore, marriage investment creates a strengthened bond against extramarital sex (Ziv et al., 2018). The congruent couple participates in shared experiences, agreeing to be monogamous and having a sense of pride in their monogamous marriage, promoting loyalty to one another (Fye & Mims, 2019).

Promotes Loyalty

Loyalty is a defining principle within marriage and cultivates devotion, steadfastness, trustworthiness, and a sense of secure dependency (Dictionary.com, n.d.-b). Many couples consider their marriage vows as an irrevocable commitment that nurtures loyalty in that they make a conscious choice to maintain the character of loyalty in their actions and behaviors (Kampowski, 2015). Through these factors, loyalty exists within the marriage relationship as extraordinary in that it requires a lifetime commitment and stability.

Loyalty in the marriage is promoted within the religious communities and discourages any acts of infidelity. Most religions and societies have a moral code against sexual infidelity.

Infidelity involves breaking a promise to be sexually faithful; the negative attitude toward infidelity promotes loyalty within the marriage (Ziv et al., 2018). Findings in both qualitative and quantitative research identify loyalty as a protective factor of marital stability and report an enduring principle that contributes to long-term relationships (Karimi et al., 2019).

Infidelity

In most cultures, monogamy is expected, particularly in committed intimate relationships directed to only one person (Isma & Turnip, 2019). However, infidelity is common in marriages. Sexual and emotional infidelity in marriage constitutes betrayal, adultery, and unfaithfulness elements. Sexual infidelity refers to the committed partner's sexual interaction with the extradyadic partner and happens on a spectrum of involvement, from a one-night stand to multiple occurrences over a long-term period. Despite the frequency or level of devotion, it violates the marriage vows (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). The occurrence of infidelity in marriage ranges between 10% and 25% (Green et al., 2016). The behaviors of infidelity fall into three categories: sexual, extradyadic sexual, and emotional betrayal (Moller & Vossler, 2015). It is estimated that up to 70% percent of all marriage relationships have experienced infidelity (Zapien, 2016). Infidelity can occur in person or through engagement using technology, such as texting, video, and social media (Fye & Mims, 2019).

Men are more likely than women to engage in extramarital sex. Infidelity statistics indicate that 57% of men admit to committing infidelity at some point, while 22% of married men admit to infidelity at least once during their marriage (Lanier, 2016). On the other hand, women have admitted to committing infidelity at 54% overall; however, only 14% of married women have admitted to infidelity once during their marriage (Lanier, 2016). The percentage of married couples indicates a higher rate of infidelity in men than women (Lanier, 2016). In 2018

roughly 20% to 25% of married men reported having engaged in infidelity sex during their marriage, and 10% to 15% of married women admit to engaging in infidelity sex during the marriage, indicating a slight increase from the previous data (Mahambrey, 2020; Munsch & Yorks, 2018).

Understanding infidelity requires a complex investigation of the quality of marriage from various perspectives. Frustration and boredom in the relationship can impact one or both spouses' investment, creating a level of dissatisfaction that contributes to infidelity (Ziv et al., 2018). Problems in communicating, disagreements in how to handle conflicts, use of spare time, religious orientation, relationships with extended family, and commonality in friendships can all contribute, at some level, to the deterioration of the relationship, which may contribute to infidelity (Aalgaard et al., 2016). In a marriage relationship, infidelity is typically not tolerated; women are more likely to leave a marriage relationship in which the husband has committed adultery (Van Hooff, 2017).

The most discussed and examined types of infidelity are sexual and emotional infidelity. Sexual infidelity refers to a committed partner's sexual interaction with the extradyadic partner, while emotional infidelity refers to the committed partner's emotional involvement with the extradyadic partner (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Notably, the broad spectrum of sexual infidelity ranges from a brief one-night stand to long-term affairs, which violates the vows to the marriage by engaging in a secret and prohibited relationship that only meets the person's needs by someone other than the married partner. Interestingly, in exploring infidelity and the reasons for it, only 8% of men reported sexual dissatisfaction, while 48% reported emotional dissatisfaction as the root cause of their unfaithful behaviors (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). There are several reasons for marital infidelity. The reasons for marital affairs are difficulties with

communication, the lack of intimacy, unresolved conflicts, stressful life events, and accessibility to engage in an infidelity event (Fye & Mims, 2019).

General Reasons for Infidelity

Traditional value systems and societal norms condemn infidelity, considering unfaithful behavior morally wrong (Haseli et al., 2019; Jackman, 2015). Although infidelity is considered morally wrong, infidelity can occur in perfect marriages and terrible marriages (Perel, 2017). Infidelity violates one's spouse's commitment and occurs for copious reasons, and breaches the marriage relationship's trustworthiness. While numerous causes contribute to infidelity, these causes seem to represent the significant findings from current empirical sources. The typical motives for infidelity are difficulties with communication, the lack of intimacy, unresolved conflicts, stressful life events, and the accessibility to engage in an infidelity event (Fye & Mims, 2019).

Difficulties with Communication

Findings in earlier studies generally agree that unhappiness in a marriage is the failure to communicate and a half-hearted commitment to the marriage union. Marriages must include open communication and total commitment to the marriage union. Marriages experience difficulties with communication when there is less focus on what is right and more focus on what is wrong. A failure to acknowledge the positives in one another diminishes the sense of connectedness a couple should have to maintain marital satisfaction. Communication while dating before marriage involves passive agreement; however, marital communication requires work and direct, honest communication (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Disputes will occur; however, having an open communication line is essential during a conflict; conflicts are unresolved without honest communication (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Negative communication and lower

relationship satisfaction are strong predictors for extradyadic sexual interactions (Silva et al., 2017).

Unresolved Conflict

Conflict is defined as strife that threatens the relationship between two people or causes inner turmoil (June et al., 2011). Infidelity has typically occurred due to unresolved issues that have remained unresolved for an extended amount of time (Mintle, 2015). For example, resentment, discontent, and loneliness are areas of conflict left unresolved (Mintle, 2015). Unaddressed conflicts and missed opportunities to authentically connect will erode mutual trust in the marriage, leading to resentment and hurt (Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). Couples can become stuck in an argument due to stubbornness or unwillingness to give in, resulting in disengaging emotionally and “checking out” (Mintle, 2015). The inability to solve problems is a contributing factor to marital dissatisfaction and is related to the actions of infidelity (Askari et al., 2016). For Christian marriages, the unresolved conflict affects the couple's prayer life, impacting the couple's ability to handle stressful events with mutual respect and companionship (Thomas, 2015).

Stressful Events

Couples can experience a high level of stress in various areas of their life. Research has consistently found that increased stress is associated with decreased sexual and relationship satisfaction (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020). One such stressful event in many marriages is the stress during pregnancy up to one year after a child's birth. After the birth of the child, the priorities for the couple change. These changes can sometimes become problematic; as the husband or wife's attention shifts, the feelings between the couple change (Divorce Statistics, 2020). The marriage's overall quality decreases from around 60% to 80% due to reduced

communication, general conversations, sexual intimacy, and increased hostility and critical comments (Padgett et al., 2019). The current pandemic (COVID-19) may be putting couples at an increased risk of experiencing infidelity. The increased stress from the COVID-19 pandemic may cause couples experiencing relationship dissatisfaction to explore alternative options due to negative perceptions of their partner and the relationship. Recent research conducted by the Kinsey Institute shows that 20% of individuals participating in the study have contacted an ex-partner, and 25% of the participants reported that an ex-partner had contacted them, and they replied (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020). Thirteen percent of those individuals in a committed relationship have tried to contact an ex-partner during the pandemic (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020).

Lack of Intimacy

Intimacy does not only involve sex. Intimacy is close familiarity or friendship, an intimate act, especially sexual intercourse (Dictionary.com, n.d.-a). Intimacy involves emotional support and empathy (Padgett et al., 2019). Experiencing a personal connection with the partner creates a strong bond; a lack of intimacy in the marriage will lead to emotional and verbal connection (Smith & McHugh, 2020). Marriages that lack affection (for women) or lack sex (for men) experience a higher probability of engaging in infidelity behaviors resulting from the lack of intimacy. In the same vein, women have a stronger desire for intimate conversations, while men desire sexual fulfillment. The missing elements of intimacy contribute to marital dissatisfaction, causing the marriage to become accessible to relationships outside of the marriage (Harley, 2011). For the male partner, sexual intimacy is an essential element in marriage satisfaction. Higher sexual and emotional intimacy relationships are less likely to

experience spousal infidelity than marriages with lower sexual and emotional intimacy (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019; Mahambrey, 2020).

Accessibility

Maintaining a long-term relationship such as marriage can be difficult; the lure of the alternative relationship partner can lead to engaging in an affair, particularly with social media and the increased interactions between genders within the workplace (McNulty et al., 2018). Approximately 20% to 30% of Internet users go online for sexual purposes; 65% of those who look for sex online engage in sexual intercourse with the person they met through the Internet (Fincham & May, 2017a). The Internet and social media provide anonymous interactions between individuals, including married ones. The Internet and social media outlets such as Facebook increase the accessibility to engage in an extramarital affair. For example, Facebook infidelities provide affordability, accessibility, ambiguity, and accommodation (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; McNulty et al., 2018).

Anonymity is not relegated to Facebook; even the most covert profile must share some information to send a friend request. To maintain the secrecy of an affair, multiple or fake accounts must be created. Facebook's use has positively correlated with marital problems and rising divorce rates (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017).

In some infidelity cases, the attraction to another person could develop from the opportunity of a close working relationship, friendship (K. Gibson et al., 2016), or from innocuous social settings (Zapien, 2016). Thirty-six percent of men and women admit to infidelity with a co-worker, and 36% admit to infidelity while on a business trip (Divorce Statistics, 2020). Interestingly it is much more difficult to disengage from the working or friendship relationship that developed into an affair, possibly due to the closeness of the

relationship when compared to Internet and social media infidelity (K. Gibson et al., 2016; Munsch & Yorks, 2018).

Predictability Factors to Infidelity

A predictor of marital infidelity is that of a low marital quality. In contrast, marital commitment is one indicator of marital quality (Sodani et al., 2019). Marital quality is a psychological state indicating that couples must work together to enhance their marriage quality. An examination of factors that contribute to infidelity identified the quality of attachment, which influences the quality of a marriage (Haseli et al., 2019); the marital relationship's quality and sexual dissatisfaction are predicting factors toward marital infidelity (Isma & Turnip, 2019).

Attachment

Individual characteristics are associated with infidelity, such as insecure attachment orientation (Fincham & May, 2017a). According to the adult attachment theory, individuals look for and feel secure and confident in the presence of an attachment figure to whom one is emotionally close (Vazhappilly & Reyes, 2018). Insecure attachment is described as a fearful and dismissing attachment style. The insecurely attached partner experiences little interest in a long-term relationship, mainly based upon their fear of a failed or failing relationship; the individual fails to develop a healthy bond with their partner. Attachment styles are worth considering related to infidelity engagement vs. non-engagement (Haseli et al., 2019).

An individual's moral thinking and behavior can be affected by others, contingent on the attachment level in the relationship. Healthy attachment occurs as a secure and safe attachment formed during infancy with the primary caregiver. It is important to note that an individual will develop into an adult with difficulties building relationships without secure attachment during

childhood. The adult attachment's underlying dimension is anxiety and avoidance; both increase an affair's likeliness of occurring (Njus & Okerstrom, 2016).

The anxiously attached adult desires closeness and protection from the spouse; however, the anxious attached individual's worries are centered on their partner's availability and their partner's worth. The behaviors of the anxious partner increase the probability of a marital affair. An additional predictor of infidelity is the avoidant attachment spouse's behaviors, especially when uncomfortable with closeness to others. The avoidantly attached adult prefers to be self-reliant and emotionally distant, which are unfavorable to marital satisfaction. However, individuals can be either high or low on each dimension of self-reliance and emotionally distant. The adult who is low on both dimensions is considered to have a secure attachment.

In contrast, the individual who is either high or low on the dimension of anxious attachment or avoidant attachment is more susceptible to violating the marriage vows (Njus & Okerstrom, 2016). It is essential to recognize and identify attachment factors; secure attachment contributes to a high-quality marriage, while anxious, avoidant, and insecure attachment will contribute to a miserable quality marriage. Building a secure attachment is a vital protective factor in preventing infidelity and strengthening the marriage (Fye & Mims, 2019).

Quality of the Marital Relationship

The marital relationship's quality is viewed as a multi-dimensional construct that measures the marital relationship's objective characteristics and subjective aspects of the marital relationship (John et al., 2017). It is necessary to begin examining marital relationship quality; it is essential to understand what is meant by quality. Quality is (a) the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; (b) the degree of excellence of something, a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something (Dictionary.com, n.d.-

c). The focus is on the latter definition of quality for examining the quality of marriage. Various factors can impact marriage quality; one element is sexual satisfaction or dissatisfaction. However, other significant aspects regarding marital relationship quality are communication, conflict resolution, and spare time (Wagner et al., 2019).

The quality of communication affects the quality of the marital relationship and thus influences the marriage's success. Communication is highly regarded as a central role in a relationship's intimate bond, maintaining the strength of the relationship with sensitive responses to one another; without this bond, relationships deteriorate (Lavner et al., 2016), for the distressed couple will display negative communication behaviors, particularly during the conflict.

Marital conflicts arise because of disagreements between spouses in cooperation, interaction, and everyday communication (Islami, 2017). The ability to resolve dispute in a manner that demonstrates respect and mutual understanding contributes to a lasting marriage. A marriage that experiences frequent negativity in the form of poor conflict resolution skills will also have low marital quality (Gottman, 1994).

A source of conflict for couples impacting marital quality surrounds the number of time couples spend together. A couple's time is often spent managing the demands of work, social, and family obligations. These distractions can lead to a couple avoiding complex marital conflicts such as financial problems or the stress of raising children, which affects the amount of time the couple spends with one another. The dynamic interactions between a couple determine marital quality. This complexity is related to being influenced by the married couple's personality traits (Wagner et al., 2019).

Potential infidelity predictors pertain to the sources of conflict and the ability to resolve conflict existing within the marriage and personality variables such as narcissism (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019; Zapien, 2016). The personality aspect of the unfaithful partner contributes to infidelity. Personality is the dimension of individual differences that tend to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions (Isma & Turnip, 2019). There are specific personality characteristics associated with infidelity (Knopp et al., 2017). When evaluating marital infidelity, it is essential to examine behaviors to understand what factors contribute to infidelity behavior. How a person acts relates to their personality and experiences. Each situation's context will further influence a person's behaviors (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019). Personality traits are a prognosticator of infidelity. Neuroticism, self-regulation, and self-esteem are also important factors contributing to infidelity behaviors and decreased marital satisfaction. The personality differences and the interactions between a couple are significant determining factors of infidelity. The couples who are highly compatible and similar in personality have higher levels of marital satisfaction (Haseli et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the secret romantic activity with a secondary partner and violation of relationship exclusivity, such as marriage, often lead to deep pain, loss of trust, and uncertainty (Haseli et al., 2019). With the violation of trust, the entire relationship's sincerity is called into question (Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). Adversely, infidelity frequency is much higher in individuals who have experienced sexual abuse or premarital sex. The dysfunctional patterns caused by neglect or abuse in childhood, including those surrounding intimacy, emotional closeness, and building trust in romantic relationships, can lead to infidelity (Haseli et al., 2019). The lack of connection resulting from personality traits and compatibility can impact marriage sexual relationships, creating an absence of sexual satisfaction (K. Gibson et al., 2016).

Sexual Dissatisfaction

Unmet sexual needs contribute to marital infidelity (Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). Only 8% of men reported sexual dissatisfaction as the root cause of their unfaithful behaviors (Zapien, 2016). Fourteen percent of married women have had affairs at least once during their married lives. Women engage in infidelity behaviors because of feeling emotionally dissatisfied (Divorce Statistics, 2020). Men will engage in infidelity behavior because they are sexually dissatisfied, while women overall attribute their choice to engage in infidelity to feeling emotionally dissatisfied (Solomon & Teagno, 2020). Sexual satisfaction, according to McNulty et al. (2018), is also associated with infidelity. The suggested correlation between sexual satisfaction and infidelity found that persons who feel significantly positive about sex, regardless of how they feel about their partner or their relationship, are just as likely to engage in infidelity behavior (McNulty et al., 2018).

Effects of Infidelity

Many infidelity consequences within a marriage diminish the likelihood that the relationship can be restored. These effects create long-lasting intrinsic challenges that are important to consider in restoring trust, communication, and the motivation to continue. The psychological impact creates a wave of potential mental health and emotional concerns. Consequently, marital infidelity causes both mental and emotional harm to the spouse who has discovered the betrayal (Sodani et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, infidelity causes cognitive distortion, weakens an individual's self-worth, contributes to depression, and causes many marriages to end in divorce (Ellis & Kleinplatz, 2018; Shrout & Weigel, 2020; Van Hooff, 2017).

Cognitive Distortion

Infidelity is a prevalent problem that significantly impacts a marriage relationship (Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). The negative cognitive appraisal resulting from infidelity significantly affects the betrayed spouse (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Cognitively, infidelity can lead to negative thoughts and depression. Infidelity can have an impact on behaviors such as aggression or retaliation. Infidelity's duplicity has adverse side effects, causing stress, shock, anger, loss of self-esteem, and depression. Infidelity can cause irreparable damage to the couple's relationship, resulting in mistrust. The mistrust toward the spouse who committed infidelity can result in the non-involved spouse experiencing thoughts that can lead to negative thinking (Sodani et al., 2019; Valdez, 2015).

The cognitive appraisal of how the non-involved partner thinks of the infidelity event is influenced by the environmental coping resources available to the spouse of the "non-involved" partner. The coping resources will affect how they respond to spousal infidelity. The responses to infidelity range from anger to emotional detachment. How the spouse interprets the causes and accountability of infidelity can impact the ability to heal from infidelity. Feelings of anxiety, depression, and shame are pervasive emotions for partners who have discovered that they had been cheated on (Valdez, 2015). The betrayal of an extramarital affair can be painfully destabilizing for the partner experiencing the betrayal, disturbing their sense of self-worth.

A Diminished Sense of Self-worth

Infidelity can brutally strain the marriage, causing the offended to feel devastated, alone, betrayed, and confused. Infidelity can impact the self-esteem of the "victim" and damage the trust in the offending spouse, creating emotional instability (Askari et al., 2016). The most confident individual will experience an emotional blow to their self-esteem in the wake of an

affair. This emotional upset from the betrayal can create feelings of doubt and worthlessness. Self-esteem can influence how a person makes ascriptions to situations and persons; these ascriptions can potentially create jealousy (Ellis & Kleinplatz, 2018). The non-involved partner with low self-perception can experience immense stress after their partner's infidelity, perhaps due to a tendency to negatively view relationship events due to limited coping resources (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Commonly, the offended spouse will experience anxious feelings, depression, or shame after discovering their partner's infidelity (Valdez, 2015). As a behavior, infidelity for the non-involved partner results in a loss of confidence and sense of self-worth in the relationship caused by the offending partner breaking the agreement between the couple to remain monogamous, resulting in divorce (Silva et al., 2017). Of all the previously mentioned emotional reactions to infidelity, the most detrimental is emotional depression.

Depression

Relationship infidelity is psychologically distressing (Knopp et al., 2017). As a result of the distress, infidelity has a pronounced impact on the betrayed partner. The infidelity is devastating to the emotional and mental well-being of the betrayed partner, causing depression. The non-involved partner can experience anxiety, depression, and shame, which are universal emotions for one who has discovered that their partner has cheated (Van Hooff, 2017). After infidelity, the non-involved partner can experience negative emotions, including depression, symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety. Self-blame can also impact the non-involved partner's response to infidelity. The greater degree of self-blame by the non-involved partner, the higher the probability for the occurrence of depression felt by the non-involved partner (Shrout & Weigel, 2018). According to Shrout and Weigel (2018), a negative cognitive appraisal is indirectly related to heightened feelings of depression and anxiety; if the

non-involved partner's perception is that their partner is responsible or caused the infidelity, the more overwhelmed the non-involved partner will feel. Persons who face infidelity problems in a marriage feel more sadness than individuals who have marital issues not related to infidelity (Ibrahim et al., 2019). For the non-involved partner, feeling overwhelmed exacerbates the symptoms of depression (Shrout & Weigel, 2020).

Marital infidelity is devastating to the non-offending partner, impacting the individual cognitively and emotionally, causing emotional agony, depression, and negative thinking. In the United States, contemporary affairs are described as the offended partner's damage. There is a general concern for the emotional agony suffered by the betrayed (Perel, 2017). Furthermore, the agonizing betrayal of an extramarital affair can be painfully destabilizing for the partner who experienced the betrayal, and on the other hand, the affair can be liberating for the offending spouse and empowering (Perel, 2017). Understanding the transactional stress theory, the non-involved partner's appraisal of the infidelity will impact their response to the betrayal and impact their well-being (Shrout & Weigel, 2018), contributing to the decision to terminate the marriage.

Divorce

Infidelity is regarded as a contributing threat to marriage, as it is perceived to cause the partner to withdraw intimacy and undermine mutual disclosure (Van Hooff, 2017). Infidelity occurs in any culture to some extent (Yuan & Weiser, 2019) and can potentially destroy any marriage. Infidelity is the most frequently cited cause of divorce reported by couples (Fincham et al., 2017b). Seventeen percent of divorces in the United States occur due to infidelity (Divorce Statistics, 2020). The pain from the betrayal of infidelity destroys the trust, causing some marriages to end in divorce. For some intensely religious couples, divorce is more likely to occur following sexual infidelity (Tuttle & Davis, 2015). The frequency of infidelity occurs in

marriages at 63% for men and 47% for women and is the most proximal predictor of relationship dissolution and the most common reason for divorce (Yuan & Weiser, 2019). Among adult couples who were ever-married and engaged in infidelity behavior, 40% are currently divorced or separated and were unsuccessful in reconnecting their marriage after the infidelity. By comparison, only 17% of adults who were faithful to their spouse are no longer married. However, only about half of the couples are currently married, compared with 76% of those who did not cheat (see Appendix C; Barna Research, 2019). The decision to divorce after an infidelity event is contingent on the couple's perceived value of the marriage (Yuan & Weiser, 2019).

Understanding Infidelity in Christian Couples

Christianity refers to people living their lives according to the Spirit of God (Sheldrake, 2016), and their marriages must be wholly understood, intentional, and long-term (Mark 10:9). It is common in the Christian faith for married couples to maintain sexual fidelity within the marriage covenant (Ziv et al., 2018). In addition to Christianity, many religions uphold the notion of sexual fidelity in the marriage relationship as an immoral practice. Virtually all religious groups and traditions condemn extramarital sexual relations, although they differ in strength (Burdette et al., 2007).

The couple who shares faith practice as a significant part of their lifestyle illustrates lower marital infidelity rates (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019). Practices such as attending church, shared prayer, regular Bible reading, and ministry involvement can provide a protective factor from infidelity (Mullins, 2016). Research results indicate that spirituality positively affects relationship balance (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). A better understanding of infidelity within the Christian couple's marriage occurs by examining their dynamics and faith. Although infidelity is

a cause of many divorces, many marriages survive infidelity, utilizing Christian beliefs and faith to avoid divorcing.

Dynamics of the Christian Couple

The religious individual's attachment to a deity is an essential link to their well-being (Culver & Lundquist Denton, 2017); within marriage, the holy covenant has meaning beyond the individual, the couple, and the family (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). The marriage requires a high degree of altruism evident in the couple's shared desires and goals (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). Historically, Christian marriages view the union as an indissoluble relationship ordained by God (Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017). Religious affiliation is strongly associated with reducing the odds of marital infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation (Burdette et al., 2007).

Marriage itself is suitable for individuals ready for marriage; having a realistic assessment of their readiness to marry is essential. However, their marriage thoughts involve viewing marriage as successful, a joyous prospect, and spending more time and energy preparing for their marriage for a religious or Christian couple. When the couple has harmoniously experienced their individual and shared religious beliefs, and their religiosity is manifested in principles and rites while anchored in a religious community, high levels of marital satisfaction exist. In addition, during times of crisis or conflict, the Christian couple is reported to be more cooperative and engages in solutions-focused communication rather than negative, destructive communication traits associated with marriages that view marriage as less sacred (Lakatos & Martos, 2019).

Faith

Congruence in religious belief is essential to many couples, according to Vaterlaus et al. (2017). As a religious value, Faith can act as a barrier for protecting a marriage, deterring the

couple from the act of infidelity. Also, religious behaviors emphasize relationship happiness, the commitment to family, and the obligation to the religious values and exposure that condemn infidelity (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019). Faith positively affects the couple, particularly during a personal crisis and stressful events (Allen, 2018). Faith protects the relationship from the negative consequences of problems; for example, while caring for a family member during the current pandemic, religious faith can protect the couple from fear and doubt, endowing them with strength and encouragement. The married couple's religious faith contributes to their psychological well-being and mutual support, contributing to marital harmony (Lakatos & Martos, 2019).

Standard Tools Used by Christian Couples Dealing with Infidelity

Religious beliefs play a vital role in the marriage, and to the married couple, the relational values of forgiveness, commitment, and sacrifice seem to improve marital satisfaction and the quality of the marriage indirectly. Evidence indicates that the married couple can resolve conflict or prevent conflicts and enhance the reconciliation process resulting from their marriage's belief with prayer, forgiveness, and corporate worship (Mullins, 2016; Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017).

Prayer

The relationship with God influences an individual's marital satisfaction in the area of love, forgiveness, compromise, and sacrifice (David & Stafford, 2015). The utilization of the spiritual practice of prayer can help couples recover and reconstruct their marriage after infidelity. There is a growing body of evidence indicating that prayer, when implemented in conflict, can function as a "time out" during which the partners can calm themselves. Prayer is an important aspect that allows a couple space to calm themselves, refocus on their mutual

cooperative goals, and shift their thoughts and behaviors to one another. Therefore, prayers focused on the partner's well-being help protect the marriage against infidelity (Fincham & May, 2017b).

In many areas of the world, religion and spirituality are of great importance (Karimi et al., 2019). One of the variables within the realm of spirituality is praying for the spouse. In Reich and Kantar's (2018) article, "The Role of Praying for the Spouse and Sanctification of Marriage in Reducing Infidelity," the emphasis is placed on prayer in Islam. Research suggests that religious activities such as prayer and religious rituals are among the factors that can positively affect marriage and family life. What is significant about praying with and for the spouse is prayer builds greater trust and closeness. A key aspect of prayer is that it increases unity in the marital relationship and improves satisfaction (Reich & Kalantar, 2018).

Prayer is a widely practiced religious behavior and essential for most people globally (Hatch et al., 2016; Reich & Kalantar, 2018). For the Christian, prayer is the very life-breath of their relationship (Thomas, 2015). A factor with a positive effect on a marriage and family life is prayer. Prayer with and for the spouse equates to greater trust and closeness in creating unity within the marital relationship (Reich & Kalantar, 2018). Research conducted on partner-focused petitionary prayer yielded results indicating prayer impacts the offended partner's ability to forgive (Fincham & May, 2017b).

Praying as a religious behavior is associated with various physical, psychological, and relational benefits that enhance the marital relationship. The direct effects of the religious agreement, praying for spousal well-being, and forgiveness positively influence marriage quality. Hatch et al.'s (2016) examination of 184 religious couples revealed that prayer is a catalyst for change, facilitates humility and positivity, facilitates communication and understanding, unifies

couples, and helps resolve conflicts. Religious homogamy operationally occurs through joint religious affiliations, and joint religious activities, including praying together (Olson et al., 2015). Married Christians are significantly more likely to say that forgiveness is easy to give away, and forgiveness is about repairing the relationship (Barna Research, 2019).

Forgiveness

The cornerstone of a successful marriage is forgiveness (David & Stafford, 2015). Forgiveness allows a person to let go of negative emotions, cognitions, and behaviors such as hostility, revenge, and verbal aggression (Aalgaard et al., 2016; Chi et al., 2019; Sodani et al., 2019).

The measurement of forgiveness is reflected in the marriage's quality; it is an organizing theme of Christian doctrine to forgive others as God has forgiven (Aalgaard et al., 2016; Anderson & Natrajan-Tyagi, 2016). The positive dimension of forgiveness, promoted in the spiritual and religious teachings, is related to marital satisfaction (David & Stafford, 2015). Forgiveness is an intrapersonal process (within oneself) or an interpersonal process (between spouses). Therefore, forgiving (as it relates to infidelity) means a person is letting go of negative thoughts, feelings, and actions toward the offending spouse, thus experiencing positive emotions, thoughts, and actions toward their spouse. Forgiveness helps the couple move toward a more satisfying relationship, particularly after a hurtful event such as infidelity (Anderson & Natrajan-Tyagi, 2016).

The link to marital quality is in the ability to forgive; forgiveness for oneself and forgiveness for and by the spouse are necessary to achieve marital satisfaction (David & Stafford, 2015). From an intrapersonal and interpersonal perspective, spouses who have experienced infidelity (the facilitators of decisional and emotional forgiveness) are involved in

deciding to stop the resentment and the thoughts of revenge (Chi et al., 2019). The forgiveness process motivates the non-involved spouse to move toward the restoration of positive emotions toward their partner. Unquestionably, forgiveness consists of a cognitive component, which is a realistic view of the relationship.

Additionally, forgiveness is an essential part of reconnecting a marriage after an affair. Forgiveness is more likely to occur if, for example, the non-involved partner perceives the infidelity as not being caused by the involved partner (locus) and that the incident will not repeatedly occur (stability). The event would not affect other aspects of their relationship (globality); the non-involved partner would respond more positively to their involved partner and be more likely to forgive (Askari et al., 2016; Shrout & Weigel, 2018).

The process of forgiveness is enhanced by releasing the negative effect of infidelity toward the offending partner (Chi et al., 2019). Furthermore, the act of reconciliation and commitment are factors that indicate positive marital quality, creating a barrier to the adverse effects of stress, negative emotions, and infidelity required for forgiveness. The interpersonal process of forgiveness enables a couple to maintain their relationship in conflict (David & Stafford, 2015; Sodani et al., 2019). Longevity, health, and healing within a relationship are achieved with forgiveness, an essential tool supported through corporate worship (Aalgaard et al., 2016).

Corporate Worship

It is essential to examine marriages within the religious context and the influence on fidelity. Couples attending religious services help maintain healthy marital relationships. Engaging in religious practices can help a couple reconstruct their marriage after infidelity (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014; Lakatos & Martos, 2019).

Studies have revealed a connection between belonging to a religious community and marital stability. These connections identified couples who actively participated in the life of their congregation to their marital faithfulness. Couples belonging to a religious community and regularly participating in social events are less likely to engage in infidelity (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). Actively engaging in religious participation is a source of control over marital sexuality since connections to friends and family forged through regular interactions in religious settings may lower opportunities for extramarital sex and increase the probability of detection (Burdette et al., 2007). Religious interaction emerges as the most definite inspiration for people's everyday life decisions when they participate in religious communities that stress the salience of religion's role in everyday decisions (Karimi et al., 2019; Mullins, 2016). Individuals who regularly attend religious services are less likely to engage in extramarital affairs (Sauerheber & Ponton, 2017; Ziv et al., 2018). Couples can routinely participate in joint religious activities by attending church together, praying together, and sharing conversations about God, enhancing marital adjustment (David & Stafford, 2015).

The Common Secular Practice of Coping with Infidelity

Regarding infidelity, the degree of forgiveness and the probability of a marriage ending in divorce depends on whether the infidelity was sexual or emotional (Bendixen et al., 2018). By examining the area of forgiveness as a therapeutic intervention and as a component of marital intervention, forgiveness offers a way of dealing with infidelity's transgression, leading to a positive relationship outcome (Aalgaard et al., 2016). Additional therapeutic interventions frequently sought to help a couple dealing with infidelity are marriage counseling and peer and family support.

Marriage Counseling

Infidelity is difficult and painful, often requiring a professional's assistance to help navigate the intense feelings of betrayal. There are several therapeutic frameworks employed in marriage counseling. Counseling the married couple attempting to protect their marriage and not divorce requires the therapist or counselor to know and use therapeutic tools from evidence-based practices. Many couples seek "traditional" marriage counseling to help them navigate the difficult journey toward reconciliation. Traditional marriage counseling refers to marriage counseling that does not involve or incorporate Christian counseling techniques or principles. Couples who have participated in counseling found the counseling helpful, finding a safe place to communicate their thoughts and feelings with a non-involved observer (therapist) who provides a listening ear and guidance. During therapy, the betrayed partner must have the freedom to express his/her feelings. Equally important, the partner who engaged in infidelity must share his/her remorse and ask for questions from the betrayed partner (Mintle, 2015). While recovering from infidelity may be extended, to be successful, the couple must sustain their engagement in therapy, discussing the disturbing thoughts and emotions surrounding the infidelity (Timm & Hertlein, 2020).

Peer Support

In current literature, a commonly studied social network influence is family and friends' approval or disapproval of a romantic relationship. Perceived support for a romantic relationship from family and friends is positively associated with relationship commitment (Plamondon & Lachance-Grzela, 2018). One's social network of friends and family can impact the non-involved partner's decision to continue or discontinue a relationship after infidelity. The social network's approval to continue the relationship has a considerable impact on the relationship and

how the non-involved partner responds to infidelity. For example, suppose the non-involved partner perceives their social network suggests ending the relationship. In that case, the non-involved partner is more inclined to end the relationship versus staying in the relationship (Shrout & Weigel, 2019). The lack of social support can cause an individual to experience increased vulnerability to the onset of mental health problems such as depression. Following a partner's infidelity, the non-involved partner's social support encourages, lessening the mental health problems related to the betrayal from the infidelity (Shrout & Weigel, 2018).

Family Support

A couple experiencing infidelity in their relationship can receive support from their family in vastly different ways. The non-involved partner's social network's expectations and beliefs, such as friends and family, can impact decisions to stay with or leave the unfaithful partner (Shrout & Weigel, 2019). Moreover, the extended family may take sides against the involved partner or become overinvolved in the marriage (Ratelif Barr, 2018). The family generally consoles the uninvolved partner for their partner's infidelity. This support from the family can be conditional; if the family favors the uninvolved partner in divorcing their partner, but the uninvolved partner decides to stay in the relationship, the family will likely become less supportive. The innocent partner expects the family to caution against choosing to remain in the relationship, work things out, and perhaps judge it. Family support is also affected by the degree of closeness to both the husband and the wife. If both have developed loving and caring relationships with their in-laws, the uninvolved and involved partners may feel strong emotions such as guilt when the infidelity is uncovered (Ratelif Barr, 2018).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the case study research design method, including the research questions, setting, characteristics of both pools of participants, and the role of the researcher. The anticipated data collection process through semi-structured interviews is detailed, and the interview questions are presented. Finally, this chapter concludes with a detailed explanation of the research plan, data collection methods, sampling and interview procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness strategies, and ethical considerations.

Design

This qualitative phenomenological case study research explores the coping strategies that married couples use to reconstruct their marriage after infidelity. Phenomenology produces a detailed description of the phenomenon of infidelity recovery. At the same time, the case study provided an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context, such as infidelity (“The Case Study Approach,” 2011). A collective case study approach involves studying multiple cases simultaneously or sequentially to generate an appreciation of the issue (“The Case Study Approach,” 2011). The collective case study approach illuminated the experiences of two groups; the first are therapists who work with couples who have experienced infidelity, and the second are couples or individuals who have experienced infidelity in their marriage relationship and chose to stay married. (Adams et al., 2017).

Five steps were used to ensure that the method was consistent. Step one involved bracketing or phenomenological reduction, a deliberate and persistent focus on the participants' information (the bracketing) achieved with NVivo by creating nodes. Step two entailed delineating units (listing units of relevance) extracted from each interview by carefully

considering the interview's literal content, the frequency of a mentioned meaning, and observation of non-verbal cues. Step three involved clustering units or themes by forming similar groupings, also completed with NVivo. Step four required summarizing and validating each interview and, if necessary, modifying any errors. The summary incorporated all of the themes elicited from the data. The researcher aimed to reconstruct the inner world experience of the participants. A validity check helped determine that the essence of the interviewees' experiences were captured. The final step involved extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary, transforming the participants' expressions into expressions appropriate to scientifically support the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews with couples and clinicians were recorded utilizing audio and written transcriptions to elicit rich, thick descriptions of their experiences. These stories and anecdotes provided a deeper understanding of the couples' reparative process and coping strategies. The research was particularly interested in identifying Christian disciplines that added the most value in restoring the marriage.

Research Questions

Research questions are formulated and tied to the purpose of this research. They shed light on the gap in research by identifying coping strategies utilized by couples who recovered from the event of infidelity. Marriages with a shared set of religious or philosophical beliefs help guide their lives, contributing to the marital relationship's success (Gottman, 1994). The research has indicated that forgiveness and spiritual beliefs help couples reconstruct their marriages during and after an affair. This research sought to answer the following overarching research question: What coping strategies do married couples use to rebuild their marriage after the occurrence of infidelity?

Hypothesis: Couples who reconstruct their marriage after infidelity use spiritual coping strategies as a part of the mending process.

RQ1: What are the experiences of couples who experience infidelity and choose to restore their marriage?

RQ2: As a couple, how do faith practices impact the recovery process following infidelity? How do spiritual disciplines impact the recovery process following infidelity?

Setting

The setting was the practices, and reparative process couples use after experiencing infidelity as they choose to stay married. This phenomenon was examined through the lens of therapists who have experience working with couples through the reparative process and through the lens of individuals and couples involved in repairing their marriage after infidelity.

Participants

The target participants were married couples who have experienced infidelity and clinicians who have worked with couples who have experienced infidelity. The married individuals and couples participants were married for at least three years, had experienced infidelity, had agreed to continue the marriage, and had been actively recovering from infidelity for at least one year. The second set of participants for this study were therapists who had clinician experience working with couples who experienced infidelity.

The married participants were recruited from Facebook, LinkedIn, A Sound Mind Counseling (a local mental health counseling service), *The Marriage Group*, and *All things Married Group*, *The Marriage Club: Really Uncut Edition*, *Marriage Club*, and *The Marriage Support Group* by posting a request for volunteers who are married, Christian, and non-

Christian, and have successfully maintained their marriage after infidelity. The clinical participants were recruited using the snowball method.

The study used criterion-based sampling with interest in couples that met the predetermined criterion of being married for at least three years and experiencing infidelity; the criterion-based sampling for therapists was experience and specialization in working with couples who had experienced infidelity. The initial goal was to recruit a combination of fifteen married participants and clinical participants. A total of 14 participants were involved in the study; six clinical participants and eight married couples (three with partners, two without partners) served as the interviewees. The transcripts of the 14 participants provided a sufficient level of saturation that was needed to understand the coping strategies married couples use to reconstruct their marriage after infidelity.

Procedures

Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensured that the research study used ethical human research practices before communicating with potential participants. After IRB approval, various recruitment methods were used, such as an online request via Facebook, LinkedIn, and A Sound Mind Counseling Service. Additionally, letters were sent to four marriage groups: one non-faith-based group, two faith-based groups, and one non-descript group. When individuals inquired about participating in the study, a screening questionnaire was administered using Survey Monkey and included these six questions:

1. Are you married? (yes/no)
2. How long have you been married? (1–2 years, 3–6 years, 7–10 years, 10+ years)
3. Have you experienced infidelity in your marriage? (yes/no)
4. Did you seek help to repair your marriage? (yes/no)

5. Are you willing to participate in a study examining strategies couples utilize to repair their marriage? (yes/no)
6. May I contact you regarding your participation in the survey? (yes/no)

Participants provided their email addresses at the end of the questionnaire to facilitate further communication during the study. Additionally, a “potential participation information form” (Appendix E) was reviewed with the participant during the initial contact, and the potential participants completed the screening questionnaire (Appendix F). Finally, a copy of the form and the questionnaire were sent to the couple by email, explaining the purpose and requirements for participation in the study. The interested couples returned their completed questionnaire to me by email. After receiving the completed questionnaire, I contacted the qualified participants by email and followed up with a phone call or meeting on Microsoft Teams to schedule their interview. Any couples who expressed an interest in participating in the research but did not meet the requirements or who were not selected for the study received an email regarding their exclusion from the study with an explanation and appreciation for their inquiry and willingness to participate. The chosen study participants were emailed the confidentiality paperwork, including informed consent, and those documents were completed before any interviews took place.

The interviews with the participating individuals, couples, and clinicians were face-to-videoed in Microsoft Teams. Practice interviews using Microsoft Team with family and friends were facilitated to ensure the transcript and recording functions work properly before the actual interviews with the participating couples and clinicians. The interviews started at the scheduled time and lasted 45–60 minutes. The participants were informed that the recording was beginning and would continue until the interview had ended. Once the interview portion was completed, an

explanation of the next steps of the research was given to the participants, and they were asked if they had any final questions or thoughts. I then asked for permission to contact them within one week to review the transcribed interview to verify accuracy. At the end of the interview, I expressed my appreciation and how valuable their participation is in helping other couples and clinicians.

Any follow-up thoughts or questions by the participants were addressed via phone. Seventy-two hours was enough time to gather sufficient data for the analysis. The recordings permitted me to listen and replay any portion of the interview as needed. Also documented were any observed non-verbal expressions between the couple, including tone, voice volume, speech pace, hesitations, emotional expressions such as crying, becoming tearful, or laughing, and pauses related to meaning not expressed verbally.

During the interviews, I asked the interview questions without offering emotional support or feedback of any kind except to say, "Thank you" or "I appreciate your candor," and then proceeded to the next question. The recordings were simultaneously transcribed; this allowed more time for evaluating the results; seeing the words of interviewees written will provide additional insights into their lived experiences. Once the interviews had been completed and analyzed using NVivo, central themes were developed and shared with the dissertation chair. Then my analysis and interpretations were documented, and the results were presented to the dissertation chair.

The Researcher's Role

I became a human instrument and provided a synthesized description of each couple's and clinician's experiences specific to the coping strategies that helped couples sustain their marriage after infidelity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I attempted to expand the participants' thoughts and

feelings by asking open-ended questions that produced richly descriptive narratives. As the researcher, my skills in counseling contribute to the research through my ability to observe behaviors and actively listen in a non-biased and non-judgmental manner, creating a comfortable atmosphere for the participants to openly share their experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I do not have experience with infidelity within a marriage relationship. Still, I understand the repercussions of previous relationships as a single adult and in my counseling role with couples who have experienced infidelity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of creating narrative data. The interviews cultivated reoccurring themes within the participants' responses. The interviews were audio-recorded with automatic transcriptions produced by Microsoft Teams. I reviewed the recordings and the transcription correcting any Artificial Intelligence errors in the form of misspelled words or misinterpreted statements. All personally identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms were assigned.

As the qualitative case-study researcher, the concern is the validity of the information communicated; to reduce the likelihood of any misinterpretation, various procedures were used to establish validity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Collecting converging evidence from various sources helped me validate the themes that emerged; triangulation of the data increases the study's trustworthiness (Levitt et al., 2018). The ideal triangulation seeks confirmation from at least three sources: direct observation, verbal report, and document review. In this study, triangulation was further achieved by direct observation from previous clients, verbal reports from a mental health clinician, and a review by a doctor in education and by the pastor of a local non-denominational church.

The framework selected for this study directs the project toward the interview method. The interview consists of open-ended questions and probes, producing in-depth responses about

Case study researchers strive to be explicit on the ways their procedures and perspectives might influence their study and how they might shift across the study. For these reasons, the value of transparency is at the root of the reporting standards across qualitative methods. I informed the participants that I am a therapist who has worked with many couples who have experienced infidelity. At this time, I set the boundaries for the interview, informing the participants that my role is strictly as a researcher and not a therapist. I further acknowledge to the participants that I have not experienced infidelity in a marital relationship; however, my interest remains in how married couples successfully navigate the challenges of infidelity within the marriage, ultimately repairing their marriage and avoiding divorce.

Interviews

The interview data produced themes that illuminate the experience of restorative practices that couples use after infidelity. Before the interviews, each participant received an informed consent document and details about the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality. Below is the list of interview questions used for both the clinical participants and the married participants.

Interview Questions- married participants

1. You both invested in continuing your marriage after experiencing infidelity. Can you walk me through the decision-making process of choosing to stay together?
2. Tell me how you conceptualize coping when considering what you have used to move on from infidelity?
3. As you reflect on the concept of coping, what has been most helpful?

4. As you reflect on the concept of coping, did you experience any mistakes or failures that might have set the relationship back?
5. Can you tell me how you decided whom to tell about the infidelity?
6. Illustrate how social support contributes to the coping process.
7. Describe how your spirituality played a part in your decision and ability to move forward.
8. Can you illustrate for me the spiritual practices that have been helpful in restoring your marriage?
9. Describe the dynamics between your faith and other coping strategies you use to keep your relationship healthy.
10. What have you learned about the role of coping individually and as a couple?
11. In reflecting back on the process of marriage, infidelity, and restoration, what would have been helpful that maybe you lacked or missed?

Interview Questions - clinicians

1. Thinking back on your previous clients and those who invested in continuing their marriage after experiencing infidelity. Can you walk me through their decision-making process of choosing to stay together?
2. Tell me how the couples conceptualize coping when considering what they have used to move on from infidelity?
3. Reflecting on the concept of coping, what has been most helpful for your clients?
4. As you reflect on the concept of coping, did the couples experience any mistakes or failures that might have set the relationship back?
5. Can you tell me how the couple(s) decided whom to tell about the infidelity?
6. Based on your experience, how does social support contribute to the coping process?

7. Describe how spirituality played a part in the couple(s) decision and ability to move forward.
8. Can you illustrate for me the spiritual practices that have helped restore your clients' marriages?
9. Describe the dynamics between their faith and other coping strategies you utilized to help the couple(s) keep their relationship(s) healthy.
10. Based on your experience, what have your clients learned about the role of coping individually and as a couple?
11. In reflecting on the process of marriage, infidelity, and restoration, what would have been helpful for your client(s) that maybe you lacked or missed?

Narrative Descriptions and Rationale for the Questions

The in-depth interviews explore the couples' and clinicians' experiences and perceptions of coping and recovering from infidelity. Descriptive details were produced using the semi-structured interview design. I chose in-depth interviews because of the lack of understanding of the phenomenon. It allowed a clear focus on restorative coping practices instead of recounting the infidelity experience (Corey et al., 2018). The focus was to identify how the couples remained married despite the challenges of navigating through the emotional impact of infidelity.

Question 1 invited the participants to examine their process of deciding to remain married, or from the clinical perspective, to report on their understanding if the decision-making process seen or recommended to the couples they counsel. Many marriages have a sacred purpose and support the notion of staying together during stressful events (Karimi et al., 2019; Mullins, 2016). However, for the religious or Christian couple, their marriage mindset involved viewing marriage as successful, a joyous prospect, and spending more time and energy preparing

for their marriage. This question provides the beginning insight into how a couple starts the process of reconnecting their marriage. When the couple has harmoniously experienced their individual and shared religious beliefs, their religiosity is manifested in principles and rites while anchored in a religious community leading to high levels of marital satisfaction. Maintaining the relationship increases when the spouses invest more time, energy, material resources, and emotions into their relationship's success. Furthermore, marriage investment creates a strengthened bond against extramarital sex (Ziv et al., 2018).

Question 2 elicits a description of the couple's perception of coping with infidelity, providing insight that points back to the research question. Coping resources affect how a couple responds to the infidelity. Typically coping after infidelity involves seeking counseling, talking with family or friends, praying, and engaging in faith-based services such as church services. This study's primary focus is on identifying couples' coping skills to help maintain their marriage, and this question provided descriptive data from the married participants and the clinicians (Culver & Lundquist Denton, 2017; Fye & Mims, 2019).

Question 3 allowed both pools of participants to speak to the coping strategies utilized to restore the marriage relationship and is directly related to RQ1. It is essential to ask questions that help participants reflect on their personal and collective resilience in maintaining their marriage. The participants' responses added insight into how couples avoid divorce and remain married despite infidelity.

Question 4 allowed explored support system and the impact, if any, they had a couple's decision to stay married. Often couples keep the affair a secret, which can create feelings of isolation. The expectations and beliefs of the non-involved partner's social network, such as friends and family, can impact decisions to stay with or leave their unfaithful partner. If the non-

involved partner perceives their social network is suggesting ending the relationship, the non-involved partner is more inclined to end the relationship versus staying in the relationship (Shrout & Weigel, 2019). This question clarifies how authentic support from family or friends impacts the married couple's recovery from infidelity.

Questions 5–7 established validity to the positive impact of faith and spirituality on the couple's ability to remain married. It is common in the Christian faith that married couples will maintain sexual fidelity within the marriage covenant (Ziv et al., 2018). The couple who shares faith practice as a significant part of their lifestyle illustrates lower marital infidelity rates (Jeanfreau & Mong, 2019). Within the context of marriage, the holy covenant has meaning beyond the individual, the couple, and the family (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). The marriage itself requires a high degree of altruism, evident in the couple's shared desires and goals (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). This question provided evidence that spiritual coping strategies are frequently used to maintain the marriage compared to any other coping strategies and was confirmed from both the clinicians and married participants.

Questions 8–11 set the stage to unpack the process of moving on from the infidelity experience. During times of crisis or conflict, the Christian couple is reportedly more cooperative and engages in solutions-focused communication rather than negative, destructive communication traits associated with couples that view marriage as less sacred (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). Restoring trust, consulting a marriage counselor, seeking help from non-judgmental friends, or seeking guidance from a spiritual leader or trained counselor all serve as coping strategies when dealing with infidelity. The couples' experience with infidelity and the personal testimonies of their own experience in recovering from infidelity remains the primary

focus of this research, adding to the discussion on how couples avoid divorce and stay married after infidelity.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the data analysis was to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within the collected data and uncover new understanding about the lived experiences of couples who have experienced infidelity in their marriage and chose to stay married. Before beginning the data analysis process, the transcriptions were member-checked to ensure that each interviewee confirmed the accuracy of their document. The qualitative data analysis computer software, NVivo, assisted in developing codes and themes of the study.

Coding enabled the consolidation of similar data into categories because of shared characteristics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Coding involved identifying a single word, a short phrase, or a complete sentence in the text that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. All familiar themes and patterns were evaluated, and deviations were identified and omitted from the results. This process produced a detailed description of the phenomenon and extended the understanding of how couples utilize coping mechanisms after infidelity (Heppner et al., 2016). The data was synthesized to answer the research questions guiding this study, and the unique points were summarized in a narrative format to create the findings. The themes helped answer the research questions regarding what coping strategies married couples use to help recover from infidelity and if spiritual or faith-based coping strategies were present.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study includes the research's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. The study confirmed these elements through a commitment to the research process. The study's credibility was assured by following the required research

methods of the Community Care and Counseling dissertation handbook and through the guidance of the university IRB office. The study's dependability was achieved through systematic procedures that were followed with a keen focus on understanding the experiences of the clinician and married participants. Each participant reviewed their transcript for accuracy, which confirmed that the narratives represented the participants' authentic voices. The results of the study have the potential to be transferable in that the finds can help understand the experience of infidelity and how various types of marriage may successfully use coping strategies to navigate the consequences of infidelity.

Triangulation

Triangulation involved using multiple sources to ensure that data represented the themes (Candela, 2019). The nature of the case study and using two pools of participants, clinicians and married individuals or couples, served as a triangulation method. Asking similar interview questions to these two types of participants offered affirming and consistent themes that were developed from both pools.

Member Checking

One of the first steps in the data collection and analysis process was to transcribe each interview as a verbatim representation of the interviewee's narrative in the interview. The first process of triangulation was member checking. Each participant received a copy of his or her interview transcript to review before entering it into NVivo. Member checking ensures that the transcriptions accurately represent the participant's reactions to the interview questions. Participants confirmed that the transcripts were accurate, and only small edits were required to some transcripts (Candela, 2019).

Expert Reviewer

As an additional means of triangulation, an expert reviewer served as a peer debriefer (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). He examines the data produced by the researcher. The expert reviewer was an experienced marriage and family counselor working with couples who have experienced infidelity. The expert reviewer reviewed the nodes, themes, and conclusions to affirm that the data represented reasonable themes and conclusions. This triangulation method cultivated the data's trustworthiness by ensuring it represents expected coping methods and safeguarding the interpretation of data and illustration of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Liberty University's IRB provides guidance and leadership to ensure that the researcher adheres to strict ethical practices in the preparation, data collection, data analysis process, interpretation, and dissemination of the research findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). As the researcher, I was concerned with producing an intellectually coherent, compelling, ethical research design and following the IRB's guidance. Additionally, recommendations from the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) were considered due to the sensitive subject of infidelity to provide stringent safeguards to protect the participants' rights throughout the study. These measures include research methods, confidentiality in research, precautions to avoid injury, and client participation. In Addition, the following ethical standards of ACA guided the study:

1. Conducting Research: Counselors plan, design, conduct, and report research in a consistent manner with applicable ethical principles, federal and state laws, host institutional regulations, and scientific standards governing research (ACA, 2014, G.1.a.).

2. Confidentiality in Research: Counselors are responsible for understanding and adhering to state, federal, agency, or institutional policies or applicable guidelines regarding confidentiality in their research practices (ACA, 2014, G.1.b.).
3. Precautions to Avoid Injury: Counselors who conduct research be responsible for their participants' welfare throughout the research process and should take reasonable precautions to avoid causing emotional, physical, or social harm to participants. The researcher will protect the participants from re-traumatization is by not asking any direct questions regarding the events about the infidelity. Participants will also receive a copy of the questions before their interview. I will provide a counselor-referral to any couple who feel they need it due to the study (ACA, 2014, G.1.e.).
4. Client Participation: Counselors conducting research involving clients must make clear in the informed consent process that clients are free to choose whether to participate in research activities. Counselors take necessary precautions to protect clients from the adverse consequences of declining or withdrawing from participation. Clients, after a thorough review, received a copy of the informed consent (ACA, 2014, G.1.c.).

Summary

The study methods provided a systematic process of recruiting both pools of participants and conducting interviews that produced consistent findings between both groups. Triangulation ensured that the study was trustworthy. Ethical standards provide a framework for respectfully addressing the topic of infidelity that limited harm or insensitive to the topic.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents the findings and describes the data collection process and theme development. This qualitative phenomenological case study aims to gain insight into the lived experiences of married couples who remained married after infidelity and what strategies are utilized to navigate the process of avoiding divorce. In this chapter, the emergent themes that resulted from interviews with two pools of participants are detailed. The first pool is experienced marriage therapists with experience in working with couples who have experienced infidelity and the second pool is married couples who have experienced infidelity.

Participants

This qualitative phenomenological case study included two participant groups. The first group is professional therapists who work with couples through infidelity experiences, and the second group is couples who have experienced infidelity. The researcher interviewed six clinicians who have extensive experience working with couples who experienced infidelity, including two doctorate level clinicians, one Masters level clinician, and three licensed clinical counselors. The length of clinical experience range from 8 years to 25 years. The married participants ranged in age from 25 to 54 and married between 3 years to 28 years. Five participants represented this group.

Name	Participant Type	Experience
Sarah	Clinician 1	10 years clinical experience
Brian	Clinician 2	20 years clinical experience
Joyce	Clinician 3	6 years clinical experience
Veronica	Clinician 4	19 years clinical experience

Jonathan	Clinician 5	20 years clinical experience
Carolyn	Clinician 6	10 years clinical experience
Fred	Married Participant M1	8 years married
Betty	Married Participant F1	8 years married
Rhonda	Married Participant F2	22 years married
Star	Married Participant F5	10 years married
Matthew	Married Participant M6	7 years married
Cheryl	Married Participant F6	7 years married
Norman	Married Participant M8	28 years married
Ruth	Married Participant F8	28 years married

Clinician Theme Development

The therapists who served as participants in this study counsel couples who experienced infidelity. There are fourteen themes that emerged from the interviews with clinicians. They are both having a part, disruptions to the family system, communication, coping as an individual and as a couple, empathy, time together, need of space, time with other couples, past trauma, self-work, setbacks, external influences, sharing the store and spirituality. In the following paragraphs, each theme is detailed with supporting quotes from the research participants.

Infidelity is one of the most common problems for marriages and family therapists. It is devastating to relationships and can be one of the complex problems to treat. However, many factors contribute to infidelity, and some couples do recover from infidelity and remain married. Participant “Carolyn” made a statement that captures the essence of the experience, saying, "it came down to decades invested in the marriage and having children and the financial

consequences. The spouse who was the victim of the infidelity decides that it is worth trying because of all of those reasons." The resulting themes capture many variables considered in the decision to stay together. There was no single influence but rather several elements of the situation and mindset that impacted the couple's decision to stay together and forge ahead. Those themes are detailed in the following paragraphs.

Both Played a Part

The first theme that the clinicians illustrated was the fact that each person in the marriage contributed to weakening the marriage relationship. For example, Sarah drew attention to the importance of both individuals taking responsibility for the relationship, saying, "the coping started with finding empathy for the other person and understanding that they both had a part to play in the infidelity." While Brian added, "the reality is you're not married at the wedding; you're married at the engagement; you're married at the point you choose that person to be your wife; you should start becoming [married] at that moment." These examples illustrate clinicians' emphasis on each person placed in maintaining the relationship through infidelity. While often, blame is placed on the one that dishonored the marriage vows, it is important to examine how each partner influenced the breakdown over the course of time.

While both partners are responsible for the breakdown of the marriage relationship, in therapy, each must do individual work that benefits their relationship. Joyce highlighted:

The couple learned that once they attended to their individual healing pertaining to their identified attachment style, they were able to build the capacity to feel safe, confident, vulnerable, and compassionate to move towards a more fulfilling relationship that met their needs and their spouse's needs.

Through the process of self-examination, each partner understands him or herself more

clearly. This cultivates awareness about the role played in the deterioration of the relationship and how each can repair trust and safety issues that are missing. Taking responsibility for self contributes to healing the relationship and building sustainable trust.

Along similar lines, the importance of accountability further emphasizes the theme of both individuals playing a role in the quality of the marriage relationship. Jonathan stated:

Individually, the word accountability is always at the forefront of our counseling. They (the couple) continued to explain that neither individual can blame the other for their own individual problems. Adding to the explanation, they continued by asserting, potentially, we have to respect the other's journey to get healthy our willingness, and only then can the two of us come together to make decisions on how we will avoid future confrontation and remain peaceful with one another. The person who caused the pain is usually frustrated because the person with the scar is not healing fast enough for their liking. So we've never been able to give advice other than it may be forever or never that this hurt is alleviated.

Accountability transforms as the couple works toward reconciliation. Accountability requires both individuals to take responsibility for their actions. As the marriage unit is restored, the couple makes decisions about avoiding problematic areas and instead hold each other accountable for cultivating healthy habits, practices, actions, and communication. Counseling is an effective tool couples utilize to recover from infidelity. Joyce pointed out, "they [the couple] expressed that they were willing to explore how counseling could support them in addressing the problematic issues within their marriage and exhaust their options before deciding to terminate the relationship."

The theme of both individuals have a part in the deterioration of the relationship gives couples space to explore their personal responsibility of repairing the marriage bond. In therapy,

couples are encouraged to engage in self-examination as a process of awakening recognition of personal and historical traits that contribute to the quality of the relationship. Accountability to self, and accountability to one's spouse are paramount to the recovery process.

Disruption of Family System

Mindfulness about the disruption that divorce would cause to the family unit is significant to decision-making. Often choosing the stay married is conceptualized as less likely to cause psychological harm to the children. However, couples understand how divorce disrupts a family unit's rhythm, daily routines, and traditions. For example, Joyce recalled her experience of working with a couple who factored in wanting to remain together because the wife was pregnant and ultimately did not want to see her family divided. She said, "they (the couple) equally pronounced how much they loved one another and how they were best friends and one another's safe haven since high school." Veronica also illustrated the importance of preserving the family's culture, saying:

They have decided to stay together because of their covenant with God, love for one another, love for their family/children, not wanting to walk away from what they have established financially nor break up their family, agreeing and committing to rebuilding trust and setting and keeping agreed-upon boundaries.

The significance of family relationships, trust, and the yoke of financial and emotional support were core considerations for couples who decide to stay together. Individuals have a keen sense of how not only their lives would change but also the disturbance of the family's traditional environment. An established family is a desired quality, and losing that is central to the decision-making process when infidelity is present.

Communication

Communication is implied in many components of a successful relationship. Therefore, it was no surprise that the role of communication was thematic in the interview response of the therapists. Finding consistent means of communication during the recovery process is a necessary quality that helps sustain the marriage. For example, Carolyn stated, "it is helpful when the one who cheated has self-awareness and introspection to own their behaviors to have empathy and not minimize the impact of their behaviors on the injured spouse." She also contributed insight into the importance of safety in voicing one's feelings, saying:

Demanding to have a voice to share how they (the couple) feel and gaining some understanding as to what motivated the spouse to cheat and understanding that it was the spouse who cheated, insecurities; not that the victim that was lacking or wrong; which is how they were able to cope.

Part of the coping process is space in which to ask questions, verbalize feelings and broaden understanding of the spouse's motivation. While this is an uncomfortable conversation, whether communicating in therapy or outside of therapy, room for dialogue is a critical piece of the healing process.

Other therapists shared similar insights on the importance of communication. According to Veronica, "clients have to engage in grieving and honest communication to share their level of hurt." Jonathan pointed out that the most helpful tool is the hand-to-hand conversation which the couple practices nightly based on their disagreements until they are comfortable enough to handle whatever issue comes. Brian acknowledged that "communication allows couples to talk about their authentic issues in a space where they feel protected in value, and part of that it's something that they have to build through trust." Brian further elaborated:

They [the couple] have to create a place where they can bring their issues and concerns and fears and not be made to be felt stupid or to have them feel like they're not warranted or dismissed the right to be able to explore them with authenticity.

Joyce illustrated the outcome of establishing effective communication explaining that, "they [the couple] were able to operate as a team to problem-solve, make decisions, and take steps to engage in quality time/intimacy." Attributes such as being open about their feelings, developed realistic beliefs and expectations, and clearly defined boundaries in the partnership and relevant to improving overall communication as a couple strives to restore their marriage.

Johnathan suggested that the undertones of a couple's communication approach can be shallow and unproductive in solving their disputes. Couples need to cultivate effective communication strategies that are used in daily conversation, and those that are used when working to resolve conflict or disagreement. The couple lacks a fundamentally piece of the framework, relevant to restoring their marriage, if communication is not a core goal of therapy or in the couple's work outside of the counseling process.

Coping and Self-Care

Individual work to heal and develop personal coping strategies is a critical step in restoring the marriage. Evidence that each partner gives time and attention to emotional coping is essential. Joyce illustrated the importance of individuals cultivating awareness of the individual work and how it influences copying within the marriage, saying, "the couple became aware of the requirement to do some individual work by exploring their needs, wants, beliefs, and values to help them safely verbalize these things in the marriage." When asked about how couples cope with infidelity, Carolyn shared:

Coping is not a mental strategy; it is an emotional strategy. We cannot separate what we

do with how we feel - effective coping starts with owning our emotional experience and healing the pain and the hurts that has resulted from the spouse cheating. At the same time, the cheating spouse must own their emotional experience and unravel the internal factors that result in the cheating. Coping starts with healing; after the couple owns how wounded and broken they are, they then embark on their personal healing journey with transparency and accountability from the cheating spouse.

Brian also contributed insight into the distraction that cause an individual to look for coping outside of themselves or focusing on needed change. He reminds us that:

They found friends; they found activities to engage themselves in while managing their experiences of the infidelity. They continue to try to become a better person in the process; they [the couple] then become or try to become whom they think that their partner is looking for. If they don't have the coping, then they don't have the bounce back; they can't bounce back. It could lead to them doing risky behavior.

When discussing coping, Sarah suggested that each partner take intentional time for self-care; she stated, "it is two different things, the couple taking care of themselves individually and not focusing on the marriage," allowing for emotional growth, which ultimately impacts the marriage. Veronica also endorsed the need to explore self-care and coping by advocating that, "self-care, individual and marriage counseling, journaling, reading books on infidelity, and prayer and meditation. The individual needs to create their self-care thriving kit and the couple to agree upon and commit to coping mechanisms." The importance of self-work allows for recognizing and identifying the emotions surrounding the infidelity for both the offending spouse and the offended spouse.

The importance of meaningful and effective self-care and individual coping strategies

translates into effective coping tools as a couple. The clinicians' emphasize that coping can be a function of individual intrinsic work or can be associated with social support that either is helpful or becomes a distraction. The quality of time and attention to self-care and coping offers a level of resilience as the couple strives to restore their marriage.

Time with other Married Couples

Establishing relationships with other married couples can help develop support in times of crisis.

Brian (C2) points out

knowing whose voice to listen to is probably the most significant support, but also understanding; those ground rules are set there is no perfect couple, so stuff that works for other people when shared with you must be filtered through the lens of your own relationship.

Additionally, Veronica (C4) adds

social support is significant in praying for the couple, listening to them, holding them accountable, and attending regular and ongoing meetings to create a safe space to share. Veronica (C4) recognized the importance of having an “ongoing accountability couple(s),” a point not recognized earlier in their career.

According to Joyce (C3), it is important to

connect with other married couples to provide support and guidance.” Having other married couples as part of their community, particularly during difficult times, can provide guidance in navigating to a place of understanding and reconciliation. Additionally, other married couples can provide a positive shared experience of married life by walking beside the couple as they restore their marriage.

Support systems can provide empathy - places and is articulated by Joyce as she indicated that “they [couple] appreciate the positive influences of older, mature married couples because they had empathy for their situation, their feelings were validated, and they were provided with skills to promote forgiveness for one another.”

Challenges in therapy

The clinician group brought wisdom and insight to the challenges that couples face in therapy as they navigate the experience of restoring their marriage. One of those challenges is addressing previous traumas, maladaptive habits or behaviors, personality traits, or tendencies that either individual brings to the marriage unit. When in therapy, following infidelity, these challenges are more animated and tend to create secondary problems for the couple. For example, Joyce shared, “past traumas caused insecure attachment styles, which negatively impacted their ability to show up in the marriage healthy and likely contributed to the infidelity.” Joyce also illustrated problems with trust and how it can be impaired even before the couple experiences infidelity. She shared an example saying, “the wife did not trust the husband’s interaction on social media, nor did the husband respect the boundaries set to develop trust within the relationship.” She stated that this couple continued to struggle with reconciliation because there “were the challenges of navigating through the emotions of shame, anger, guilt, blame, and lack of assurance.” Another insight that Joyce shared was the need for autonomy in the healing process for the couple and how breaching information about infidelity creates more challenges in the restorative process. She shared an example saying, “the husband did not respond well to the wife disclosing information about the infidelity or their marriage with her friends or family because they would express their judgment and disdain for him.” She further explained that the couple would frequently “doubt their resilience and ability to overcome the

infraction due to external influences.” In addition, “the infidelity was openly displayed on social media by the woman that the husband was having an affair with.” The couple recognized that it was difficult to shift toward a space of healing “because they could not privately address the issue, which placed a deeper strain on the marriage.”

Brian provided an understanding of how past hurt can trigger new cognitions and behaviors that might have been uncharacteristic before the infidelity. He shared:

Promises the couple makes to stay together is that the person that is risking everything to stay with an offending partner after infidelity is holding on to every promise; promises not fulfilled triggers it because of remembering what happened.

He added further insight by saying that this new lack of trust was expressed in one of his clients when she said, “I am still sensitive, right so the first time you don’t answer your phone first time, you don’t text back the first time when I try to FaceTime, you ignore me right the first time you’re late first time you stay out later the first time you say you’re hanging with the people you hung with before going to the same places it’s a trigger.”

Sarah (C1) described that when setbacks occur; the couple will

“use an exercise to rate the argument if the argument is on a scale of 1-10 and if the rating is higher for one partner indicating a higher level of importance, they will compromise on the argument.”

Sharing the story

For the couples attempting to reconcile their marriage after an occurrence of infidelity, deciding whom to tell is tremendously important. The clinical participants in this study submit that the couples carefully considered whom they can trust and support the marriage in the restoration process before sharing any information.

Clergy

Couples often turn to the Pastor or clergy in the time of crisis, supported by Brian, as he recalls an experience by a couple he was working with. He stated:

They (the couple) trusted their Pastor enough to sit down and share with them the event, the fact that they constantly run it by their Pastor or the fact that they continuously reach out because they could just like each other again, but you could just as well say I'm done, tear up the papers, throw the ring back, leave, and be gone. However, they show up together; they still do the steps. Even though they're not together yet, they're going to counseling; they are working on restoration. 'Jesus story' or any of the biblical narratives that deal with wilderness moments and then promised lands or crucifixion and resurrection always shows that there is hope in the after; after this, it will get better, it may hurt now, but if God purposed us and this is part of God's process.

Veronica added insight, saying that, "couples decide to tell their pastor, counselor, and parent about the infidelity." Carolyn offered that sometimes pastors offer spiritual guidance but may not clarify the crisis; she stated:

The married couple told their Pastor, and they feel that their Pastor gave the spiritual platitude but did not help them understand why they are in this crisis. They recognized there was a need for spiritual and natural support.

Jonathan shared a specific case in which he was involved on the staff of the church and recommended that the couple limit whom they share information with about the infidelity. He recounted:

It was only me, my wife, and a Senior Pastor of the church, and we advised them not to seek help from other individuals, especially their own individual family members,

because it leads to problems in the future when you are done with the issue your family members are still holding onto what you shared with them.

The significant role and impact of the pastor or clergy for the married couple recovering from infidelity provide a safe emotional, and supportive space to discuss the infidelity without judgment or condemnation. Moreover, the pastor or clergy provides the spiritual, biblical guidance that aligns with the couples' values.

Family and Friends

Support for the couple navigating through the infidelity restorative process is essential. Family and friends can provide support for the couple as they restore their marriage. Carolyn shared, "Social support is integral to the healing processes as long as the social support is not there to give advice or analyze but to provide emotional space for each member to emote."

Joyce contributed by sharing this piece of insight:

It is essential to have a network of support that will respect and honor a couple's values, even if it does not align with their own. Sharing the infidelity with an impartial, unbiased person can be easier than sharing with close friends or family members. The impartial individual(s) do not present a challenge to forgiving or not forgiving the offending partner.

Discerning the 'right' support is essential to successfully restore the marriage. The proper support provides opportunities to openly discuss feelings, thoughts, and experiences as the couple manages the difficulties of recovering from infidelity.

Jonathan shared some of the risks of sharing information with family, stating:

Family is primarily negative because the family takes sides of their relative right or wrong or indifferently supports their loved one. Therefore, we advise professional counseling, individual counseling, or pastors to help keep down family involvement.

Brian retold a story of how a couple decided to limit interaction with others and only invited a select few friends to be knowledgeable of their situation. He said:

One couple identified social media as a form of support during the infidelity and the mending of the marriage; however, a female client decided to cut off all social media access, and she limited her outings with friends. Instead, she focused all of her energy on her marriage; those close friends would visit their home and spend time letting couples but both refrain from going out.

Joyce illustrated how having a couple that can provide mentoring and offers a safe place to receive guidance and empathy can be a welcoming benefit. She shared:

The couple shared that they appreciated the positive influences of older, mature, married couples because they had empathy for their situation, their feelings were validated, and they were provided with skills to promote forgiveness for one another.

Often times, friends and family serve as an important source of support for each partner or the couple. As illustrated by the clinicians' stories, it is important to be mindful of the dynamics, personality, and availability of emotional energy that friends or family bring to the situation. Family members might have an especially difficult time moving past the hurt that either partner causes. Friends can be equally as complex in the way they respond to serving as a support. Finding the right support is an important element of the recovery process.

Spirituality

Faith-based or spiritual counseling is frequently used to help couples recover from infidelity. Jonathan shared his experience working with a couple, saying:

Spirituality played a huge part in that they are both believers in Jesus Christ, and they often reflect on the scripture that declares a three-part cord is not easily broken. They know the

good in each of them was to bring them both back to the center when they stray from the Christian way marriage is designed to be.

Brian also illustrated how he incorporates spirituality with clients, sharing:

I introduce the discipline of prayer as a necessary part of their morning and evening, so the first thing they need to do is pray together; he prays for her and for issues; she prays specifically for him, for his heart, for his strength right covering him and also allowing them to space to listen to the language of their prayers because in the language of their prayers they're giving stuff to God they hear about the worries and concerns of each other that becomes a necessary part.

Joyce also contributed by adding insight to a couple she worked with, saying:

The wife and husband were not invested in spirituality in the same way. The wife leaned on her spirituality and religious beliefs to assist her with forgiveness and direction in the marriage. The wife attempted to encourage her husband to attend church with her, yet, he did not uphold spirituality with the same reverence. However, the husband did attend church a few times with his family to appease his wife.

Carolyn indicated, "spirituality gave them (the couple) the opportunity to examine their spiritual core and engage in personal restorations clarifying their personal values." These values include spiritual practices. The spiritual practice consisted of the wife having faith and praying for herself, her family, and her marriage.

Veronica articulated her thoughts by suggestion:

The client's spirituality has been most helpful. A couple's spirituality is critical to remaining married and working through their healing journey. Their commitment to their

covenant, repentance, forgiveness, restoration, trust, and belief that God or a Higher Power will enable them to move forward.

Carolyn urges her clients to use spiritual practices saying she encouraged:

Weekly couples Bible study just the two of them, attended church together weekly, and each has their individual practices. In addition, the injured spouse engages in yoga and meditation circles with others, and the offending spouse plays a musical instrument re-engaging with their music. The offending spouse also attends church services, while the injured spouse does not join in going to services [which] helps the offending spouse's spiritual and emotional reserve to continue fighting for the relationship.

Veronica (C4) suggests that inviting couples to share their experience of God in their relationships is helpful:

Allowing couples to share how they met, how did they know they were God's provision for one another, what contributed to where they are now, define marriage, and was is their definition based on, Grieving, Prayer, Bible Scripture, Mission/Vision of their marriage and family, Spiritual Podcast/Video teachings, Couple's Devotion, Marriage Counseling with Pastor or Christian Counseling, and Marriage Ministries, Conferences, Date Night, Intimacy, Mentors and Accountability Partners.

Brian said, "Grace is a factor that is going to help a couple if they are trying to do it forever." The experiences of a couple dealing with infidelity vary; however, the road to reconciliation is complex and challenging. The couples who successfully navigate the challenge of reconciliation share a common, if not similar, interest in spiritual practices and their relationship with the Lord.

Married Participants Theme Development

The participants in this study provided insight into their real-life experiences with infidelity. In addition, the participants offer an inside account of how they navigated through the infidelity, honestly and openly sharing what helped in addition to the pitfalls but ultimately avoiding divorce and successfully maintaining their marriage. Infidelity is heartbreaking and devastating and can destroy a marriage, as infidelity is one of the most common contributors to divorce. However, although infidelity is devastating and could ruin a marriage, there are marriages that can and do restore their marriage after infidelity. The participants shared that many factors contribute to infidelity.

The themes that emerged through the interviews with the married participants include disruption to the family system, communication, depending on each other, empathy, establishing and maintaining boundaries, meaningful time, need of space, preventing external influence, support of other couples, rebuilding, self-work, withholding information, faulty behaviors, involving support, unbiased sounding board, triggers from the past, non-spiritual coping and spiritual coping. These themes are described in the following paragraphs

Disruptions to the Family System

The participants responded to the decision-making process of choosing to stay together, emulating the answer to the equivalent question posed to the clinical participants.

Recovering from infidelity requires considering reasons to maintain the marriage. Reasons to initially stay in the marriage are not always for love. Star reported, “He is the father of my kids, and I did not want to tear my family apart. Our marriage is essential to both of us, and we decided to work through it.”

A few of the participants identified that it was not always easy to find someone to tell;

they recognized that if they told close family members, they may hold and harbor resentment towards the other spouse, so they chose to tell only those close family members and people who wanted to see them work things out and remain married. Norman and Ruth recalled, “that was very important to agree on whom to tell, making sure that whom we told would not harbor any anger from what we shared.” Star admitted, “I did not want to tell anybody. I decided to talk to my aunt about it. I was glad to have my aunt support me during this difficult time. She did not judge my husband or me; she just encouraged us to get the help we needed.” While Cheryl added, “I would say just having somebody to talk to, outside of my husband; that contributed to me coping because I was able to have somebody to talk to through like my feelings.” Not everyone feels comfortable sharing with several people. Matthew suggested that he “only told his mother and father.”

A few of the participants identified that it was not always easy to find someone to tell; they recognized that if they told close family members, they may hold and harbor resentment towards the other spouse, so they chose to tell only those close family members and people who wanted to see them work things out and remain married. For example, Ruth “We trusted some people, and one of them was actually my sister.”

Communication

Learning to communicate with each other was a common theme heard from many participants and mirrors the importance of this variable, as demonstrated in this same theme from the clinicians’ interviews. Norman provided insight:

I would say agreeing on terminology has been very helpful. For instance, the terminology of honesty it can mean different things based upon how you were raised and based upon what your own coping and defense mechanisms are because a lot of that one

area was really a major issue for us because I understood honesty differently than wife understood it.”

Rhonda contributed her insight saying:

Coping with communication and listening for understanding, not responding, was an essential part of their recovery. We talked through it a couple of times with another couple who would listen to both sides, reaching a point where we could hear each other out; if we did not, then it may have gone another way. Continuing to communicate and listen to each other and getting support from close friends who knew what was going on between us was helpful.

Matthew simplified the process and began to “just being honest with myself.” He further added:

Communicating more with each other and listening to each other, and not talking to say words was extremely helpful in mending the marriage. We weren’t verbal enough with each other we held back a lot of things, and we just felt like it was certain things that we thought it was supposed to happen a certain way, and when it didn’t, it never really got talked about.

Further details regarding communication was given by Fred, who stated:

Our open communication has been the most helpful, understanding how open communication along with faith are key with keeping our marriage strong. We committed to opening our channels of communication when it came to expressing how we felt about things.

In conclusion, the participants identified that having open and honest communication, agreeing on terminology, and listening for understanding by not responding are helpful tools for

restoring the marriage after infidelity.

Depending on Each Other

Surviving the affair can draw couples closer together as they begin to communicate more openly and depend on one another for feedback and guidance on what they are doing well and what they need to improve. Norman suggested:

There are three entities within a marriage it's the husband, it's the wife, and it's the marriage and each of them have their own dreams, own calling, and own purpose. So you have to make room for all of them; that was really transformative for us.

Star shared her experience of depending on her spouse by saying:

We also learned all the things we needed to agree on or make compromises to achieve a favorable outcome. Keeping things in was difficult and did not help us initially, but it forced us to lean on each other more. I have learned that we must be on the same page to accomplish anything in marriage.

In addition, Ruth stated:

Whoever is like hurting the worst or needing some time and attention, the other would kind of fall back and just support each other, so we were doing that with each other, and we kind of like OK, it's my turn now, you know that type of thing, so we did a lot of that supporting ourselves as individuals in marriage.

Matthew recalled what helped him, saying, "Knowing that I'm doing something that's like just making her happy like or you know that she wants so that for me that's helpful for me because I can see the difference." Betty also added, "when one of us falls back into that negative space, the other one will start using those skills learned to bring us back together."

It is crucial for couples to depend on each other, particularly during difficult times such as

restoring the marriage after infidelity. The couple can provide support with an open dialogue regarding their feelings, their thoughts, and experiences on a daily basis. Additionally, providing feedback on what is helpful, what is working, and what needs to be improved are key components to the restorative process.

Empathy

The theme of empathy was revealed as the couple shared how their open and honest communication contributed to their empathy for one another. Norman discussed restoring intimacy as it relates to empathy. He reported, “intimacy cannot take place without trust, and it cannot take place without honesty, and it cannot take place without empathy; all of those things were just lessons learned in the processes of restoring our marriage.” Rhonda related her experience of empathy, adding, “I feel like even that [empathy] was a choice; we chose to try to hear and understand each other’s perspective.”

Being able to take the perspective of one’s spouse, even in the most hurtful circumstances, seems to have reparative characteristics and allows for the process of reconciliation to become an option.

Meaningful Times

Spending time with one another helps build and establish a bond between two people. As the couples rebuild their marriage, spending meaningful, purposeful quality time assists in reconnecting the married couple and restoring them to covenant marriage. Ruth and Norman stated, “establishing meaningful time with each other and our children. We purposefully set time to have dates with each other and with our children.” Ruth added, “we had a broader story that was beyond the infidelity that gave us the reason to stay focused on what we’re in.”

Spending intentional, quality time together as a couple helps foster intimacy both

sexually and emotionally. In addition, spending time that is meaningful elevates the mood and promotes happiness by creating memories; as indicated by participant Ruth (F8), the couples have a broader story; the couple at one point shared happier memories before the infidelity.

Need of Space

There are times when space and spending time alone offers an opportunity to regain perspective. For example, participant Cheryl asserted, “the process of getting back together would be more challenging, but we just started spending more time with each other, living separately, but coming together to spend time and date. Matthew shared that he “had to live without her before making her my wife; but living without her as my wife was a different and challenging experience. It made me realize that I did not want to live without her.”

Although spending time alone is a necessary part of the recovery process, participants indicated that the needed space served as a reminder that they wanted to be with their spouse. Proving some truth to the statement ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder.’

Preventing External Influence

Emotional disconnection is one of the causes of infidelity. An estimated 8% of men reported sexual dissatisfaction, while 48% reported emotional dissatisfaction as the root cause of their unfaithful behaviors (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Fourteen percent of married women have engaged in infidelity behaviors because of feeling emotionally dissatisfied (Divorce Statistics, 2020). Understanding some outside influences such as social media, other couples, and past trauma is necessary to understand how couples can recover from infidelity. Fred added, “I was able to remove all outside interactions to decide if I truly wanted to do right by my wife and family and try to keep our issues between us in house.” After discovering her husband’s infidelity, Betty explained that she said “no social media.” She made this choice because of the

inappropriate interactions between her husband and the person. She and her husband recognized that social media allowed false personas to exist and made it easy to talk to someone discreetly. Additionally, Norman noted, “rebuilding is influenced by everything else that is happening in your life.”

The traumas from the past, negative influences from friends, family, or strangers can hinder a marriage from recovering from infidelity. For the couple reestablishing trust in their marriage, the necessity to insulate the marriage from outside influences is a necessary part of the marriage restoration process.

Support of other Couples

Being around other married couples provides support during difficult times and presents the opportunity to learn different ways to communicate and commiserate with couples who have shared experiences. For example, Norman identified that “being with other couples gave me hope that we can restore our marriage.” Rhonda shared, “we talked through it a couple of times with another couple who would listen to both sides.”

Similar to the clinical findings, having other married couples as support during difficult times helps the recovering couple identify different ways to communicate and gain insight from couples who have shared experiences with infidelity.

Self-Work

It is essential to work on self to bring a whole and healed person back to the marriage. Ruth shared, “we had to learn how to be individuals, fail, succeed, get back up, take care of ourselves, make time with friends. The trauma from the infidelity causes you to have tunnel vision.” Betty identified that her “infidelity was due to her own personal resentments and rejections.” She recognizes the need to get self-help with loving herself and healing from her

past.” Ruth added, “we had to learn how to be individuals, fail, succeed, get back up, take care of ourselves, and have time with friends to avoid codependent behaviors.” Matthew shared his strategy saying, “I completed a book, and it was a book that was solely for our marriage.”

Working on self; rebuilding or repairing self-esteem is a crucial element to restoring the marriage. Becoming a healthier version of self will benefit the couple and the marriage long-term by diminishing codependent behaviors, spending time with friends, and dealing with past resentments and rejections.

Withholding Information

A potential setback to infidelity is not sharing everything with the spouse. It is difficult to hold on to all the emotions involved in dealing with infidelity. Matthew shared:

I would say there’s been times where it [setback] could be something like not giving all the information that she should have had for whatever reason, whatever the situation. When it comes to issues like infidelity, that little stuff like that can be a problem, and it really can be a setback. Forgetting to give information about certain things, and then it’s a surprise when things happen, and she is thinking, you don’t think enough to tell me, you don’t think about me enough to tell me this, or she feels like she’s being kept out of the loop on stuff.

Keeping secrets does not help in the healing and recovery process. Inadvertently leaving out details can cause the offended spouse to doubt the offending spouse, further diminishing the trust the offended spouse may have for the other spouse.

Adding a different perspective, Cheryl indicated, “holding information regarding her feelings, thoughts, and at times withholding sexual intimacy was a set up for continued resentment and anger.” Ruth also added, “if it wasn’t there in a moment, it wasn’t there.”

Potential setbacks will occur when there is a withholding of information or withholding intimacy.

Faulty Behaviors

The emotional drain from infidelity can cause a person to feel emotionally flooded and impact the way they think and act. The behavior of “shutting down,” as a way of coping was common among some participants. Cheryl stated a mistake she made was “me shutting down and just being done with the situation at that point.” Star shared a similar experience saying:

We realized that trust would be a problem moving forward. However, we are working on trust to get our marriage back on track. I was glad to have my aunt support me during this challenging time. I also learned all the things we needed to agree on or make compromises to achieve a favorable outcome.

Overthinking, over-analyzing, and rehearsing the events of an affair are powerful ways of thinking. Star shared her experience, saying, “we thought we could handle our marriage without including our spiritual walk and prayer lifestyle as the head of our relationship.” Rhonda (F2) stated that she would “continue to relive the past by constantly thinking about what happened.” Matthew recalled a mindset that he would have liked to avoid by saying:

Deal with what you bring into the marriage and what you do not bring to the marriage. For me, I was probably just that way before I was even married. Just having somebody teach me those things, and I think that would have helped me.

Continuing to replay the events of the infidelity, minimizing the importance of coping skills such as having a spiritual walk and prayer lifestyle, and not recognizing what is individually brought into the marriage are examples of extreme thinking that could negatively affect the recovery process.

Involving Support

Having support for the marriage after infidelity helps the couple successfully maintain their marriage and avoid divorcing. Couples carefully consider whom they wish to tell based upon the level of trust the couple has for the individual and the level of support to maintain the marriage. There are three support systems that were thematic for the married couple participants; clergy, close friends, and family are important individuals that couples involve and confide in as a means of support.

Clergy

According to many believers of the faith, one of the safest individuals to talk to is the Priest or Clergy person. During an interview of couple six, Matthew and Cheryl indicated that the “one thing I would say is with faith and coping is we’ve been, you know, discussing faith and religion.” Star added, “The First Lady [wife of the Pastor] and I would have conversations regularly. In addition, we would have prayer and spiritual readings to help me focus on my family and my marriage.”

The clergy or priest are one of the emotionally safe places people turn to during difficult times. As indicated by the response of the participants, faith and talking with clergy helped the couples in their restorative process

Close Friends

Choosing whom to tell about the infidelity can be difficult and requires thoughtful consideration. Fred and Betty decided not to tell others and shared, “not telling any other single friends due to them not being really able to tell or advise them on what to do as a married couple.” In addition, they did not want to have any of their single friends try to move in on the other spouse. Norman admits that “wrestling with whom to tell was that things weren’t

transparent and the only way for things to be transparent is to open it up so that others can see what's going on." Betty acknowledged, "we told close family and people who wanted us to work it out." While Rhonda asserted, "telling friends with whom we have been in a relationship for years. Our friends are a part of our married small group that we met with monthly at my old church."

When identifying what friends to share the infidelity event with, participants indicated that they chose to tell only close friends, friends who wanted the marriage to succeed, avoiding telling single friends, who are less likely to have a shared experience.

Family

It is difficult to tell a family member about infidelity. The challenge is that family members can take sides, and if the couple decides to reconcile and remain married, the family may have difficulty letting go of the past and moving forward. Therefore, it is important to share only with those who support the marriage. For example, Betty stated, "we told close family and people who wanted us to work it out." For the couple experiencing infidelity, participants indicate that the family may or may not be the best support system. The family often will side with their family member and may not support the continuation of the marriage. Therefore, it is essential to share with the family member who will support the marital success. Rhonda mentioned the importance of her parent's marriage relationship and how it served as a blueprint for navigating through difficult times. She stated, "remembering that my parents' marriage survived infidelity. I held on to that fact and that if God could keep them together for over 50 years that He could hold mine together as well."

In the final analysis, choosing whom to tell about the infidelity can be difficult and requires thoughtful consideration. Whether telling close friends or family members, an

important factor the couples considered is choosing people who have a shared experience and those who support the success of the marriage.

Unbiased Sounding Board

Having a third-party, unbiased person in the life of the married couple recovering from infidelity helps manage the stress and varied emotions managing the infidelity event. Cheryl identified that “a challenge to their recovery process has an unbiased third party to talk with when the infidelity was first discovered.” Rhonda also stated:

Having two unbiased people to help get through such a challenge makes a huge difference. You know that they are not taking sides; however, they are there to just listen to both of us to help us get to a place where we are hearing each other out.

In light of the information reported from the participants, it is helpful having an unbiased person to help navigate the process of restoring their marriage by listening to and guiding the couples to hear one another’s emotions.

Triggers, The Past

Unresolved trauma from childhood will and does impact a person in adulthood. The triggers can hinder affection, intimacy, security, trust, and communication. Rhonda said, “I realized that I was holding on to some things that my father did to my mother, projecting those feelings onto my husband. Continuing to relive the past by constantly thinking about what happened.” Betty added by saying, “My circle is small, so my close friends would come to see me at my house and spend time with my husband and me so he wouldn’t have triggers.” Overall, unresolved trauma can unknowingly create trauma responses which can hinder the recovery process.

No Spirituality

Not all couples engage in spiritual practices. For example, Matthew stated that “I completed a book and utilized the skills covered in the book. The books that I read were primarily about marriage. Betty acknowledged that spirituality “didn’t [play a role] until I did wrong in the marriage.” Rhonda used the practice of “journaling those negative thoughts related to the past and throwing it away,” as a helpful coping mechanism. Ultimately not all couples engage in spiritual practices; however, they do engage in other coping skills that are common practices for individuals who are under stress to use.

Spirituality

Spirituality was a common topic most participants mentioned having to rely on during the mending process and beyond. Several couples noted their relationship with God, faith, prayer, and resilience as vital factors that helped them overcome obstacles and limitations and successfully maintain their marriage. Betty shared:

Honestly admitted that spirituality did not play a significant part in her life until the infidelity; working with a spiritual therapist allowed her to pray and meditate properly. She contributes greatly to her ability to move forward and enables her to move forward to have calmness. We prayed together on top of individually.

Star decided to get their spiritual life back together after discovering the infidelity. Couples who believe that marriage is sacred are also more likely to remain committed to the marriage since they have promised God. The couples desire to obey God’s guidelines for marriage, and they believe their marriage is part of God’s will. Ruth stated, “spirituality was very essential; we had power struggles, unrealistic expectations, communication issues, trust issues, and childhood baggage.” Norman contributed his viewpoint by saying:

“I view marriage as a spiritual thing, and it’s not a contract, but something supernatural happens at the point of saying I do; that’s not like anything else. One spiritual practice identified frequently was the practice of prayer individually and praying as a couple.

Ruth added by suggesting, “my faith in God was the main thing because when you look at the natural circumstances; and how long it takes, I certainly would not have been the one to do that just in my own personality.” Additionally, Rhonda shared, “I had to forgive my husband, and I had to forgive the other person involved.” She continued by stating, “Spiritual practices that helped restore my marriage were definitely prayer, fasting, and just trusting and believing God to restore our marriage and making it better.” Star also offered insight saying:

The most important spiritual practice was prayers. We had family prayer, and we sought out spiritual leaders/clergy to pray for us and with us. It was vital for us to have a prayer life and other spiritual individuals when we needed reinforcement in our new walk to heal our marriage.

A relationship with God, faith, and prayer, both individually and as a couple, and being resilient are significant factors that helped the couples overcome obstacles they encountered during the restoration process.

Research Question Responses

Research Question 1

The first research question asked what experiences couples went through who experienced infidelity and decided to restore their marriage. Couples went through a wide range of experiences, such as past trauma, the need for space, communication with each other and other married couples, and setbacks.

According to the clinicians, the most common reason couples decided to stay together

was due to time spent together in the past. They also knew that this decision meant they properly understood “the terms of forever.” Clinicians stated that couples worked on empathy to restore their relationship, such as “finding empathy for the other person” and knowing “who their partner is.” They also discussed how the couple’s work was bolstered by self-work, by “evaluating the self” and exploring individual “needs, wants, beliefs, and values. Clinicians also discussed different aspects of disclosing the infidelity to others, with the most common theme being that family members were not informed due to fear of judgment or siding with one side of the couple. Clinicians also stated how couples would remain off social media due to fear of backsliding and other “external influence” while only sharing the situation with close friends and other married couples. Finally, clinicians explained the setbacks that couples experienced, such as boundaries being crossed, past trauma, which revealed the roots of infidelity, the development of unhealthy attachment styles, and feelings of shame and guilt. All these experiences were involved throughout the mending process for various couples.

Individuals who were not clinicians discussed a variety of experiences as well, such as needing to communicate and listen, depending on each other while also working on the self, finding social support, and rebuilding the trust. Most individuals expressed how they had to listen to their partners by not just hearing them. One individual remembered how defining terms and using the same terminology was beneficial, especially due to different upbringings. Regarding working together while also being apart, one individual discussed how he and his wife needed space and separation to understand themselves before coming back together. Self-care and self-work were crucial for blame and resentment not setting in. One participant stated that she had to work on not going to the extremes of trust by not “forgiving too soon” or “holding back trust.” The concept of rebuilding the marriage was also brought up by many individuals,

such as remembering the foundation of their marriage. Individuals also discussed the importance of support for friends, family, and other couples. Seeing how couples in a similar situation rebuilt their marriage gave hope and courage that it could be done personally.

Research Question 2

The second research question assessed how faith and spirituality impacted the mending process through infidelity. Couples went through both spiritual and secular practices to restore their relationship.

According to most of the clinicians, a mixture of spirituality and secular practices was used to accommodate the couple. For example, one Clinician stated how they “used spiritual techniques for the wife due to her beliefs while using more secular techniques for the husband since he was less religious and spiritual.” The Clinician was also “careful not to make the husband feel pressured to be more spiritual when these practices were done as a couple.” Other clinicians stated how spirituality was the main reason couples fought to restore their marriage, saying how couples decided to “stay together because of their covenant with God.” Clinicians referred to “multiple spiritual techniques used, such as the Miracle Question, prayer/praying together, Bible scriptures, spiritual podcasts, and Christian counseling.” One Clinician stated that spirituality was a “tremendous part” of the mending process due to the couple both being believers. “Since spirituality techniques were not always used, secular techniques, such as the “Feel, Felt, Found” method, the discussion of other love languages, and other coping strategies, were used to provide a balance of spiritual and non-spiritual practices.” One clinician stated that they do not focus on faith or spiritual techniques but rather “person-centered therapy to spend time with the couple individually and to see the focus on how their actions affected the marriage.”

For the individuals who are not clinicians, there were more personal aspects of the benefits of spirituality. One participant how she and her partner did not experience spirituality or practice it together until she had done “wrong in the marriage.” Once they started counseling and restoring their marriage, they started praying together and practicing more spiritual techniques, both separate and together. Individuals also stated how spirituality was the key to rebuilding their marriage. One individual said that she would not have been able to mend the marriage without the spiritual incorporation because of her attitude, and she had nothing to motivate her. Couples expressed how spirituality helped them come together, even if it was not as present in the relationship before marriage. One couple described the “spiral staircase,” which involved tackling problems and issues at lower levels before climbing higher in the relationship.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings from couples’ lived experiences coping with infidelity and restoring their marriage and the lived experience of clinicians who worked with couples that experienced infidelity. Each participant offered an array of experiences to explore the coping strategies. After the data analysis, I gathered that couples remained committed to the covenant of marriage using support from family, other married couples, and faith practices. This study illuminated the qualities of commitment and resilience of the couples. Moreover, despite the betrayal of infidelity, they exhibited the courage to stand firm in their belief in their marriage vows.

Participants were different individuals and couples with diverse backgrounds and varying and shared experiences as married couples or as a therapist. The illustrations clarify the important significance related to their lived experiences. In synthesizing their experiences, it is essential to highlight the meaning of the supporting themes rooted within the main themes that

were revealed from the data gathered from the participants through semi-structured interviews.

Each theme contributes to a deeper understanding of couples' ability to avoid divorce, restore the marriage relationship, and use the best strategy that aided in the restoration process.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a summary of the findings, a discussion of the results, implications of the study, delimitations, limitations of the study, and topics for future research. The findings can provide insight for counselors, therapists, or other married couples on what strategies can help a couple survive infidelity. Additionally, the results will add to the body of literature that documents positive associations between faith strategies and repairment of marriage after infidelity and provides a foundation for future research on successfully maintaining marriage after marital infidelity.

Summary of Findings

This study comprised six clinical participants and five married participants who shared their experiences as clinicians working with married couples or as a married couple who experienced infidelity. The findings answered the two research questions centered on the restorative process for married couples who experienced infidelity. The first research question explored what practices do couples who experience infidelity employ that helped restore their marriage? And secondly, how do faith practices or spiritual disciplines impact the recovery process following infidelity? While the participants acknowledged the challenges they faced trying to rebuild trust, one of the key themes that emerged was how spirituality, faith, spiritual practices, and family, friends, and support helped them navigate restoring their marriage.

Three findings capture the essence of this phenomenological inquiry. This includes 1. Spiritual practices are essential to the restoration process. Because this study focused on this aspect of the recovery process, it was easy to see its role in the participant's stories. Those participants with active faith practices used spiritual disciplines as tools in the restoration process. By engaging in spiritual or faith-based practices, couples begin rebuilding the marriage.

With the support of counseling, couples began praying together and practicing more spiritual techniques, both separately and together. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, shared devotion time, bible study, forgiveness development, and corporate worship positively influence the recovery process. However, one clinician was cautious in recommending spiritual practices as tools to recovery unless they clearly understood the faith and spiritual background of the couple.

2. Communication is a catalyst for restoring the marriage. Communication is a broad theme but was easily observed as the overarching element that steered the recovery process for couples. The clinicians emphasized the importance of effective and useful communication between the couple as a means to not only recover from infidelity but to create lasting benefits to the marriage. Equally, the couples were aware of the focus on improving communication as a necessary tool for the main aspect of the recovery process. 3. The perspectives of the clinicians validated and confirmed many of the married participant's experiences. In addition, the clinicians offered an outside understanding of an inside experience of infidelity and the impact it has to a marriage. Interviewing both pools of participants, clinicians and individuals, provided an extra dimension to the understanding of this phenomenon.

Discussion

Despite the change in the research method, this study confirmed the real-world implications that are evident in the supporting literature, as illustrated in the literature review. These implications align with two significant themes a) spiritual practices are essential to the restoration process; b) communication is a catalyst for restoring the marriage.

Spiritual practices are essential to the restoration process

Clinical participants and married participants identified spiritual practices as an essential part of the restoration process. The married couple's religious faith contributes to their psychological well-being and mutual support, contributing to marital harmony (Lakatos & Martos, 2019). Additionally, couples attending religious services help maintain healthy marital relationships. Researchers Esselmont & Bierman, 2014; Lakatos & Martos, 2019 found that couples engaging in spiritual practices can help the couple reconstruct their marriage after infidelity. The couples maintain the relationship by increasing when the spouses invest time, energy, material resources, and emotions into their relationship's success. Furthermore, marriage investment creates a strengthened bond against extramarital sex (Ziv et al., 2018). Aalgaard et al., 2016, Karimi et al., 2019; Mullins, 2016 suggest a positive association between marital satisfaction, religion, spirituality, and forgiveness.

Married Christians are significantly more likely to say that forgiveness is easy to give away, and forgiveness is about repairing the relationship (Barna Research, 2019). While prayer is an important aspect that allows the couple space to calm themselves, refocus on their mutual cooperative goals, and shift their thoughts and behaviors to one another. Therefore, prayers focused on the partner's well-being help protect the marriage against infidelity (Fincham & May, 2017b). Additionally, the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, shared devotion time, bible study, forgiveness development, and corporate worship positively influence the recovery process. The couple's commitment to using spiritual disciplines has a stabilizing influence and a renewed focus on their faith as the core of the shared healing process. The findings align with David & Stafford, 2015 findings that couples can routinely participate in joint religious activities by

attending church together, praying together, and sharing conversations about God, enhancing marital adjustment.

Communication is a catalyst for restoring the marriage

Communication is highly regarded as a central role in a relationship's intimate bond, maintaining the strength of the relationship with sensitive responses to one another; without this bond, relationships deteriorate (Lavner et al., 2016). One of the major themes that emerged in the data was the identification from the clinical participants as well as the married participants who identified communication as a significant factor that contributes to problems in the marriage when there is a lack of communication; however, communication is also a factor in healing the marriage when the couple allows for open, honest and authentic conversation which facilitates the healing process. The typical motives for infidelity are difficulties with communication, the lack of intimacy, unresolved conflicts, stressful life events, and the accessibility to engage in an infidelity event. The finding aligns with Fye & Mims's 2016 research, which indicated that marital affairs are difficulties with communication, the lack of intimacy, unresolved conflicts, stressful life events, and accessibility to engage in an infidelity event.

Askari et al., 2016 and Shrout & Weigel, 2018 reported that forgiveness is essential for reconnecting the marriage after an affair. Interestingly the clinical participants nor the married participants identified forgiveness as part of the restoration process. However, communication and spiritual practices contribute to rebuilding trust, forgiveness, and restoration of the marriage.

This study is a novel contribution to the field of counseling in three aspects 1) gives real-life testimony to the benefits of spiritual practices to the restorative process of healing a marriage after infidelity and avoiding divorcing, validates the value of utilizing spiritual practices in a counseling setting and provides a gateway to future research in the field of spiritual counseling.

For professional clinicians working with couples, incorporating spiritual practice and other research-based therapeutic approaches can maximize the healing process for couples wishing to avoid divorce and maintain their marriage.

This study confirmed that couples could overcome the trauma of infidelity and successfully maintain their marriage with spiritual tools, professional counseling, and a mutual willingness to preserve the marriage. These implications align with the clinical participants' three main themes: experiences, sharing, and faith impact, along with the seven themes identified by the married couple participants; experiences, causes of infidelity, setbacks, sharing, strong marriage influences, third party, and triggers/the past.

Implications

This study captures the participants' descriptions of their experiences, the impact of infidelity personally on their marriage, the challenges in repairing their marriage, the role of family and social supports, and their coping strategies for dealing with the challenges of recovering from infidelity and avoiding divorce. Clinicians can provide research-based counseling techniques by educating themselves on spiritual or faith-based practices becoming an ally for the married couple in restoring their marriage after infidelity. The service of spiritual counseling demonstrates that the clinician either shares or at least understands without judgment the client's faith, enhancing the therapeutic process for the client.

Activities for the clinical setting

Restoring a marriage after infidelity occurs requires assessing the 'damage' resulting from the infidelity and developing skills to repair the damage. There are some specific recommendations that emerged from interviews with the clinicians. One recommendation is to utilize an assessment tool as a means to collect background information or engage clients

regarding the details of the infidelity experience. It is often difficult for clients to offer the clinician a full account of the experience of infidelity, so that using a survey or instrument helps navigate the information gathering process. A second tool that was mentioned is Chapman's love languages, apology languages, and fight languages or anger languages. These resources address communication from various angles. A specific communication tool that can be used with clients is MATs which is a geographically segmented communication tool that lets the person talking express their issues, verbalize what they feel they need to resolve the issue and how they can finalize the problem; meanwhile, the listener on the MAT allows that person not to be ready to answer immediately but focused on promoting active listening skills. Utilizing available tools to help couples through the restoration process provides a consistent and objective way to navigate through trust and communication issues.

Understanding Forgiveness

One theme that was missing from the anticipated and expected themes of this study is the role of forgiveness. Although central to this study was the presence of spiritual and faith-based practices as tools in the restoration process, forgiveness was rarely mentioned. The interview questions did not specifically ask about forgiveness, but an assumption was that forgiveness would emerge and be a common variable in the restoration process following infidelity. The data analysis process pointed to the important role of communication, which also included the expression of empathy. It seems like these two variables are indicative of the way forgiveness is expressed without necessarily operationalizing forgiveness as an actionable element of restorative practices.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study can provide a small-scale viewpoint into a more significant phenomenon that may exist in other married couples. This study contributes to the body of literature on marital infidelity.

It provides empirical findings for the role of spirituality and faith practices, the importance of communication, and differentiation between individual healing and couple healing as actions that contribute to mending marital relationships following infidelity. There are evident limitations to the study. The married participant group was limited to heterosexual married couples. This study did not include participants in same-sex marriages or co-habituating, non-married relationships. A second limitation is the small sample size. The original plan was to interview fifteen married couples who had experienced infidelity and chose to stay married. However, after several months of trying to recruit such participants, the researcher was unable to recruit enough couples for the study. Therefore, a case study method was adopted to include two participant pools that included clinicians and individuals.

An additional limitation is that the request for participation included interest in those that practiced spiritual or religious disciplines. There was a specific interest in using spiritual disciplines and practices in the recovery process. Expanding the participant pool to those with no spiritual or religious association might enlarge understanding of non-spiritual or religious coping.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are recommendations for further study that involve adjustments or changes to the research approach and design. An alternate case study design would include working intimately with a therapist through the counseling process with a willing couple. Having access to a therapist and a couple who is navigating a recent experience with infidelity through the healing process would enlighten the process of reconciliation. Also, partnering with a church that houses a formal counseling center for couples would be beneficial to capture a deeper understanding about the process of reconciliation from both the therapist's perspective and the client's perspective. Because the researcher was not affiliated with a counseling agency that offered these services or with a church with counseling services, recruiting clients was challenging. It was expected that forgiveness would be a major theme in this study; however, based on the questions and responses from the clinical and married participants, it did not emerge as a theme. A study that unpacks the experience of forgiveness after infidelity might provide a unique and unsurfaced understanding of the role of forgiveness in the emotional aspects of healing and restoring trust in the marriage. Another angle that could steer a research study is assessing couples who do not restore marriage due to infidelity; understanding the variables that make reconciliation non-negotiable would be an added perspective that illuminates the opposing outcomes to this study's interest. Additional research discussing the difference between secular counseling and Christian counseling and/or counseling within the church setting vs. counseling couples in a private practice setting can add to the body of current data regarding best practices for couples.

Summary

Communication is a significant variable in restoring marriage relationships following infidelity. The findings from this study will help other couples who have experienced or are currently experiencing infidelity and help the couples navigate the challenges of restoring their marriage, thereby avoiding divorce. Furthermore, this research will allow those working in the counseling field, particularly Christian counselors, a concrete idea of what coping strategies will benefit the couple in crisis resulting from infidelity. Previous research studies indicated forgiveness as a critical component of infidelity recovery; however, the current research demonstrates that communication and spiritual disciplines are most helpful in recovering from infidelity implicating forgiveness as a by-product of communication. Further research is needed to explore a stronger connection to forgiveness, communication, and spiritual disciplines.

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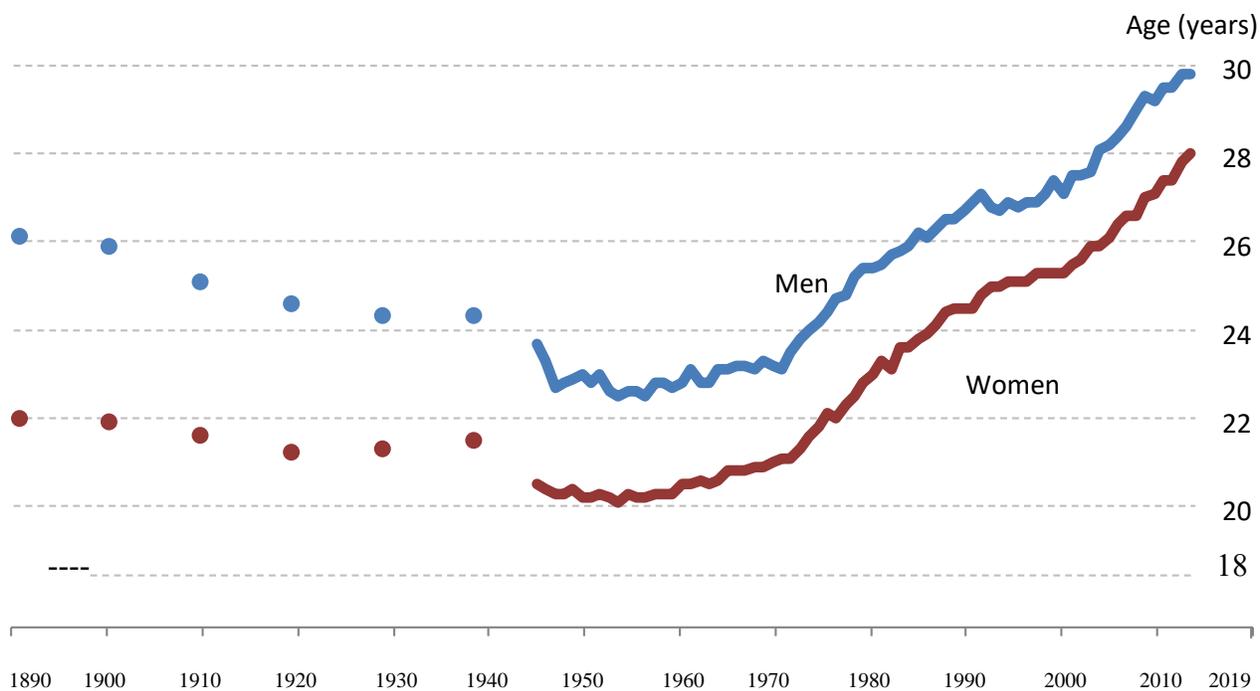
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: 2019 U.S. Census Bureau Report



The graph indicates the increase in the age of individuals getting married based on gender

Appendix B: 2019 Marriage Report

MS-1. Marital Status of the Population 15 Years Old and Over by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1950 to Present						
(Numbers in thousands)						
For more information about ASEC, including the source and accuracy statement, see the technical documentation accessible at https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/complete.html						
Men						
			Unmarried			
				Never		
Year	Total	Married ¹	Total	Married	Widowed	Divorced
All races						
2019	127,903	68,504	59,399	45,279	3,465	10,655
2018	127,233	67,976	59,257	44,792	3,405	11,060
2017	125,660	67,667	57,993	43,825	3,277	10,891
2016	124,953	66,695	58,256	44,079	3,469	10,708
2015	123,621	66,347	57,274	43,052	3,270	10,952
2014	122,353	65,853	56,499	42,711	3,059	10,729
Women						
			Unmarried			
				Never		
Year	Total	Married ¹	Total	married	Widowed	Divorced
All races						
2019	135,554	69,254	66,300	40,084	11,412	14,804
2018	134,825	68,530	66,294	39,770	11,691	14,833
2017	133,403	68,082	65,320	39,087	11,642	14,591
2016	132,662	67,450	65,213	38,995	11,387	14,831
2015	131,395	67,217	64,179	37,974	11,331	14,874
2014	129,871	66,732	63,139	37,311	11,214	14,614

Appendix C: American Divorce Rates

“Removed for Copyright”

From “3 Data Trends in Marriage and What They Mean for Your Church” by Barna Research, September 26, 2019, Married People for Churches (<https://marriedpeoplechurches.org/author/barna/>). Copyright 2019 by the Barna Group.

Appendix D: IRB Approval

June 28, 2021

Kimberly Youngblood
Jackie Craft

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-957 SURVIVING THE AFFAIR: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE STRATEGIES COUPLES UTILIZE TO REPAIR THEIR MARRIAGE SUCCESSFULLY AFTER THE OCCURRENCE OF INFIDELITY

Dear Kimberly Youngblood, Jackie Craft:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of

continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional
Research Research Ethics Office

Appendix E: Screening Consent Form

Potential Participant Information Screening Form CONSENT to be screened for research study:

I, _____, understand the questions below are a vetting process to be a participant in the qualitative research study titled: **“Surviving the Affair: A Phenomenological Study of the Strategies Couples Utilize to Repair Their Marriage Successfully after the Occurrence of Infidelity.”** I have had all my questions answered, and I agree to answer the study's screening questions. As a potential participant in this study, I agree to allow the researcher to use the information collected in this form for the research study. I understand that if I am not selected for the study, my potential participant information form will be destroyed immediately, and no data from it will be saved or used for the project. My signature on this form is my consent to voluntarily participate in the screening for this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____

Spouse's Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Appendix F: Informed Consent

Title of the Project: “Surviving the Affair: A Phenomenological Study of the Strategies Couples Utilize to Repair Their Marriage Successfully after the Occurrence of Infidelity.”

Principal Investigator: Kimberly Youngblood, MS, LICDC, ICDAC, Doctorate Candidate.
Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, must a) have experienced infidelity and remained married, (b) must be able to articulate your life experiences and (c) are in a heterosexual marriage. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the strategies couples utilize to restore their marriage after the occurrence of infidelity. To understand the experiences of couples who use faith practices along with other coping strategies to repair their marriage after infidelity and to fill the gap in research on how couples recover from infidelity, avoiding divorce, renewing their commitment to their marriage.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a 45 – 60-minute recorded interview answering questions directly related to how you maintained your marriage and recovered from the infidelity.
2. Answer any clarifying questions related to the interview to insure accurate transcription.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are assisting other couples currently dealing with infidelity and enhance the skill of therapists working with couples dealing with infidelity.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include the possible remembering events related to the infidelity. The risk involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Each participant will be assigned a letter based upon their gender followed by a number based upon the order of the interview. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant's responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Interviews will be conducted using a secured encrypted video conferencing service. The interviews will allow the couple to remain in their home or a private location of their choosing.
- Data will be stored on a password/fingerprint-locked computer.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed and stored in a password/fingerprint-locked computer.
- All information will remain confidential and destroyed three years after the completion of the research.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please complete the Participant Withdraw Form and contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Kimberly Youngblood. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. [You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy of the document for your records]. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix G: Participant Withdrawal Form

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from June 28, 2021
Protocol # 45 CFR 46: 101 (b)

HOW TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY

I, _____, have decided to exercise my right to withdraw my participation from the qualitative research study titled: **“Surviving the Affair: A Phenomenological Study of the strategies couples utilize to repair their marriage successfully after the occurrence of infidelity.”** I have had all of my questions answered, and I understand that all video/audio recordings or data collected about me will be destroyed and will not be used as a part of this study.

My signature on this form is my consent to revoke participation in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____ (Participant)

Signature: _____ Date: _____ (Researcher)

Appendix H: Interview Questions

1. You both invested in continuing your marriage after experiencing infidelity. Can you walk me through the decision-making process of choosing to stay together?
2. Tell me how you conceptualize coping when considering what you have used to move on from infidelity?
3. As you reflect on the concept of coping, what has been most helpful?
4. As you reflect on the concept of coping, did you experience any mistakes or failures that might have set the relationship back?
5. Can you tell me how you decided whom to tell about the infidelity?
6. Illustrate how social support contributes to the coping process.
7. Describe how your spirituality played a part in your decision and ability to move forward.
8. Can you illustrate for me the spiritual practices that have been helpful in restoring your marriage?
9. Describe the dynamics between your faith and other coping strategies you use to keep your relationship healthy.
10. What have you learned about the role of coping individually and as a couple?
11. In reflecting back on the process of marriage, infidelity, and restoration, what would have been helpful that maybe you lacked or missed?

Appendix I: Survey Monkey Screening Questionnaire

1) Are you currently married?

Yes or No

Yes, to question 1, prompted to go to the next question.

No to question 1, the survey ended.

2) How long have you been married?

1-2 years

3-6 years

7-10 years

10 + years

3) Have you experienced infidelity in your marriage?

Yes or No

No to question 3, survey saved and ended.

Yes, to question 3, advanced to the next question.

4) Did you seek help to repair your marriage?

Yes or No

Once you have answered question 4, Proceed to the next question.

5) Are you willing to participate in a study examining strategies couples utilize to repair their marriage?

Yes or No

No to question 5, the survey ended.

Yes, to question 5, advanced to next question.

6) May I contact you regarding your participation in the survey

Yes or No

Yes, please provide a working email address to receive additional information.

No, Thank you for your time and for completing the survey.

Appendix J: Interview Questions (Clinician)

1. Thinking back on your previous clients and those who invested in continuing their marriage after experiencing infidelity. Can you walk me through their decision-making process of choosing to stay together?
2. Tell me how the couples conceptualize coping when considering what they have used to move on from infidelity?
3. Reflecting on the concept of coping, what has been most helpful for your clients?
4. As you reflect on the concept of coping, did the couples experience any mistakes or failures that might have set the relationship back?
5. Can you tell me how the couple(s) decided whom to tell about the infidelity?
6. Based on your experience, how does social support contribute to the coping process?
7. Describe how spirituality played a part in the couple(s) decision and ability to move forward.
8. Can you illustrate for me the spiritual practices that have helped restore your clients' marriages?
9. Describe the dynamics between their faith and other coping strategies you utilized to help the couple(s) keep their relationship(s) healthy.
10. Based on your experience, what have your clients learned about the role of coping individually and as a couple?
11. In reflecting on the process of marriage, infidelity, and restoration, what would have been helpful for your client(s) that maybe you lacked or missed?

