

## It's Not You, It's Us

### Relationship-Based Factors That Predict Infidelity

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Infidelity is often defined as perceived as a violation of relationship exclusivity rules, and many view infidelities as immoral. Thus, one can imagine the importance of understanding why up to a fifth of research samples report cheating in their current relationships. There is considerable literature regarding what factors predict infidelity. Although individual characteristics associated with infidelity do exist, relationship-based variables tend to be the most consistent and robust factors. This chapter will discuss various theories and research findings that suggested different relationship-based factors and frameworks with which to consider and predict why some people engage in infidelity. This chapter reviews some major ideas and research through the lens of the investment model of commitment (i.e., satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment), as well as other relationship-based variables (e.g., opportunities and boredom, relationship type and length) that have received empirical support. Finally, the chapter ends with a nod to future directions in this area, and a notion of what researchers should expect from the literature in the future.

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Whether using the term “adultery,” “unfaithful,” “extramarital,” “extradyadic,” “infidelity,” or simply “cheating,” what is typically being referred to is a betrayal of the expectancy of sexual

and romantic monogamy in a relationship (Moller & Vossler, 2014). As the vast majority of romantic relationships have such expectations, especially in America (DeMaris, 2009; Scheinkman, 2005; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1996), it is not surprising that most relationships, whether formalized by marriage or not, have unwritten and sometimes never-verbalized agreements regarding loyalty, fidelity, and betrayal (Sevi et al., 2020). In a recent sample of almost 500 people, over 90% reported expecting romantic and sexual exclusivity from a partner, and over 95% reported that their partners expected romantic and sexual exclusivity from them. Moreover, most of the participants (84%) reported having an exclusivity agreement, either explicit, as a mutual understanding, or merely implied (Gibson et al., 2016). Infidelity is often perceived as a violation of such exclusivity ground rules, and many view infidelities as immoral (Fincham & May, 2017; Sevi et al., 2020; Thompson, 1984). Hence, one can imagine the importance of understanding why up to a fifth of research samples report cheating in their current relationships, regardless of its cultural unacceptability (e.g., Mark et al., 2011).

The ability to predict who might cheat in their relationships could be valuable information for therapists, counselors, and anyone in a romantic relationship. In a fantasy world, it would be ideal if researchers could identify a particular trait in a person who cheats on their partner(s). Perhaps a test could be developed that could be sold at a local pharmacy to help identify those who will betray. Even more tantalizing is the idea that individuals could simply look at another person and determine, perhaps even on a first date, that the person is a “cheater.” They could walk around with a giant label that says “Adulterer” on their chest, like Hester Prynne, for all the world to see (Hawthorne, 1850). It might make life easier and save a lot of time and emotional distress. However, as everyone knows, it is not that simple.

In the real world, the motivation to remain monogamous, and conversely one's motivation toward infidelity, are influenced by various sources. Arguably, individuals might be motivated to be monogamous to meet cultural expectations (Haseli et al., 2019; Solstad & Mucic, 1999). Or, perhaps they are motivated to avoid punishment, as a recent study that asked participants to explain why they remained monogamous revealed that most people do it to avoid negative sanctions, such as guilt, shame, family disapproval, or divorce (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010). People's attitudes about fidelity may also reflect gender roles and norms (Glass & Wright, 1985; Haseli et al., 2019), the type of relationship (e.g., sexual orientation, dating, or marriage (Parsons et al., 2012;)), the type of cheating behaviors (e.g., explicit or ambiguous; Mattingly et al., 2010), the source of the cheating behaviors (e.g., online; Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011), whether an individual has a past experience with infidelity (Donovan & Emmers-Sommers, 2012; Knopp et al., 2017) or if they have been "burned" before (Sharpe et al., 2013).

People tend to be inaccurate when predicting their own likelihood of cheating. For instance, when Buss and Shackelford (1997) asked participants to estimate the probability that they would engage in various extramarital behaviors during the first year of their marriage, about 35% reported expecting that both they and their partner would probably flirt with another person, approximately 15% predicted that both they and their partner might passionately kiss another person, and approximately 2% expected they or their partner would go on a romantic date, have a one-night stand, or a brief affair (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Seeing as rates of reported infidelity tend to be around 20%, people apparently underestimate the likelihood that they or their partner will engage in cheating behaviors.

Research has examined hundreds of factors that predict infidelity, including individual differences and relationship/circumstantial factors. While demographic (e.g., sex, age) and

individual difference factors (e.g., personality) are empirically associated with infidelity, the most consistent and robust predictors are found within the relationship (Fincham & May, 2017; Gibson et al., 2016; Haseli et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2017; Tsapelas et al., 2010; Vowels et al., 2020). This is especially true when one considers that any relationship encompasses the intricate behaviors that a couple engages in, including the macrosystems (e.g., religion) microsystems (e.g., infidelity experience), exosystems (e.g., home instability), and mesosystems (e.g., satisfaction) that are interacting to influence the relationship and the individuals within that relationship (Haseli et al., 2019). In fact, relationship factors such as satisfaction, need fulfillment, boredom, emotional support, and communication account for up to one-fourth of the variance in infidelity (Atkins et al., 2001; Tsapelas et al., 2010).

Various theories and research findings have suggested different relationship-based factors and frameworks with which to consider and predict why some people engage in infidelity. In this chapter, we review some of the main theories (e.g., the investment model of commitment) as well as relevant variables from previous research (e.g., boredom, communication, conflict) that have empirical support as relational factors involved in infidelity. Before discussing these theories and frameworks, however, we want to state an important caveat: none of these variables or theories—individually or in combination with one another—guarantees a person will engage in infidelity; nor, for that matter, are any of these frameworks or variables required to be present for someone to be unfaithful in their relationship. The decision to engage in infidelity is always a decision made by the person involved, and the following theories and variables are aspects that might play a role in that person's decision-making.

## Investment Model of Commitment

Commitment (i.e., the intention to stay in one's current romantic relationship) is probably the most powerful and relevant factor in predicting whether an individual will cheat in a relationship, and allows for systematic prediction of infidelity behavior (Drigotas et al., 1999; Le & Agnew, 2003). Interdependence theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and, more specifically, the investment model of commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1998) posits that relationship commitment is based on the combination of three factors: high satisfaction, high investment, and low quality of potential alternatives. Moreover, the investment model is central to explaining relationship functioning, and comprises both attachment and motivation to continue the relationship via those three factors (Drigotas et al., 1999; Fincham & May, 2017; Le & Agnew, 2003).

Commitment refers to a long-term, subjective state that includes an emotional attachment to one's partner and/or the relationship, and a desire to maintain the relationship (Lambert et al., 2014; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). One's commitment reflects the amount of investment, involvement, satisfaction, constraints, or barriers to terminating the relationship, and intention to stay in the relationship (Emmers-Sommers et al., 2010; Roloff et al., 2001). Importantly, a sense of commitment motivates and influences a range of relationship behaviors. Desiring to continue a relationship promotes prorelationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., compromise; Meyer et al., 2011) and discourages relationship-damaging behaviors, such as infidelity (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). An individual's decision to damage a relationship, particularly through acts of infidelity, is often mediated by feelings of commitment to the relationship, and speaks to the strength of the investment model (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Simply put, if one plans to continue the relationship, the likelihood of engaging in infidelity decreases significantly (Maddox Shaw et al., 2013).

As relationships increase in commitment, people become more invested both tangibly (e.g., resources, income) and intangibly (e.g., time, energy, emotions), and satisfaction increases as a result. Conversely, the quality of potential alternatives diminishes as commitment increases, including new potential partners and other outside options (e.g., moving to a different location without one's partner). In one study, 220 participants currently in a relationship were asked to report reasons for being unfaithful to their partner (if they had been). A lack of commitment, lack of investment, and perceiving better alternatives were all mentioned, and a lack of satisfaction with the relationship was the most commonly reported reason (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010).

### Satisfaction

One's relationship satisfaction is based on comparisons that are shaped by previous experiences as well as upward and downward social comparisons (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). According to the deficit model of infidelity (Thompson, 1984; Tsapelas et al., 2010), when a relationship exceeds an individual's generalized expectations, or if they benefit from social comparisons, they feel satisfied. When the appraisal of the relationship falls short, they feel dissatisfied. For example, if Brien looks at his close friends' romantic relationship and perceives their relationship to be of a higher quality than his own, he may become dissatisfied with his current relationship.

However, satisfaction can be more nuanced and complicated. According to equity theory, one's feelings of satisfaction do not just depend on the absolute value of what one is getting from the relationship but also on an input-to-output ratio relative to the partner's input-to-output ratio (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). When these ratios differ, individuals are dissatisfied. For example, if Brien feels he is putting much more into his romantic relationship than he is getting out of his relationship, he may be unsatisfied. Furthermore, if he feels that his input/output discrepancy is greater than his partner's input/output discrepancy, Brien will feel unsatisfied in the relationship.

Inequity predicts higher engagement in infidelity, and this appears to be exacerbated for women, and has been shown to be independent of dissatisfaction (Prins et al., 1993). Infidelity is more likely among those who are in poorer-quality relationships (Mattingly et al., 2010), arguably because individuals turn to people outside of their relationship to meet their needs for intimacy (which they would prefer to have met by their partner), and thus become more satisfied with their lives but not with their relationships. In the infidelity literature, there has been much research on satisfaction as a predictor, and satisfaction is arguably the most robust predictor of the relationship-related predictors. However, the source of the satisfaction impacts how well it predicts infidelity. Researchers have focused on two main sources of satisfaction in regard to infidelity: relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction.

### Relationship Satisfaction

A recent study of individuals who were actively engaging in infidelity via a facilitating website (i.e., AshleyMadison.com) indicated that above and beyond any personal factors, low satisfaction with the primary partner was the largest contributor to their decision to be unfaithful (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021). This finding was true for motivations that were based on relationship satisfaction (e.g., I have fallen out of love with my primary partner), as well as for feeling neglected (e.g., I feel neglected by my partner) and less satisfied sexually (e.g., I want more frequent sex than I am getting with my current partner).

Satisfaction within various domains (e.g., sexual satisfaction, neglect, etc.) in one's primary relationship predicts a person's attitudes toward infidelity, and less satisfaction increases the likelihood to engage in an affair, as individuals who are happy tend not to stray from the things that make them happy (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Garg & Ruhela, 2015; Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Larson et al., 2014; Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Mark et al., 2011; Martins et

al., 2016; Silva et al., 2017; Treas & Giesen, 2000; Vowels et al., 2020; Whisman et al., 2007). For example, in another large study in which respondents were asked to report reasons for engaging in infidelity, the most frequent reason was lack of satisfaction with their current relationship (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010). Interestingly, in a recent study, relationship satisfaction was the main predictor in a machine-learning algorithm that predicted infidelity by both men and women (Vowels et al., 2020).

No single variable can explain all the variance in models predicting infidelity; yet, satisfaction interacts with other variables to play an instrumental role in predicting infidelity. Satisfaction is not only correlated with the number of extradyadic partners people admit to having (Wiggins & Lederer, 1984), but also predicts the degree of involvement of the infidelity (e.g., one-night stand versus an ongoing relationship; Glass & Wright, 1985; Tsapelas et al., 2010), and the type of affair (e.g., sexual versus emotional; McDaniel et al., 2017). In fact, relationship satisfaction is a significant predictor of online-only infidelity related behavior, even after controlling for demographic variables (e.g., gender, age) and other relationship factors, such as marital status or relationship length (Martins et al., 2016; McDaniel et al., 2017; Whisman et al., 2007).

### Gender and Satisfaction

In various studies, the pattern of relationship satisfaction predicting infidelity is stronger for women than men (Allen et al., 2008; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Glass & Wright, 1985; Mark et al., 2011; Prins et al., 1993; Wiggins & Lederer, 1984), and relationship variables, such as satisfaction, are particularly important to women's sexual functioning and overall satisfaction (Basson, 2005; Dennerstein et al., 2005; Prins et al., 1993). For example, among people who engage in extramarital infidelity, women report being less satisfied in their marriage than are

men (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Glass & Wright, 1985). In one study, women's level of unhappiness in their current relationship predicted a 200% increase in engaging in infidelity, and levels of incompatibility in sexual values predicted an almost 300% increase in engaging in infidelity, even after controlling for demographics (e.g., age) and relationship type (e.g., marital status; Mark et al., 2011).

These gender differences suggest that, for women, relationship factors may be more relevant in predicting infidelity than demographic (e.g., marital status) or social variables, such as religiosity (Atkins et al., 2001; Mark et al., 2011). It is important to note these variables likely interact. For example, the difference in the likelihood of engaging in infidelity for people low in marital satisfaction was four times greater for those also low in religiosity than for those higher in religiosity (Fincham & May, 2017; Whisman et al., 2007), suggesting that religiosity may act as an "infidelity buffer" and hinders commitment-damaging behaviors. Future empirical research should continue to explore how demographic variables (e.g., gender identity, marital satisfaction) interact with social and cultural variables, such as religiosity or gender role expectations.

In another survey of people's likelihood of engaging in infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997), males' marital satisfaction was negatively correlated with their expectations of how likely they were to engage in kissing, dating, and having serious affairs with women other than their committed partner. Men who were unhappy in their relationship reported higher probabilities of flirting with and having a brief affair with extradyadic women. Similarly, women who were unhappy in their marriage anticipated a higher likelihood that they would flirt, date, kiss, and have brief and serious affairs with other men, and also that their husbands were more likely to kiss, and have one-night stands and brief affairs with other women (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

These findings suggest that unhappy individuals expect to cheat, and expect their spouses to cheat as well (Tsapelas et al., 2010; Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

It is unclear why relationship satisfaction interacts with sex and gender as it does. It is also unclear what other factors might interact with or predict relationship dissatisfaction and infidelity in the way it appears that sex and gender does. Potential explanations for the relationship that have been discussed in the literature include boredom (Garg & Ruhela, 2015), a lack of communication and emotional intimacy (Gonzalez-Rivera et al., 2020), involvement in poor-quality relationships (Demaris, 2009; Gibson et al., 2016), ignoring dissatisfaction early in the relationship until the shortcomings negatively impact the relationship (Huston & Houts, 1998), or simply too much conflict (Atkins et al., 2005).

### Satisfaction and Communication

Communication is important for the success of a relationship, and ineffective communication can have serious consequences, including less relationship satisfaction and greater likelihood for infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Maddox Shaw et al., 2013). For instance, women who report that love and affection were not expressed much in their marriage anticipated a higher likelihood for themselves of engaging in a brief affair during the first year of marriage, and their husbands had similar expectations for their wives' behavior in this situation (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

One possibility for why relationship satisfaction has such a strong influence on infidelity is because of the way that dissatisfaction and a lack of communication (which we discuss in the next section) have far-reaching consequences in a relationship. For instance, couples in therapy dealing with issues of infidelity had higher levels of dishonesty and more arguments about trust (Atkins et al., 2005). Husbands who complained about their partner's moodiness and

withholding of sex reported a greater likelihood of flirting and kissing other women, while women with moody husbands anticipated kissing and having brief affairs with other men. Additionally, women who complained that their husbands sexualized others (e.g., commenting about the attractiveness of other women) estimated higher likelihood of themselves engaging in flirting, kissing, and having a one-night stand with other men (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Women who complained that their husbands are jealous or possessive reported a higher likelihood of brief affairs, in line with the predictions that the husbands made about their wife's behavior—perhaps suggesting a self-fulfilling prophecy (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

The influence of relationship satisfaction on infidelity underscores the importance of communication for predicting infidelity. Relationship satisfaction and communication within the relationship are strongly connected (Yoo et al., 2014). This link between relationship satisfaction and communication is revealed in research that explored how technology has impacted communication among partners; for example, smartphone use increases communication (Lapierre & Custer, 2021), but too much online intrusion into a partner's life decreases satisfaction (Norton et al., 2018). The communication does not have to involve major issues or deep conversations—the men in couples who doubled their “pillow talk” during a three-week experimental period had greater relationship satisfaction than the control group after a laboratory-induced conflict (though there was no increase in satisfaction for women, nor was there lower stress for either; Denes et al., 2020). Communication is related to relationship satisfaction across cultures, even if the mode of communication is culturally specific (Williamson et al., 2012). The direct effect of communication on infidelity, as well as the effect of communication on relationship satisfaction (which then predicts infidelity) warrants deeper examination.

In a study of 72 (White, educated) couples that used a diathesis-stress model (i.e., understanding unhealthy or problematic behavior as a result of the interaction between genetic predispositions and the stress caused by environmental factors; Ingram & Luxton, 2005) to understand infidelity, the most robust and consistent effects were found among relationship variables (stress), particularly communication effects (Allen et al., 2008). The findings showed that couples who engage in infidelity have more problematic communication even before marriage, such as lower levels of positive communication and higher levels of negative communication. Positive communication includes positive affect, problem solving, and support, whereas negative communication includes negative affect, denial, dominance, withdrawal, and conflict (Allen et al., 2008). A specific type of negative communication is emotional invalidation, which refers to communication behaviors including insults, negative comments, sarcasm, and “mind-reading,” coupled with negative affect. High levels of this particular type of negative communication premaritally were highly predictive of engaging in infidelity after getting married.

Men who cheated, as compared to those who did not, reported less positive communication from their female partner, higher levels of their partner’s emotional invalidation, and higher levels of their own negative communication and invalidation (Allen et al., 2008). In fact, women’s invalidation continues to predict men’s infidelity even after controlling for men’s invalidation. Women who cheated, as compared to those who did not, reported higher levels of positive communication, lower levels of men’s positive communication, higher levels of both women’s and men’s negative communication, and higher levels of both men’s and women’s invalidation (Allen et al., 2008). This suggests that it is not necessarily one partner ruining the relationship, but instead that couples (or, at least, heterosexual couples) who have lower levels of

positive communicative interactions are at higher risk for future infidelity. That is, rather than one partner driving the other into the arms of another, the communication problems in the relationship may lead an individual to be more receptive or open to the idea of an extramarital relationship.

Moreover, it appears that worrying about the relationship and whether both partners are satisfied increases the likelihood of infidelity. In a longitudinal study with participants in relationships where infidelity had not yet occurred, higher levels of divorce proneness (e.g., thinking the marriage is in trouble, thinking about divorce, talking about divorce) predicted greater likelihood that at least one spouse would eventually engage in infidelity. Moreover, the relationship between satisfaction and infidelity was not unidirectional. Extramarital infidelity increased the odds of divorce, as well as indirectly increasing the odds of divorce via decreasing marital happiness and increasing divorce proneness and discussions. In fact, the odds of divorce were more than twice as high among individuals who reported infidelity than those who did not (Previti & Amato, 2004).

Finally, infidelity is often a secretive, concealed behavior and thus not usually communicated to the partner (Weiser et al., 2014). Moreover, once engagement in infidelity is discovered or suspected, a majority of individuals deny involvement, especially if the infidelity was short-lived (Moller & Vossler, 2014), and the communication tactics and strategies to do so are usually negative in nature, such as destructive strategies that actively work against the partner or relationship (e.g., revenge; Donovan & Emmers-Sommers, 2012). That is, while communication issues may have existed before the cheating, once infidelity has occurred, the partnership is more likely to suffer from communication problems. This pre-existing and

continuing lack of positive and healthy communication can present particular problems for couples (and their counselors) as they work through the consequences of infidelity.

### Sexual Satisfaction

A person's perception that their needs are not being met is correlated with higher susceptibility to infidelity, and this includes sexual needs (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). A lack of satisfaction with or a greater desire for certain sexual activities is one of the top 10 predictors of infidelity (Vowels et al., 2020). Both men and women who are unhappy with the sexual components of their married relationships are more likely to anticipate that they could become sexually involved with extramarital individuals, especially in the context of one-night stands (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Many studies have examined the impact of sexual satisfaction on infidelity, and the conclusion appears to be that low sexual satisfaction predicts higher engagement in infidelity, particularly for men (Allen et al., 2008; Atkins et al., Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Liu, 2000; Mark et al., 2011; Vowels et al., 2020). Men who have cheated, as compared to those who have not cheated, report lower sexual satisfaction (Allen et al., 2008; Mark et al., 2011); however, a study of couples in therapy discussing issues related to infidelity showed that sexual dissatisfaction interacted with gender, in that men who had affairs were more sexually dissatisfied than women who had affairs (Atkins et al., 2005).

Moreover, the relationship between sexual satisfaction and infidelity exists not only for the sexual satisfaction component of frequency of sexual activity but also for incompatibility in sexual attitudes, sexual values, and sexual importance. Liu (2000), using National Health and Social Life Survey data, concluded that declining frequency of sexual activity in a heterosexual marriage led to a higher incidence of infidelity, especially for men. Additionally, men were

prone to seek sexual partners outside of their marriage when they perceived their wife to be withholding sex (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

For both men and women, perceived incompatibility related to the couple's sexual attitudes and sexual values was associated with infidelity. Mark and colleagues (2011) found that approximately two-thirds of men and 51% of women who engaged in infidelity reported lower sexual compatibility with their committed partner compared to those who did not engage in infidelity. In that same study, 70% of men who engaged in infidelity reported low compatibility with their partners in terms of the importance of sex for their lives and relationships (Mark et al., 2011). It should be noted that there is potential overlap between attitudes and behaviors in this case. For example, if one does not believe that sex is important, then avoidant behavior may result. As such, there is still much research needed to distinguish between sex-related attitudes and behaviors, and how they relate to satisfaction and ultimately infidelity.

As explained by the investment model of commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1998), people's satisfaction with their relationships—including communication and sexual satisfaction—plays a major role in predicting infidelity. At the same time, no one variable (such as satisfaction) can account for all of the variance in infidelity. Another important variable in the investment model of commitment, as well as a predictor of infidelity, is the amount of resources people perceive they have invested into their current relationship.

## Investment

Investments into one's romantic relationship includes anything that binds an individual to their partner or the partnership, and something that would be devalued or lost if the relationship were to end (Coy et al., 2019; Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008; Rusbult, 1980). Those investments could include intangible resources such as time, energy, self-disclosure, sacrifice, or compromises, and

could also include tangible resources such as mutual friends, finances, or possessions (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008). Commitment to one's relationship is increased not only by investment of resources into the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), but also by the partner's investment, even after controlling for the individual's level of satisfaction and their perceived alternatives to the relationship (Coy et al., 2019).

The specific investment of sacrifice has been studied as a correlate of commitment in a few studies. For example, in situations when one partner does not agree with the other partner, sacrificing one's own needs or preferences so that the partner is benefited demonstrates a dedication to the partner's happiness and the relationship (Etcheverry & Le, 2005; Le & Agnew, 2003). One's willingness to sacrifice is positively related to commitment, in that individuals who are willing to sacrifice are more committed to the relationship, and shows that the individual is partner- and couple-focused rather than consumed with their own desired outcomes. Across studies, individuals who sacrifice or forego their own needs to resolve a conflict with their partner experience enhanced mood and increased satisfaction in their relationship, especially when they underestimate their costs and overestimate their benefits, suggesting that sacrifices protect one's well-being and perceptions of the relationship (Visserman et al., 2021).

One potential explanation for the positive outcomes resulting from investment is via cognitive dissonance theory and effort justification. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019) posits that individuals strive to remain consistent in their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Once those elements become misaligned, individuals experience an aversive emotion (i.e., dissonance arousal) that they are motivated to reduce by engaging in behaviors such as changing the misaligned element or engaging in rationalization and justification. Although initial research on cognitive dissonance focused on nonrelationship

projects or tasks (Festinger & Aronson, 1960), the same behavioral process can be seen in various aspects of relationships. Specifically, when an individual considers abandoning a relationship in which they have highly invested, dissonance is the potential (and common) result (Nicholson & Lutz, 2017). Thus, individuals may increase their perceptions of satisfaction with the relationship in an attempt to justify the amount of effort (i.e., investment) that they have put into the relationship (Aronson & Mills, 1959).

In contrast to satisfaction and alternatives, which have a theoretical focus on what happens when an individual chooses to stay in a relationship, the investment portion of the investment model focuses on what happens (or may happen) when one leaves the relationship (Coy et al., 2019). As one's investments in a relationship increase, the costs of betraying or damaging the relationship increase as well. Individuals who are not invested in their current romantic partners are more likely to engage in infidelity than those who are invested (Drigotas et al., 1999; Mattingly et al., 2010). And, in cyclical fashion, infidelity is then related to subsequent declines in investments (Drigotas et al., 1999).

### Self-Expansion Opportunities

Investments can be in the past or planned for the future. Another intangible source of investment in a relationship could be related to one's identity (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The self-expansion model (SEM; Aron & Aron, 1996; Aron et al., 1998) posits that people are motivated to enhance their perceptions of self via close relationships, new resources, perspectives, skills, abilities, and insights that increase self-efficacy and enhance their senses of self. That is, as individuals increase their emotional investments in their relationships, they begin thinking of themselves as part of a unit rather than as an individual. That is, Jana may begin to see herself as a member of the Todd-and-Jana unit, but also that the Todd-and-Jana unit makes up an important feature of

who Jana is and how she perceives herself. The inclusion of the other in the self (i.e., viewing one's relationship partner as part of one's self), blurs the distinction between the two partners (Aron et al., 1991). To damage that relationship would then also inflict damage on Jana's own identity and sense of self.

Tying one's identity to another person is an intangible investment, but also provides a buffer against infidelity via new opportunities for self-expansion within the relationship. Sharing novel activities and experiences is one way to gain self-expansion and avoid boredom in a relationship, and is positively correlated with relationship quality (Reissman et al., 1993). If the process of self-expansion declines or stops, partners become less satisfied. That is, if an individual believes that their current relationship has the potential to provide self-expansion opportunities, then the need to terminate the relationship or seek alternatives is reduced. Conversely, if there is little opportunity in the current relationship, then the need for self-expansion might be found through alternative relationships (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006).

In fact, the perceived potential for self-expansion in one's possible future relationships predicts susceptibility to infidelity, even after controlling for gender, relationship length, and need fulfillment (e.g., intimacy, companionship, and sexual, security, and emotional involvement; Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). This is because extradyadic others, or extradyadic relationships, can provide self-expansion opportunities that the primary relationship may be failing to offer (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). This is particularly true if alternate partners and relationships are perceived to be of higher quality than the current partner or relationship.

### Quality of Alternatives

People who are in relationships where exclusivity is desired are not immune to the existence of tempting others. More so, individuals feel more committed to their relationships when they believe they have poor quality alternatives (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). That is, the perceived attractiveness of one's other possible options (that is, if they were not in their current relationship) directly influences one's level of commitment. These alternatives could include nonromantic friendships, hobbies, moving to a new geographical location, and, as specifically related to infidelity, other tempting partners, relationships, or sexual opportunities. The quality of one's alternatives refers to the "siren's call" that may pull one away from their current relationship.

An increasing number of desirable alternatives predicts participants' reported propensities for engaging in infidelity if they believe they could get away with it. Moreover, higher quality of alternatives is among the strongest predictors of cheating (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010). Specifically, relationship quality is negatively related to intense attraction to others and to infidelity (Gibson et al., 2016). The more alternatives someone thinks they have and the higher quality they think those alternatives are, the more likely they are to engage in infidelity. This is particularly true if they perceive the quality of those potential alternative partners to be greater than that of their current partner.

One way to manipulate (albeit often unconsciously) one's perceptions of the quality of alternatives is to derogate and devalue those alternatives (DeWall, Lambert, et al., 2011). Studies have shown that individuals who are happy and committed in their relationships restrict the time they spend on alternatives (e.g., time-consuming hobbies), wear symbols to ward off potential alternatives (e.g., wedding rings), actively avoid the temptation or even gazing at the tempter, and emphasize negative aspects of potential alternatives (DeWall, Maner, et al., 2011;

Etcheverry et al., 2013; Meyer et al., 2011; Rodrigues et al., 2017). These studies speak to the power of commitment to shape one's behaviors, where the urge to engage in infidelity or even attend to attractive alternatives is reduced by the rewards of the current relationship (DeWall, Lambert, et al., 2011). In a classic infidelity study, Johnson and Rusbult (1989) found that the tendency to derogate the alternative was correlated with increases in the attractiveness of a potential alternative. That is, the more attractive the potential alternative was, the tendency to derogate occurred more often and to a greater degree. Presumably, the tendency to derogate alternatives in the first place is a relationship maintenance strategy that helps to buffer the relationship against infidelity.

The derogation of alternatives must be voluntary as opposed to enforced by a partner or situational demands. That is, if one partner restricts, or attempts to restrict, the ability of the partner to attend to alternatives, the effects are negative for the relationship (DeWall, Lambert, et al., 2011). This is likely because forcing individuals to reduce their attention toward attractive alternatives simultaneously increases their positive attitudes toward the alternative, increases their long-term memory of the alternative, increases their positive attitudes toward infidelity, and decreases their relationship satisfaction and commitment. That is, the restrictive partner unknowingly creates a forbidden fruit (DeWall, Lambert, et al., 2011; Ogolsky et al., 2017). Thus, the relationship maintenance behavior must come from the motivation of the tempted, not the threatened, or it might produce a type of relational reactance.

### Other Potential Relationship Factors That Predict Infidelity

The investment model of commitment is a validated and replicated theory that explains various processes that engage relationship factors (Le & Agnew, 2003). The theory is useful in predicting relationship commitment and the outcomes associated with it. However, the quality of

the interdependence among partners in a relationship (e.g., satisfaction, communication, investment) are not the only relationship-based factors that predict infidelity. Myriad other variables connected to the relationship, such as the details and demographics of the relationship (e.g., marriage versus cohabitation), also account for variance in predicting infidelity.

### Relationship Type

Married women are less likely to engage in infidelity than women who are cohabitating or dating, suggesting that there might be a commitment mechanism in marriage that serves as a protective factor against infidelity, although this may also be due to the level of commitment or investment in the relationship rather than speaking directly to the institution of marriage (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010). Respondents who were married at a young age (i.e., 16 years or younger) were four times more likely to report infidelity than those who were married in their early 20s. Finally, the likelihood of infidelity decreases steadily as the age at which participants were married increases (Atkins et al., 2001).

### Relationship Length

The length of a relationship has an interesting and sometimes curvilinear relationship with infidelity. Many studies have shown that relationship length negatively predicts infidelity behavior, in that infidelity was more likely to occur in shorter relationships (e.g., DeMaris, 2009)—possibly because relationships might end after an instance of infidelity, keeping those relationships short. This correlation often interacts with gender. For women, infidelity is more likely to occur in longer primary relationships than in shorter relationships, regardless of the commitment level of the relationship (e.g., dating, cohabitating, married; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). However, for married women, the rates of infidelity increase until about the seventh year and then begin to decline (Liu, 2000). For married men, this relationship is the opposite, in that

relationship time is negatively related to likelihood of engaging in infidelity, until the 18th year, at which point the likelihood begins to increase again (Liu, 2000; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). For dating relationships, men show a positive relationship between the length of time in the relationship and the likelihood of committing infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

It is possible that the duration of the relationship is correlated with commitment, but other studies show that, again, it could be the number of quality investments that couples have made that is the better predictor. For example, couples in therapy who reported infidelity showed greater marital instability, spent more time apart from one another, enjoyed time together less, and engaged in more steps toward separation and divorce (Atkins et al., 2005). Moreover, couples who live apart are more likely to engage in nonmonogamous behaviors (Blow & Hartnett, 2005), perhaps because living apart provides greater opportunities and more potential alternative partners for infidelity.

### Opportunities for Infidelity

As it pertains to cyber-infidelity, there is a clear sense that the Internet makes cheating behavior more possible, particularly infidelity that might not have been possible otherwise, because the Internet creates opportunities for coincidental online contact (Martins et al., 2016; Vossler & Moller, 2020). That is, individuals can intentionally seek partners through social media (e.g., Facebook) or infidelity-facilitating websites (e.g., AshleyMadison.com), but they may also find potential partners through means that are not directly related to relationship building, such as gaming (e.g., World of Warcraft). The Internet presents an array of ways to meet potential partners.

However, opportunity also increases by simply leaving the house. For example, Atkins and colleagues (2001) found that participants reported less infidelity when neither partner was

employed as opposed to other employment categories (e.g., both are employed, one works). Respondents who were working outside the home but whose spouse was not working outside the home were the most likely to engage in infidelity (Atkins et al., 2001; Brooks & Monaco, 2013). Arguably, this is because the work environment adds opportunity, provides potential alternative partners, and individuals spend approximately 40 hours or more with these individuals weekly (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Treas & Giesen, 2000).

Another argument may be that this likelihood of infidelity is because of similarity in assortative mating (Brooks & Monaco, 2013). That is, if one spouse works and the other one does not, there is a lack of similarity, producing what could be referred to as a bad pairing and motivating the working individual to find someone who is more similar to themselves. Regardless of the reason, one study (Wiggins & Lederer, 1984) showed how prolific this pattern is, as half of the participants who had engaged in infidelity reported being involved with one of their coworkers.

Moreover, respondents earning \$75,000 or more annually were 1.5 times more likely to engage in infidelity than respondents earning less than \$30,000 annually (Atkins et al., 2001). This may not be due to the money itself, but to other factors related to income such as stress, entitlement, and opportunity (Atkins et al., 2001; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Lower relative income (i.e., economic dependency on one's current partner) is associated with higher odds of engaging in infidelity, even after controlling for race, age, education, hours worked, religious attendance, and the presence or age of children (Munsch, 2015). Of course, this relationship was mediated by relationship satisfaction or amount of conflict. For women, those who are economically dependent on their partner are more likely to engage in infidelity than either women who provide

all the income in a household (i.e., the breadwinners) or women who are in an economically equal relationship (Munsch, 2015).

## Future Directions

There is a considerable literature regarding what factors predict infidelity. Although demographic and individual characteristics are inconsistently associated with infidelity, relationship variables are the most consistent and robust across multiple studies (Haseli et al., 2019; Vowels et al., 2020). However, this research on relationship factors accounts for, on average, only one-fourth of the variance in infidelity behavior (e.g., Atkins et al., 2001; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Tsapelas et al., 2010), leaving a large amount of variance unexplained. Simply put, infidelity does sometimes occur in happy relationships (Perel, 2017), and we still do not fully know why.

Perhaps some of the variance can be explained not by *what* we are studying, but *how* we are studying it. No one would argue that a beautifully modeled longitudinal study examining the interconnectedness of couples would not be groundbreaking in discovering that missing link (or links) of why people cheat. Following a large sample of individuals as they interact, influence, and potentially betray one another over a long period of time may be imperative for understanding how this behavior occurs. The analysis would be complicated, the study would be expensive, and the time required could be career-ending, but the mechanisms that underlie the transition from monogamous to betrayed (or betrayer) might be uncovered for all the world to see. For the time being, though, psychology must continue to examine potential factors, and how those factors interact with other known factors, mostly with cross-sectional and correlational designs. The good news is that the more studies that find consistent links, the more we can trust the results.

Future studies may want to start asking broader questions about infidelity. For example, rather than asking *why* individuals seek out extradyadic others, we might ask what individuals get out of an extradyadic relationship or affair. That is, most of the research has focused on predicting infidelity based on individuals' motives, disappointments, or other such factors. But few studies have asked why an individual continues the affair (or affairs). We know that individuals who cheat are likely to repeat the behavior (Knopp et al., 2017), but do we know what they gain from it? If the source of their discontent lies in the relationship, do they keep finding themselves in poor quality relationships? Or, is there something they get from the extradyadic relationship that is fulfilling a need?

For example, Hackathorn and Ashdown (2021) found that individuals may be motivated to cheat through sex-based motives (e.g., higher desired frequency), but may not be finding the satisfaction they crave for those motives in the extradyadic relationships they form. Instead, participants reported being emotionally satisfied with their extradyadic relationships, even if a sex-based motive drove them to cheat in the first place. This might suggest that their sex-based needs are now being met with the extradyadic partner, and they are able to progress toward fulfilling other needs, such as emotional intimacy. Or, it might suggest that there is a disconnect between what people think they need or want and what they actually need or want. Future research should examine what individuals get out of extradyadic relationships.

Lastly, in knowing the consistent and robust predictors of engaging in infidelity, such as a lack of relationship satisfaction, what can we do about it? Perhaps addressing relationship-based issues early on might provide a buffer against infidelity, whether through one's own behavior or the partner's, or through the partners' interactions with one another. Perhaps in an ideal future, experimental studies in which couples voluntarily attend infidelity or conflict prevention therapy

will begin to shed light on which factors to pay attention to—including aspects of the relationship—in order to reduce the siren’s call. If we can identify which of those factors can be isolated, manipulated, or reduced, perhaps we can help improve relationships. We need to keep adding evidence to the notion that it is not that the cheater is a bad person, or a type of person whom we can easily profile or spot in a crowd. It is the interacting dyadic nature of the relationship that may be the root cause. That is, it’s not you, and it’s not me . . . it’s us.

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