

**THE IMPACT OF PARENTS' EXTRAMARITAL  
RELATIONSHIPS ON THEIR ADULT CHILDREN**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the meaning that adult children of parents who engaged in adultery assign to their experience and to understand how, or if, the knowledge of their parent's infidelity affects them in their own romantic relationships. Much research has been conducted on the marital dyad, yet few if any studies have addressed how infidelity impacts the children. This study is important to the field of counselling and associated professions in both theory and practice as it ties together literature from infidelity, marital conflict, divorce, and adult attachment studies and it informs therapists on possible issues that may arise from being exposed to the knowledge of a parent's infidelity while still a child.

This study consisted of seven participants recruited at Memorial University of Newfoundland who participated in two interviews regarding their experiences of their parent's infidelity. Interviews involved reflection of themes from prior discussions, interviewer interpretation and reflection, and the production of participant narratives founded on both interviews.

Ten themes were elicited from the data set with seven themes being Essential or core to the experience and three Incidental where not all participants shared the experience yet it was still seen as fundamental to their experiences. Inter-raters and participant feedback were used both in theme validation and in assuring narrative accuracy.

Four unique themes were identified in this study: Betrayal / Rejection of the Family; Cognitive Understandings vs. Latent Emotions; Fear of the Future / Marriage; and Honesty and Openness – Forming a New Parent-Child Bond. Implications for future research are also explored.

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## CHAPTER I

*"In the words of the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century anthropologist Margaret Mead, 'There is no society in the world where people have stayed married without enormous community pressure to do so'"*  
(McLean, 2000, p. 44)

Adultery has been present in the unions of men and women for centuries. Marriage has been a societal institution before the beginning of recorded history and as the old saying goes, as soon as there was marriage, there was infidelity. "Adultery is a legal term. It is also a biblical term" states Glass (1998, p. 44) underscoring the depth of history behind this behaviour. From Moses bringing down the Ten Commandments from Mt. Ararat and issuing forth the edict, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', to Jesus challenging the Pharisees who wished to stone the Adulterous Woman to death to let 'he who hath no sin cast the first stone', and more recently former United States president Bill Clinton undergoing impeachment proceedings for his affair with an intern, public attitudes towards extramarital sexual behaviour have been disapproving and often met with harsh penalty.

Public whipping, branding, beating, mutilation of genitals, chopping of noses and ears, slashing feet, chopping at one's hips and thighs, divorce, desertion, death by stoning, burning, drowning, choking, shooting and stabbing – such are the punishments handed down by societies across the world for marital infidelity (Fisher, 1992; Humphrey, 1982). Daly and Wilson's (1988) reviews of spousal homicides across cultures and societies found that the most prevalent motive in the majority of cases was the male partner's suspicion of his partner's fidelity. The Harvard Law Review (1991) reports that in America, such 'passion killings' had the charge of murder reduced to manslaughter "if the act was committed upon learning that the spouse had committed adultery" (p. 1674).

These extreme consequences for engaging in sex with a partner outside of the marital covenant are by and large the 'frontier-justice' remedies of historic or non-Westernized societies. Within Western cultures justice is meted out by the court system that, while not as physically punishing as the aforementioned penalties, is nonetheless harsh in its evaluation of extramarital behaviour. Approximately half of all American states and territories maintain laws against infidelity on their books with such punishment as denying "married persons who have extramarital sex the right to vote, serve alcohol, practice law, adopt children, or raise their own children" (Treas & Giesen, 2000, p. 48). The Harvard Law Review (1991) adds to this list stating that people who cheat on their marriages "have had their lawsuits dismissed, their appeal for worker's compensation benefits rejected, their employment with the state terminated, and their homes invaded" (p. 1673-1674). While prosecution of infidelity is rarely seen, within divorce proceedings it is extremely common.

Given these harsh reprisals for infidelity, it may be surprising that people continue to stray from their marital vows, yet they do, and in continually large numbers in Western Society. Whereas the vast majority of North American couples, "married or cohabiting, expect sexual exclusivity of one another" (Treas & Giesen, 2000, p. 48), the frequency of extramarital sexual activity has remained constant or increased since the 1950's.

### *Frequency of Infidelity*

Alfred Kinsey (1948) found, in his groundbreaking study of male sexual behaviour, that "approximately one-third of men and one-fifth of women had had extramarital sexual intercourse" (p. 282). For the past fifty plus years though, these numbers have been both verified and challenged by a plethora of quantitative research studies seeking to gain an understanding of just how often infidelity is taking place in the modern marriage. While

Kinsey's study, the vast majority of follow-up surveys, and this paper focus primarily on North American populations, it is important to acknowledge that infidelity is not confined to this continent. Betzig (1989) in a survey of 160 cultures across the world found that the most often cited reason for divorce or dissolution of the marriage, was infidelity.

While a more detailed summary of the multitude of studies on the frequency of infidelity will be outlined within the Literature section of this study, the range of participation has been found to be anywhere between 2% (over that past 12 months) and 88% (over the course of the marriage) of men and 0.8% (over the past 12 months) and 70% (over the course of the marriage) of women who have engaged in extramarital sexual activity.

Therefore, it is unclear just how often extramarital sex is occurring within Western society. What is clear is that it is happening and marriages and families are being impacted by its occurrence. However, before exploring the potential impact on the family unit, it is important for the purpose of this study to define infidelity.

### *Definition of Infidelity*

*"An affair is an escape from the realities of everyday life" (Glass, 1998, p. 44).*

Just as there is disagreement within the academic community about the prevalence of extramarital affairs, there is disagreement about how to define what an affair is. Whereas Kinsey (1948; 1953) surveyed individuals to uncover illicit sexual liaisons, recently some researchers have sought to expand the definition of an affair. Shirley Glass (1998) opens the understanding of infidelity by stating that, "affairs really aren't about sex; they're about betrayal" (p. 36). Betrayal involves the breaking of the marital covenant where intimacy is experienced secretly outside of the bond between the couple. This illicit intimacy then, is not necessarily limited to

sexual contact, but the definition can be expanded to include emotional bonding that is unknown to one of the marital partners. Lusterman (1998) states that infidelity is the “breaking of trust. While often thought of as sexual misconduct, it may also include nonsexual but secret relationships. The most distinguishing characteristic of all types in infidelity is secrecy” (p. 280).

The concept that a ‘nonsexual’ relationship could be considered an extramarital relationship is a relatively new idea and is based on Glass and Wright’s (1992) assertion that previous definitions of infidelity “reflected a male bias by using extramarital sexual intercourse as the criterion for extramarital behaviour instead of considering a full range of extramarital sexual and emotional involvement” (p. 361). Therefore, in addition to secrecy, Glass and Wright (1988) have expanded the traditional definition of infidelity to include emotional infidelity. Glass and Wright (1988) state that “when someone starts confiding things to another person that they are reluctant to confide to their partner, and the emotional intimacy is greater in the friendship than in the marriage, that’s very threatening” (p. 38). Therefore, similar to the sharing of physical intimacy, the sharing of emotional intimacy involves a break within the marital bond and is included within the current definition of infidelity.

However, nonsexual relationships where there is no sexual desire or behaviours cannot be included in the realm of infidelity. This is the final element necessary to constitute an affair in the most recent literature. Without the presence of sexual chemistry, the external relationship resists the label of an extramarital affair. Using this completed definition of secrecy, emotional intimacy, and sexual chemistry, Glass and Wright (1997) have found that up to 60% of their clinical population report being impacted by extramarital involvement of one or both spouses.

While it is important to understand the current developments within the academic study of infidelity, for the purpose of this study the definition of infidelity will be limited to sexual extramarital affairs and will not address emotional infidelity. The rationale for this decision is

that, while sexual affairs can be clearly defined and described by participants, emotional infidelity is a more amorphous and intangible behaviour that is open to much interpretation by each individual. Fenigstein and Peltz (2002) state clearly that “sexual infidelity is highly conspicuous, whereas emotional infidelity is less visible and perhaps not as disturbing (p. 311). Therefore, a sexual extramarital affair will be defined as sexual contact between one or both members of the marital dyad with an individual external to the marriage that, at the time of the contact, is unknown to and not condoned by the other marital partner.

### *Purpose of the Study*

Moulthrop (2003) proposes a model of an affair “which would see it as a classic permutation of a triangle in an emotional system. It is traceable to the multigenerational dynamics in the families of origin of the spouses, particularly the involved spouse” (p. 268). What Moulthrop appears to suggest here is that the participating spouse in an extramarital sexual affair is able to trace similar behaviours to previous generations, more specifically his or her family of origin. This presents the question: what is the impact of parents’ extramarital sexual affairs on their children as they reach adulthood and enter into their own sexual relationships? This inquiry is intended to contribute to the field of counselling psychology by: (a) providing information about how adult children of infidelity are impacted by their parents’ affairs; (b) how or does their parents’ infidelity impact their ability to be in a sexual relationship; and (c) if these adult children are impacted by their parents’ extramarital sexual affairs, what do they need to mediate or reduce the effects of their experiences.

By exploring the meaning that adult children of parents who broke their marital bond of fidelity make of their experiences and how it impacts their own lives and relationships, counselling psychologists can move to a place of greater understanding of their clients’ world.

In addition, it may be important for current and future parents to fully comprehend the full reaches of their actions, both beneficial and detracting, so they can make a more conscious decision before engaging in illicit sexual liaisons outside of the marital dyad.

### *Rationale for the Study*

The impact of extramarital sexual relationships on the marital bond (trust, commitment, sexual intimacy, marital satisfaction), has been well researched and there are a number of self-help psychology books that explore the loss, hardship, heartbreak, and trauma experienced by the non-participating spouse in the infidelity triangle. There are even manuals available on the Internet describing not only how to tell if your spouse is having an affair, there are also how-to guides for cheating on your partner without their knowledge. However, very few researchers and psychologists have thought to shift their focus outside of the marital dyad to the children of these parents in order to explore if and how their parent's infidelity impacts them.

In a society that is fascinated by the continuum of reconciliation or separation, healing or revenge, the marital couple receives the lion's share of research concerning their mental and physical health. The number of marital self-help books describing how to heal or leave marriage line the shelves of the local bookstores while therapists in the field offer the opportunity to rebuild the shattered relationship or negotiate an amicable marital dissolution. What is interesting is the lack of information addressing the impact of infidelity on children. How then or does this adjacent proximity to infidelity impact on children within the family unit?

The parent-child relationship is the main conduit for transmitting values and attitudes. Pryor (1999) states that "interpersonal relationships provide a model and a resource for young adults' development of their own intimate relationships" (p. 51). While there is not a causal link between the behaviours and interactions of a parent's marriage and the relationships developed



by their children, there is an understanding that the family of origin and marital environment witnessed by children can be highly influential. Carlson and Corcoran (2001) state that “the child’s home provides a context where learning and socialization take place, and apart from other variables, the quality and characteristics of the home environment have important consequences for child outcomes” (p. 780). With regard to sexual attitudes, Sanders and Mullis (1988) found that college-aged students reported that their parents were more influential on their beliefs about sex than friends, books, and school.

Literature on the impact of divorce and marital conflict on children is clear in stating that prolonged instability within the marital relationship leads to increased sexual experimentation, earlier incidents of pregnancy, lowered academic performance, behaviour problems, and difficulties maintaining romantic relationships in adulthood. While a more detailed description of these impacts will be explored in sharper focus in the Literature section of this study, it is clear that the marital dyad is highly influential on the level of functioning of children within the family.

Pittman (1993) suggests a more causal link between parents’ infidelities and those of their adult children. He states that, “philanderers may be the sons of philanders . . .” (p. 36). However Pittman does not simply limit this link to men. He goes further to describe that “there are female philanderers too, and they too are usually the daughters or ex-wives of philanderers” (p. 37). While Pittman’s evidence is largely anecdotal, it cannot be dismissed as a specious argument. There have been other studies to reinforce this concept that the sexual values of parents are bestowed upon their children. Taris (2000) found that there was “some evidence that mothers influenced their children’s sexual attitudes” (p. 176). This does not imply, of course, that simply by influencing a child’s sexual attitudes that this is dooming a child to being incapable of maintaining a monogamous relationship in adulthood, but it does suggest the concept of a behavioural predisposition to infidelity.

DeLamater and MacCorquodale (1979) assert that parents' sexual beliefs are translated to the child before all other beliefs and consequently "provide the foundation for subsequent sexual development" (p. 25). With the presence of infidelity in the marital dyad, how does the child then understand how committed relationships operate and is there an underlying doubt that exists within them that they may follow in their parents' footsteps? These attitudes and values that parents exhibit to their children are compounded by the barrage of material in North American media discussing infidelity.

"Television strongly implies that adultery and teen sex are normal, even desirable, when the truth is that such behaviour can lead to shattered lives" (Brownback, 2000, p. 52). Modern literature, film, drama, and art display largely permissive scenes of infidelity as exciting, adventurous, and as a relatively consequence free behaviour. Brownback states that "according to the Parent's Television Council, over the last 10 years, the amount of vulgarity and sexually explicit material in prime-time network shows has increased threefold, and virtually all sexual relationships portrayed on television are extramarital, premarital and rarely depict any negative consequences" (p. 52). While it is important to contextualize this research by the Parent's Television Council by acknowledging their largely conservative, pro-traditional family perspective, we cannot entirely dismiss their assessment of trends in popular media. Even the courts have found that "adultery relates to marriage . . . family relationships, and child rearing" (Harvard Law Review, 1991, p. 1675) through its foundational connection with these elements. With children in Western society being witness to infidelity in the home, on-line, on TV, in movies and books, how does this impact their own views of themselves as partners in a relationship, their partner / spouse, and the concept of monogamous relationships?

"Thou shalt commit adultery". This misprint of the 1805 edition of the Bible, causing it to become known as the Wicked Bible (Fisher, 1992, p. 97), describes an activity that occurs in marriages around the world. Although people are no longer branded with a scarlet 'A', there

remains a stigma attached to extramarital relationships. We live in a society that encourages the expression of personal needs and desires, yet it is in this restrictive environment that men and women must attempt to forge a solid marital foundation that meets both partners' needs. This must be done for not only the health of the individuals in the marriage dyads, but also for their children. As Glass (1998) states, a healthy marriage is the best gift parents can give to their children and the best way to increase the opportunity for their children to have healthy relationships of their own.

By exploring the meaning that adult children of parents who broke their marital bond of fidelity make of their experiences, how it impacts their own lives and relationships, counselling psychologists can better inform themselves when working with clients who have this background and assist them in healing any rifts that may exist in their current family or romantic relationships.

### *Approach to the Study*

It is valuable to understand from the co-researchers' perspective the experience of being in a romantic relationship after having witnessed / lived through having parent(s) engage in an extramarital sexual affair.

A research method that appeared to embrace the current research question as well as being congruent with the researcher's assumptions is Heidegger's (1962) Hermeneutic Phenomenology. Whereas the majority of research that focuses on the impact of infidelity are quantitative in nature, hermeneutic phenomenology was considered most suitable for studying the lived experience and meaning individuals make of their parent's infidelity. This method engages participants in self-reflection, understanding, and meaning making allowing them to fully articulate their conceptualizations of what happened and how it impacts them.

Chesick (1990) writes that, "The present is only understandable through the past, with which it has a living continuity. The event of understanding comes when our horizon of historical meanings and assumptions fuses with the horizon within which the text or narrative is placed" (p. 262). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to access the meaning that individuals make of their past experiences and present understandings through a process of reflection and interpretation. Memory and meaning making are constructions of the mind and cannot be reduced to the level of 'hard data' as quantitative methodologies seek to do.

As van Manen (1990) states, "human life needs knowledge, reflection, and thought to make itself knowable to itself . . . It is naïve rationalism that believes that the phenomena of life can be made intellectually crystal clear or theoretically perfectly transparent" (p. 17). There is no Truth that can be accessed that will describe what it is like to be the adult child of an adulterous parent. Instead, a textual depiction of the experience of each participant can be created through reflection, description and interpretation (through either verbal or written expression), and the text becomes a mirror that reflects meaning and shows us the core of the lived experience.

It is the experience, rather than providing causal explanation of the experience, that hermeneutical phenomenology strives to understand. "Hermeneutics seeks to elucidate and make explicit our practical understanding of human actions by providing an interpretation of them" (Packer, 1985, p. 1086). Experience is attained through conscious understanding and consciousness is how human beings access the world. Through the description of an individual's conscious understanding, the phenomenological researcher attempts to determine the meaning that lies at the core of experience. Benner (1985) writes that, "meaning resides not solely within the situation but is a transaction between the two so that the individual both constitutes and is constituted by the situation" (p. 6). What this means is that it is only through the process of discussion, questioning, and interpretation (which is a cyclical process), that the essence of the

individual's experience can be understood, and the interpretation of the experience can be described to others.

It is important to remember, however, that the interpretation of the individual's story will never reach an endpoint. The essence of the experience is core and unchanging, yet the interpretation is alterable and open to re-definition. "Interpretation reveals understanding and understanding, in turn, rewrites interpretation" (Allen & Jensen, 1990, p. 244). Interpretation is ephemeral in nature as it lasts for only as long as it takes to reflect or explicate, yet the essence of the experience of being an adult child of adulterous parents remains constant and true. This is the hermeneutic circle of inquiry and it is part of the continuous and never-ending quest for understanding. What this study will present, however, is the fusion of horizons where understanding of an experience between the participant and researcher have come together and the essence of the experience is identifiable to people who have experienced the same phenomenon and understandable to others who have not experienced the phenomenon.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review is to provide both theoretical and empirical support for this investigation of the experience of adult children whose parents engaged in extramarital sexual activity. Discussion in this chapter will be structured around first, the clinical and scientific literature on infidelity, so that the background on the definition, frequency, impact, and etiology can provide a foundation for this research.

The focus in this section on the impact of infidelity on the marital dyad is designed to establish a context by which the reader may understand how infidelity affects marriage. Although the literature discussed in this section does not precisely relate to the impact of infidelity on children, there simply is little to no research that directly deals with the research question under investigation. As such, by understanding the impact of infidelity on the marriage, the author hopes to provide a larger context from which the reader can understand the familial environment once infidelity is discovered.

The factors that are thought to be relevant to understanding the impact of parents' infidelity on children (i.e. attachment theory and divorce and marital conflict (and the long-term impact on children)) will then be reviewed to provide the greater rationale and context for this study.

#### *Infidelity*

##### General Attitudes

In their survey study of attitudes towards nonmarital sex in 24 countries, Widmer et al. (1998) found that there was a range of feelings towards extramarital sex. From a low of 36% of participants in Russia who felt that extramarital sex is always wrong, to a high of 88% of

Phillipino participants who strongly disapproved of infidelity, the majority of these surveyed countries did not approve of sexual relationships outside of the marriage. Only 2% of Canadian and American respondents felt that extramarital sex was not wrong at all as opposed to 74% who described infidelity as always wrong.

In a very early survey of attitudes towards extramarital sex, Hunt (1974) found that of over 2,000 participants, who were asked if they would object if their mates were to pet with another person, have extramarital sex, or engage in an extramarital love affair, 80 to 90% of the sample responded that they would strongly object to each of these behaviours. This strong response is consistent throughout the literature and is echoed in Christopher and Sprecher (2000) who state that “. . . consistently through the years, 70-80% of Americans express complete disapproval of a married person having sex with someone other than his or her spouse” (p. 1007). Treas and Giesen (2000) have found that this disapproval number is even higher at approximately 90% of the general public exhibiting strong condemnation of infidelity. In fact, whereas attitudes towards premarital sex and homosexual sex in the United States have become increasingly more permissive, attitudes towards extramarital sex have become progressively more negative over the past 30 years (Treas, 2002).

Lawson (1988) provides an alternate perspective on attitudes towards extramarital sex. Whereas the aforementioned studies asked for attitudes based on hypothetical infidelity of primarily unwed university students, Lawson surveyed married individuals and found that in the first year of marriage that both men (80%) and women (90%) expected sexual exclusivity with their partners, but as the marriage progressed their attitudes became less restrictive and more tolerant towards the presence of extramarital sexual behaviour. While in agreement about their general condemnation of extramarital sexual activity, men and women were found to differ in what reasons might be acceptable for engaging in an affair. Women were far more permissive (77% of the sample) of individuals who cheated on their marriages because of ‘falling in love’

than men (53% of the sample). Men, on the other hand, were more permissive (75% of the sample) when 'sexual excitement' was used as a justification for infidelity than women (53%) (Glass & Wright, 1992). However, what is interesting is that in both situations, approval rates for both justifications were over 50%. Glass and Wright (1992) state that the predictors of these attitudes towards extramarital affairs include: "background demographic variables, social context, religiosity, liberality, and premarital sexual attitudes and behaviors" (p. 361). With these attitudes in mind, is there any generalizable explanation as to why these affairs take place?

### Evolutionary Psychology

Are human beings innately capable of monogamy within their sexual relationships?

Barash (2001) believes that human biology and history precludes the idea that we are naturally monogamous. He states that:

... the evidence is as follows: first, men are significantly larger than females, a pattern consistently found among polygynous species ... second, around the world, men are more violent than women ... it avails little in acquiring a large number of mates for a male to be physically intimidating unless he is also inclined to make use of his assets ... third, girls become sexually mature earlier than do boys ... and fourth, before the cultural homogenization that came with Western colonialism, more than three-quarters of all human societies were polygynous (p. 16).

This would suggest that monogamy is a social construction of Western society that has been imposed on cultures around the world. However, even if this has historically been the case, some argue that our mating bonds are now "hard wired" and that "it is in these relationships, and in our relationship partners, that we put our physical, emotional, and economic resources as well as our trust, and hopes for the future. And it is the loss or feared loss of these aspects of life that make infidelity such a powerful type of loss" (Boekhout et al., 2000, p. 359). While Western



society may have socially conditioned the concept of monogamy, we are now established in a system that rewards fidelity. However, Fenigstein and Peltz (2002) state that while we have been habituated towards monogamy, men and women have individually been socially conditioned towards sexual behaviour. Stating that there is encouragement for “male agency and female communion”, Fenigstein and Peltz believe that “certain differences in sexual behavior . . . exist because males are largely socialized toward the personally and physically pleasurable aspects of sex, whereas female socialization is more concerned with the relational and emotional concomitants of sexual interactions” (p. 302). So, while there is a societal emphasis on monogamy, there exists a competing gender drive towards sexual gratification for men and emotional connection for women. Sprecher et al. (1997) agree with this view stating that traditional sexual scripts for men require multiple partners and frequent casual sex while women are mandated to engage in committed, monogamous relationships. This differentiation is used to explain the differing reactions towards infidelity that is generally experienced between men and women.

Nannini and Meyers (2000) report that evolutionary psychologists postulate that men perceive a greater threat when their mate is sexually engaged with an external male while women are more threatened by emotional infidelity of their partner. Shackelford et al. (2002) and Wiederman and LaMar (1998) state that this is due to the survival of genetically linked offspring. For example, a husband who commits infidelity would not threaten his wife’s genetic maternity and she is still able to channel her energy towards her own children. If, however, her husband became emotionally invested in another woman, then there is a threat of the division of the husband’s investment in her family and she would react accordingly. The reverse would be true of men. In order to ensure his genetic paternity, monogamy would be expected and therefore, if his wife engaged in sexual intercourse with another male, his paternity is put into question.

Fenigstein and Peltz (2002) state that, for women, “over the course of generations, the cost of losing one’s partner to another woman should have resulted in a specific sensitivity in females to their male partner’s emotional infidelity” (p. 302), while for men, “the cost of investing in another man’s offspring should have selected for a specific emotional sensitivity on the part of males to their female partner’s sexual unfaithfulness” (p. 302). Does human evolutionary and social conditioning then prevent affairs? Obviously this is a poor rhetorical question. Beyond the evolutionary explanations then, why do human beings stray from their marital bonds?

### Etiology

Within their survey of the rationales used by married individuals for breaking their marital bond, Spanier and Margolis (1983) found that participating spouses listed: needing greater sexual variation, revenge, greater emotional connections, natural progression of a sexual relationship from a friendship, aging, alcoholic inebriation, disagreements with their marriage partner, low maturity levels, alienation, and unhappy marital situations. Glass and Wright (1992), in their review of the clinical literature on infidelity, were able to identify 31 separate reasons for infidelity. Most of these explanations fell into the categories of “sex, emotional intimacy, love, and ego bolstering” (Treas & Geisen, 2000, p. 50).

Glass (1998) found a distinct gender difference in the etiology of affairs. “Surveys show that for women, the highest justification is for love; emotional intimacy is next. Sex is last on their list of justifications. It’s the opposite for men; sex scores the highest” (p. 42). Glass explains that women are changing their roles in society, gaining more opportunities in the workplace, experiencing more incidents of premarital sex, and they have increased financial

independence. As a result, more women are engaging in affairs and their justifications are beginning to change.

In their study using the 1994 General Social Survey, Allgeier and Allgeier (1995) found that the likelihood of infidelity was greater for individuals who had been either legally separated or divorced. Possibly this result indicates a diminished belief in or value of monogamy within relationships due to difficulties encountered in the previous marriage. In addition, Janus and Janus (1993) found a link to religiosity with those individuals who described themselves as 'low' and 'high' in religiosity maintaining higher rates of infidelity than individuals who were moderately religious. In fact, religious beliefs were found by Atkins et al. (2001) to be influential (in preventing infidelity) only in couples who reported high levels of marital satisfaction. Atkins et al. did not find that religiosity played a role in preventing extramarital sex for all other groups.

Buss and Shackelford (1997) identified that personality styles also are strong predictors of the beginning of extramarital affairs. They found that "a personality style marked by impulsivity, low dependability, and low reliability in general carries over into the sexual sphere" (p. 217). This suggests that when opportunities to cheat arise for these individuals, they lack the impulse control to reject them and maintain their monogamous marriage. Buss and Shackelford go further to report that "one of the strongest predictors [of infidelity] is Narcissism. Women high on Narcissism predict that they will flirt with, kiss, and date other men, as well as have one night stands, brief affairs, and serious affairs with other men" (p. 216). Pittman (1989) concurs with this concept and believes there are those individuals who are natural philanderers, both men and women, who simply lack the ability to control their impulses.

Treas and Giesen (2000) found that individual values and beliefs, opportunities to cheat, and especially marital values are most commonly linked to extramarital sexual activity. The focus on marital values is also found in Atkins et al. (2001) who report that there exists a

“continuum” (p.746) on which marital satisfaction and its subsequent link to probability of infidelity lies. Marriages that were described as “not too happy” were four times more likely to report extramarital sexual activity than those marriages that were described as “very happy”. Marriages that were “pretty happy” were twice as likely as “very happy marriages” to report infidelity. This result challenges the concept that only when marital satisfaction is low will individuals begin to stray.

### Marital Satisfaction

A survey of marriage therapists uncovered the belief that infidelity does not automatically suggest that there is difficulty in the structure of the marriage (Finzi, 1989). However, the level of satisfaction within the marriage has consistently been reported as a contributing factor, to one degree or another, to the occurrence / probability of extramarital sexual affairs. In his review of ten separate studies of infidelity, Thompson (1983) found only one that was unable to demonstrate a significant link between the level of marital satisfaction and extramarital sex. Spanier and Margolis (1983) disagree with Thompson and state that “neither premarital coital experience, quality of marital sex, length of marriage, religiosity, nor physical attractiveness were related to the occurrence of extramarital coitus” (p. 46). It is important to note this dissent yet it is a singular voice against the link between marital satisfaction and infidelity and that the vast majority of literature confirms a link between marital quality and affairs (Brown, 1991; Greeley, 1991; Prins, Buunk, & VanYperen, 1983; Vaughn, 1986).

Glass and Wright (1977) report that there exists a gender difference in marital dissatisfaction and an individual’s participation in an affair. Affairs were more common for men who expressed marital dissatisfaction in the early years of marriage, and women who were more

dissatisfied in later years of their marriage. Liu (2000) also addresses the issue of marital duration stating that it is “an important factor that affects the likelihood of extramarital sex” (p. 372). Atkins et al. (2001) hypothesize that the reason for the link between marital length and infidelity is that “people who have been married longer have had more time to engage in EMS [extramarital sex]” (p. 746) yet they challenge Glass and Wright’s (1977) gender differences stating that marital duration and infidelity are consistent for both sexes. Interestingly, Glass (1998) found that men in long-term marriages who engaged in affairs had the highest rate of marital satisfaction. This is in stark contrast to women in long-term marriages. This population had the lowest level of marital satisfaction.

Petersen (1983) suggests that it isn’t a question of marital satisfaction, but rather a question of sexual satisfaction within the marriage. He reports that while women who are sexually satisfied have lower rates of participation in infidelity, men will cheat regardless of the quality / quantity of marital sex. While Petersen’s study can be questioned for its academic rigor, the results reinforce previous assertions by Glass (1998) that for men, sexual variation / gratification / experimentation is the number one reason for engaging in an affair while it is the last reason for women.

#### Gender Differences in Response to Infidelity

Buss and Shackelford (1997) found that both sexes are “remarkably similar in the linkage between lack of love and affection within the marriage and susceptibility to extramarital involvement” (p. 218) and that there didn’t appear to be major differences to how they responded to infidelity. More recently however, Shackelford et al. (2002) altered this perspective by stating that men had more difficulty resolving infidelity where sexual contact has taken place (as opposed to emotional connection to another man), and that sexual infidelity was more likely to

lead to dissolution of the marriage for men. Women, conversely, were more disturbed by emotional betrayal and were more likely to end the marriage when an emotional affair was present (Shackelford & Buss, 1997; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1993; Wiederman & LaMar, 1998).

This is a major gap in the understanding and resolution of affairs between men and women. Glass (1998) explains that “most women believe that if you love your partner, you wouldn’t even be interested in an affair, therefore, if someone has an affair, it means they don’t love their partner and they do love the person they had the affair with.” (p. 34). The literature explains that this is a misunderstanding and that men will often not equate sexual infidelity with love and in fact may describe their marriage as happy even while engaging in multiple affairs. Pittman (1989) takes a different approach to the gender gap. He states that whereas men may be insensitive to their sexual misdeeds, women overreact and place too much emotional value on sexual infidelity:

Any gender-based generalization is both irritating and inaccurate, but some behaviors are typical. Men tend to attach too little significance to affairs, ignoring their horrifying power to disorient and disrupt lives, while women tend to attach too much significance, assuming that the emotions are so powerful they must be ‘real’ and therefore concrete, permanent, and stable enough to risk a life for (p. 40).

Women, he suggests, superimpose their feelings of what it would take to have an affair on their husbands while men assume that sexual infidelity is not the harmful action it is simply because it does not contain an emotional connection. Glass (1998) reports that in her clinical practice she has found that “44% of men who said they had extramarital sex said they had slight or no emotional involvement; only 11% of women said that” (p. 36). In dealing with the female partner’s infidelity however, we see a very different picture. Across cultures, a female partner’s sexual infidelity has a greater chance of leading to the dissolution of the marriage than a man’s

(Betzig, 1989). In fact, Daly and Wilson (1988) found that sexual infidelity by the female partner is the number one attributed factor to spousal violence and murder.

Guilt is a common emotion that can be experienced both from the participating and non-participating spouse. However, this reaction appears to appear differently in men and women. Spanier and Margolis (1983) in their study of divorced individuals found that 11.4% of men felt very guilty about engaging in an affair whereas 38.1% of women experienced the same level of guilt. These numbers are almost reversed with regard to the number of participants who reported no feelings of guilt upon the discovery of their affair(s). Forty-five percent of men indicated no feelings of guilt versus 26% of women. Spanier and Margolis hypothesize that women express more guilt as their affairs tend to begin with an emotional connection that is followed up with sexual contact. However, this could also be the result of societal expectations and social roles that state greater levels of approval for male extramarital behaviour. Men also have primarily sex-based affairs with low emotional component which may also impact the level of guilt they feel for their actions.

The sexual components of the male extramarital affair are also evident in Charny and Parnass' (1995) study on the impact of the affair on the non-participating spouse. Charny and Parnass surveyed 62 practicing family therapists and had them fill out a questionnaire where they described a specific case of an affair with which they were very familiar. They found that 67% of men who had been cuckolded felt a "blow to [their] sexual confidence" (p. 109), while 53% of women reported the same impact. Men also described having a larger sense of abandonment (21% of men versus 15% of women) while women were more likely to feel rage and a justification for desires to separate or divorce (16% of women versus 11% of men). These results suggest that women respond more to the betrayal of the extramarital sexual act and the indication the infidelity has towards the overall health of the relationship while men respond by

turning inward to assess their own performance within the marriage and their own feelings of loss.

### Frequency

Ever since Kinsey's (1948; 1952) reports on human sexuality, there have been disagreements as to an accurate number of how many men and women engage in sexual extramarital affairs. The lowest incidence reported within the literature, based on yearly participation in infidelity, was 1.5% of all Americans (Smith, 1991). This result was based on the 1989 General Social Survey and brought into question the large numbers reported by Kinsey and similar sexual behaviour surveys. However, it is important to note that interviews conducted for the GSS in 1989 were not private and in many instances, family members and spouses were present during the questioning.

Other yearly figures include Leigh, Temple, and Trocki (1993) who, using a 1990 national survey sample of adults, found that 3.6% of men and women had engaged in either vaginal or anal intercourse with an individual outside of their marriage in the past 12 months. Billy, Tanfer, Grady, and Klepinger (1993), using a 1991 national survey of men between the ages of 20 to 39, found that 4% of men reported engaging in vaginal intercourse outside of their marriage in the past year. A similar number (4%) was found for women aged 20 to 37 by Forste and Tanfer (1996). Additionally, Choi, Catania, and Dolcini (1994), using a 1990 survey of married adults, found that 2.2% of men and women had engaged in either vaginal or anal intercourse outside of their marriage in the previous year. What is not made clear in these studies is whether there was spousal knowledge or permission for these external sexual liaisons.

Across the lifespan of the marriage, the participation rates climb significantly higher. Wiederman's (1997) study of the frequency of extramarital sex found that 22.7% of men and



11.6% of women will engage in infidelity over the course of their marriage. These results are not too dissimilar from Atkins et al. (2001) who indicate that “between 20% and 25% of all Americans will have sex with someone other than their spouse while they are married” (p. 735). In their survey of six separate studies on infidelity rates, Shackelford and Buss (1997) found that “estimates of marital infidelity among American couples range from 26% to 70% for women and from 33% to 75% for men” (p. 1034). Thompson’s (1983) survey appears to fall in the middle of these results finding that between men and women, the chances of one or both partners having an affair was between 40% and 76%. Broken down along gender lines, Thompson stated that the level of male infidelity was at least 50% and that married women were quickly bridging the gap. The highest number found within the literature for infidelity was 88%. Halper (1988) surveyed over 4,000 male business leaders, executives and professionals who delivered this extremely large participation rate. Due to the increasingly larger number of women in the workforce and in positions of influence, higher pay, and power, researchers are finding that women are quickly catching up and that “recent research suggests that the differences between the sexes in rates of infidelity may be decreasing” (Atkins et al., 2001, p. 735; Greeley, 1994; Laumann et al., 1994; Thompson, 1983).

In their non-clinical sample of infidelity rates, Glass and Wright (1997) found that the incidence of extramarital sex “ranges from 30% to 60% of the men and from 20% to 50% of the women, with an even higher incidence among divorced and separated persons” (p. 472). Within the divorced adult population, McGoldrick and Carter (1989) report that in 70% of divorces one or both of the spouses was involved in an affair. Janus and Janus (1993) in their survey of sexual attitudes and behaviours disagree with McGoldrick and Carter. They found that 11% of divorced men and 22% of divorced women cited infidelity as the cause of their divorce. Finally, Atkins et al. (2001), in a sample of couples therapists, found that between 50% to 65% of couples seeking couples therapy were there as the result of an infidelity. While exact numbers

detailing the rate of participation in infidelity may not be readily accessible, empirical, clinical, and anecdotal evidence suggests that extramarital affairs are occurring often enough to be a major concern for the health and longevity of the modern marriage.

### Impact of infidelity on the marriage

*My partner is benevolent, my relationship is meaningful, and I am worthy. These are the beliefs governing many relationships; however, at the time that one relationship partner learns of the other's infidelity, the statements become: My partner is a betrayer, my relationship is meaningless, and I am worthless. It is then that one's loss of faith is dramatic, one's illusions are torn, and one's world is turned upside down (Boekhout et al., 2000, p. 360).*

While this may be a stereotypical reaction to the discovery of infidelity within the marriage, it is useful in illustrating the extent to which extramarital affairs can impact the marital union. Hetherington (1998), however, states that there is a wide array of responses to infidelity with some individuals coping with "apparent equanimity" to the infidelity, while others "exhibit marked affective disruption and distress" (p. 168). There can be no doubt though that the presence of infidelity impacts the non-participating spouse on a psychological level. If there is no impact, one might be left to question whether the relationship was close / intimately linked at all.

One of the common myths of extramarital relationships is that when they are discovered the marriage must instantly dissolve into divorce proceedings (Pittman, 1989). While this belief is not directly reflected in the literature, infidelity certainly poses a large stressor and an increase in conflict for the marriage. Infidelity can either allow a marriage to struggle and ultimately survive in better condition than it was prior to the occurrence of cheating, or it can cause decay in the marital bond that renders the relationship permanently crippled (Pittman, 1989). Pittman adds his own anecdotal experience to the ending of relationships stating that,

“most of the post affair divorces are instituted by infidels, not cuckolds, who express bewilderment about how to return to the marriages they feel so guilty for betraying” (p. 51). Rather than face the consequences of their behaviour and work to save the marriage, the participating spouse may choose the route of least resistance and end the relationship. However, most relationships that experience a single incidence of infidelity do not end in divorce (Charny & Parnass, 1995).

### The Discovery

When the discovery is made, the cuckolded spouse is very likely to experience a wide range of uncomfortable and difficult emotions. Anger, guilt, self-loathing, sadness, betrayal, and jealousy are common to the experience (Buss, 2000; Lawson, 1988; Shakelford et al., 2002). The Harvard Law Review (1991) states that, “in the absence of spousal consent, extramarital intercourse often violates important promises, results in lies and deception, inflicts emotional pain, and can terminate or severely disrupt a marriage” (p. 1677). In fact, the discovery of an extramarital affair can lead to a reaction similar to a trauma response.

Glass and Wright (1997) assert that, “We have observed that the symptoms of many betrayed spouses are strikingly similar to the post-traumatic stress reactions of the victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse” (p. 473). Lusterman (1995) also links PTSD reactions with infidelity, stating that the safety and security the marriage once offered, has been removed. As the previous assumptions of the non-participating spouse’s sense of the world have been greatly impacted by the infidelity, a shock response followed by a reconstruction and reevaluation of beliefs is typical. Boekhout (2000) believes that “no longer do we believe we can trust our partner. Our physical and emotional intimacy seems a sham – we have been betrayed” (p. 360). This view is continually reflected in both empirically driven and clinically

based studies. Janoff-Bulman (1992) responds that the individual's sense of safety has been crushed and it is not at all atypical to witness "obsessive ruminating and repetition, hypervigilance and digging for details, accusatory suffering and flashbacks" (Glass & Wright, 1997, p. 472) in the betrayed spouse.

Similar to other traumatic events, though, is the possibility to reconstruct the individual's personal belief, the marriage, and the family. Weil (2003) suggests that "an enactment of an affair can be thought of as the new ground upon which the trauma scenario of failed mutual influence can be revisited" (p. 52). What Weil is advocating is that often infidelity can offer an opportunity to review the failures of the marriage and build corrective measures that ultimately establish a stronger marital union. However, before this is possible, the healing process of the couple must include a full accounting of the infidel's actions. Glass (1998) states that there can be strong resistance on the part of the unfaithful person to recount the details of the affair, whereas the betrayed person wants to know all of the "gory details" (p. 47) and they may experience guilt for continuing to hold onto the affair while the participating spouse wishes to put it in the past. Mongeau and Schulz (1997) report that often the participating spouse is less than forthcoming about information and that the "participants' description of the transgression were substantially more truthful as the partner's knowledge increased. Only when participants were sure that their partner knew of the transgression did they mention the intimate details of the infidelity" (p. 148). Whether this reluctance is due to feelings of guilt, shame, or a refusal to accept responsibility or acknowledge their actions, without this full accounting, the research demonstrates that marital and individual repair is not fully possible. Glass (1998) states that in cases like these, "they may stay together, but they really don't learn anything or heal" (p. 47).

Boekhout (2000) states that for the betrayed spouse, it can be very frightening to confront the personal vulnerabilities that arise from an affair, yet, "this very recognition appears to be necessary for our working through and recovering from traumatic loss" (p. 359). In order to

have the prospect of rebuilding both the individual's belief structures of the world, and possibly the marriage, the experience of the affair must be deconstructed and understood before a new foundation can be laid. Glass (1998) describes the process:

In the beginning, the betrayed partner wants details. Where, what, when. Did you tell them you love them? Did you give them gifts? Did they give you gifts? How often did you see them? How many times did you have sex? Did you have oral sex? Where did you have sex, was it in our house? How much money did you spend? Those kind of factual questions need to be answered. Eventually the questions develop more complexity. How did it go on so long if you knew that it was wrong? After the first time, did you feel guilty? At that point they're in the final stages of trauma recovery, which is the search for meaning. (p. 48).

Regardless of whether the marriage proceeds with reconciliation, separation, or divorce, the literature is clear that neither individual remains the individual they were prior to the discovery of infidelity. Boekhout (2000) states that, "the experience of infidelity, as with the experience of any trauma and loss, leaves successful survivors . . ." (p. 371). The old views of marriage as safe are not recoverable, yet through the process of understanding and meaning making, the newer, more negative assumptions of marriage need not remain as permanent.

#### The other man / woman and the marriage

Occasionally, the third party to the extramarital triangle becomes a permanent fixture with the betrayed spouse being left behind. While only 15% of affairs end in a marriage taking place, the extramarital relationship often continues beyond the demise of the original marriage. There is very little research involving this third party and, from a societal perspective, this individual is often shunned, ostracized, or forgotten. Pam and Pearson (1996) report that,

. . . while the transgressions of the affair-couple have been conjointly committed, their offenses are seen as quite different. The partner is perceived as 'perfidious',

having betrayed sacred pledges and duties, whereas the rival is seen as 'predatory', and opportunist who despoiled a loving marriage (p. 181).

In these situations, the non-participating spouse will often adopt a 'moral-highground' stance where they believe that punishment is required for the destruction of the marriage by this third party or interloper.

This stance can lead to vigilante actions of the betrayed spouse towards the newly formed couple and can negatively impact upon the relationship between the new couple and the children from the old marriage. Pam and Pearson (1996) state that "the only way for [the betrayed spouse] to express indignation is to personally ensure that the 'sinful' pair do not escape unpenalized and unstigmatized" (p. 195). These beliefs have led to such actions as "crimes of passion, child abduction, custody suits, or hysterical accusations of sexual abuse" (p. 196) and, Weiss (1979) found that some cuckolded women, afraid of losing their children on top of their husband to the new woman, will see the interloper as 'unclean' and will deny access to the new couple for fear of the other woman 'contaminating' her children. Jacobs (1988) has coined the phrase 'Medea complex' to understand this reaction. Based on the Euripides play from fifth century BC, Medea is cuckolded by her husband and in order to enact revenge upon him, she kills their two sons. Jacobs describes the modern form of this punishment as "depriving the other parent of access, in effect killing the children so far as this other parent is concerned" (p. 190). While the spurned mate may see this as hurtful to the 'offending' spouse, the impact is equally or more impactful on the children of the dissolved marriage.

It is important to acknowledge these different impacts and reactions of the individuals within the marital dyad for two reasons: (1) to understand the physical and emotional reactions of men and women to infidelity, and more importantly for this study (2) to create a context within which we can begin to understand the environment that children of parents who engage in extramarital sexual activity live in. Bartle-Haring and Sabetelli (1998) write that "the foundation

of marital intimacy resides within each spouse's experience of his or her family of origin . . . [and] the dynamics of the family of origin work their way into marital dynamics when each partner seeks to integrate familiar patterns of interaction from the family of origin into the marital relationship" (p. 905). Webster et al. (1995) agree, finding that family history directly impacts both future marital quality and marital stability. How these children of adulterous parents create their own romantic relationships is based largely upon a template created by the primary relationship they witnessed while growing up: their parent's marriage. While there appears to be therapeutic 'paths of action' for the husbands and wives of infidelity, there is a severe shortage of options for the children of these individuals.

#### Impact of Infidelity on the Children

Adultery is not just a matter between two people. It is as hurtful as murder, and the devastating effects never go away entirely. The offenders have the privilege of choosing to engage in adultery, but their families have no choice about the suffering inflicted upon them. (Streeter, 1995, p. 38)

While there is a paucity of research dealing directly with the subject of the impact of infidelity on children, there are some studies that include both anecdotal and empirical evidence, that deal with how infidelity influences children and adult children of parents who engage(d) in infidelity. Janoff-Bulman (1992) describes the aftermath of infidelity as a 'trauma' where our 'illusions' of how the world operates, are lost. This commentary is directed towards to cuckolded spouse, and not the child, yet is there a difference for children? Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1996) state that we maintain three fundamental beliefs about the world: "(a) my world is benevolent, (b) my world is meaningful, and (c) I am worthy" (p. 135). When there is a betrayal within the family, these values are challenged.

The presence of a third adult in the marriage can be very challenging for children, both young and old, as it confronts loyalties by placing the child in a situation where they have to engage the interloper into the family. Pam and Pearson (1996) address this at length stating that “. . . triangular breakups are the most enduringly acrimonious . . . and that children are especially damaged by the ensuing turmoil in the reorganizing family after a triangular breakup” (p. 198) and that “the polarization of the two camps makes the psychic life of the child precarious, leading to delicate balancing to keep both parents assured that he or she is still ‘loyal’. But a child cannot be diplomatically adept forever; his or her own feelings come into play, at times leading to loss of trust by one or the other parent” (p. 189). When the cuckolded spouse reacts to the loss of the marriage to a third party, they can seek to receive the support of the child for their morally-superior position within the breakup. This can lead to the parent requiring the child to adopt a similar stance and to reject the offending parent which can be “gravely deleterious to the emotional balance of the child” (Pam & Pearson, 1996, p. 196). The adulterous parent, on the other hand, may require the children to accept the new partner as a “fact of life which [the] children must accept” (p. 189). However, as Pam and Pearson point out, such situations are not always so easily accepted and many children will “refuse to see, obey, or respect the new partner” (p. 189). With the support of the cuckolded spouse, the child may refuse to ever validate the new partner of the adulterous spouse causing the child to have reduced contact with that parent:

An eight-year-old girl refused to use, or even touch, a new hairbrush left for her by her father's lover. The girl did not personally like the woman, resented her presence during visits to her father's place and saw her as the reason she could no longer live in an intact family. This attitude sat well with her mother, but exasperated her father who felt she gave his girlfriend no chance to relate. Forced to constantly choose between his daughter and his girlfriend, the man saw less and less of his daughter (Pam & Pearson, 1996, p. 189).



This situation is in contrast to the long-term psychological health needs of the child.

McGoldrick and Carter (1989) state that research has found a parent's remarriage to be beneficial to the children and they emphasize that stepfamilies can receive therapeutic assistance in bridging mistrust and hostility to establish a new, healthy family environment. However, the process of going through the marital conflict and divorce proceedings that can erupt after infidelity can cause both short and long-term damage for children.

Walker and Ehrenberg (1998), drawing from their review of Gigy and Kelly's (1992) study of divorcing adults, believe that where parents have separated due to extramarital affairs, "young persons themselves may lack trust in romantic partners and experience difficulties initiating or sustaining long term relationships" (p. 425). Walker and Ehrenberg (1992), who were studying the impact of parental divorce on attachment, found that parental extramarital affairs was one of the three most important variables in determining secure or insecure attachment styles in young adults. They state that this is a 'sensible' finding as "perceptions of one or both parents betraying each other's trust could be related to young persons feeling fearful of infidelities in their own relationships" (p. 433). These findings also appear to separate out parental extramarital affairs from divorce as having a unique impact on children. While the effects of infidelity are explored within the context of divorce, the end result of infidelity is separate from the impact of divorce and marital conflict found in many studies.

### *Divorce and Marital Conflict*

While there is no apparent research exploring the impact of extramarital relationships on adult children when the marriage survives the infidelity, there is a plethora of material exploring the impact of divorce, and more specifically marital conflict, on children (both in the short-term and long-term). Buss and Shackelford (1997) believe that conflict within the marriage is

strongly linked to occurrences of infidelity. Common points of conflict prior to or after the infidelity include one partner's high levels of jealousy or suspiciousness concerning their spouse's activities, sexual withholding, and the sexualization of individuals outside of the marriage.

Shackelford et al. (2002) states that, "infidelity may be unmatched as a source of relationships dissolution" (p. 300). This opinion is reinforced by Liu (2000) who writes that infidelity is often established as a reason for divorce. It must be mentioned though that, particularly in the United States, matrimonial lawyers "routinely file adultery allegations in divorce proceedings because adultery is a complete bar to alimony and custody of children in many states" (Harvard Law Review, 1991, p. 1672). While this may skew the numbers to some degree, there is enough evidence to confidently state that infidelity frequently plays a role in the ending of marriages around the world. It is therefore important that we understand the impact of divorce on children so that we may be able to distinguish whether infidelity has a unique impact on the adult children of adulterous parents in this study. Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson (1997), in their survey of couples therapists, found that infidelity was the most difficult issue to treat therapeutically and exacted the greatest damage (generally) on marriages. Where these couples have children then, there are witnesses to either the marital conflict and / or divorce proceedings that can often occur.

### Divorce

Calhoun and Friel (2001) believe that the family is responsible for socializing the child, "providing her or him with a system of values and norms. Consequently, different familial forms or disruption of the family unit are expected to have an effect . . ." (p. 670) on the child. Just how great is the impact of these family alterations and disruptions? In the United States, it

is estimated that over one million children every year experience their parents divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census) and it is projected that between 50% and 60% of American children will experience life within a single-family home (Hetherington et al., 1998). While it must be acknowledged that of these large numbers of children, the majority will not experience undo difficulties developing into healthy, functioning adults (Emery & Forehand, 1994), many of them will develop social, psychological, or academic difficulties. As Pryor (1999) states, "there is no doubt that parent-child relationships are pivotal for children's well-being in a number of ways, including mediating the effects of adversity in families . . . To the extent then, that young people remain in a family environment that lacks cohesion and supportive parent-child interactions, they may be at risk for adverse outcomes" (p. 51). Jacquet and Surra (2001) are more poetic in stating that divorce 'ricochets' through "multiple domains of children's lives, including economic, psychological, academic, and personal arenas" (p. 628). All children whose parents divorce will experience general experiences of loss, anger, sadness, confusion, guilt, and other normal emotions due to the dissolution of their family in the short term. However, for some of these children, these emotions pervade into their adult lives and relationships.

Studies have shown that children from divorced or remarried families have a greater propensity towards: academic difficulty; socially inappropriate behaviour; psychological disorders such as anxiety disorders and depression; reduced self-esteem (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington et al., 1998); lower socio-economic attainment; and a greater chance that they live on welfare (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hetherington, 1998). With regard to their own adult relationships, specifically romantic relationships, adult children of divorce are more likely than adult children from intact families to: express doubt regarding the viability of marriage as an institution; report high levels of marital distress even when they describe themselves as happily married; escalate conflict during marital difficulties and reduce their willingness to communicate (Webster et al., 1995); exhibit "more reciprocated, escalating,

negative exchanges, including denial, belligerence, criticism, and contempt, and less effective problem solving during their marital interactions” (Hetherington et al., 1998, p. 168). Children of divorce also report associating intimacy and commitment with the risk of conflict and separation (Duran, 1997) which ultimately alters their ability to relate to their spouse. Additionally, Franklin et al. (1990) state that the majority of college aged children of divorce reported having less trust in their future spouse and did not hold optimistic views of marriage.

The impact of all of these relationship challenges is that it is harder for these adult children of divorce to maintain their married status. Having not witnessed effective communication and problem solving techniques, many of these adult children of divorce are prone to repeat their parent’s actions. Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet (1991) state, in fact, that the ‘intergenerational transmission of divorce’ is up to 70% or greater within the first five years of a marriage for women whose family of origin experienced a divorce as opposed to women from non-divorced families. More specific to the topic of extramarital sex, when divorce has been experienced, there is a higher incidence of infidelity and acceptance of infidelity in adults (Wiederman, 1997). These authors seem to suggest that through witnessing and experiencing the demise of a marriage, these adult children of divorce tend to have less faith in marriage, less belief in monogamy, and a greater expectation of marital failure. Webster et al. (1995), reports that adult children of divorce are “twice as likely . . . to have cohabited with their spouses before marriage” (p. 414). This reinforces a belief that adult children of divorce are seeking to guarantee some success in their relationships when compared to children from intact families. It is important to note here, for the purpose of this study, that “cohabitators are more likely . . . to engage in infidelity” (Treas & Giesen, 2000, p. 54).

Webster et al. (1995) in citing Glenn and Kramer (1987) state that “children of divorce have higher rates of divorce not because their marriages are less happy but rather because of a higher propensity to divorce that stems from a reluctance, given their fear of failure, to fully

commit to marriage” (p. 427). However, Webster also cautions that it is only “when marriages become less than very happy that children of divorce . . . give divorce more serious consideration than their peers from intact families” (p. 426). The literature demonstrates that these beliefs are further exacerbated by the decline in the health of the relationship between the parent(s) and the child post-divorce.

During the process of divorce, the children may be called upon to alter their roles within the family to provide support to one or both parents. Pryor (1999) found that adult children of parents who separated / divorced reported feeling “demands for premature maturity and the parenting of their parents and discrepancies between apparent and real family stability” (p. 58). The secure base that parents provided as a functioning family unit is altered or damaged through the process of divorce and the feelings of security felt by the children are impacted. This will be discussed in greater detail with regard to Attachment Theory. Pryor (1999) additionally found that adult children described feeling “not supported as they grew up” and they “also found themselves in the position of parenting their own parents before, during, and after the separation” (p. 54). By removing themselves as the secure base and asking their children to become that security for them, parents relinquish their roles as providers of safety and security. Kaufman and Uhlenberg (1998) and Aquilino (1994) both found that the quality of the parent-child relationship is harmed through this alteration and especially the relationships between the adult children and their fathers are detrimentally impacted. Kaufman and Uhlenberg (1998) believe that this decline in the quality of the parent-child relationship is due to the fact that “even children not living in the household are subject to the hostility and upheaval often associated with this transition” (p. 925). Within the literature, there is a strong foundation of belief that this marital conflict is of even greater impact on the children than the act of divorce is.

## Marital Conflict

The vast majority of couples that divorce do so with at least some degree of conflict and negative interactions. Grych et al. (1992) state that often parents will underestimate what their children are aware of with regard to marital conflicts. Also, children may focus on elements of the conflicts that parents do not consider. Masheter (1991) states that while this conflict may fade over time, those couples who have children remain in contact and as a result, maintain conflictual relationships for longer periods of time as they negotiate custody, economic considerations, living arrangements, and co-parenting strategies. Fincham (1994) states that:

Researchers first showed a relation between overall marital discord or divorce and child functioning, then went on to identify marital conflict as the aspect of marital discord or divorce related to child adjustment, and have more recently identified overt interparental conflict to which children are exposed as most relevant for understanding child adjustment. (p. 123)

Marital conflict, Fincham believes, is a greater factor than divorce, in comprehending social, psychological, and behavioral impacts on children. Other researchers concur, stating that interparental conflict had much more detrimental effects on children than parental divorce does (Booth & Edwards, 1990; Holdnack, 1992).

Fincham (1994) reports that not only does interparental conflict negatively impact a child's overall adjustment, it also sensitizes them to conflict and sets up a dynamic where they fear or avoid conflict in relationships. Amato et al. (1995) found that conflict is clearly the most influential and determining factor when considering adjustment problems found in children of divorce. He states that "children in high-discord two-parent families have the most problems, children in low-discord, two parent families have the fewest problems and children of divorce fall in-between" (p. 899). Therefore, conflict, not divorce, is the root of the majority of child-to-adult adjustment concerns.

E.M. Cummings, et al. (1981; 2003; 2004) found consistently that children who witness multiple interadult conflicts have heightened behavioral responses and move quickly to a state of high physiological arousal. Webster et al. (1995) reports that this higher level of sensitivity and arousal to conflictual situations based on a history of interparental conflict will result in the adult children of divorce / marital conflict having "lower marital quality and greater difficulty in marital interactions than children" (p. 407) who didn't experience such conflictual family environments.

Hetherington et al. (1998) state that marital conflict is highly associated with depression, lowered social abilities, decreased academic performance, and behavioral problems in children. El-Sheikh (1997) explains these difficulties by reporting that, "frequent and intense marital conflict is associated with externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems and interadult arguments have consistently evoked overt behavioral distress, verbalized fear and distress, anger and aggression, and physiological arousal in children" (p. 165). The more frequent the conflict between parents, the less safety the child feels within the family, the more pronounced their behaviours become, and their concept of the family as secure is destroyed. Other research demonstrates that sheer frequency alone may not in fact be the most detrimental factor for children. The type of conflict is more impactful on the child. Where the parents are: fighting about the children, denigrating each other, requiring the children to state their loyalty to one parent over another, or using the children as a means of communication between each other, the children are more negatively impacted (Buchanan et al., 1991; Hetherington et al., 1998).

El-Sheikh (1997) further reports that when compared with children from low-conflict homes, children from highly conflictual homes "perceived the actors engaged in . . . the interadult . . . disputes as more angry and reported feeling more fearful during these arguments" (p. 165). These children form emotional scripts or patterns of expectations regarding conflict that lead them to amplify conflictual situations.

Bartle-Haring and Sabatelli (1998) write that "the individual's experiences within the family of origin affect his or her personal adjustment, which further impacts how he or she behaves in relationships" (p. 908). The patterns of the family of origin carry forward to the next generation if there isn't an opportunity to heal the damage that divorce / marital conflict can do:

The perception of parental unhappiness, and the emotional unavailability of parents presents children in unhappy families with contradictions for which they are ill equipped to deal, especially if discontent is not openly acknowledged and conflict not satisfactorily resolved (Pryor, 1999, p. 53).

How can children develop effective and healthy coping skills for conflict if they experience it as a divisive, isolating, and permanent experience? The more distant and conflictual the parental relationship is, the more that children from this union will come to experience it as a normative experience and repeat the pattern in their own adult relationships. "Parents and children are connected throughout their lives", write Kaufman and Uhlenberg (1998) and "each generation experiences life course transitions, and these in turn, influence the lives of the other generation" (p. 924). For the purpose of this study, it may be important here to recall the words of Pittman (1993) who states that "philanderers may be the sons of philanderers" (p. 36) and "there are female philanderers too, and they too are usually the daughters or ex-wives of philanderers" (p. 37). Does it hold then that infidelity, similar to divorce, experiences an intergenerational transition? Glass (1998) states that you are more likely to engage in infidelity, "if you come from a family where there's a history of affairs" (p. 42).

Bowen (1978) states clearly that as children move in adulthood and form their own relationships / marriages, these relationships form a stage upon which the functional or dysfunctional patterns of the family of origin are replicated. Bartle-Haring and Sabatelli (1998) maintain that multigenerational perspectives, such as Bowen's, operate under the belief that the "dynamics within the family of origin constitute a legacy that impacts the trajectory of both



individual and family development” (p. 903). Multiple studies have demonstrated that adults with troubled family histories are more prone to poor marriages, negative attitudes towards parenting, and they behave less warmly and accommodating of their own children.

### *Attachment Theory*

Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1988) initiated the concept of attachment theory and stated that attachment is an integral piece to human development and behaviour “from the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby, 1979, p. 129). A basic assumption of attachment theory is that “the quality of one’s early emotional bonds with primary caregivers serves as a template for guiding one’s attachment orientation to later (adult) intimate relationships” (Lopez et al., 2000, p. 177). Human beings form life-scripts or understandings of interaction based on their perceptions of how safe their world is. Attachment behaviour is defined as “any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identifiable individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world” (Bowlby, 1988, pp. 26-27). Though attachment behaviour may be demonstrated towards multiple individuals, lasting attachment exists with a very few, select individuals (Bowlby, 1988).

Crowell and Waters (1994) describe the attachment bond as consisting of one’s “(a) use of another as a ‘secure base’ from which to explore and master the environment in times of safety and (b) use of that individual as a ‘safe haven’ in times of stress or danger” (p. 31). Security to experience the world with the knowledge that in times of fear, that secure base will be ever-present – this is the foundation to attachment theory. Cassidy (2001) defines this availability as ‘giving care’ which she further defines as:

... being available – to children, to an adult romantic partner – in times of trouble. It means being able to recognize when the person needs care, and doing what it takes to provide it. Giving care means being loving: being

respectful of the truth of another, accepting of a range of ways of being, ways of feeling. It involves openness, flexibility, acceptance (p. 130).

However, giving care is not the only aspect of forming a positive attachment.

Bowlby (1988) believes that attachment wasn't simply built on receiving care from others, but he believes attachment is based on "the capacity to make intimate emotional bonds with other individuals, sometimes in the careseeking role and sometimes in the caregiving one" (p. 121). This ability, Bowlby states, is essential to building a secure personality and ensuring that the individual will be able to function at a high level. While the vast majority of attachment theory research has been conducted on children, Bowlby (1973) frequently states that our attachment is by-and-large formed from infancy to adolescence. Hazan and Shaver (1994) state that only then, do our attachment styles "become relatively resistant to, but still not impervious to, change" (p. 70). Again, this refers to attachment being in a process of flux from birth through until death.

Collins and Read (1990) reinforce this by stating that "... working models and subsequent patterns of attachment are not static. Instead, mental models are dynamic representations that may be altered in response to new information" (p. 661). Therefore, through the process of self-understanding and ongoing / new relationship development, the individual can alter his or her attachment style in their adulthood (Kenny & Rice, 1995). Attachment does not always fall to the parents either. Although the primary caregiver(s) for a child most frequently are the ones to provide (or not) the secure base from which the child will explore and experience the world, Hazan and Shaver (1994) state that this safety may come from any source:

Our views of the social world are no doubt multiply determined, but the experiences we have with the person on whom we most depend for comfort and security will form the foundation of our model of the world as a place in which comfort and security can be reliably counted on or not (p. 71).

Human beings require the 'other' to know safety. In isolation, there is only independence and self-sufficiency. We are social creatures and our mental and physical health often depends on the presence of others to provide safety and reassurance. Ainsworth (1969) believed this was an innate, biologically driven need. She believed that humans have cybernetic behavioral systems, which pre-exist our birth, that drive our need to find security and safety from others.

Lopez et al. (2000) report that adults with secure attachment orientations "typically describe their early relationships with parents as warm, positive, and supportive" (p. 177) while insecurely attached adults reflect a family environment that was "less warm and more conflicted, controlling, and invasive" (p. 177). This early parental bond forms what Bowlby (1973) refers to as an 'internal working model' of close relationships. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) reinforced this belief by stating that "the attachment relationships in infancy may be both a prototype and a precursor of supportive interactions in adulthood" (p. 258). While a prototype may be formed, it can be (as mentioned previously) altered by highly emotionally charged experiences where the security of the child / adolescent / young adult is threatened. Crowell and Waters (1994) reinforce this aforementioned 'across-the-lifespan' belief regarding attachment styles stating that "the similarity between the grief responses of infants and adults has been the primary piece of evidence for the attachment behavioral system being an important and powerful component of relationships throughout life" (p. 31).

### Attachment Styles

Ainsworth et al. (1978) in their study of infants, who are separated from their caregivers, discovered three main attachment patterns in infants: (a) secure, (b) preoccupied / ambivalent, and (c) avoidant. A securely attached child maintains a belief in the permanence of their caregiver, and that in times of need, the caregiver will respond and provide the comfort and

security that they require. When the caregiver is readily accessible and attentive to the needs of the child, the child extrapolates from this that they are lovable and worthy. Insecurely attached children, on the other hand, do not experience the same level of trust that the caregiver will come to them in times of need. However, for the purposes of this study, it is important to recognize how attachment is seen in an adult population. Within the adult attachment literature, the labels on attachment styles have been altered to include a wider variety of attachment behaviors. Crowell and Waters (1994) state that adult attachment styles are “commonly labeled *secure*, *preoccupied or anxious / ambivalent*, and *dismissing or anxious / avoidant*” (p. 33).

### Secure Attachment

Securely attached individuals balance their relationships between being close and intimately involved while at the same time maintaining their own independence and autonomy. “Individuals with a secure attachment style are confident and trusting in intimacy, develop closeness with others easily, tend to feel stable and committed in their relationships, and rarely worry about being abandoned” (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002, p. 192). Secure individuals are also more readily able to seek out support and assistance in times of need as well as being able to use themselves as a secure base for the safety / security of others. Within sexual relationships, “secure adults were more likely to be involved in mutually initiated sexual activity and to enjoy physical contact than were other adults” (Cassidy, 2001, p. 138). The securely attached adult is able to interact with the world in a manner in which they maintain feelings of safety and a belief that others are primarily benevolent and not necessary for their survival.

### Preoccupied or Anxious / Ambivalent

Within their adult relationships, anxious / ambivalent adults “tend to be excessively focused on relationships and . . . have a high level of proximity seeking and [they] constantly [monitor] their attachment figure” (Davila & Bradbury, 2001, p. 372). These individuals consistently report having more difficulties in their relationships and they employ fewer coping strategies within their relationships (Crowell et al., 2002). Anxiously / ambivalently attached individuals have been found to express higher levels of jealousy than securely attached adults, they appear to desire higher levels of closeness than their partners wish, they see others in their life as untrustworthy and not dependable, and they report worrying about whether or not their partner will leave the relationship (Brennan & Shaver, 1998; Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Feeney et al., 2002). Cassidy (2001) states that anxious / ambivalent adults’ “heightened desire for closeness reflects an impairment of the attachment system that would be likely to interfere with intimacy, because to expect someone else to fill all one’s needs, to be utterly dependent on another, to be threatened by another person’s natural autonomy strivings, is bound to lead to ambivalence and resentment in both partners” (pp. 128-129).

In sexual relationships, anxious / ambivalent university-age women were more likely “to report engaging in extra-relationship sex and . . . practices such as voyeurism and exhibitionism” (Feeney et al., 2000, p. 1107) as well as dominance / bondage (Cassidy, 2001). Anxious / ambivalent males on the other hand described being sexually disinterested or reluctant to engage in sexual relationships (Cassidy, 2001). Anxious / ambivalent adults see security as a tenuous and ephemeral experience and maintain a general belief that they will ultimately be left alone by others.

### Dismissing or Anxious / Avoidant

Anxious / avoidant adults are generally characterized as fearing the intimacy of relationships and prefer to rely upon themselves to an excess. Anxious / avoidant individuals maintain emotional distance from others and appear to have difficulty trusting others and believing that they are dependable (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). When their partner's desire higher levels of intimacy, they report feeling uncomfortable. In sexual relationships, anxious / ambivalent individuals report "less enjoyment of physical contact and their sexual behaviors were more likely to be those with low psychological intimacy (one-night stands, sex outside the relationship, sex without love)" (Cassidy, 2001, pp. 138-139).

### Adult Attachment and Romantic Love

As previously mentioned, Bowlby (1979) believed that attachment continued to be affected into adulthood. Crowell et al. (2002) write that "mental representations are open to revision in light of important relationship experiences throughout childhood, adolescence, and adult life . . . a powerful opportunity for change appears to have been afforded" (p. 476) by developing an adult romantic partnership. Insecure attachments from childhood / adolescence can be altered or even healed through a secure attachment with a partner. A healthy / secure adult attachment relationship maintains a different bond than the parent-child bond. Between adults, the bond is that of peers where both individuals play both the caregiver and receiver roles. It is a reciprocal relationship where each individual has strength as an individual accompanied with the ability to ask for and give support and security. Similar to the adult-child attachment model, however, adult attachment involves a relationship "in which proximity to a special and preferred other is sought and maintained to achieve a sense of security" (West & Sheldon-Keller,

1994, p. 19). The ability to move with free-flow between autonomy and dependence is what best exemplifies a secure adult attachment.

Shaver et al. (1988) believe that a secure adult romantic bond involves three behavioral systems: (a) attachment, (b) caregiving, and (c) sexual mating. They emphasize that the attachment system provides the foundation for establishing the romantic connection between adults. What this means is that attachment style has been found to influence the type of partner people select or are attracted to. As Hazan and Shaver (1987) state, people who possess different attachment styles describe having dissimilar views of what romantic love is, of what loneliness is, and they have dissimilar relationship patterns that they have developed through their family of origin. This final point is based on the parent-child attachment that each individual adult had to their primary caregiver. Brennan and Shaver (1998) write that, "adult romantic love has been conceptualized as an attachment process that is conceptually parallel to most people's earliest relationship: infant to mother (p. 837). What is not parallel to the parent-child bonding is the requirement within a romantic relationship to not only receive, but to give care. Cassidy (2001) believes that all studies on adult caregiving within romantic relationships require this dual ability with regard to giving care.

The ability to give the care and security necessary to the relationship is a strongly determining factor to the overall success of the relationship. For securely attached partners, they may experience a deepening connection and intimacy to their partner, while insecurely attached adults may, for example, overly distance or pursue their partners, seeking to recreate or heal their insecure attachment to their primary caregiver. Davila and Bradbury (2001) report that, "attachment functions are transferred to the romantic partner and, as such, the adult romantic relationship follows similar processes and serves similar functions as the childhood attachment relationship" (p. 372). Each partner has relationship expectations that have developed throughout their life and these expectations are replicated in their choice of mate. Caspi and

Herbener (1990) and Volling et al. (1998) believe that adults select mates who have similar backgrounds and social history in order to create their expectations of what a relationship should be, unhealthy or not. Guerrero (1996) agrees stating that, "those having positive models of others display communication styles reflecting intimacy, whereas those having negative models of others exhibit communication styles reflecting avoidance and detachment" (p. 269). It is not, however, a *fait d'accompli* that insecurely attached individuals are destined to have poor, insecure relationships. There exists an opportunity through the new adult romantic relationship that the adult is able to reconcile / heal their insecure attachment and develop a secure base (Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Crowell et al., 2002). This does not mean that the romantic partner becomes the new parent as the insecurely attached individual must also be open to new experiences, to exploring and gaining confidence in the world as a safe place. In fact, Crowell et al. (2002) emphasize that it is the opportunity for change that is created in all new relationships that can alter attachment style. They state that the new partner doesn't even have to be securely attached for this to take place.

If attachment insecurity remains unresolved in adult relationships, however, the impact on the long-term health of the relationship can be very detrimental. Davila and Bradbury (2001) report that "a number of scholars have theorized that marital distress is grounded in attachment problems" (p. 372). Kobak et al. (1994) postulate that the symptoms seen in marital distress are in fact poorly communicated attachment signals. Davila and Bradbury (2001) state that in particular, "concerns about abandonment and love worthiness" (p. 372) may cause a great deal of damage to the adult romantic relationship. These worries and concerns can often result in relationship insecurity and put undue strain on the relationship and can cause aggressive or withdrawing behaviour in the partners. It is important to note, however, that the vast majority of research conducted on adult attachment and romantic relationships has been conducted on college-aged populations and must be evaluated with that specific population in mind.



## Infidelity and Adult Attachment

As previously mentioned, insecurely attached individuals, particularly anxious / ambivalent adults, have been found to be more likely to engage in extramarital sexual activity. There is evidence that this pattern is often established in adolescence where insecurely attached individuals have been found to engage in sexual activity at an earlier age and have more partners than securely attached individuals (Feeney et al., 2000; Bogaert and Sadava, 2002). Bogaert and Sadava (2002) have gone as far as to suggest that “one might expect that attachment insecurity should predict affairs because insecure individuals may be more interested in short-term sexual relations generally and because they have more conflict in their relationships” (p. 193). However, not all insecurely attached individuals engage in infidelity. Yet, it reinforces the necessity of investigation into whether a parent’s infidelity negatively impacts their ability to attach and leads them to

The impact of infidelity on a relationship has also been suggested to negatively impact the cuckolded partner’s sense of safety in the world, their attachment style. Bowlby (1979) wrote that the threat of losing or being separated from an attachment figure results in feelings of separation anxiety and if the attachment object is permanently removed, the individual feels grief. Both the threat and actuality of the loss result in anger because the person who experiences the loss can no longer rely upon the attachment figure being present. Mitchell (2000) writes about this when he states that for both the infidel and the cuckolded spouse, “each is invested in the avoidance of deeper intimacy which could threaten to re-acquaint them with the frightening experience of early object loss” (p. 384). Loss can lead to a decreased sense of safety in the world and thus can negatively impact upon the attachment style of each partner, especially the cuckolded spouse who Mitchell (2000) believes, is “wedded . . . to shame and loss

of love” (p. 383). The push / pull of insecurely attached relationships then make them both difficult to stay in and to leave because either way, the attachment bond is hurt.

### Attachment and the Impact of Divorce

While there is a paucity of studies on the impact of parent’s infidelity on attachment behavior / styles, some studies have been conducted on whether parental divorce is connected to attachment styles in young adults. In their study of a nationally representative sample, Mickelson et al. (1997) found that both parental divorce and separation were negatively related to secure attachment yet positively related to anxious attachment. White et al. (1985) did not find any difference in attachment styles but did discover a weaker emotional attachment to non-custodial parents following divorce. However, two of the most recent investigations into the impact of parental divorce on child attachment styles were unable to find significant effects (Lopez et al., 2000; Brennan & Shaver, 1993) and they suggest that “the experiences of parental divorce is not, in and of itself, meaningfully associated with college student’s orientation toward either avoidance or anxiety in their intimate peer relationships” (Lopez et al., 2000, p. 182). It is interesting though that these findings counter Bowlby’s (1988) belief that unsettling life experiences including loss and grief can be directly responsible for altering internalized schemas and attachment styles. Hopefully, as more research is done in this area, the impact of family of origin disturbances on adult children will become clearer.

### Summary of the Literature

Infidelity literature suggests that the reaction of the non-participating spouse is similar to a trauma reaction and that in order to heal the devastation of an infidelity within the marriage, a full and complete explication of the details of the affair must be forthcoming. For children,

while the literature present is largely anecdotal, there is a belief that the aforementioned trauma reaction resides in children as well post-infidelity discovery. Children can also be triangulated into the marital disruption due to infidelity (choosing sides, comforting the betrayed spouse, asked to accept the new partner) and that a long-term impact of this experience is believed to be present.

Divorce and Marital Conflict literature states that infidelity is the number one stated reason for divorce and that over one million children in North America will experience parental divorce each year. Along with the greater propensity for academic, behavioural, and social problems, these children have been found to have an increased chance to have failed relationships in their adulthood.

Adult Attachment literature suggests to us that the attachment to the primary caregivers is malleable across the lifespan and that a highly charged emotional incident that threatens the safety of the child can forever alter the security bond. The combination of these three branches of literature lead to the research question for this investigation: What is the impact of parents' extramarital sexual activity on their children and their children's monogamous sexual relationships?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The selection of a research method is done with the intent of matching the goals of the research question. In the present study, the goal is not to derive conclusions or to prove or disprove a theoretical position. The research question, "What is the impact of parents' extramarital sexual activity on their adult children and their monogamous sexual relationships?" focuses on the lived-experiences of adult children of adulterous parents as it relates to their life and their ability to form their own monogamous relationships. The purpose of this study is to inform the field of Counselling Psychology of the potential impact(s) of parents' extramarital affairs on their children and to understand if / how infidelity affects the 'next generation's' ability to form their own healthy monogamous relationships. In attempting to identify a research method that was (a) congruent with the researcher's assumptions and beliefs about the experience of this population and (b) appropriate and compatible with the purpose of the study, Heidegger's (1962) Hermeneutical Phenomenology was chosen.

Phenomenological approaches to psychological research have been used to understand and illuminate human science for over thirty years (Hein & Austin, 2001). Where other methods are limited in their ability to describe certain human conditions (i.e. passion, death, birth, and love), phenomenology allows a unique perspective that informs both the theory and practice of psychology. Phenomenology belongs to the qualitative school of methodology due to its strong emphasis on language, texts, and a lack of structuring in the data that attributes numbers to human understanding and meaning.

Polkinghorne (1992) states that the term 'qualitative research' refers to a specific perception of human existence; it is not simply a grouping of methodologies. Human beings are complex, rich with diversity, and deep with meaning. Qualitative research links these qualities to

language as a means of accessing human reality. Phenomenology separates itself from the field of qualitative methods by defining separate goals for research outcome. Van der Zalm and Bergum (2000) write that, “the epistemology of phenomenology focuses on revealing meaning rather than on arguing a point or developing abstract theory” (p. 212). Therefore, the aim of phenomenology is not to arrive at conclusions, to be definitive, or to form generalizations that would suggest human beings can be labeled. Instead, phenomenology seeks to understand the meaning that unique individuals ascribe to their lived experience (Johnson, 2000). Meaning is the cornerstone of understanding and explanation. Meaning cannot be quantified and the approach of the natural sciences cannot adequately access this doorway to humanity. The phenomenological method, specifically hermeneutical phenomenology, allows for the exposure of unique meaning in order that participants might explain their experiences so that others may understand.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 - 1911) is often credited for separating and providing a contrast between human and natural science. Natural science is founded on the assumptions that we must be able to observe the object under study, that we can measure or define the properties of the object in question, and that these observations and measurements are replicable by other researchers. Dilthey believed that human study could not exist within the parameters of *Naturwissenschaften* [the natural sciences] without missing or eliminating the core components of humanness.

van Manen (1990) writes that “for Dilthey the proper subject matter for the *Geisteswissenschaften* [human sciences] is the human world characterized by Geist – mind, thoughts, consciousness, values, feelings, emotions, actions, and purposes” (p. 3) and that these ephemeral qualities of humanity become objectified through “language, beliefs, arts, and institutions” (van Manen, 1990, p. 3). One cannot replicate consciousness, conclusively define a feeling, or predict a value. As van Manen (1990) writes, “phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a

philosophy or *theory of the unique*; it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable” (p. 7). Dilthey and phenomenologists believe that it is only through rich description, writing, discussion, and a contextual examination of the history, culture, and art of a people that you can understand and inform both the theory and practice of psychology.

van Manen emphasizes that unlike the empirically driven approach of natural science, phenomenology does not seek to ‘teach’; phenomenology does not hierarchically dictate to psychological practice and it does not separate us or decontextualize us from the world. Rather, phenomenology provides insight into our experience and situates us in the world; it flips the positivist perspective on research and states that, “practice (or life) always comes first and theory comes later as a result of reflection” (van Manen, 1990, p. 15). Experience informs us about what it means to be human and experience can only be accessed retrospectively. Meaningful experience is “the basis for all knowledge and human behaviour” (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 7). We must live life before we can explain or understand what it means to be alive. This is the fundamental tenet of phenomenological thought.

Phenomenology further separates itself from both natural science and other human science methods through the role of the researcher. In all forms of research, qualitative and quantitative, the researcher is encouraged to maintain an inner awareness, a self-understanding of the assumptions and presuppositions they hold on the subject (or object) of their research. However, within phenomenology, these assumptions and presuppositions *must* be explicated so as to avoid “obtaining results that are primarily a reflected image of something already existing in our understanding” (Nystrom & Dahlberg, 2001, p. 339). Within phenomenological thought there exists diverging views on the process of explicating our existing knowledge and perspective which will later be explored in this paper, but the foundation of clarifying our pre-understandings is a core requirement to phenomenological research.

Hein and Austin (2001) write that a “presuppositionless perspective from which to analyze descriptions may be . . . unattainable, but the phenomenological reduction is nevertheless important in increasing our awareness of such influences and their role in the research process” (p. 9). Can we truly know or convey all of our experiences, thoughts, and feelings towards our research topic? Can we be aware of the environmental factors that contribute to the beliefs, values, and understanding of our worldview? The answer most certainly is no. Our conscious experience of a phenomena is one that a researcher “cannot make fully explicit and cannot get completely clear about or clear of” (Benner, 1985, p. 5) yet the effort must be made in order to situate the researcher within the process of the research and to frame a context from which the results of the research may be viewed. Without this process, the researcher risks supplanting their worldview on to the lived experience of others, superimposing their pre-understandings and experience and altering the foundational *theory of the unique* that van Manen (1990) speaks of.

What does phenomenological research produce then? How does it inform theory and practice? Van der Zalm and Bergum (2000) clarify the results of phenomenological inquiry stating that they “provide us with a life-world account of a phenomena upon which we can reflect, and say, ‘so, that is what it is like. . .’” (p. 216). However, life is not static; life is complex, ever-changing, indefinable, and with each description of a lived experience there is an alternate experience that exists. “All phenomenological descriptions can be challenged by another phenomenological description . . .” (Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000, p. 212) and it is this transitory nature of phenomenology that aligns it with human experience: phenomenology is a mirror to human experience, a reflection of its focus of study.

van Manen (1990) states that because phenomenology lacks the staticity of the natural or empirical sciences, it “does not allow for empirical generalizations, the production of law-like statements, or the establishment of functional relationships” (p. 22). Instead of predicting,

phenomenology sensitizes us to possibilities, it informs us of the experiences of *some* while refusing to paint human complexity with the broad brush of conclusions and prescriptions. The 'results' of phenomenology are validated by "mutual recognition given by the 'phenomenological nod' which says 'yes, that is an experience I could have'" (Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000, p. 212).

### *History of the Method*

Within phenomenological thought, philosophy, and research, there are two definable streams that share history, foundational beliefs, and practice: Edmund Husserl's (1859 - 1938) existential / descriptive phenomenology and Martin Heidegger's (1889 - 1976) interpretive / hermeneutic phenomenology. While there is significant agreement and similarity between these two schools of phenomenological thought, there also exists disagreement and divergence. Both similarities and differences in theory, the role of the researcher, and interpretation of 'data' will be explored in this chapter along with an exploration of the hermeneutic circle of inquiry which further distinguishes these two methods in order that a clear rationale is demonstrated for the researcher's choice of Hermeneutic Phenomenology for this study.

Hein and Austin (2001) state that while there are multiple forms of phenomenological thought and research, the "majority . . . can be classified into either two broad categories. . . empirical phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology" (p. 4). For the purpose of this study, empirical phenomenology will be used interchangeably with either descriptive, transcendental, or Husserlian phenomenology while hermeneutic phenomenology will often be referred to as Heideggerian or interpretive phenomenology. These two schools of thought are founded on similar theoretical and philosophical bases yet as they have formed into psychological research methodologies, significant differences have appeared. Dilthey (1831 –



1911), who is often referred to as the father of hermeneutic phenomenology, stated that the main differences between these two schools lay in how they believed humans experience the world: “(a) standing back separately and observing a world conceived as composed of natural objects, and (b) living in the world – we cannot ever live and interact with people and things without adopting a stance towards them, an inextricable involvement” (in Chessick, 1990, p. 257). This is primarily the struggle between natural and human science. How can we explore the ephemeral and complex world of human experience while at the same time employing scientific rigor and meaningful discovery? This is where we begin to distinguish interpretive and descriptive phenomenology.

Ontologically, Heidegger (1962) found discomfort with Husserl’s (1931) basic definition of phenomenology believing it to be too closely linked with natural scientific goals of “certainty and absolute clarity” (Fleming et al., 2002, p. 114). Husserl sought to employ rigorous and impartial perspectives on human experience with the belief that, through research, we might systematically arrive at “an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6; Hein & Austin, 2001). Conscious understanding is the key to Husserl’s phenomenology as it allows the researcher to access experience.

It is a human constant; to experience our world we must be awake, conscious of our environment and therefore “conscious awareness is . . . the starting point of knowledge building” (Draucker, 1999, p. 361). To understand human experience, a detailed description of conscious awareness must be provided. Through thick description, researchers can circumvent “the naïve naturalism of science and provide a point of departure for solving philosophical problems” (Buckley, 1997, p. 328). Consciousness then, is a form of truth for Husserl and description is the means of attaining this knowledge. What we perceive and understand of our experiences is our fundamental truth, not a generalizable or summative truth, but a unique perspective that when

added to the voices of others can provide the basis of *eidos*, the universal essence of a phenomena.

However, consciousness, for Husserl, does not in itself provide a route to human experience. Descriptive phenomenology relies on “theoretical thinking” (Fleming et al., 2002, p. 114) to provide clear a clear portrayal of conscious thought. What this means is that consciousness must be connected to meaning in order to “provide a reliable foundation for the further development of knowledge” (Fleming et al., 2002, p. 114). To summarize then, conscious links to the meaning we derive from experience is explicated through description (language) which then forms a base for further exploration and gathering of knowledge.

Giorgi (1992) refers to this process of investigation as a “descriptive science” (p. 121) that is lacking in hermeneutic phenomenological thought. Heidegger (1962) suggested that Husserl’s focus on placating the requirements of natural science (i.e. ensuring scientific rigor) causes descriptive phenomenology to neglect the phenomena under investigation; the true essence of human experience cannot be boundaried by the laws of empirically based scientific inquiry.

While Heidegger and Husserl had fundamental disagreements with the nature of scientific investigation, it is meaning, the key to understanding our conscious experience of phenomena, where the two streams of phenomenological thought truly part company. Husserl’s (1962) belief that meaning is derived through thick description of conscious reflection on a experience is seen by Heideggerian phenomenology as woefully incomplete. Heidegger (1962) believes that the individual’s context must be accounted for in understanding meaning. “One’s humanity, one’s culture, one’s personal situation or the practices adopted by a particular group” (Rescher, 1996, p. 114) along with a historical and sociological context provides the primary basis for situating meaning. Secondly, hermeneutical phenomenology argues that meaning “arises not from consciousness, but from the essential finitude of being human” (Johnson, 2000,

p. 135). Hermeneutical phenomenology argues that human beings cannot be removed from their environment. We cannot separate our history, our cultural knowledge, or our humanity in order to isolate our experiences.

Bauman (1978) states that interpretive phenomenology is founded on the premise that, “meanings are constituted, and understanding is called for and accomplished, not in the act of pure, a-historical contemplation, which is always an activity with a tradition, and an activity which consists in recapitulating this tradition” (p. 17). Heidegger takes Husserl’s concept of *lebenswelt* or life-world (which espouses that human beings are consciously positioned towards an object, towards our world and that this is intentional (Hein & Austin, 2001)) and he alters it to mean “being-in-the-world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 183). With this alteration, human beings cannot decontextualize themselves. “Hermeneutic phenomenology is holistic in that it seeks to study the person” (Benner, 1985, p. 2) in their context, without pulling them apart. We are in the world and how we derive meaning is impacted by being present in the world. Magee (1988), states that Heidegger dismissed Husserl’s assertion that we are able to observe the world from without; that we can extract ourselves from the world of objects. Instead, individuals are “inseparable from an already existing world” (Draucker, 1999, p. 361). As a result of this alteration, the very concept of knowledge is essentially different when viewing empirical and interpretive phenomenology.

Husserl’s previously stated desire to build a reliable basis of knowledge, founded on the presupposition that there exists an essence, a buried commonality of human experience that can only be uncovered through description, is rejected by hermeneutics. Instead, Heidegger was “interested in the possibilities of Being, in which existence knows itself only in relation with others and other objects . . . thus no experience could be like another. Every perceived experience is unique” (Fleming et al., 2002, p. 114). Essentially, what this means is that no human being has an identical historical background, culture, or worldview. van Manen (1990)

summarizes by stating that hermeneutic phenomenology “is a human science which studies persons . . . the term ‘person’ refers to the uniqueness of each human being” (p. 6).

An additional area of divergence between hermeneutic and descriptive phenomenology is in human development. Whereas Husserl (1931) believed in a human being’s ability to extricate him/herself from their world, to be the subject viewing an object and expounding upon their experience of the object, Heidegger believed that human knowledge “rests upon the premise that our fundamental mode of being in the world is that of understanding and interpreting; there is no knowledge free of presuppositions” (Chessick, 1990, p. 258). Our experiences then are always in context and stand on the building blocks of our prior knowledge, our history as it were. Because human understanding is, by Heideggerian definition, an interpretation, our knowledge of human experience can only take place at the meeting of our “horizons” (Chessick, 1990, p. 260). The ‘horizon’ is a coming together of perspectives and experiences, essentially a joining of meanings where the goal is not to be prescriptive or conclusive. ‘Horizon’ is designed to allow for all experience and all meanings to be included and it is “the essential concept of modern hermeneutics because it undercuts the Cartesian opposition of subject and object and is the very condition or possibility of anything at all appearing or being known” (Chessick, 1990, p. 260). The concept of Cartesian dualism provides one of the largest splits between descriptive and interpretive phenomenology.

Can the subject remove him/herself from the object or are they one and the same?

Whereas Husserl described his lifeworld theory as “an antithesis of all objectivism” (Nystrom & Dahlberg, 2001, p. 339), his concept of the individual remains linked to the duality of the subject / object world. Dreyfus (1988) states that Husserl’s phenomenology is synonymous with Cartesian dualism as it is founded on the concepts of a subject (human) being directed towards an object (their conscious experience and meaning). Husserl believed that we can de-contextualize ourselves, ‘bracket’ ourselves out of our experience in order to reflect with clarity

on our experiences. The self is a moveable subject that can separate from the object in order to view it, describe it, and observe it:

[Husserl] incorporates the French-Cartesian legacy of rationalism . . . the hope that meanings can be adequately grasped is now seen to reside in the possibility of freeing the meaning from its tradition-bound context, instead of meeting it there, in its 'natural' habitat. Historically and structurally determined tradition can only produce understanding inherently protean and contingent. Meanings can be grasped in the apodictic, absolute truth only outside that tradition, where they can be rooted in soil on which history and structural divisions have no impact. Husserl postulates 'transcendental-subjectivity' as such a soil, as a sort of extra-historical 'community of meanings' which generates and sustains phenomena in the only relevant mode of existence – in the mode of 'being known'. True meanings can be glimpsed only if one gets access to this 'transcendental subjectivity'. This can be done by a phenomenological contemplation of 'pure meanings', as disclosed by the experience of phenomena laid bare of their historical-structural guise." (Bauman, 1978, p. 17)

For Husserl then, absolute truth lies outside of context, outside of history, culture, and language. He believed that there is a level of human consciousness in which 'pure meaning' is accessible and by extricating the subject from his/her 'tradition-bound context' we can truly know the meanings behind an experience. Splitting subject from object is where meaning begins and ends and all other meaning is confounded by context. "The self is viewed as a possession and attributes are given objectively as possessions by the subject in a purely intentional way. This view cannot take account of the historical, cultural, embodied, situated person" (Benner, 1985, p. 2). Instead of the focus on the person situated in their context, Husserl used the concept of intentionality to describe how human beings orient themselves to their lifeworld. Husserl's belief was that "there is always an intentional relationship with the things that make up our everyday lives; that is, we understand the meanings of things we use and that we see around us as the things and places that belong to and signify our world" (Nystrom & Dahlberg, 2001, p. 341). People are subjects oriented towards objects. We develop this intentional relationship in order to make meaning of our world; we define the objects that make up our world and this is a one-way process.

Hermeneutics rejects this vision and concept of human knowledge and meaning making. Instead, hermeneutic phenomenology believes that human knowledge is limited; inextricably confounded by our context and that the very foundation of how Husserl's phenomenology views the individual is incorrect. "The person is studied in the situation and pragmatic involved activity is considered the way of knowing and being" (Benner, 1985, p. 8). To study the person outside of their reality is incomplete and furthermore, it is impossible. Humans are immersed in our history, community and culture. Draucker (1999) writes that "experiences can only be understood in terms of one's background, or historicity, and the social context of the experience" (p. 361). We create and are created by our environment and we must use this context to interpret our meaning of the world. Valle et al. (1989) write that "without a person to reveal its sense and meaning, the world would not exist as it does . . . existence always implies that being is actually 'being-in-the-world'" (p. 7). This means that how we interpret our world directly impacts how we interact with our world; Heidegger's phenomenology focuses more on this interpretation of an experience as opposed to Husserl's belief in the description.

The three essential tenants of Heideggerian phenomenology are that: (a) humans derive meaning through self-interpretation and their experiences are constructions based on context; (b) human beings' self-concepts and perceptions are self-defined; and (c) the meanings a human can extract from an experience are always limited and bounded by context, yet these meanings are never static but instead they are living creations capable of change (Brenner, 1985, p. 4). All meaning is interpreted experience, and all meaning is defined only in the moment, a snapshot that once viewed will provide a new interpretation and deeper meaning and understanding. This cyclical process is known the hermeneutic circle of inquiry and will be explored at greater length.

The hermeneutic circle rejects Husserl's concept of 'absolute truth' and, as Gadamer (1992) states, "[the hermeneutic circle] is the process of questioning and interpretation and

reflection that develops a version of truth” (p. 261). Truth is never absolute, nor is it ever attainable. Heidegger (1962) coined the concept of *daesin*, the aspect of humanness that is curious about our own humanity and existence; of finding our own truth and meaning of Being. However, truths are as unique as human beings and dependent on context and interpretation. Therefore, when it comes to conducting interpretive phenomenological research, van Manen (1990) reminds us that “to *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal (p. 18). Human beings cannot be defined in a concrete, static, natural science perspective. We are always in the process of becoming; this is Heidegger’s concept of temporality where because time moves forward, human beings interpretation of experience has no finality except in death (Johnson, 2000). There is no end to the exploration of meaning. There is only the fusion of horizons.

### *The Researcher*

Phenomenological thought states that the researcher must understand and explicate his/her own understanding of the phenomenon to be explored. Fleming et al. (2003) state that “if one does not recognize one’s preunderstandings, there is a risk that one will fail to understand or will misjudge meaning” (p. 115). This is an attempt to open the process of research and is based on the idea that it will allow the researcher to remain receptive to the meaning that research participants attribute to their experience. Nystrom and Dahlberg (2001) state that preunderstanding, “emanates from a tradition or context with which the researcher is familiar, and it may facilitate as well as constrain understanding” (p. 341).

Within hermeneutic phenomenology, and this study, it is not possible for the researcher to “bracket out” my experiences as in other phenomenological forms. While the researcher is expected to reveal preunderstandings and assumptions, these are viewed from the perspective that “no ultimate ground of knowledge outside history and culture is possible” (Chessick, 1990, p. 259). Researchers must access their own experiences; discuss their experiences with others while opening their mind to hearing the perspectives external to their own. They must also infiltrate the world of literature, film, art, and music to examine how others portray their experience. As it is essential for the researcher to explicate their prior understandings and the impact of their culture, media, and other influences, I have included both my own story of the impact of my parents’ adultery and my presuppositions and pre-understandings in the previous Chapter of this study.

Gadamer (1992) states that human beings are in their history, in their culture, combined with and influenced by the people and texts they contact and, as such, they are immovable from their world. Bracketing does not take these contextual components into account. Heidegger and other interpretive phenomenologists therefore view bracketing as “necessarily incomplete because as we uncover and bracket presuppositions, other hidden ones are discovered beneath them. That is, we are always in the world . . .” (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 9). Therefore, the clarity of vision that Husserl endorsed, can never be attained as we can never be clear of our assumptions, our daily lives, and our ‘self’ is always connected to the ‘other’ in an inseparable fashion.

Gadamer (1992) goes further to state that overcoming our prejudices is an unattainable task and that “no technique and method can ever secure absolute objectivity in interpretation” (Chessick, 1990, p. 261). Our ‘horizon’, the meaning in which we attribute to our experiences, floats and never reaches a stable or static place. Our understanding of history and culture and self, all of the components of our horizon, are everchanging and undergoing deeper



interpretation. These components, culture, history, and “our bodily being” are aspects “which are so pervasive as to be nearly invisible” (Chessick, 1990, p. 260). Therefore, Gadamer affirms that the researcher, or interpreter, will always bring their presuppositions or prejudices with him/her and that these preunderstandings “form a sort of foreknowledge and serve as a matrix or prism through which the data are organized and interpreted” (Chessick, 1990, p. 257). All interpretation in research arrives with the prejudices of the researcher attached. In order to understand the interpretations of the researcher then, the readers must understand these prejudices, and more importantly, the researcher must be aware of the bias I may bring. “Otherwise, it is impossible to confront ‘the otherness’ of a phenomenon in the process of research” (Nystrom & Dahlberg, 2001, p. 340). In essence what this is stating is that viewing the results of hermeneutic research without the voice and context of the researcher would be like listening to only one side of a phone conversation. Understanding can be attained, but it is incomplete and lacking in clarity. It is for the purpose and understanding of the reader then that the author’s story is made plain:

*Author’s Story: The Foundation of Biases and Presuppositions*

In 1976, my parents were engaged in constant battles. Every day was full of conflict and I can remember spending a lot of time in my room with the door closed as I sat behind it listening to my parents fight. Sometime during the summer, my dad moved out of the house and into an apartment. I don’t remember feeling upset about dad leaving; there was just relief as the fighting stopped. My parent’s told both my sister and myself that they needed time apart because of the fighting and that it wasn’t our fault. Beyond that, I didn’t know why they were in such conflict and I wouldn’t know until 5 years later.

I first learned of my father's extramarital affair at the age of 10. An old filing cabinet was stashed away in a seldom-used room in the house. I recall going through that filing cabinet which contained my parents' university assignments and various stored documents. I was looking for paper. I found my father's journal from 1976. I don't recall it saying "Journal" or anything on the front. It was a non-descript exercise book with a black hard-cover and a white sticker with my father's name on the front. I opened it up and saw that there were dated entries and I began to read. I'm not sure why I read, let alone opened, the book. My memory of myself at that age was one of curiosity. Endless curiosity. I loved looking through old things, items with history and meaning. I often wish that I hadn't chosen that book and that I never learned about my father's affair. However, what's done cannot be undone. It can only be understood and learned from. The content of the book was not important in itself. It was the message within the content.

The first and only paragraph I happened to read described my father's relationship with another woman. I don't remember reading more than that one segment of his journal. It's still a hazy memory for me. Similar to a patient being diagnosed with an illness, you remember the message but blank out on the details, the content. I can recall feeling several competing emotions: numb at first, then curiosity, confusion, and a nervous / anxious feeling that always seemed to come on when I found myself in a place that I didn't think I should be. The feelings of anger came later.

I never confronted my father with this information until I was an adult. I remember though that I was very angry with him and for months I would have very little to do with him or say to him. I don't think that I was consciously linking the actual act of infidelity to the anger; I just didn't feel like being around him after reading that selected journal entry. My father never asked me why I was angry; he just seemed to stay away. It was my mother who finally addressed my detached behaviour. I was in the kitchen of our family home preparing a sandwich

and she stood at the door and said, "Why are you so angry at your father?" I don't recall exactly how I responded but the gist of my answer was that he had cheated on her. She appeared shocked by my response by the look on her face. The next thing I remember her saying was that I shouldn't just be mad at him because she had had an affair too. It was now my turn to be shocked and in some way I can remember 'turning off' at that point. Completely blank. I just didn't know how to work with that information.

My mom went on to explain to me how she had been very angry with my dad after his affair and so she had engaged in an outside relationship as well. The feelings I had towards mom as a result of her revelation were many. Anger, disappointment, disgust, understanding, sorrow, all of these were present. As an adult I believe that I came to forgive my mother for her transgressions far in advance of my father for reasons which will soon become clear.

My parents separated as a result of my dad's infidelity for about three months. I can remember my mom crying a lot and my sister and me trying to comfort her. My sister recalls wanting mom to leave dad because of the hurt we witnessed her go through. It was hard watching mom and I remember her talking to me about her feelings and I have an image of her crying while I held her. That was scary for me as I felt like I had to care for her and neither her or dad (who was now gone) were able to care for me. I was about six when that happened.

When I was older, I came across a journal of my mother's from the time of my dad's affair. It was by accident that I came across it and I'm not sure if my mom even recalls its existence, but it was impactful to me as mom was describing her rage and disgust at my dad's actions. Her writing was thick and scrawled on the page as though written with a clenched fist and she wrote about how angry she was that my dad was able to meet his needs while she was left to be 'the responsible one' who had to take care of the kids. I remember mom crying all of the time at the time of the affair and being a witness to the rage in her journal entries rekindled

the feelings of anger I had towards dad for letting his desires hurt the people he purported to love.

The first and biggest event that helped me deal with the affairs was mom's willingness to engage me on what happened. She answered my questions and seemed to understand that I was impacted by their infidelities and that it was her responsibility to be accountable. My father didn't address his actions directly until I was in my late 20's. His willingness to listen to my questions and to discuss affairs and my research has helped us to move past the barrier that had remained for so many years. I get the sense from both of them that there remains a sense of shame surrounding their behaviour but their willingness to face my questions and open themselves to the past have allowed us to have a more adult, and clean relationship.

The second thing that helped me with my mom was having her apologize. I don't recall hearing an apology directly from my dad, although I'd have to say it was implied. Apologies, in my understanding, are social constructions designed to allow individuals to account for transgressions where they believe / understand that their actions or behaviours have negatively impacted on others in a way that causes some degree of hurt. Without an apology or some equivalent acknowledgement of the hurt that we cause others, I believe that the incidents such as affairs can remain open wounds within the relationship.

I feel that my dad's affair is a bit of an enigma to me. I know what he did but something is missing in my understanding of what happened and why? I don't think I know how to put myself in his shoes, to empathize with his experience or conceptualize where he was at in his life. I can arrive at my own conclusions as to why he went outside of his marriage but I still can't fully wrap my mind around the reasons for the initiation of an affair. I'm certain that there are many 'reasons' that one could arrive at for engaging in extramarital sexual activity but for some reason each idea that I come up with ends with a negative judgment in my own mind. Phrases run through my mind like, "so what?", "that's selfish", and "don't get married then".

These feelings, in my opinion, are the clash that occurs between the feelings of anger and betrayal of a child and the cognitions and understanding of my adult self.

The question that appears to be unanswered as to this point is 'how have these experiences affected me?' What I am aware of is an underlying concern or self-doubt in my own abilities to maintain a long-term monogamous relationship. I have the cognitive belief that nothing could ever lead me to have an affair yet there exists an emotional reaction that lurks somewhere in the back of my mind that doubts my fidelity. If dad could do it, if mom could do it, what makes you think you're so invulnerable? I don't know how else to describe this feeling. The thought of cheating on my partner is so incredibly unappealing and yet that nagging doubt doesn't seem to be extinguishable. I know all of the techniques for both detecting and avoiding detection of an affair in a relationship. I know the rationales for affairs; I know how to avoid affairs. My mind is sure and steady. So why is there doubt?

Friends of mine have suggested a genetic predisposition to unfaithfulness exists. Others state that we are always responsible for our actions and that to suggest otherwise is to make excuses. Comedian Chris Rock has said that "men are only as faithful as their options" and judging from some of the behaviours of friends, colleagues and clients I have been exposed to, this opinion is not so far from becoming a Truth. How does this apply to my partner and my beliefs about her ability to remain monogamous? My partner's father had numerous affairs that have been known to her from childhood. I could not trust her more. I cannot imagine a scenario in which she would cheat on our relationship. I've often thought about the fact that my father's affair is somewhat unresolved for me while my mother's is completely resolved. Does my trust for my partner extend based on trusting women to be more accountable and reliable while my own self-doubt is linked to my belief that men cannot be trusted as much and have a greater propensity for straying from their marital vows? I'm not sure but I do feel a greater sense of trust for women than men (with regard to sexual fidelity).

### *Other Significant Relationships*

Beyond my own experience with my parents are the many friendships and relationships that I've had in my thirty-three years. One of the first memories that jumps into my mind is of a conversation I recently had while visiting two childhood friends of mine. They had enquired about my research topic and when I told them they were unusually quiet. Then they both revealed that both of their fathers and one of the mothers had engaged in affairs while they were growing up. This was followed up by descriptions of their own infidelities. Now, these descriptions were stated quite matter-of-factly and I was surprised at how both of these men relayed their actions as 'normal' even though they professed to feel some elements of guilt. However surprised I was at how they described their infidelity, I wasn't surprised that they had participated in an affair. Perhaps I have become numb to the occurrences I hear about and perhaps I just expect this behaviour from people.

I recall that the earliest account of infidelity that wasn't my parents came when I was still in Elementary School. One of my best friends told me that his parents (who I had spent a large amount of time with) had decided to divorce because his dad had been having sex with a woman at his work. I don't remember the details but I do remember the tone of how my friend told me about the dissolution of his family. It was almost as though he was reading the news – no emotion – just facts and realities. Looking back on this, I might say that he was in shock, that he was in denial, or that he was attempting to put on some form of macho/bravado exterior to hide his true feelings. In speaking with him about this some twenty years later he described being very angry with his dad but did not say more. It was clearly still an area of emotional discomfort for him.

I have been preparing to conduct research on the topic of infidelity now for the past six years. As a result, I have had six years of talking with friends and co-workers about infidelity and whether / how it has impacted their own life. I have found that when I state my research topic to people, the responses I get are extremely black and white. Some people will say, "Oh really?" and take a step forward and engage me. Others will have the opposite reaction and say, "Oh really?" and take a step backward and the conversation suddenly ends. It is very rare that I get a different response or no reaction at all.

I have heard many stories about husbands and wives that have left these friends and colleagues. I have heard many stories about being a child / adolescent and having parents separate due to infidelity. I have had people volunteer their children as potential research participants while others have volunteered themselves. Throughout all of my discussions with people I have revealed my research interests to I have yet to find a single individual whose life has not been touched by infidelity in some way. At the same time, there seems to be a conflict brewing within these people. It is as though many of them are torn between wanting to talk openly about their experiences of infidelity while at the same time they often remain silent and report not wanting to embarrass or shame the people who have committed the infidelity. Perhaps these feelings are simply my projections on them. Perhaps not.

#### *Description of co-researchers*

Potential volunteer co-researchers were made aware of the present study through posters at Memorial University of Newfoundland and through discussions with classes in the Psychology Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The inclusion criteria were discussed in both the poster and in the classroom presentations. Potential volunteers were directed to contact the researcher through either phone or email at which point they were

contacted by phone in order that a pre-selection interview could be conducted. During these pre-selection interviews, the researcher ensured that potential participants met all of the inclusion criteria. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and that they may experience emotional discomfort with the topic. All seven of the individuals that contacted the researcher met the inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. 19 – 25 years of age
2. Heterosexual
3. Heterosexual parents
4. Presently in a monogamous relationship of at least six months
5. One or both parents engaged in an extramarital sexual relationship that is known to the participant
6. Ability and willingness to discuss their experience, provide informed consent, be interviewed in English, to comply with study procedures

A total of seven ( $n = 7$ ) volunteer co-researchers participated in this study. These seven people represent a theoretical sample (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). When constructing a theoretical sample, there is no predetermined number of participants needed to sufficiently explore the experience under investigation. Instead, each participant's experience is analysed and forms the foundation necessary to understand the phenomenon. New participants are added until a saturation point is reached and no new understandings are being explicated.

The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 23 years of age. The length of relationships they were presently engaged in ranged from seven months to nine years. Six of the co-researchers were unmarried and childless while one participant had been married for three years



and had a child. The age of discovery of their parent's infidelity(ies) ranged from six years of age up to 22 years of age. Six of the participants had parents who were either in the process of separation and divorce while one of the participants had parents who remained married.

Three of the participants had grown up in the St. John's, Newfoundland area while the remaining four had grown up in small coastal towns in the province of Newfoundland. Socio-economic status ranged from working-class to upper-middle class. Five of the seven had parents who were employed in blue-collar work and the other two participants had parents engaged in white-collar work. All participants were raised with a Christian religious background.

It is important to briefly discuss the Newfoundland culture as it is unique within mainland North American culture. Newfoundland is a province of just over 500,000 people in Atlantic Canada. It is currently the only province in Canada to have experienced a decrease in population over the past 50 years (Rehman, 2002, p. 44). It is a province with a heavily resource based economy and at the time of this study had an unemployment rate of 18%. Rehman (2002) states that, "to describe describe the Newfoundland culture as a subculture is not entirely accurate due to its intensity. A more appropriate term would be ethnic group" (p. 45). Spencer (1996) defines the qualities of an ethnic group as: "it shares a culture, it's members communicate and interact with one another and consider themselves to have much in common, and it's members form a community that can be distinguished from other similar social groupings" (p. 366). This definition is more than appropriate for the culture of Newfoundland.

Finally, the exclusion of homosexual children of adulterers and of homosexual infidelity is purposeful and yet unfortunate. Because Western society is still coming to grips with the concept of homosexual marriage and, by-and-large, it remains unsanctioned, the literature speaking directly to extramarital affairs deals solely with heterosexuality. This is not to suggest that the experiences of heterosexual adulterers or their children would differ from the

homosexual population. For the purpose of this study, to confine the number of limitations to the results, it has been narrowed to only select a heterosexual population.

### *Data Collection*

Hermeneutic phenomenology uses the interview very specifically. van Manen (1990) believes that interviews serve “as a means for exploring and gathering experiential, narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 66). This accurately reflects the goal of this study.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were used in collecting data in order to allow for participant-initiated meaning to be described and discussed. The structure that was provided for interviews was based on thematic and interpretive questions designed to ensure that similar ground was covered in each interview and to deepen the understanding and meaning the participant attributed to their experience. These questions were open-ended to encourage participants to answer in their own voice. Questions such as “What did you experience? Or, What was it like for you?” (Polkinghorne, 1989) were asked as opposed to more general questions such as “What happened?” In addition, following van Manen’s (1990) guidance, questions such as “How did you talk about [the phenomenon with your loved ones]?; How did you feel about that?; Can you give an example [of that experience]?; What did it feel like?” (p. 67). All questions were designed to elicit greater internal descriptions from the participants while maintaining the focus on the phenomenon under investigation. However, within these semi-structured questions, it is important to remember that hermeneutic phenomenology requires flexibility and openness in the structure of each interview, providing space for “choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures, and sources that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project” (van Manen, 1990, p. 162).

The researcher's role in the data collection is to engage the participant in a conversation and encourage the participant to freely explore their experience of the phenomenon and the meaning associated with this lived-experience (Mishler, 1986). van Manen (1990) states that the interviewer must be creative when approaching the phenomenon under investigation; these procedures must be tailored to meet the unique character of both the interviewer and participant. The interviewer follows the descriptive and interpretive process of the participant while concurrently tracking the story and ensuring a strong focus on the phenomenon under investigation. These interviews were conducted face-to-face to allow the formation of rapport and trust.

### *Interview procedures*

The first interview involved an introduction to help the participant to understand the purpose and format of the interview. The following statement was used to orient participants:

"Hello X. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As we discussed over the phone, the purpose of this study is to understand the experience adult children of parents who engaged in extramarital sexual affairs have of their parents' infidelity. My intention is to discuss your experiences in order to understand the meaning you make of your parent's infidelity and if / how it impacts on your current relationship. My goal is to determine if there is a shared experience common to all individuals whose parents engaged in infidelity. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

The researcher and co-researchers also discussed the nature of the study and established a rapport. The researcher clearly established the purpose of the study in order to avoid having

interviews diverge into non-related topics. Prior to the onset of the interview, the co-researchers were presented with a consent form which contained a description of the study's purpose, confidentiality of their interview, and their option to withdraw at any point. The consent form was read out-loud to the co-researcher and a copy was presented for the co-researcher to read along. Upon reading the consent form, the researcher offered to answer any questions the co-researcher may have had. The consent form (Appendix A) was then signed by both the researcher and co-researcher once both parties were satisfied that the material was clear.

The introduction was followed up by the interview process which consisted of a discussion of the co-researchers experience of their parent(s) adultery. Information on when they discovered the infidelity, how old they were, and how they found out was covered first in the interview after which, following the hermeneutical phenomenological method, each interview followed a pattern of explanation, interpretation, and understanding involving the researcher and co-researcher. Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for themes. In addition, after each interview had been completed and transcribed, an independent reader would review the transcript and themes elicited by the researcher to provide thematic agreement.

Two interviews were conducted for each co-researcher. The first interview was based primarily on eliciting the story and subsequent meaning and clarification of the meaning the co-researcher made of their lived experience. The second interview involved a reflection of patterns and descriptions from the first interview of each specific participant and from other participants with the purpose of eliciting any commonalities across participants. The process of reflection and interpretation of the participant's meaning of their experience continued until no new understandings were being reached. Each participant was encouraged to write down or attempt to recall any information / understanding that may be reached in between the first and second interview sessions. Interviews were always ended with the researcher's statement of:

“Is there anything that we haven’t discussed today that is important or any understandings that haven’t come up in our conversation that are important to cover before we end today?”

The second interview was introduced by the following statement:

“Thank you for coming again. As you recall, the purpose of this study is to to understand the experience adult children of parents who engaged in extramarital sexual affairs have of their parents’ infidelity. I have transcribed our last interview and I’ve identified some potential themes / experiences that I’d like to discuss further with you. Before we begin, I’d like to ask you what your experience of the first interview was. Was there anything that stood out for you or that you recall strongly from our first interview?”

Interviews were conducted at the Counselling Centre of Memorial University of Newfoundland. Each interview was tape recorded with the consent of each participant and lasted between 50 minutes to 2 hours in length. The second interview was conducted within a period of one month after the first interview. Due to individual scheduling, some participants were interviewed for a second time 17 days after the initial interview up to 33 days after the initial interview.

### *Interpretation of the data*

Phenomenologists believe that, “interpretation is an act of the text as opposed to an act on the text, that is, the text is used to gain understanding” (Allen & Jensen, 1990, p. 244). van Manén (1990) states that, “phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience,

hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life . . .” (p. 4) and this is the ‘art’ of interpretive phenomenology. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, the researcher is not boundaried off from the text, purposely cut from the ‘data’ in order to attain clarity. Instead, for hermeneutical phenomenologists the “goal of interpretation is to produce an emotional relationship with the text” (Allen & Jensen, 1990, p. 244). Through this connection new interpretations arise and, with each new interpretation, come deeper understanding and new perspectives. Our emotional connection to the researcher is the key to revealing the horizons of the participants. Gadamer (1992), in *Truth and Method*, defines horizons as “the limits to our vantage point, the limits of our empathy” (p. 269) and claims that “horizons are always in motion and whenever we investigate we cannot disregard ourselves” (p. 270). In this way, the researcher is a tool for themselves. Their access to internal emotional responses allows them greater access to the meaning behind the experiences of the participants.

Furthermore, Gadamer states that the meaning derived from the text is never completed by the researcher. As the research moves through language, culture and historical context, “new meanings are culled from it not anticipated by the author or its contemporary audience. Thus instability is part of the character of the work itself and all the interpretation of a work or a text is a dialogue between the past and the present” (Chessick, 1990, p. 261). This is the text, the researcher, and the participant as a living document where interpretation of the phenomena being investigated is ceaseless so long as it is being exposed to other persons. Interpretation in Heidegger’s phenomenology accesses “lit, poetry, visual art, television, theatre, and other research” (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 9) along with culture and language as these are vital to understanding the results of a hermeneutical inquiry. This is the ever-changing socio-historical context that does not allow the research results to remain static; the context is continually in flux and subsequently, so are the results.

Therefore, interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology cannot be utilized to produce a definitive End. The goal is not to capitulate to the demands of natural science for laws and universals. Interpretation is designed to “explicate context and the world” (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). The results of hermeneutic phenomenological research are an uncovering of meaning; they are descriptions of the phenomena that are “offered as insights, not as replicable results of structural analyses” (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 11). It is the spirit of the experience that is discovered, not the structure. Even once the results of an inquiry are written, there is new interpretation, new understanding, and new discussion once these results are re-read or read for the first time. “A full understanding of a phenomenon is not considered possible. There can be no saturation point, no final analysis” (van Manen, 1990, p. 130).

Hermeneutic phenomenology can be a confounding method to employ in conducting research as there does not exist a “how to” checklist that the researcher can follow. It has been suggested that for hermeneutical inquiry a prescribed method does not exist (van Manen, 1990; Gadamer, 1992). While there may be no detailed method involved with hermeneutical phenomenology, there exists a tradition and a history of hermeneutical inquiry that can be employed as a guideline for new research and investigation (van Manen, 1990).

In analysing the text that is formed from the interviews, van Manen (1990) states that “making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (p. 79). When we view the text then, we seek to determine what the core elements of the text are, the themes that when bound together, create the experience of each individual.

For the current study, themes were elicited from the text using “the selective or highlighting approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93) in which “we listen to or read a text several times and ask, *What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the*

*phenomenon or experience being described?* These statements we then circle, underline, or highlight” (p. 93). What this requires is a careful reading, and re-reading of the transcripts of interviews, listening to the audio-taped interviews, and dwelling in the experience of what it means to be an adult child of adulterous parents. Based on this careful listening, reading and re-reading, and then finally highlighting and writing the themes, the essence can be uncovered.

van Manen (1990) states that, “human science meaning can only be communicated textually – by way of organized narrative or prose and that is why the human science researcher is engaged in the reflective activity of textual labour. To do human science research is to be involved in the crafting of a text” (p. 78). This last statement has double-meaning. Not only is the researcher involved in the textual creation through their presence in the interview that forms the foundation of the text, but they are also the creator of the narrative that represents each participant’s unique experience of the phenomenon under study.

Therefore, for this study, the process of data interpretation involved several steps:

1. The initial interview.
2. Verbatim transcription of the first interview. Transcripts read and re-read.
3. Thematic analysis of the first interview with independent reader providing thematic agreement.
4. Second interview involving a reflection and further discussion of the themes from the first interview and an introduction of new thoughts / feelings about the lived experience.
5. Verbatim transcription of the second interview. Transcripts read and reread.
6. Thematic analysis of the second interview with independent reader providing thematic agreement.
7. Individual narratives for each participant written and re-written based on themes from both interviews.



8. Narratives given to participants for clarification and accuracy and additional responses or changes they felt were necessary to increase accuracy.
9. Narratives read by individuals outside of the research who have experienced the phenomenon to assess accuracy and validate findings.

“Methodologically speaking, story is important because . . . it simultaneously pulls us in but then prompts us to reflect” (van Manen, 1990, p. 121). The process of writing each narrative must include maintaining a balance between the whole and the parts of each text. This is the process of the hermeneutic circle. The researcher moves between the description of the phenomenon, both the whole of the interview and then its parts, their interpretation of the interview they are reading / hearing, and their understanding of each participants lived experience. “Understanding, then, is an unfolding process which rotates on itself” (Allen & Jensen, 1990, p. 245). What this means is that with greater understanding comes a new layer of meaning which leads to greater understanding. This process is cyclical and never-ending. Hermeneutics cannot provide an ‘ultimate answer’ or ‘Truth’ as, foundationally, hermeneutics denies that such a thing exists. There is no ‘Truth’, just a deeper layer of meaning and understanding.

### *The Hermeneutic Circle of Inquiry*

“The hermeneutical circle of interpretation moves forward and backward, starting at the present. It is never closed or final” (Allen & Jensen, 1990, p. 244). This belief applies equally to the text as to the interview. The researcher must, when confronted with the textual account of the interview, take the meaning of individual words and then expand out to the sentences, take the meaning of the sentences and contextualize them to the interview as a whole, and then

reverse the process. By moving forward and backward in the interview and the analysis, the researcher is better able to increase their understanding and extract the meaning given by the participant to their experiences. "It is this process of moving from the parts to the whole that is referred to as the hermeneutic circle" (Valle et al., 1989, p. 15).

Meaning is in the dialogue. Meaning does not exist within the mind of an individual speaker or writer (Chessick, 1990), but it comes forth in the relationship and discussion of the experience. There can be no "logic, reliability, adequacy, and generalizability" (Allen & Jensen, 1990, p. 245) to hermeneutical phenomenology as it uses ontological, not epistemological, understanding. Ontological understanding focuses on meaning through interpretation. Fleming et al. (2002) cautions that ontological "understanding remains transient" as dialogue can continue indefinitely. This is not to say that the cyclical process of hermeneutic inquiry does not reduce or boil-down the meaning derived from experience. As Bauman (1978) states, understanding "consists of endless recapitulation and reassessment of collective memories – ever more voluminous, but always selective" (p. 17). Selective is the key word. The hermeneutic circle is endless but it is also more like a funnel in uncovering meaning. As the dyadic uncovering of meaning continues from the interview to the data analysis, meaning is defined through the 'fusion of horizons' – the common understanding of the experience by both the researcher and participant. It is when this fusion is reached that the circle may close and understanding can be said to have been attained.

### *Rigour*

van Manen (1990) writes that for many human science researchers, "writing is conceived largely as reporting process" (p. 125). This, he states, is done in order to ensure that human

sciences are rigorous, and produce 'hard' data. However, what this endeavour sacrifices is the writing of the text itself. van Manen cites Barthes (1986) who warns that:

Some people speak of method greedily, demandingly; what they want in work is method; to them it never seems rigorous enough, formal enough. Method becomes a Law . . . the invariable fact is that a work which constantly proclaims its will-to-method is ultimately sterile: everything has been put into the method, nothing remains for the writing; the researcher insists that his text will be methodological, but this text never comes: no surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the scrap heap of abandoned projects than Method. (Barthes, 1986, p. 318)

Writing is the research activity of phenomenology and rigour must be considered from a different perspective in conducting hermeneutical phenomenological inquiries. 'As there is no prescribed method, no rules or steps to follow for conducting hermeneutical research, the writing and the written product must provide the evidence of a rigorous study.

Benner (1985) writes that "when the interpreter [researcher] has done a good job, participants can recognize and validate the interpretation. Participants will be somewhat annoyed or pleased that the interpreter has given a meaningful account of their experience" (p. 6). The test of good phenomenological research is the ability to communicate to a larger audience, to facilitate understanding, and provoke empathic reactions to the experience of the participants. The researcher refers to this as Accessible Validity: the ability for individuals who have experienced the phenomenon to see a reflection of their own experience in the meaning of another, the ability for individuals without the experience of the phenomenon to understand the experience as a human concept, a clear and reasonable reaction to the situation. This is the ability to empathize, to place the reader's feet in another's shoes and grasp the meaning. Guba and Lincoln (1989) refer to this process as transferability which they require in order to maintain trustworthiness.

In addition, rigour will be assessed through Embedded Validity: speaking with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of a parent engaging in adultery, having them read the text, and then discuss the impact on them. The researcher believes that if the meanings and stories of participants move the readers to a self-reported state of emotionality then the research has Embedded Validity.

Polkinghorne (1989) believes that validity for phenomenological research must be able to answer the question, "Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected?" (p. 57). Simply put, how well linked are the varying interviews to each other and how closely related are the experiences? Can we locate themes and understand the meanings derived from the experience.

An additional concern lies around interpretation. Polkinghorne (1989) talks about the issue of the researcher influencing the contents of the participants' experiences; of inaccurately interpreting the data in such a way that the participants' true experiences are lost. This has been addressed through a reflective interview where the participant has direct quotes from their interviews and the researcher's interpretations mirrored back to them and the participants were then able to respond in agreement, disagreement, and welcome to challenge or enhance the interpretations made by the researcher. This ensures that the voice of each participant is maintained in the data and it also provides an opportunity for further discussion, description and understanding.

Finally, referring again to Guba and Lincoln (1989), this study has dependability: this refers to the ability of the research process to be audited by another researcher; where he or she can easily follow the decision trail used by the present researcher to arrive at similar conclusions.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

This chapter will present the personal narratives constructed from the interviews with the research participants. These narratives will be immediately followed by participant reaction to the accuracy of the narrative and by an independent reviewer's comments. Each participant has been given a pseudonym and any names they mention in the course of their narrative are also masked. As much as possible, quotes taken from the interviews are used to form the body of the narrative and maintain the 'voice' of each participant.

Themes from a comparative pattern analysis of all seven stories will be discussed in Chapter Five.

All of the stories are approximately equal in length and reflect the depth of the experiences and the essence of what it means to be a child of adulterous parents.

#### *Narrative Number One: Marie's Story*

I remember that around the time I was seven, my dad began to sleep on the couch in the living room and when I asked him why he would tell me it was because he was having a hard time sleeping in the bedroom; it was either too cold or too hot. Then he began to sleep at his mom's house and there was a time that I didn't see him for a couple of months. Then one day he brought me a kitten and my mom got mad at him, they had a fight and the next thing I knew, their marriage was over.

I didn't find out that the reason the marriage ended was because my mom had had an affair with her boss at work until I was nine years old. My mom was the one who told me and she also said that the affair was why she had quit her job. I don't know why but it still frustrates me and makes me sad when I talk about my mom's infidelity. It was a "shock" to learn about mom's affair, and after dad left it was "hard for me" because mom "went wild" and dated a lot of men and I didn't see her very much. I'm angry at her for this because she put her sexual needs ahead of taking care of me. As for her boss, I feel "indifferent" towards him. I know who he is but it was my mom who betrayed the family, not him.

I understand why mom had an affair, because "mom and dad got married early, like my mom was nineteen" but I'm still angry at her for what she did. When I first found out about her

affair, I can remember that I "wasn't too impressed" with mom but "I still love her" and "people make mistakes". At the same time, by mom having the affair, I now have "an underlying fear and an underlying feeling of anger" about what happened. I'm like, "ok, you know this made sense after it happened, shit happens, but there's an underlying feeling of, okay mom, you cheated on dad!" And I get this kind of "cognitive dissonance" around mom because mom is the one who cheated and yet she takes no blame for the marriage ending. I'm angry at her for this refusal to acknowledge her role in ending the marriage and for her "self-pity". I want to say to her, "what about you? Look what you did, right?" She says that it's dad's fault that they broke up. "Like, she went out and had an affair! You're married! That's what frustrates me".

Mom is very denigrating towards dad and if I ever want to visit him she will say to me, "your father is an asshole" and "he drank, he was abusive", "don't you remember what he was like when he lived with us?" I remember dad being angry, but never abusive. I think mom is trying to poison my relationship with my dad by talking about him that way.

I feel like I grew up faster than other kids "big time" because I feel like I had to "parent my mom" and I had to "tell her what to do" which is wrong. It is the job of "the parent to teach the child", not the other way around. I can't "really rely on my mom" so I have to rely on myself.

"I think there's still tension" between me and mom and I'm "disappointed" and "sad" because "I can't get through to her" and I just don't think I'll ever have the kind of relationship that I want to have with her because there are too many things that mom won't talk about with me. Mom's just "not approachable about the affair" and I find that with mom, "I'm kind of the peacemaker trying to bring things up and get them out in the open as diplomatic and calmly as possible and with my mom, I'll say to her in a calm voice, 'okay, mom, I know you might get upset' and if you say the wrong thing, boom, everything goes up". I'd like to ask her about the affair, you know, find out if "she thought about the long-term consequences of sleeping with her boss". I need to know "why? Why would you do that? Like, an orgasm or two for jeopardizing the family you've established, you know?" I think if I was able to talk to mom about the affair that "it would tie it all together. Like, good, you've finally accepted your part in the demise of the marriage. You recognize you play a part in this". Until she's willing to talk about it, I think that this will hold mom and me apart.

I don't feel personally rejected by my mom having an affair but I do see it as a "betrayal of the family and of dad". Mom "betrayed the trust and the whole everything of marriage" and I feel like "poor dad" for having to go through that. I have talked to dad about what happened and he says, "You know what, people make mistakes. I made mistakes and your mom did too and there comes a time when you deal with it and move on". I didn't see my dad for nine years after they separated because of the way mom was portraying him but now I feel like I have "an adult relationship with dad" because he "acknowledges his role. I know my dad. He's great. And I feel so bad that for that span of nine years we didn't have much contact".

There is a "small part of me that is afraid that I'm going to be like mom in all ways" and that, even though I trust myself not to cheat 100%, there's a tiny fear that "I might do what mom did". "I know what feelings" having an affair "evokes for everyone, you know. You not only affect yourself or your own self-esteem, you affect your partner and everyone around you . . . It's not just one or two lives you mess up".

When I was starting to date my current partner, who I've been with for the last three and a half years, my mom told me to "be careful" which I think caused me to be a bit "more hesitant" and "slower" in developing intimacy. I made sure that we were good friends first before we started dating because "you have to test the waters first to see if they have the traits you're looking for". It gives me a sense of "security" knowing that he had a previous girlfriend cheat on him. Both of us talked about cheating on each other and promised that we'd be upfront and break up with each other before we cheated. I sometimes worry if, because my boyfriend knows about my mom cheating on my dad, if he worries about me cheating and so I try to reassure him (and me) that I won't cheat on him ever. Still, even though I trust him, I'm probably "more vigilant in my relationships" both with my boyfriend and friends, and I'm "always looking for signs" that people are lying to me.

Through my mom having an affair, I've learned "from the actions of others and you know, you try to model what you want and what you don't want". My mom's affair "made my family unstable" and parents need to know that having an affair will "affect your children's ability to be in a healthy relationship and it will hurt your relationship with your kids". I still have a fear of infidelity, and when I see it "glamorized" on TV, I think its "sick", and I just know inside me that it's so "wrong" and that "I'm definitely not going to have an affair, because I know how much it hurts people".

Marie's Response: I finally had the chance to read the narrative closely. I think that it depicts my situation very well. I like how you used direct quotes from our sessions. That made it much more personal and accurate. I would not make any changes to it, as it is just fine. I must say though, it seemed pretty different to be hearing my point of view precisely coming from a fictitious character!

Independent Reviewer's Response: I have read the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes of the interviews. The narrative that the researcher has written is accurate in mirroring Marie's experience of being a child of an adulterous mother.

### *Narrative Number Two: Diana's Story*

My parents separated when I was 9 but I didn't find out until about a year later that it was because my dad had an affair and he was now living with his new girlfriend. My mom told me that dad had been "seeing" this other woman while he was still living with us. That's when I knew for sure that he had had an affair.

My dad actually got married to this new woman eventually but they're now divorced. "I don't even think about her" and I don't blame her for the affair. But I do blame my dad. "I had no relationship with her. Why should she care about me? It's him. It was him who had to care about me. He was my dad."

I would go and see my dad after he left and he would "bawl and cry for like, a half hour, on my shoulder about how bad he felt" and this made it hard to go see him. Eventually, after a couple of years of seeing him on the weekends, my dad "wasn't so interested in seeing me" so our relationship just sort of died. It makes me sad to think about dad because I remember "the good times when I was a child" but now "it certainly doesn't feel like I have a dad. I don't have one in my heart". Now I try to rationalize dad leaving us for another woman by saying it was a midlife crisis, "but at the same time, he's a grown person. He's an adult. He's still responsible for what he does".

When I think about dad leaving, feelings come up about not being good enough for him to stay and it feels like this other woman was chosen over me and my family. "I equate the affair with, like, him betraying all of us". This has lowered my self-confidence and my self-esteem. "If he just said he didn't love mom anymore, I could cope with that. I could accept that. But I can't accept the fact that he just like, screwed everybody around". "Although it was a rejection of mom, it was also . . . he's rejecting me because the way I see it is like, when you have an affair, you're playing with the emotions of your kids . . . and the kids well-being." I've never told my dad how angry I still am and I just carry it around with me.

When I think about what he put mom through, I get so angry. Mom had to get an AIDS test after he left because "who knows what he could have been bringing home to her". Seeing the "pain he put my mom through" "killed me" inside and I'm still so angry at him for just leaving us and not even supporting us. "He didn't care enough about us to like, keep us fed and clothed" and now I worry about money all the time. Most of the anger I feel towards him isn't about the divorce, "the anger is more associated with the affair". The "hatred and anger that just like, comes along with the fact that he had an affair – it changed everything. It made my life hostile".

I have negative feelings towards men in general now, there's a voice in my head that says, "men are pigs" and "you can't trust anybody". I wish sometimes that I could be the "better person and say, you know, like, I don't forgive you for what you've done, but I accept what you've done and like, if you want to have a relationship with me know, I'll go for that". But then I stop and say to myself "why would I want somebody in my life who has done that to me?" I mean, "why does anybody do something like that?" I've never asked him that question but "I don't think anything could justify what he did even if he told me 'I was a crack addict and I didn't know what I was doing'" but if I knew why he did what he did it might allow me to "tolerate" being around him but only if he wanted to be around me.



Growing up was “scary” for me because I couldn’t trust dad and mom became “emotionally unstable” after she found out about the affair so I learned to depend on myself. I feel like I had to grow up too fast, too early. Like, I was doing my own laundry at age nine and listening to mom talk about how there wasn’t enough money to pay the bills. That’s scary for a little girl to hear. I also think that “I started to have sex too young and I was definitely too sexually active” at a young age.

Although mom and I have a “super close relationship” and she was “there for me and my family through everything”, there’s been times that I feel like my relationship with mom “is more like a partnership” and “I feel like she should take care of me, you know, like, it’s more like I feel like sometimes I have to take care of her”. I can remember when dad left for the next three years I was always listening for my mom and aware of where she was because I was “afraid that mom might leave in the middle of the night” and one night I remember my mom crying because she was so worried about money and I had to comfort her. That was “scary” too. I remember mom getting angry about dad’s cheating and leaving and she would talk about dad cheating “in a really harsh way. She was so angry and couldn’t get over what he did to her.” I’m angry at mom for telling me so much and for using me as her confidant. I think that I’m also angry at her for not seeing earlier that dad was cheating when “there were definitely signs of it, and I kinda resent her for not putting things together earlier”. Maybe if she had, dad wouldn’t have left.

The end result of my dad having an affair? “Well, I guess you just don’t feel safe anymore. That’s the feeling I got and I kinda still have”. “You kinda get this sense like that . . .there’s nobody there to protect you anymore and you don’t trust anyone anymore”. I could see the hurt that my dad’s affair caused my mom and “that just affects you in that you don’t feel safe, you don’t feel like you have somebody who can protect you”. Just talking about this brings tears to my eyes because it’s this lack of safety which is the biggest thing I’m still dealing with today. There is also like, a “gnawing kind of fear inside of me, of just like, my future, and I think that lack of stability at the young age has created that in me”. It’s also really upsetting to me to see how infidelity is shown in the media because they “deem that adultery is normal, and that it’s no big deal . . .but it is a big deal. It’s a huge deal.”

I’m also really afraid of “not having a stable relationship in the future” and of people leaving me. I do trust my current boyfriend because he is like “the rock I lean on” and “he keeps me grounded” when I’m not stable. Although he is “stable”, sometimes I’m not so sure of why I’m with him. “I don’t know, we have lots of fun together too, so that makes me think that, you know, I do really love him”. I definitely made sure that we started out as friends first though and I was drawn towards his trustworthiness but I sometimes “wonder to myself, like, am I with him because he’s safe?” Although I want to believe that I trust my boyfriend 100%, in reality it’s “maybe 99%. I guess there’s always that little thing, there is a possibility” and it’s that possibility that is really scary. I do watch him for any signs that he might be cheating and I’ll ask him questions like, “Where did you go? Who were you talking to? Whose phone number is that in your agenda book?” but I’m asking these questions less and less the longer we’re together.

I swear sometimes that my boyfriend is “a freak of nature who I caught by luck” because he is the first guy who hasn’t cheated on me. When my other boyfriends cheated on me, it was never really a surprise because “it’s almost like you expect it. Yeah. Like as a woman, I think you expect it”. I think that men believe they are more “entitled” and that they can do whatever

they want “without regarding the impact on women”. If my current boyfriend did cheat on me, I would leave him because by him cheating, he’s already left the relationship.

I’d like to get married one day but I’m not so sure I believe that a happy, monogamous relationship is possible. I’m really scared that a marriage won’t work out and “that’s the biggest fear of my life, I swear to God, is like, being married and like, having my husband cheat because I know that if I was married . . . the second my husband cheated on me, I wouldn’t be able to be with him anymore. It’s a huge fear”. So, for now I’m like, “why get married? You know? Like why commit yourself that wholly to somebody when something like them cheating on you could happen?” Marriage is really “just a piece of paper”.

I’ve definitely learned that I need to be self-sufficient and my dad’s infidelity has taught me to “get your education, get a good job, so you can take care of yourself because you can’t depend on men” because eventually they will “cheat and leave”. I’m also pretty wary of my friends too and “if I catch them lying, I can’t take it” and I will end the friendship. “I know how much damage” that lying can do and I value honesty above all else. I think that this is directly connected to my dad’s infidelity.

I’m hoping to “leave the ghosts” of my dad’s infidelity behind me eventually. Sometimes I think that “it would have been easier if he had just died” instead of cheating and leaving because I think I could heal from that. “At least he’s not there to hurt me anymore”. But you know, the “hurt never goes away” and I’m left feeling “unsafe because of everything that happened” and I wish I knew how to heal the hurt.

Diana’s Response: Hi Jonathan. I’ve read through the narrative and I think it is an accurate depiction of what I’ve been through. The process of completing the interviews was difficult for me. There are times when I feel like things are going good for me and then something comes up that brings out all of my insecurities and makes me relive all of the feelings I have spent so long trying to move on from. That was what these interviews were like for me. Last summer I was going through a tough time with an eating disorder and because I went to the interviews I decided to try to get some help. I kicked the eating disorder in about two months because I got that help. So, in the end the interviews were a positive thing. Sometimes my feelings about my family are so complex that I don’t even understand them and I consider myself to be a person who is very in touch with her emotions. I do feel I need to move one from the difficulties in my family that occurred so long ago, however some of the effects will last a long time and it is important that I get them off of my chest once in a while. I hope that explains it enough.

Independent Reviewer’s Response: I have read the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes of the interviews. Diana’s experiences are accurately represented in this narrative and clearly demonstrate the strong emotions Diana expressed within the interviews.

### *Narrative Number Three: James' Story*

I first learned of my dad's infidelities when I was about sixteen years old. My dad seemed to be spending long periods of time away from home and I suspected something was going on so I asked mom and she told me about his affair. "I remember being particularly devastated when I found that out". Two years later I found out there were multiple infidelities, "it happened more than once . . . it happened at the beginning, and it happened throughout too". My parents are now going through the process of divorcing. To me, the divorce is very different than the infidelities. "The divorce doesn't hurt me like finding out about my dad having the affair and cheating on my mom did". And the impact of his infidelities goes beyond just my immediate family. It impacts on my extended family, my aunts, uncles, and grandparents. They were "disgusted" and "disappointed" with what he did.

For me, I don't know exactly what happened and I wish I could just know "the truth. It's hard. That was one of the hardest things for me to deal with when I first found out about it was the fact that he had told me specifically that he had not cheated and when I found out that was hard for me to deal with because for somebody who I had for eighteen years at that point in my life, considered him a role model and that was a pretty heavy thing for me to take at that point because I looked up to him and stuff and then all these ideas that I had or I thought I had seemed false".

I remember confronting him directly. "I asked him specifically. I said, 'Well, are you cheating on mom right now?' and he didn't answer me. And so I said, 'Well, I take it from your answer that I can kind of assume'. And he didn't say no and he didn't deny it". You know, that "really hurt" because I believed my dad "had decent family values and he talked about how much he loved my mom" and "then he is just willing to throw that away for sex on the side . . . and it very much impacted the way I thought about him and still think about him now". So, finding out about dad's affairs was "pretty shitty" because I thought I knew who he was and so, the "first time I heard it, it was really, really hard. It was tough to deal with because you have a perception of somebody for x amount of years and then you find this out". "A lot of the ideas I had about my dad kind of crumbled because of you know, obviously lying to my mother about something that's very serious". The fact that he had more than one affair is "damaging" too, but more for my mom than for me. I just wish I knew "the truth in terms of what happened". I don't need to know why, but I want to understand what happened to have my family fall apart. "I don't need to know all the details" but "I don't know all the facts" and I need to know.

By having some "open communication", it might make things better between dad and I because "just being able to feel like you can ask somebody something can make a big difference". When I tried to speak to dad before about what happened, he told me "it doesn't involve you". "Well, it does involve me. I'm having a family that's falling apart when all this came down". There are some times that I don't want to hear what he's had to say because I just can't. "I don't know if it's because I haven't come to grips with what he's done or the fact that I have come to grips and I'm just pissed off and I don't really want to talk to him about it".

The fact that "he had not told me the truth is shitty because that puts a big damper on our relationship because, like I said, that without trust there's a breakdown and it just makes things really difficult and that's when you start not trusting people, I think. When there's a breakdown like that". "I know he's not telling the truth and I find that insulting. I wouldn't tolerate that from one of my good buddies and I sure as hell am not going to tolerate that from my father, nor

would he tolerate it from me if I was doing it to him". And, you know, if he did tell me what happened, "I think at first it would be hard. It would definitely put a bit of a wedge there for sure between me and him but I think that after a while, it would become easier because then I think I could kind of deal with the fact that ok, this is the truth, this is what happened", "at least you were honest, we cleared that up and that's out of the way", "let's put it behind me and move on".

Dad's affair also "did affect me, like I said, in terms of my self-esteem". Like, the fact that dad chose to be with his lover's family over mine "affected my self-esteem because you feel that, like I said, he was willing to throw a good family, a good home, a good wife, he was willing to throw that shit away for a couple of orgasms here and there". "You definitely do feel like, you know, well, Jesus, he is willing to choose that over, you know, all the years that he had had with my mother and our family". Sometimes, when I think about what he did, "it's tough because there are times that I wonder, you know, like will I, will I turn out to be like my dad? Will this eventually happen to me?"

I'm not alone in being a victim of my dad's infidelity. My mom was really hurt by what he did and "all of my sympathies belong to her. I do have some sympathies going to my dad but he brought it on himself". I have, like I said, a "sense of loyalty to my mom" and consequently, I won't go and spend time with dad and his new family because "mom would be devastated and I can't do that to her". Like, because dad was the breadwinner for the family, mom has had to keep working, sell her car and other things, and move in with my grandma just to survive. This makes me angry too.

I don't have any real animosity towards my dad's lover though. "I mean, I don't have any bad feelings towards her now, but at the time I felt, I mean, Jesus, she knows he's a married man and what did she have to gain besides having an orgasm, right?" Still, I won't sanction their relationship by spending any time with them. Like I said, that would be like me betraying mom.

In my relationships, I always found that I couldn't trust my girlfriends. "You know, like before with my ex-girlfriend, sometimes she would go downtown and that night I'd be like, 'who the fuck is she going to run into tonight?'" Now, with my current girlfriend, at "first I was really hesitant" about getting into the relationship, but now "I totally trust her". "I was very hesitant, not about trusting her, but very hesitant about letting myself get involved". But, like I said, "I do trust her . . . but in terms of like, you know, like I said before, like I wouldn't cheat on her but I do have a little bit of doubt you know, like what if?" Like, sometimes I wonder if there might be a genetic predisposition to cheating. I trust myself, but part of me is worried that I'll follow in dad's footsteps and cheat. I just don't think that it's possible to build back trust after infidelity, "I can't see how somebody could forget about it".

I know I would leave if my girlfriend cheated on me because, "I've seen some of the effects it has on people and I just wouldn't put myself in that situation to be beat up again". You "can definitely see the signs of cheating because if you're around it and you're somewhat conscious of what's going on you know that one person's cheating on the other. You can see the signs in the person". I think I'm vigilant to the signs of cheating. "When people lie to me, there's like this little tingle or twitch or something that goes off in my stomach". I caught an ex-girlfriend cheating on me by paying attention to that twitch. I'm not so sure that I believe in getting married anymore either. "I don't feel like I have to marry [my girlfriend] to show everybody else that I am committed or show her I am committed. I wouldn't want to do it because of the fact that if we were to get married and one of us had an affair, then got divorced,

then there is a lot of crap that you got to go through". You know, the media makes marriage look so easy to get out of and they don't show that it is hard work to be in a relationship. "Too many young people cheat or divorce because that is the easiest thing to do rather than fix that is wrong in your marriage".

James' Response: The report was great - good interpretation, so I give it 2 thumbs up. My thoughts on marriage have changed a bit, when you find someone you can trust, love and all that other good stuff and those feelings are reciprocated, grab em' and hold on tight. Right now is not the time but when it is I will definitely be marrying my present girlfriend. You got the second part right about how it takes a lot of work, compromise, trust, etc., etc., to make a marriage work - anything worth having is worth fighting for if you value it enough. I think that's another source of hurt for my siblings, my mom and myself - my dad didn't value his marriage enough to stick it out and try to make it work and his relationship with us (kids). My father's relationship with my brother and sister is, quite simply, the shits. Because they are out of the province (I'm the only one here in [location], as is he), he rarely talks to them and won't call them because he is afraid of the fact that they may possibly give him shit about what he has done and is still doing (ignoring his FIRST family). My dad severely underestimates the extent of emotional pain he has caused by his actions/inactions and by not talking with my brother and sister he widens the already massive gap between them. Dad expects everyone to put the past behind them, that whole forgive and forget stuff, but it is easier said than done - especially when you are the one who has caused the problem (let's remember Jesus [my good ol' Catholic upbringing] said that whole forgive and forget stuff and he was perfect - we are not or none of this shit would have happened in the first place). It is unfortunate because if my folks were still together this would not be happening (I mean not talking to my brother and sister) so why, if mom and dad aren't together, should that change things (I don't know the reason/answer, but in our case it does change things). I know when I move away the same thing will happen and I will rarely speak with my dad - sad but true. Even when I write about it it's a bit therapeutic but still really confusing - I don't really know the full circumstances about what happened, why it happened, why my father is now acting the way he is and still not taking responsibility for his actions/inactions. He actually has the nerve to ask me "What can I do?" to solve the problems he has created. That's not for me to even conjure up some kind of advice/cure for the problem - do it YOURSELF goddammit!!!

Independent Reviewer's Response: I have read the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes of the interviews. I believe that James' focus on his dad's infidelity and his reactions are correctly displayed in the narrative that the researcher has written.

#### *Narrative Number Four: Natasha's Story*

I don't remember how old I was when I caught my dad kissing "Aunt" May, but I remember that it was a cloudy, summer night and I was very young. My mom was in the kitchen doing the dishes and I ran into the backyard and found "Aunt" May (who was my mom's best friend) "on my dad's lap and they were kissing". Both my dad and Aunt May had been drinking that night. My mom was standing at the window and they were in full view of her. I went in and told mom what I had seen and my mom told me that dad was "just comforting" Aunt May.

The other infidelity my dad committed was when we were on vacation in the United States and my dad had been drinking and I guess he was being sexually physical with another woman because mom woke us up in the middle of the night and told us we were leaving to go back home.

My mom passed away when I was in my late teens and I never got the chance to talk to her about what happened but for me, both of these events were infidelities where my dad betrayed my mom's trust. While my mom didn't seem concerned with dad kissing Aunt May, I didn't "quite like May anymore" and I stopped calling her "Aunt". I remember feeling "uncomfortable" with what I saw and "I think I almost feel mad for my mom in some ways because I feel like she should have gotten mad at them". As a result of these infidelities, I have a hard time trusting people and this mistrust comes "from a combination of things; especially the knowledge of my mother's best friend kissing her husband. Where was the respect for the relationship in that?" I think sometimes that I'd like to confront May. "I'd love to explore that, just for my own sake, so like maybe she would say . . . I'm sorry, that was stupid".

I had such a strong relationship with my mom and so, when she passed away, I "had to get to know my dad" which "put a big conflict in me because I was still like, 'you did this to mom' but at the same time I was going, 'poor dad'". I feel like I had to leave his infidelity behind because "all of a sudden there was no mom and I had to be with dad".

When I think about my dad's infidelities, and how they were so brief and connected with alcohol, it causes me concern because "it makes me think that I'm completely powerless to protect myself from infidelity" because "it only takes a second to cheat". You know? You can be together with someone for a long time and then "do that" which makes me wonder, "can you really stay faithful?" "There isn't anything to protect a relationship" and eventually the person you love will leave. I know this feeling is more linked to my mom's premature death but it also has to do with my dad's infidelities. "I think the infidelity is part of it because you will lose something you believed in, the person that you thought they were, although you might not lose them physically, you lose who you thought they were. They changed in your head".

I don't think that my dad was rejecting me by having his affairs, but it leaves me "wondering why he didn't care, you know, if we left. I felt like we were fairly disposable in that area". When dad had his affairs, "he was risking my brother and I too" and I just wonder "why didn't we pop into your head and just go, 'I have a family, I have a wife. I love these people'".

My dad doesn't know that I saw him with May or know about his other affair and I'm not sure I could ever tell him that I know because "he has suffered enough by losing his wife". The "anger I feel" is "just my problem" and I just can't speak about his affairs even though it's "killing me because I want him to know", "because it has cost me relationships". There is also

part of me that wants to know what happened, "not so much to know why but just to find out how did you get past it? How do people deal with life?" I need to know how to fix infidelity because "I need to be prepared to work through that with a future husband". I need to know from dad how "did you get through it, because I'm afraid". If I knew what happened and how to deal with an infidelity, it would allow me to "work it through" and it would allow me to understand my own feelings of fear of infidelity in my relationships.

There are two things that I take from my dad's affairs: the first is that my parents must have really loved each other to work through the infidelities, and the second is that "it's going to happen to me. I mean, it happened to my parents and they loved each other that much, then it's going to happen to me". "I look at my own life and I'm like, 'I am never going to be happy in a relationship because I'm never going to trust him' and it, it does, it pisses me off on a regular basis".

I didn't trust myself in relationships before the one I'm in right now, and I actually did cheat on an ex-boyfriend by "kissing back" a guy who kissed me. When I did that, "I hurt myself, my self-esteem. I mean, for a year after that I felt like a slut basically . . . just for kissing back. I felt terrible and I don't want to go through that again, that guilt and everything". The "consequences" of cheating "to me are so much bigger than just losing a relationship . . . it's losing faith in myself and it's disappointment in myself that I can't handle". That is why when I cheated on my ex-boyfriend, I broke up with him because "I was like, 'You will never trust me again' and I don't deserve you"". I usually don't start off being friends with my boyfriends. Instead, I start by feeling attracted to the person and "being vacant when it comes to trust". That's how I started off my current relationship.

Worrying about my boyfriend's cheating is "constantly on my mind. In every relationship. Insane jealousy about every other female member of society". I don't trust other women to not offer to have sex with my boyfriend. "I don't trust other people not to go after him because . . . people don't respect" that he's in a relationship. Also, "I always pay really close attention to how I act around other people's boyfriends" because I don't "want to be perceived as a threat" to their relationships. In my past relationships I never expected that the guy wouldn't cheat on me, "all guys cheat. When a guy cheats, they are just being a guy". With my current boyfriend though, he has had "severe infidelities" happen to him in his past relationships and so if he cheated "I'd be mad at him because he knows how much it hurts". "It would hurt" knowing that he had cheated, "and I'd be jealous, and I'd probably be very mad but because of how I feel about him, I'd say 'work it out'".

My boyfriend also has memories of catching his dad cheating on his mom. It is because he has been hurt by infidelity that I'm constantly "trying to win his trust" and I feel like "he is always holding me at an arms length". Knowing that he has been hurt by people cheating on him "gives me a little bit of security" because "I have this knowledge of what he's been through and he knows I will never do it to him". Also, by being in a relationship with someone else who has difficulty trusting and being open, it feels like "I am overcoming, you know, my own like, wanting to be alone all the time and nobody is worth it and I'm going to get hurt. I feel like I need to prove to myself that you know, good things come to those who wait".

I feel "completely powerless" in my relationship and I wonder if I "am enough" to keep my boyfriend happy. "I wonder if I measure up and if I can keep a man. It preys on everything, my self-esteem, my body image; my . . . everything I do is always about am I going to be enough

to keep someone from leaving me for someone else?" Because of these questions, in my current relationship I'm like, "will you assure me? Will you assure me? Will you assure me? And he could do it 24 hours a day, and at the end of the day, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> hour, if he stopped, I'd be wondering for that one hour". I'm always wanting to ask him, "do you really love me? Are you really not going to hurt me? Really?". Inside my mind, "every minute of the day, I'm like 'is he seeing someone else?'" and "if I don't hear from him, 'Who is he with right now?'" and "he's with me in the car and he looks at his cell phone to see if anyone called, and I'm wondering, 'Is he trying to hide a call from me?'" This is like "torture" for me. I find myself trying to "be what he needs" because if he isn't happy, he'll leave. I would need him to be like, "obsessed" with me in order to feel secure. "The security to me is knowing that the reason he won't stray is because he's completely stupid over me".

Being in my current relationship is "difficult and part of me is like, maybe I should just leave and find somebody safe, somebody who would be infatuated with me" but I just don't find any other men attractive. So instead of leaving, "I'm hyper-vigilant" and I'm "on, it's like I'm on constant alert" and this had lead me to do things like checking my boyfriend's phone messages.

When I think about marriage, "I don't see the point of it. I think it's a farce" and yet, the other day "I spent twenty minutes staring at engagement rings, wondering what it would be like to find somebody I wanted to marry". For me, marriage "automatically contradicts what I want to do. What if it's a guy who's just going to cheat?" Knowing what happened in my parents marriage makes me feel "lonely because now I realize that I may never trust anybody. I may never be comfortable in a marriage. Pretty lonely." I believe that this is an advantage that children of adulterers have, "we wouldn't be as destroyed as other people" if our partner cheats because "we're like, 'Oh, I knew it was going to happen" and we never felt 100% safe in the relationship to begin with.

I can't stand seeing infidelity being shown in the media. "Every scandal on a show is such and such's infidelity . . . you know, it's everywhere. You know, I mean even if it's only you know, what is it? 30 or 70% in real life? It seems like it's 80 or 90% on TV". It's hard for me to watch people cheating on TV because "you see people being betrayed and you kind of . . . I identify with the character who's being betrayed because I'm like, oh God, I didn't see that coming either. How am I going to see it coming in my real life?" Now, when I see it on TV, "I walk away" because "it sickens me to know that it's getting a rise out of people". "People are enjoying infidelity. They're getting entertainment out of watching people's relationships fall apart".

Having been exposed to infidelity has shown me a reality that others don't have and "I just feel logical. I feel protected". "You learn the defense mechanisms" and you protect yourself from getting hurt by someone else. "And you know what, that I've realized too? My fear of being like this is bigger than my fear of being cheated on. My fear of always – of never feeling the trust is bigger than of being betrayed. . . I'm pretty pissed about it . . . infidelity really bugs me, really makes – I'm very passionately disgusted by it".

Natasha's Response: "I received the file, thanks. I read it through a couple of times, and I feel it

is a very accurate representation of our conversation. I don't know whether or not it's of importance, but the part where "my brother told me



later" about the second infidelity, was much much later. After my mother had died in fact, so about 10 years later. I couldn't remember if I had told you that."

"Over all I got the feeling that you listened and interpreted my thoughts very well. I wouldn't change a thing."

"I have noticed that since I made the decision to participate in your study that I am feeling less bothered by the whole thing. I had never said it all to anyone before and now that I have, and I have it on paper, it seems to have "left me alone". It was interesting that when I entered your office to talk about it I thought I'd open a can of worms in my head, while what I really did was just allow myself to sit back and look at it all. It made me realize that the infidelity had nothing to do with me, I wasn't marked or doomed. It was between my parents as a couple, and I think I can let that go unexplored."

"Thanks for allowing me the chance to participate and review my sessions."

Independent Reviewer's Response: I have read the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes of the interviews. While Natasha provided a lot of information reflecting many life experiences, I believe that this narrative has accurately synthesized her experiences as they pertain to being a child of an adulterous father.

*Narrative Number Five: Teresa's Story*

I don't remember living with my mom when I was young and most of my contact with her was getting a birthday present in the mail and things like that. My mom had an affair with another man when I was only two years old, but I didn't find out about it until I was twenty-two. My sister explained how her infidelity had ended my parent's marriage and I remember being "really surprised" but I finally understood why my dad was "so upset and why there is so much tension still between my mother and my other siblings".

I think that my mom's infidelity has had a different impact on me than on my siblings because by the time I found out, "I'd already established an adult relationship with my mother". In a way, I "feel a little guilty" that I'm able to have a relationship with mom and my brothers and sisters don't. I "feel a lot of sympathy for them" because mom leaving the family for another man was "so hard on them and so hard on my father". You know, my brothers and sisters tell me that I got "the good deal" and that I "don't know what it was like" for them to have to babysit, clean the house, and take care of things "because dad wasn't doing any" of those things. It is because of these hard feelings that I don't talk to my family about my mom's infidelity and "I'm kind of glad, to be honest, that I wasn't raised by her" and that "I was so young I have absolutely no memory of my mother at all". Now, because my dad remarried so quickly, I feel like I have two families instead of one because of my step-family. Dad remarried a woman who had kids of her own and I was the youngest so it was a "wonderful experience" to be around all of these new kids. I really love my family.

My siblings though, still have a lot of anger towards dad about the way he "didn't pick up the pieces very well" after mom left but I've always had a good relationship with my dad and I feel badly for him that he was so hurt by mom leaving for another man. Dad never spoke badly of mom to me for what she did and he really encouraged me to stay in contact with her throughout my childhood; "he wanted me to have a relationship with my mother". Now my mom and dad will talk on the phone because I think my dad worries about my mom being lonely. I "can't picture them as a couple" and "it's a little creepy for me" in some ways for her to be in contact with dad because it feels like "she's trying to play mom again".

It's "too late" for mom to be a mother for me. I'm not really angry about that, it's just that we will never have a mother-daughter relationship. For me, mom is like "an outsider" to the family. I just don't feel like I have that "mother-daughter connection or whatever people talk about". She's "kind of like an aunt I would go to lunch with" when I was a teenager. Sometimes now mom will try to take on a mothering role with me and I'm very independent so I'm "bugged" by her trying to change her role back to being a mother. My attitude in those situations is to say to mom "don't go trying to be something you're not". I know that mom's just "trying to make up for not mothering" my family and because she knows how hurt my siblings are. For me, mom isn't that "safe type of mom that other women have". I can't rely on her and "when things go wrong in my life, my mother's not the first person I call".

My mom "runs away from problems, because dealing with them is too much for her". Mom also will lie in her relationships and this is why her relationships "haven't been successful". Mom was "living a lie" when she left the family; the affair was an escape for her from the life of the family. Her affair hasn't been "the worst thing in the world for me". I know that "it was a lot worse for my brothers and sisters" who "suffered" as a result of mom's leaving. My dad was hurt a lot more than my siblings though. "I don't think mom realized how much she

was going to hurt my father". The whole affair and leaving us for a new relationship was not just a betrayal of my dad, it was a betrayal of the family. I really don't talk to mom about the affair; "it's still a very sensitive area". Mom has "repeatedly apologized for leaving my family", so she's "figured out what she's doing and that she's hurt a lot of people along the way and she's making amends". Really, that's all I can expect her to do, "apologize and try to understand. If she were just recklessly engaging in affairs and hurting people, well then I wouldn't be interested in having a relationship with her". It is because my mom is developing a better understanding of her relationship patterns and making amends that I can now have an adult relationship with her.

If I could ask my mom about the affair, I would definitely want to know "what were you thinking? My dad's a great guy". I'd want to know her rationale for doing what she did. I think I already know why mom ran off with that other guy but being able to have her questions answered "might be an opportunity to become closer". If she were to say, "Look, I made this mistake. I really messed up. This is why I did it and I won't ever do it again" that might help to build the relationship so that we would be closer. Parents need to tell their kids that by having the affair, that "you didn't mean for anything to hurt them" because their cheating "can destroy the relationship you have with a parent".

You know, it's interesting, when I think of someone who would cheat, I think of a woman. "I don't want to make the same mistake" as my mom did and I'm very careful not to sacrifice my own needs in my relationship the way mom did. I "wouldn't be able to live with myself" if I ever cheated on my boyfriend. I feel "very secure" in my relationship and my partner "comes from a very close-knit family" where people are very "committed" to each other so "I don't think he would ever cheat on me". Knowing what I know about infidelity though, if he did cheat I would say, "Well, I've seen this before and I know where it's going so let's end it now". I am vigilant in my relationship because of mom's infidelity because "I've seen how it can destroy or hurt your family" and I don't want to repeat what happened to my family. So, "I am, I am kind of watching out" and I'm also vigilant about my mom and dad not rekindling their relationship because I'm concerned about my step-mom getting hurt.

Knowing about mom's infidelity makes me aware of just "how fragile relationships are and how much effort you have to put into them to make them work". You know, the idea of an "intact family is a bit naïve as marriages and families have gone to pot" but having a broken family is "nothing to be ashamed of". Real life is nothing like what is shown on TV. Infidelity is not "glamorous, sexy, and exciting". Infidelity "doesn't just impact the marriage. It affects a lot of other people and it hurts children and erodes the family". However, infidelity can also provide an opportunity for the couple to build a stronger relationship and family out of the "chaos that comes from finding out about an infidelity". As long as parents are willing to "deal with their mistake and bring it out into the open and talk about it" then they may be able to prevent their kids from being so hurt and from repeating their mistake.

Teresa's Response: Wow...reading the story is a totally different experience from telling it. It feels as though it is someone else's story!

I was very happy to share my experiences with you. Like I said, it is simply not as painful for me to recount as it would be for my siblings. In fact, it gave me an opportunity to reflect upon my own relationships. It is strange that you do not necessarily need to be raised by someone to be influenced by their decisions. By that I mean that although I was not

raised by my mother I am noticing that I sometimes will catch myself doing something in my relationship that reminds me of my mother's behaviour. That's what I meant about being vigilant in my own relationships...I want to make sure I don't follow in her footsteps, if you know what I mean.

I do have a correction for you to add to the narrative. The narrative implies that I have always enjoyed my step-family. The truth is, I don't particularly have a good relationship with my step-mother, the woman who raised me. In fact, I don't think she wanted anything to do with my father's children, but had to take them on in order to get my father. Some of my friends believe that her behaviour bordered on emotionally abusive. My father knows that my step-mother has not at all made his own family feel welcome in her life, but for my dad, another separation was out of the question, as was raising children on his own. I do understand this...in my mind, my father has been through enough with the divorce from my mother, which totally broke his heart. I used to be very angry with my step-mother, but I now take the position that people can only work with what they've got, and she just never had a lot to work with. She came from a huge family and was largely ignored by her siblings and mother, which I guess is where she got her parenting style from. In any case, I am just happy that my father is happy.

Anyways, I just wanted to clear that up since the narrative made it sound that my step-family was a safe haven from my mother's affair. When my siblings say to me "you don't know what it was like", I just say to them, "No, \*you\* don't know what it was like", since I figure we both got the raw end of a different deal, but I guess that is for another study!

Independent Reviewer's Response: I have read the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes of the interviews. Teresa's narrative includes many detailed quotes directly from the interviews and correctly describes Teresa's experiences.

### *Narrative Number Six: Emily's Story*

There are two memories that remain with me about my dad's affair. The first was when I was eight years old, I remember hearing my dad having sex with his new girlfriend. I remember "being really scared and I didn't know what to do" so I went to the apartment across the hall and told my aunt who went to talk to my dad. Later, I told my mom about dad and the other woman. That was "hard, but I do consider myself to be a very strong willed person. Like, I was there for my mom. After I told her she started to cry and I stayed there with her until she started to calm down". I feel like I "ratted out" my dad's affair to my mom but I "had the right to rat him out. Mom had the right to know". I knew that dad being with this other woman was wrong. "I just knew that daddy was married to mommy and daddy wasn't supposed to be with anyone else. Daddy was supposed to be with mommy".

My other memory is that, after I told mom about Daddy and the woman in the apartment, he wasn't home late at night. I remember telling mom that "daddy is not in bed" so mom and I went out in the car looking for him and "that's when we saw them, saw them in her house". Mom and dad didn't separate or divorce right away though. Mom stayed with him for ten more years before separating because "mom said she'd stay married until I was eighteen". Dad's new relationship didn't last that long though; it was over in about two and a half years.

When I think about that other woman, I feel "very resentful" and "every time I hear her name, every time I get her face in my mind, I cringe". I've never talked to her because any time I'd see her she'd turn around and walk away from me. If I could say anything to her, I'd ask her "How dare you do this to my family?" "You got us scarred for the rest of our lives and turned against our father!"

Dad used to be "really good to us" and then he went and "stabbed us in the back" by having an affair. And, in some ways, I still feel "responsible" for him cheating "for the simple fact that I ratted him out". I remember how angry I was at him for what he did. I would yell at him saying, "I hate you. I hate you" when I was about twelve and I even hit him "because I just had all that built up in me".

I was so anxious after he left and began spending time with his lover and her kids. He used to bring us to play with her kids and then he started to take toys that belonged to me and my brother and give them to her kids. "It really got to me. It really irked me to no end" when I saw dad spending so much time with that other family. "He used to spend a lot of quality time with them and not with us". That was the biggest betrayal, that he would take from us and give to them – our possessions and his time. That's where I see my dad's infidelity as different from my parent's separation. The separation was planned and I knew about it. The infidelity is so strongly linked for me to the betrayal of him taking our things and giving them to this other family and by dad spending so much time with them and not with us. It "hurt me a lot" knowing that he was over with them building a new family, "but as a child there was nothing I could do to stop it so I just thought I would take care of mom the best I could".

I remember telling my dad, "I hate you because you did this to mom". That's been one of the hardest things for me, seeing the impact of his affair on mom. "It was horrible, mom went through pure hell and she had a nervous breakdown over it". Mom "suffered" and even when mom would "lash out" in a "harsh" way towards dad, I understood because dad "had done something wrong". Mom was so good to dad too. She did "everything for him and the family"

and he went out and had an affair. What that taught me was that "you can be the best partner you can and even that is no security against infidelity".

It was also really hard to be in a small town and have everyone know about dad's affair. I remember being in the shopping mall and people around us would be whispering about us and dad's cheating. I remember hearing people saying that mom must not be very good to dad to have him cheating on her. In school, the other kids would ask me about my dad's affair. They would "hear about why dad is fooling around from their parents and then they would come to school and repeat what they heard from their mom and dad" and they would say, "What's wrong with your mommy?" "Why is your daddy sleeping with other women?" The kids of my dad's new girlfriend would also bully and taunt my brother and I saying that my dad didn't want to be with us. All of this caused me to feel "very isolated" in school and "I'd get very withdrawn in school; therefore I wouldn't want to be around anyone really".

I know that dad had the affair because my parents were "forced to marry" and dad didn't really want to be with mom from the beginning. Still, I want to hear from dad why he cheated. I try to talk to dad about his infidelity but "he gets on another topic and he tries to evade the whole thing . . . right up to this day". If he could tell me why, "at least he would be honest enough and man enough to tell me" and "there'd be a new honesty thing here" in our relationship. It's "hard" for me having him not talk about what happened "because, I mean, there is nothing wrong with the truth . . . I can't forgive him for it but at least I'll know what really went on; but the chances of him telling me what happened are slim to none". "I also want him to apologize to my mother . . . and to the rest of the family" but I don't think he'll ever do this.

I never really had "a real boyfriend" when I was younger. I would just "take the first boy that would come along that had shown me any kind of attention". I still think that in general, "men are scum" and that after seeing what dad did that "basically all men are like this". This is why I "had to be friends first with the one I am with now, just because I needed to get a hint of what he was like". I know that dad's infidelity has affected my own relationships because with my past boyfriends, "I'd always be questioning them like, about where they've been, who they went out with, and all that" even though I knew that this behaviour was "killing me, yeah, it was killing me inside because I didn't want to be doing it". Like, I would "snap" if one of my ex-boyfriends was going to a place where girls would be; "I would automatically get angry".

With my current boyfriend, we "started building trust for each other before starting a relationship". He "gives me a lot of emotional support, he gives me a lot of support in every way and he is there for me all the way". I would describe our relationship as "healthy" and "really good" but "I'm always expecting something bad to happen, and I don't know why and that's my problem. I am always expecting something to happen, even though it's not going to but that thing is always there and I don't understand". I find that I have a feeling of paranoia versus jealousy when I think about my boyfriend cheating on me. At the same time, I'm afraid that I will do "something to wreck it, and as a result I'm very tense about everything and I don't know if I'm doing the right thing or the wrong thing". I think a lot of those feelings come from my dad blaming me for breaking up the family by telling mom about the other woman.

It's strange because "I trust myself 100%" because I've never cheated in any of my relationships but I have "this fear" that what happened to my parents will happen to me. "There is always this fear, not that I don't trust my boyfriend, because I do. It's just seeing what my mom went through, there's always this fear that something's going to happen to wreck

everything". Because of this fear, I'm very cautious about spending time with my guy-friends alone because "I feel uneasy" about how my boyfriend would think about it and "I wouldn't want my boyfriend thinking that, okay, I was seeing somebody else behind his back". That would end the relationship for sure. Cheating is certainly the only reason I can think about for ending our relationship. Everything else can be worked out.

With my current boyfriend, I know that he was cheated on in his previous relationship and "I don't want to hurt him in the same way". Being with someone who has been cheated on give me "a sense of security" because he knows how much it hurts to be cheated on. Honestly, in my whole life I trust my family, my boyfriend, and no one else. Trust always has to be earned with me because of what I've seen.

Infidelity "tears families apart" in my opinion and it's a rejection of the whole family, not just the other spouse. "It destroys family life". As a result of my dad's affair, I think "I grew up too fast" and "I kinda lost out on my childhood years" because I felt so "responsible" for what happened so "I would always stay home with mom and take care of her". I was "seeing all this going on, hearing fights between them, and seeing mom upset and I felt like I should take some of the responsibility" and so now I feel like I act more "teenaged because I'm trying to make up for lost ground". At the same time, I've really tried to make sure I'm independent because I need to be able to rely on myself

Emily's Response: I finally got the chance to read the narrative you sent and I am giving you the go ahead to use it as part of your study, as I feel it is as close to my experiences as it can get. I am glad that I got the opportunity to speak with you and be a valuable part of your study. I hope this research project has proven to be a success.

Independent Reviewer's Response: I have read the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes of the interviews. The researcher's writing of Emily's story is accurate in portraying Emily's experience and appropriately limits extraneous information that did not relate to the phenomenon under investigation.

### *Narrative Number Seven: Cathy's Story*

I remember vividly finding out about the first of my dad's affairs when I was thirteen years old. I had come home early and I heard noises coming from the bedroom and when I opened the door, my dad was in the middle of having sex with a friend of mine who was eighteen at the time. I remember being so shocked at seeing this that I backed out of the room. They hadn't heard me so I left the house and made a lot of noise coming in again. By the time I was in the house, they were both dressed and in the living room and they looked at me and said "Oh, you're home early". It was about one year later that I found out about my mom's emotional affair with a family friend.

I remember coming home with a friend and my mom told me "your dad and I are getting a divorce" and "then my whole world just like, fell apart, precisely at that moment. I was like, why? And she said she was in love with this family friend and that they were going to be together". I was very "confused" by all of this and I had assumed that mom had found out about dad having sex with my friend, but it turns out that she was leaving because she was in love with another man. So, I moved with mom and her new boyfriend out of the province. I found out later that dad had had "multiple affairs in the seven years prior to the divorce" but my parents "never fought so it was a real shock when they announced the divorce". Their marriage "didn't seem like a normal marriage because, like, everybody argued except for my family".

When I think about it, the divorce is more upsetting for me then the infidelity because of the amount of lies that mom and dad said about each other. When I think about what happened back then, I'm surprised at how much anger I still have and how much my feelings of mistrust come from their affairs. Also, because of what happened, I feel like I grew up too fast and took on responsibilities I shouldn't have had; "I was cleaning, I would cook supper so it would be ready when they got home". "You had to learn to deal with everything and to me, in order to do that, you had to grow up because you couldn't understand it otherwise".

With the affair I caught my dad having, I still am angry with my friend who was having sex with him because "I've asked her to explain what happened and why she would do that, and she's never given me a reasonable explanation". You know, "if you're willing to step in the middle of somebody's marriage and do something that could, in turn, completely take away what they had together" you should have a justification beyond just wanting to have sex. I think she was "stupid" and that "she should have known better" for having sex with a married man. I'm more angry at her then at my dad and the whole thing to this day "doesn't make sense to me". I also feel like in a way, walking in on my dad having sex with her impacted my sexual development. "It did impact me growing up faster because I was doing things that I shouldn't have been doing".

I moved back with my dad when I was sixteen years old. In talking to my dad about his infidelities, it seems like he just "didn't care" about committing adultery because "everybody seemed to accept it, so he just continued to do it". For me, the fact that dad had multiple affairs is worse because "it's just about sex then" and not about "building a connection to another person" which would be easier for me to understand. "To me, there's no excuse to go and sleep with somebody else. There's no . . . I don't see the basis behind that. I can't comprehend why he would do that".



By my dad being willing to sit down and talk to me about his infidelities, it has allowed us to "get really close". "He sat down and like, I just said, 'Dad, you've got to be very open'". My dad told me that he had a high sex drive and that mom wasn't interested in sex, so even though he tried to get sex in the marriage, he couldn't get what he needed. He made himself available to answer all the questions I had whereas mom "refuses" to answer any questions that she thinks are too personal or embarrassing. You know, a lot of the healing that took place between me and dad was because "he took the time to sit down and say, you know, I screwed up and basically I am selfish and this is why I did it. Like, that type of thing, it made a big difference between the bond that me and dad had". "If you can explain anything, it's better than nothing". Like, "you don't have to be that direct but you have to tell your kids something. Like, if you say, even if you say my sex life wasn't what it should be or what I wanted, but you don't have to delve into it if you aren't comfortable with that". The only thing is about finding out why dad cheated is it makes me think, "if it happened to dad while he was married, is it going to happen to me?"

It was hard to hear my parents expressing their anger towards each other about the affairs and I think parents need to understand that they must keep their anger away from their kids, because "kids just don't understand it". I'm angry at mom because she wasn't able to contain her emotions around the infidelity and the divorce and I'm also angry at mom for the "betrayal of dad" that remains unexplained and unaddressed. "If it's not explained, if you don't try to make it better, then things are not going to get better". Finding out about my parent's infidelities has "made it harder to trust people because the two basic influences in my life have taken that away". My mom and I don't have a close bond now because her mom "didn't explain to me" why she had started another relationship with her friend. "You can't deal with it until you know why". A child who "has knowledge of what is going on can have compassion for the parents and make sense of what is happening in the family. Knowledge is safety".

Ultimately, I'm glad that my mom moved in with her new boyfriend because she's happy now, "extremely, extremely happy". At first, I blamed my step-dad because "to me, it was all his fault" that my parents divorced so "I didn't like him at all". Even though mom and her new boyfriend didn't have sex until my parents were separated, I still see this relationship as a betrayal because mom lied about where she was going and what she was doing, but I don't see it as an affair. What dad did was definitely "worse" because mom lacked an emotional connection with dad and she couldn't get that from him but all dad was doing was "going out for sex".

I think that children of adulterous parents look for someone who is the opposite of the parent who had the affair so we can make sure that what happened to us as kids won't happen again. At the same time, I think I've found someone who is more like my dad even though he cheated, because dad was honest about his infidelities and open to answering my questions. So, honesty is the biggest thing for me. When I started dating my husband, I wouldn't let him get too close to me and when I thought he was too close I would break up with him because I knew "if he got in I would get hurt" and at least by breaking up with him, "I could control the hurt".

The greatest impact of my parents' cheating was that I couldn't trust people, and so when my husband cheated on me (prior to us getting married), "it just kind of proved the point, you know what I mean? Like, I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, and then it did. So, now its like, 'well, he's done it once so . . .'". In our relationship now, "trust is a constant argument". I just don't feel I can trust him 100% because he cheated on me, "he lied right to me about it, and then I caught him and then he just didn't know what to do". It's hard for me when he goes away

for work and he calls me and I can hear women in the background. That's when I start to get nervous and ask lots of questions. My husband's cheating coupled with my dad's leads me to be suspicious and vigilant about getting the truth. I do look for signs of deception and lies. "I think it's natural to ask where the other person has been, why they are late, and who they were with". I find that if my husband ever questions my questioning him, I get anxious and I worry that there is something going on. I think that monogamy is possible but the fact that my husband and dad had affairs is "always in my mind". It's like there's "an underlying emotion" that drives me to be suspicious. I'm also surprised that as I talk about it, I'm still angry at my parents even though they are both in happy relationships now.

I don't doubt my own ability to remain monogamous because "I saw what other people went through" and that the feeling of being betrayed is something "I'd never want to put on anybody else". I've told my husband that "if anything's going to happen, like if you don't want to be here, if you don't want to be with me and this is not what you want, there's the door. Leave now". I've got a little girl of my own and so sometimes it "makes me anxious – like, if anything happens between myself and [my husband], then I get really anxious because I don't want her to go through anything I went through". At this point though, my daughter is so young so it wouldn't be so bad if he cheated and left now because she "wouldn't really remember him" and his leaving "wouldn't really impact her".

You know, it's just difficult to trust anyone because once trust has been damaged, "it's hard to get it back because it's just not there". When it comes to trust in a relationship, it's like "if you are missing something that important to you or you feel that you have to have, and you are not getting it, then you are going to look for it elsewhere even if you don't know that you're looking for it". For me, I feel like I'm missing "a solid base" where you can rely on someone else because there is a void inside where you "don't feel secure". This is why it's so important to me that my daughter be able to trust me and feel like she can come to me for anything and ask me anything and know that she'll get the truth.

Being lied to "is my big thing" because my parents lied, to me, and to each other. "They're not supposed to lie to me. Your parents are supposed to always be truthful and be clear, at all time, in terms of what you need to know. And when they're not . . . I think it impacts on every level". Infidelity is huge for children, and parents need to know that it will affect their kids "forever, even if they don't know that it's there, it's always going to be there". My parents "tore apart the family" and it hit me because, as a child, "you grow up feeling like the family is secure" and then when you find out that it isn't true, "it just tears me apart because the family unit is not together" and it's based upon a lie. I see this lie in the way that infidelity is portrayed in the media too. The way that TV shows infidelity is that "nobody gets hurt by it, but they don't show the aftermath of it".

Basically, I believe that if you make a commitment to someone either by marrying them or giving birth to them that "commitment is everything" and "if you make a commitment to someone, you are there no matter what and any issues that come up. Anything happens, you should be able to communicate and deal with them". Affairs don't need to affect the parent child bond if parents "look at it and sit down and talk to you and try to explain like even if you are younger, to try to explain a little bit why this happened or why they left or why they are with this new person if they are with somebody else. To try to explain what happened like, even just a little bit so the child understands and comprehends a little bit". If parents do this then, "I think they can rebuild the bond and make it stronger than what it was before, and then go from there".

If this isn't done, then the parent and child will coexist but "there is no actual bond there" and your relationship will never be the same again.

Cathy's Response: Unfortunately, Cathy relocated outside of the province and all contact information (phone number and email) were found to be inactive.

Independent Reviewer's Response: I have read the transcripts and listened to the audio tapes of the interviews. The narrative written by the researcher accurately depicts both the general essence of Cathy's experience and her specific quotes from the interview text.

## CHAPTER V

### RESULTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the themes elicited from the results of the study are discussed with examples being provided for each theme derived from the transcripts.

The focus of this study was to examine the experiences and meaning that individuals make of being the children of parents of engaged in extramarital sexual affairs (with regard to their own development and their current romantic relationships). Interviews with seven co-researchers produced 10 thematic categories that were found to be recurrent and prominent aspects of being a child of an adulterous parent(s): (a) Betrayal / Rejection of the Family, (b) Loss of Safety and Security, (c) Cognitive Understanding vs. Latent Emotions, (d) The Third Party, (e) Adulthood, (f) Witnessing the Hurt, (g) Fear of the Future / Marriage, (h) Gender Links and Fear of Infidelity, (i) Vigilance of Infidelity, (j) Honesty and Openness – Forming a New Parent Child Bond. These themes will be presented in three sections that have been organized chronologically: Past Reflection, Current Experience, and Healing.

However, not all of these 10 themes were found to be universal in the data set. van Manen (1990) states that in determining themes relating to the experience of a phenomenon, “we need to make the distinction between incidental themes and essential themes” (p. 106). Not every theme is unique to the particular phenomenon or experience under investigation and there may be crossover themes with other experiences. van Manen suggests that the phenomenological investigator uses a process of “free imaginative variation” (p. 107) to generate essential themes. What this means is that the researcher must “*discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is*” (p. 107). By imagining whether the experience or phenomenon would remain if each theme was deleted, the researcher can determine which themes are essential and which are incidental.

While each theme will be presented individually, it is important to consider that each theme is contextually connected to the others and, similar to the hermeneutic circle of inquiry, each theme is a part and the reader is encouraged to return to the whole of the experience to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The narratives of each participant will be referenced to provide evidence of each theme and to provide an overall context or general narrative for the study. However, essential themes will not reference all seven participants simply due to concerns over volume of information.

The majority of themes were experienced by all participants (essential themes) and, in the case of the incidental themes which did not universally apply to the participants in this study; they are included because of their significance to the participants' experience of the phenomenon. What this means is that these themes are so critical to the meaning of the experience that they override the necessity of universality for this study.

For example with theme D, The Third Party, five of the seven participants indicated feelings of anger or resentment towards the extramarital lover / interloper. The significance of this theme in the context of their experience is essential to understanding what it means for them to be a child of an adulterous parent. These themes add to the overall understanding of the phenomenon and provide areas for future study and investigation.

For clarity and ease of reference, the names of each participant will be used when discussing themes.

### *Past Reflection*

The following themes were universally found in the interviews with all seven participants. They are essential themes.

A. Betrayal / Rejection of the Family

All of the participants indicated that when they reflected on their parent(s) infidelity that they didn't simply view the act as a transgression of the marital bonds. Betrayal ranged for the participants from feeling rejected or "chosen over" by the participating spouse to feeling "disposable". Emily's narrative describes a different depth of betrayal:

[My dad] used to bring us to play with [his lover's] kids and then he started to take toys that belonged to my brother and I and give them to her kids. "It really got to me. It really irked me to no end" when I saw dad spending so much time with that other family. "He used to spend a lot of quality time with them and not with us" That was the biggest betrayal, that he would take from us and give to them – our possessions and his time. (Emily)

Love in the sense of time and toys were stripped from Emily and given over to this new family that her dad chose to be with. She described feeling lowered self-esteem and self-worth as a result of this experience. James echoed this impact and expressed anger in his father's decision to adopt a new family and follow his sexual desires:

the fact that he was willing to throw a good family, a good home, a good wife, he was willing to throw that shit away for a couple of orgasms here and there.  
(James)

James adds that his extended family felt the rejection: aunts, uncles and grandparents felt the betrayal of the family as a larger whole. The betrayal of the family is about family stability and interpreting the behaviour of the infidelity:

Although it was a rejection of mom, it was also . . . he's rejecting me because the way I see it is like, when you have an affair, you're playing with the emotions of your kids . . . and the kids' well being. (Diana)

Betrayal is rejection that extends past the marital dyad. Diana here expresses how personally infidelity is felt by the children in the family.

B. Loss of Safety and Security

Participant's reported feeling a loss of safety and security in their world as a result of their parent's extramarital sexual affair. This reaction has been associated with the impact of divorce on children, yet even the three participants whose parents remained married experienced a loss of safety.

I guess you just don't feel safe anymore. That's the feeling I got and I kinda still have. You kinda get this sense like that . . . there's nobody there to protect you anymore and you don't trust anyone anymore. . . Just thinking about this brings tears to my eyes because it's this lack of safety which is the biggest thing I'm still dealing with today. There is also like a 'gnawing kind of fear inside of me, of just like, my future, and I think that lack of stability at the young age has created that in me.' (Diana)

Participants equate trust with safety and protection. If you can't trust or predict your parent's actions / behaviours, trust is impacted and the child / adolescent must learn to rely on themselves and reduce their faith in other people being present for them. The image of the parent as stable and safe disappears after infidelity. As Natasha states,

The person that you thought they were, although you might not lose them physically, you lose who you thought they were. They changed in your head. (Natasha)

For James, his dad's infidelity "crumbled" the image that he had of his dad, and destroyed a feeling of safety and a foundation that he had relied on throughout his childhood:

... when I found out, that was hard to deal with, because for somebody who I had for eighteen years at that point in my life, considered him a role model and that was a pretty heavy thing for me to take at that point because I looked up to him and stuff and then all these ideas that I had or I thought I had seemed false.  
(James)

For many participants, the sense of safety they lost as children is being discovered or sought in their current romantic relationship:

... my current boyfriend ... is like 'the rock I lean on' and 'he keeps me grounded' when I'm not stable. (Diana)

Through their current intimate relationships, participants report a feeling of security that was either damaged or altered in their childhood. Through these connections, they suggest that a healing process is taking place although it is challenging and difficult. Emily reports being able to find the consistency that she described losing as a result of her father's infidelity:

[My partner] "gives me a lot of emotional support, he gives me a lot of support in every way, and he is there for me all the way. (Emily)

Cathy summarizes the experiences of the participants stating that there is something missing inside; something has been shifted or removed in discovering their parent's infidelity:

For me, I feel like I'm missing 'a solid base' where you can rely on someone else because there is a void inside where you 'don't feel secure'. (Cathy)

Therefore, the known world of the child is altered through the altering of the 'solidity' of the parent.



C. Cognitive Understanding vs. Latent Emotion

All of the participants described having an understanding of why their parent(s) engaged in adultery, and would often describe this understanding with flat or no affect. They reported the 'reasons' for the extramarital sexual activity as though 'it makes sense' why this infidelity took place. However, they followed their description of the 'reason' with strong latent affect.

My dad told me that he had a high sex drive and that mom wasn't interested in sex. So, even though he tried to get sex in the marriage, he couldn't get what he needed." This explanation is followed by, "There's an underlying emotion" in me. I'm also surprised that as I talk about it, I'm still angry at my parents even though they're both in happy relationships now. (Cathy)

Even though Cathy can rationalize what brought her dad to have a sexual affair, she still maintains that feeling of anger when she talks about what happened and how it impacted her.

Marie states:

I understand why mom had an affair, because 'mom and dad got married early, like my mom was nineteen' but I'm still angry at her for what she did." . . . "I don't know why but it still frustrates me and makes me sad when I talk about my mom's infidelity. (Marie)

The participants report that years after the affair, the rationalization they have either been given or that has been self-developed is not sufficient in addressing the underlying hurt they maintain:

I know that dad had the affair because my parents were 'forced to marry' and dad didn't really want to be with mom from the beginning", is followed by the latent emotion, Dad "stabbed us in the back" and "I hate [him] for what he did. (Emily)

The following themes were not universally found in the interviews with all seven participants. They are incidental themes.

D. The Third Party

Five of the seven participants described maintaining feelings of anger towards their parent(s) extramarital lovers for their role in the infidelity and the subsequent impact it had on them and their families. The other three participants described “neutral” or “indifferent” feelings towards these third parties and felt that the “blame” for the affair should fall solely on their parent(s).

The process of imagining why a person would get involved in an affair with a married person with kids seemed to evoke feelings of anger and sadness for the participants. They described lacking the ability to comprehend why a person would knowingly enter into a relationship that might end up dissolving or harming a family:

I mean, Jesus, she knows he's a married man and what did she have to gain besides having an orgasm right? (James)

Some participants also reported wanting an apology or an accounting of their behaviour from the extramarital partner in order to heal their experience of the infidelity. Natasha says that:

I think sometimes that I'd like to confront May. 'I'd like to explore that, just for my own sake, so like maybe she would say . . . I'm sorry, that was stupid.  
(Natasha)

Cathy maintains strong feelings of anger towards the lover she caught her dad having sex with.

This may be due to the fact that this extramarital partner was a friend of Cathy's who was only a few years older than Cathy was when she discovered their sexual relationship:

I am still angry with my friend who was having sex with [my dad] because, 'I've asked her to explain what happened and why she would do that, and she's never given me a reasonable explanation'. You know, 'if you're willing to step in the middle of somebody's marriage and do something that could, in turn, completely take away what they had together' you should have a justification beyond just wanting to have sex. I think she was 'stupid' and that 'she should have known better' for having sex with a married man. (Cathy)

E. Adultification

All of the participants with the exception of James and Teresa described feeling as though they grew up too fast or had to take on adult roles and responsibilities as a result of their parent's affair(s). This may be attributed to James being in his late teens when his father's infidelity was discovered and Teresa being only two when her mom had the affair (and her being twenty-two when she first learned of her mom's affair). At these points in their lives, they were already experiencing adult or pre-adult responsibilities and could care for their own needs independent of their parents. Teresa did describe her siblings (who were in their early or pre-adolescence at the time of her mom's affair) feeling as though Teresa:

"got the good deal" and "that I don't know what it was like' for them to baby sit, clean the house, and take care of things 'because dad wasn't doing any' of those things. (Teresa)

Emily describes a different form of adultification in which he believes she took on the parental role of comforting and being his mother's emotional confidant after his dad's affair:

It 'hurt me a lot' knowing that [dad] was over with [his lover and her family] building a new family, 'but as a child there was nothing I could do to stop it, so I just thought I would take care of mom the best I could. (Emily)

Participants who described feeling as though they had to develop self-reliance as a result of taking on these adult responsibilities and roles as the non-participating spouse didn't seem

willing or able to care for them the way they needed after the discovery of the affair. Diana described feeling as though she needed to comfort and support her mother who had been left behind and her dad who felt guilty for his act of infidelity:

I would go and see my dad after he left and he would 'bawl and cry for like a half hour on my shoulder about how bad he felt' and this made it hard to go see him" and "I feel like I grew up too fast, too early. Like, I was doing my own laundry at age nine and listening to mom talk about how there wasn't enough money to pay the bills. That's scary for a little girl to hear". "There have been times that I feel my relationship with mom 'is more like a partnership' and 'I feel like she should take care of me, you know? Like, it's more like sometimes I have to take care of her. (Diana)

Marie describes the lessons she learned by her mom's reaction to her dad's infidelity:

"I feel like I grew up faster than other kids 'big time' because I feel like I had to 'parent my mom' and I had to 'tell her what to do' which is wrong. It is the job of 'the parent to teach the child', not the other way around. I can't really 'rely on my mom' so I have to rely on myself." (Marie)

#### F. Witnessing the Hurt

Six of the seven participants described feeling impacted by witnessing the level of hurt that the non-participating spouse went through as a result of the infidelity of the participating spouse. This theme is linked to the previous category in that the hurt of the non-participating spouse often debilitated the parent and impacted their ability to care for the child, it is separate in that the participants described that their emotional reactions to the participating spouse's infidelity was based on witnessing the pain / hurt of the other parent.

James states that:

I'm not alone in being a victim of my dad's infidelity. My mom was really hurt by what he did and 'all my sympathies belong to her.' . . . I have, like I said, a 'sense of loyalty to my mom' and consequently, I won't go and spend time with

dad and his new family because 'mom would be devastated and I can't do that to her.' (James)

Due to the hurt he witnessed his mom endure as a result of his dad's affair, James is willing to sacrifice a relationship with his father so as not to add to the suffering of his mother. Emily's reaction to witnessing her mom's pain is intense and has endured until the present day:

I remember telling my dad, 'I hate you because you did this to mom'. That's been one of the hardest things for me, seeing the impact of his affair on mom. 'It was horrible, mom went through pure hell and she had a nervous breakdown over it.' (Emily)

The intensity of Emily's anger is echoed in Diana's feelings at watching her mom's hurt. She goes further to react to the medical implications for her mom as a result of her dad's having sex with an external partner:

When I think about what he put mom through, I get so angry. Mom had to get an AIDS test after he left because 'who knows what he could have been bringing home to her'. Seeing the 'pain he put my mom through' 'killed me' inside and I'm still so angry at him . . . (Diana)

Not only did her dad's infidelity cost Diana her family stability and structure, when her mom had to get an AIDS test, Diana was afraid the affair might also cost her the life of her mom.

### *Current Experience*

The following themes were universally found in the interviews with all seven participants. They are essential themes.

G. Fear of the Future / Marriage

All seven participants described feeling fear when it came to their future relationships and the idea of marriage. The majority of fear comes from wondering whether or not a monogamous relationship was possible for them and, more specifically, it was a fear of repeating the same level of hurt that they had experienced as a result of the infidelities of their parents. For Cathy, the only currently married participant and only participant with a child, the fear of infidelity is ever-present for her:

I've got a little girl of my own and so sometimes it 'makes me anxious – like, if anything happens between myself and [my husband], then I get really anxious because I don't want her to go through anything I went through. (Cathy)

Cathy even had gone as far as to consider that if her husband cheated on her while her daughter is still young it wouldn't be as bad because "she wouldn't really remember him" and his leaving "wouldn't really impact her." It is almost as though for Cathy, the fear was almost a certainty. For Teresa, even though she discovered her mom's infidelity in her adulthood, the fear of repeating her family history is present:

I don't want to make the same mistake" as my mom did and I'm very careful not to sacrifice my own needs in my relationship the way mom did. (Teresa)

Teresa is attempting to learn from her mom's affair and in doing so, to safeguard her relationship from infidelity. James appeared to connect marriage with increasing the opportunity for infidelity and commitment with opening himself up to being hurt:

I'm not so sure I believe in getting married anymore either. 'I don't feel like I have to marry [my girlfriend] to show everybody else that I am committed or

show her I am committed. I wouldn't want to do it because of the fact that if we were to get married and one of us had an affair, then got divorced, then there is a lot of crap that you got to go through. (James)

Similar to Cathy, James appears to feel his fears will eventually become a reality if he moves towards marriage with his current girlfriend. Natasha describes feeling trapped between desiring the connection of marriage and fearing the infidelity that she believes will happen despite her best efforts to stop it.

When I think about marriage, 'I don't see the point of it. I think it's a farce' and yet, the other day 'I spent twenty minutes staring at engagement rings, wondering what it would be like to find somebody I want to marry'. For me, marriage 'automatically contradicts what I want to do. What if it's a guy who's just going to cheat?' Knowing what happened in my parent's marriage makes me feel 'lonely because now I realize that I may never trust anybody. I may never be comfortable in a marriage. Pretty lonely.' (Natasha)

#### H. Gender Links and Fear of Infidelity

One of the most interesting patterns that developed throughout the interview process was a 'link' between gender and the fear of infidelity. The use of the word 'link' is not meant to imply causal or correlated as the purpose of this study is not to draw conclusions. Instead, 'link' here is designed to indicate a connection that each participant made between gender and the fear of infidelity. There were two such connection patterns identified through the interview process: (a) fear of committing adultery where the adulterous parent was the same sex as the participant, and (b) fear of the participant's partner committing adultery where the partner is the same sex as the adulterous parent.

James, Marie, and Teresa all had parents of the same sex engage in adultery. While each one of them indicated that they would never engage in adultery because they knew the harm it

would cause the people around them, they indicated an underlying fear or doubt that they might cheat:

Like I said before, I wouldn't cheat on her but I do have a little bit of doubt you know, like what if? Like, sometimes I wonder that I'll follow in dad's footsteps and cheat. (James)

There is a 'small part of me that is afraid that I'm going to be like mom in all ways' and that, even though I trust myself not to cheat 100%, there's a tiny fear that 'I might do what mom did. (Marie)

These participants seemed to wonder if there was a genetic link, some form of predisposition that might cause them to be tempted to stray or to cheat when their guard was down. All of these participants reported being highly vigilant of their own behaviour so as not to 'follow in the footsteps' of their adulterous parents.

The second group: Diana, Natasha, Cathy, and Emily, all reported that they trusted themselves 100% with no doubt of whether or not they would cheat. However, all of them indicated a sense of mistrust or doubt about their partner's fidelity:

It's strange because 'I trust myself 100%' because I've never cheated in any of my relationships but I have 'this fear' that what happened to my parents will happen to me. (Emily)

Knowing that [my boyfriend] has been hurt by people cheating on him 'gives me a little bit of security' but . . . Inside my mind, 'every minute of the day, I'm like, is he seeing someone else?' and 'if I don't hear from him, who is he with right now?' and 'he's with me in the car and he looks at his cell phone to see if anyone called and I'm wondering, 'is he trying to hide a call from me? This is like 'torture' for me. (Natasha)

Although I want to believe that I trust my boyfriend 100%, in reality it's 'maybe 99%. I guess there's always that little thing, there is a possibility' and it's that possibility that is really scary. (Diana)

Trust, either of themselves or their partners, has been damaged and all of the participants appear to be struggling with wanting to believe that trust is possible yet the undercurrent of doubt is present for all of them.



## I. Vigilance in Relationship

All seven of the participants reported that due to the aforementioned difficulties they experience with trust and they describe having developed a higher level of awareness, a vigilance of their partner's actions. They describe always been 'on-the-lookout' for infidelity and betrayal in their relationships.

I know that dad's infidelity has affected my own relationships because with my past boyfriends, 'I'd always be questioning them like, about where they've been, who they went out with, and all that' even though I know that this behaviour was 'killing me, yeah, it was killing me inside because I didn't want to be doing it. (Emily)

Still, even though I trust [my boyfriend], I'm probably 'more vigilant in my relationships' both with my boyfriend and friends, and I'm 'always looking for signs' that people are lying to me. (Marie)

I am vigilant in my relationship because of mom's infidelity because 'I've seen how it can destroy or hurt your family' and I don't want to repeat what happened to my family. So, 'I am, I am kind of watching out. . .' (Teresa)

## *Healing*

## J. Honesty and Openness – Forming a New Parent-Child Bond

All of the participants indicated that what has healed, or what is needed to heal, the relationships with their parents (both participating and non-participating spouses) is the opportunity to seek truthful information about what occurred at the time of the infidelity and after. It is important to note that participants were clear that they did not wish to know all of the details of the affair (i.e. sexual contact and experiences with the external partner), but they did

wish to reach a point of understanding with their parents and this would allow them to rebuild the damaged relationships many were still living with.

Some of the participants had had opportunities to understand and get the clarification they needed. For example, Teresa, who found out about her mother's affair in her early 20's stated that:

... infidelity can also provide an opportunity for the couple to build a stronger relationship, and a stronger family out of the 'chaos that comes from finding out about an infidelity.' As long as parents are willing to 'deal with their mistake and bring it out into the open and talk about it' then they may be able to prevent their kids from being so hurt and from repeating their mistake. (Teresa)

Cathy has spoken to her adulterous parent and reached a place of understanding that has allowed her to develop and / or maintain healthy adult relationships with the adulterer:

By my dad being willing to sit down and talk to me about his infidelities, it has allowed us to 'get really close'. . . He made himself available to answer all the questions I had whereas mom 'refuses' to answer any questions that she thinks are too personal or embarrassing. You know, a lot of the healing that took place between me and dad was because 'he took the time to sit down and say, you know, I screwed up and basically I am selfish and this is why I did it. Like, that type of thing, it made a big difference between the bond that me and dad had.'  
(Cathy)

Honesty then is essential to breaking cycles of damaged relationships and in addressing the hurt suffered by the children of adulterers. Marie has not yet been able to speak with her mom about the affair she engaged in and she feels that this blocks their relationship:

I'd like to ask her about the affair, you know, find out if 'she thought about the long-term consequences of sleeping with her boss'. I need to know 'Why? Why would you do that? Like, an orgasm or two for jeopardizing the family you've established you know?' I think that if I was able to talk to mom about the affair that 'it would tie it all together.' . . . Until she's willing to talk about it, I think that this will hold mom and me apart. (Marie)

Understanding is not always about 'why' though. For example, Natasha already had a rationale and didn't need to know why. As her parents had survived the infidelity, Natasha felt that she needed to know something else:

There is also part of me that wants to know what happened, 'not so much to know why, but just to find out how did you get past it? How do people deal with life? I need to know how to fix infidelity because 'I need to be prepared to work through that with a future husband'. I need to know from dad, how 'did you get through it, because I'm afraid.' (Natasha)

Emily, who desires a rebuilding of her relationship with her dad, finds it difficult to address the infidelity but she believes that she needs to understand what her dad did before she can begin the process of rebuilding:

I want to hear from dad why he cheated. I try to talk to dad about his infidelity but 'he gets on another topic and he tries to evade the whole thing . . . right up to this day.' If he could tell me why, 'at least he would be honest enough, and man enough, to tell me' and 'there'd be a new honesty thing here' in our relationship. . I mean, there's nothing wrong with the truth . . . I can't forgive him for it but at least I'll know what went on . . . (Emily)

For Emily, forgiveness is not a consideration because of the hurt she has experienced and witnessed in her family. However, understanding may allow for a new beginning and a new relationship to be forged between herself and her father with whom she has had very little contact since she was a little girl.

James had a different experience in that he confronted his father and asked him if he was engaged in an extramarital affair. His dad's refusal to answer "hurt" James and the ideas James

had of who his dad was “crumbled”. James says that although there has been a lot of pain, there is still a chance to heal the relationship he has with his father:

By having some ‘open communication’, it might make things better between dad and I because ‘just being able to feel like you can ask somebody something can make a big difference’ . . . The fact that ‘he had not told me the truth is shitty because that puts a big damper on our relationship because, like I said, that without trust, there’s a breakdown and it just makes things really difficult. . . And, you know, if he did tell me what happened, ‘I think at first it would be hard. It would definitely put a bit of a wedge there for sure between me and him but I think that after a while, it would become easier because then I could kind of deal with the fact that, ok, this is the truth, this is what happened’, ‘at least you were honest, we cleared that up and that’s out of the way’. ‘Let’s put it behind me and move on. (James)

The truth is not easy to hear and healing does not happen overnight, but it does open a door to a new way of relating and towards putting the past to rest so a new, adult relationship can be formed.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

Phenomenology is about context: viewing the text in detail and then placing it in the larger context, the larger community of experiences. Having examined the results in detail, it is therefore important to situate the themes that have been elicited into the broader literature in the academic environment. To close the study, an accounting of the limitations of the current research, implications for the field of Counselling Psychology, areas for future research, and a general summary of the research project will be discussed. However, it is important to briefly revisit the research question in order to determine if it has been adequately answered.

#### *Research Question*

This study asked the question: What is the impact of parents' extramarital sexual affairs on their children as they reach adulthood and enter into their own sexual relationships? Seven individuals were interviewed and ten themes (7 Essential and 3 Incidental) were elicited. The seven essential themes are especially important to focus on as they represent the foundation for determining the essence of this phenomenon; the common experience or fusing of horizons that leads to a greater understanding of what it means to be a child who grew up knowing about his/her parent's extramarital sexual infidelity. While it cannot be said that the Answer to the research question has been found, the answer with respect to these seven individuals has been determined.

It is important to revisit the objectives laid out in this study to assess whether or not they have been met. This inquiry was intended to contribute to the field of counselling psychology

by: (a) providing information about how adult children of infidelity are impacted by their parents' affairs; (b) how or does their parents' infidelity impact their ability to be in a sexual relationship; and (c) if these adult children are impacted by their parents' extramarital sexual affairs, what do they need to mediate or reduce the effects of their experiences.

I believe that all three of these objectives have been met within the essential themes that have been revealed through the process of conducting this study. I believe that we see the impact of infidelity on these adult children in themes of Betrayal / Rejection of the Family; Safety and Security; Gender Links and the Fear of Infidelity. I believe we see the impact of infidelity on the sexual relationships of participants in the themes of Vigilance of Infidelity and Fear of the Future / Marriage. Finally, I believe that the theme of Honesty and Openness – Forming a New Parent / Child Bond provides the answer to the third question regarding what these adult children of infidelity need in order to mediate or reduce the effects of their experiences.

#### *Fit With Literature*

The vast majority (if not all) of the literature dealing with the impact of infidelity has focused on the marital dyad: the frequency, etiology, how to heal the relationship, etc. This study is unique in that it has shifted the focus off of the married couple and on to the children with a specific interest in the long-term impact on the adult children's romantic relationships. This is not to say, however, that all of the findings of this research are similarly unique.

A large number of the themes found in this study were found to be largely in agreement with the literature explored in Chapter II, particularly within the body of literature that has explored the impact of parental divorce or marital conflict on children as they move towards adulthood. In particular, the category of Fear of Marriage and trepidation participants reported

with regard to commitment were similarly reported in Amato and Keith (1991a; 1991b) and Hetherington et al. (1998). The present study affirms the concerns young adults coming from a highly conflictual or broken home have that they may repeat the patterns of their own family of origin. However, there is a slight difference in that in addition to the fear of divorce, participants in the present study also identified a fear of infidelity leading to divorce; a slight but specific separation.

The category of Adultification is also closely linked to studies on the impact of divorce on children. Pryor's (1999) description of children "parenting their parents" (p. 54) highly complements the descriptions of the participants in this study. This suggests that when the marital dyad is under high degrees of stress, children appear to either take on extra responsibilities or have them thrust upon them through parental demand / absence. Both within Kaufman and Uhlenberg's (1998) study and the present investigation, the burden of additional responsibilities appears to negatively impact upon the child's relationship with the parents and further reduces the child's sense of connection to the family. It is interesting to note that none of the participants mentioned being witness to high levels of marital conflict due to the presence of infidelity within the marriage. However, participants did focus on the impact of Witnessing the Hurt.

The results from this category provide an additional link to the impact of divorce on children literature. While this aspect of parental divorce is not specifically explored in the literature section of this paper, distinct references are made to the emotional difficulty that children who observe their parents in the process of separation or divorce experience (Jacquet & Surra 2001; Calhoun & Friel 2001; Amato & Keith 1991a; and Hetherington et al. 1998). Participants in the current study described aligning with or empathizing with the cuckolded spouse and moved to a position of blame with the spouse who had engaged in the extramarital affair. More specifically, they focused on the intense suffering and hurt they viewed in the non-

participating parent after the affair was discovered / revealed. The pain of the parent is felt, understood, and validated by the child. In this process, the child is further impacted by the act of the infidelity within the marriage.

Many of the participants in this study reported maintaining strong feelings of anger towards the extramarital party. While this was not an essential theme as defined by van Manen (1990), it is worth exploring as it is mirrored in the infidelity literature. The results of this study are reflected in Glass, 1998, Glass and Wright, 1997, Boekhout, 2000, and Pam and Pearson, 1996. However, unlike these aforementioned studies which described the anger held by the cuckolded spouse towards the third party, the present study found that this anger is also often shared with the children in the family. While the children may not maintain the intensity of feeling maintained by the non-participating spouse, the same feelings of indignation and resentment are present as is the 'moral-highground' stance that Pam and Pearson (1996) describe. Some participants reported a desire to confront or challenge the extramarital partner with the purpose of either extracting an apology or to understand why this person would consciously jeopardize their family stability. These desires are commonly understood to be present and normal responses in the non-participating spouse; this study suggests that it may also be natural for children to share these feelings and desires with regard to the third party.

Of the very few studies that address the impact of infidelity on children, Pam and Pearson, 1996 and Pittman, 1989, both describe the 'link' between philandering individuals and the possible heredity of infidelity. One of the most intriguing findings within this study is the gender association described by the participants with regard to infidelity. Pittman (1989) writes that "... philanderers may be the sons of philanderers . . ." (p. 36) and that this also applies to daughters / women. The results of this study would suggest that there is a link or association that the participants make between the infidelity of their parents and their own fear of engaging in infidelity or having a partner who cheats on them. Male participants with infidel fathers and



female participants with infidel mothers describe doubts or fears associated with their own ability to remain monogamous. Similarly, males with mothers who cheated and females with dads who cheated describe strong (if not imperviously strong) levels of trust within themselves to not engage in infidelity. However, they describe maintaining the same doubts and fears described by the previous group when discussing the perceived fidelity of their partners. While no causal link stating that the 'sins of the father are visited upon the son' or upon the daughter has ever been demonstrated, the literature and this study clearly reflect that the possibility is present in the minds of adult children of adulterous parents.

All of the participants in the present study described a shift or an altering of their sense of safety or security as a result of their parent(s)' infidelity. The adulterous parent, who was thought to be understood or a known commodity for the child becomes unknown and is therefore an unstable base for the child to rely on for consistency. These results support the studies on the impact of divorce on children (Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991a; Webster et al., 1995; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 199) and yet, it is important to note that even the participants whose parents remained married experienced a loss of security or safety.

In addition, participants reported seeking or finding the security or stability that was lost in their current romantic relationships. These individuals reported feeling 'grounded' or 'stable' as a result of the relationship with their partner. This finding is consistent with research on adult attachment (Brennan & Shaver, 1998; Cassidy, 2000; Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Cröwell et al., 2002). The relationship partner does not become the new parent, but they create a new opportunity for the insecurely attached individual to recreate secure attachment. These partners become the new secure base, or as Diana states, "the rock I lean on" in order to feel stable.

### *Unique Findings*

Four of the categories found in the results section appear to qualify as unique findings for this study. While there are examples of anecdotal evidence that support these findings, no studies were found to have examined or found these results.

All of the participants in this study reported that the adultery committed by one or both parents was not simply a betrayal of the cuckolded or non-participating spouse. Each individual was quite clear that the extramarital activities were a betrayal or a rejection of the family as a whole. This included a feeling of being 'chosen over' where the participating spouse would reduce the quantity or quality of the time they were spending with their children in favor of the third party, or in some cases, the children of the third party. The participants did not seem to distinguish between the feeling of rejection and the feeling of betrayal they felt. Through the adulterous parent's choice to redirect their emotional, physical, and often financial attentions to people outside of the family unit, the individuals in this study viewed this as a simultaneous rejection and betrayal. While this result may seem somewhat obvious (and certainly feelings of betrayal and rejection are reflected in abundance in studies that have explored the impact of infidelity on the cuckolded spouse), I believe that it holds a position of great importance in this study from a healing perspective for children of, and in, families experiencing adultery.

All of the participants reported having an incongruity within their understanding of their parent(s)' infidelity. They described maintaining knowledge of 'why' the infidelity happened, and would relate this understanding with limited or flat affect. However, upon reflection and questioning, all of the participants described latent feelings of anger. There appeared to be a separation between cognition and affect with regard to the infidelity. It would certainly make sense from a coping perspective that participants have come to 'make sense' of the adultery in order to remove themselves from the anger that lies beneath these 'understandings'. Through

denial or repression, participants are able to deal with the occurrence of their parent(s)' adultery on a daily basis without having to live in the emotions of their experience. While there is a similarity between this finding and the results of research conducted on children of divorce and marital conflict, I believe this to be an experience unique to children of adulterous parents as a) it is collectively described while children of divorce and marital conflict do not collectively describe this coping mechanism, and b) participants relate this experience regardless of parents marital status post-affair discovery.

Also unique to this study was the finding that participants unanimously described maintaining a high degree of vigilance within their current and past romantic relationships. They also stated that they maintain a heightened degree of sensitivity to signs of infidelity within their relationships. This finding has been described anecdotally within the research on the impact of infidelity on the marital dyad and within self-help literature dealing with infidelity and marriage. However, while the cuckolded spouse has been adequately represented and understood to be extra-sensitive to the signs of infidelity, the author was unable to find any studies that found this hypersensitivity extended to all family members. Participants in this study stated that because they had experienced the impact of adultery within their family, they were determined to protect themselves from repeating their family history in their own romantic relationships. Therefore they were continually aware of any of their partner's behaviours that may suggest participation in a relationship with an external individual.

Finally, each participant in the present study described the necessities or the process for healing their relationship with their parents in the post-affair family environment. Some participants felt that their relationship with the adulterous parent had been healed prior to this research. These individuals described having the adulterous parent open up a dialogue with them regarding the infidelity where they were able to ask the questions they had relating to the event of the infidelity and how it impacted them and the family unit. None of these individuals

described needing (or desiring) the level of intimate details that a spouse may require in order to know about the affair. Instead, participants described a feeling of resolution once they had ascertained a level of truth regarding the affair. They stated that trust had been breached in their relationship with their parents and it needed to be healed by an accounting of the events and an acknowledgment of responsibility.

In the situations where the participating parent had not engaged in a dialogue with their children around the extramarital affair, each participant stated that in order to heal their relationship with one or both parents, they felt they needed to be able to talk with their parents and ask questions and receive honest answers. Similar to the participants whose parents did open a conversation on the infidelity, these participants were not interested in the minute details of the affair itself. Rather, they were seeking to understand what happened and / or why and they desired to remove the affair as an obstacle of secrecy that blocked or limited their relationship with their parent(s). Clearly, within both groups in this final category, these participants are stating that they see themselves as affected by the act of the adulterous parent(s) and therefore, they feel they need to be involved in the process of healing.

### *Limitations*

This research is limited by a number of factors. First, the methodology limits the study in three specific ways: language, the co-researcher's awareness, and the researcher's personal experience and bias.

Language: van Manen (1990) writes that "the phenomenological method consists of the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive – sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak. This means that an authentic speaker must be a true listener, able to attune to the deep tonalities of language . . ." (p.

111). What this means is that the researcher and co-researchers must maintain a high level of awareness of the specificity of language and the corresponding meaning that language gives to their experiences. How are the co-researchers able to convey the experience of having parent(s) who committed adultery? How are those words translated and interpreted by the researchers? While language is able to portray the lived experience of being an adult child of adulterers, it also limits the conveyance of the thoughts and emotions that represent that experience. Communication too, is not simply completed through verbal language. Facial expressions, body language, tone, volume, all of these add to the message. While the verbal / acoustic representations of the co-researcher's experience were captured, the physical communication is lacking in this study. As a result, the research is limited by the understanding and depth of language of each co-researcher and the researcher who participates in the storying and interpretation of the co-researcher's experience.

The Co-Researcher's Experience: the ability of the co-researchers to describe and define their lived experience and to comprehend the depth of how it has impacted them limits the study. Conscious understanding and unconscious impact allow for an incomplete interpretation of the phenomenon. Witness Teresa who described not being impacted by her mother's infidelity during the initial interview only to describe strong feelings of anger and confusion in the follow up interview. That which was unconscious became conscious and therefore describable.

The Researcher's Personal Experience and Bias: Similar to the aforementioned conscious / unconscious awareness of the co-researcher, the researcher's ability to fully explicate all understandings, presuppositions, and biases prior to the interview process is limited by the researcher's level of self-understanding. How the interview's took shape, the questions and interpretations offered, the themes elicited from the data, and the process of creating a narrative that would succinctly represent the experiences of each co-researcher all bear the psychological 'fingerprints' of the researcher. While the researcher has endeavoured to describe all

presuppositions, experiences, and biases in order to contextualize the whole of this study, it is impossible to state all understandings and influences and therefore, there is researcher bias present in the study.

Secondly, this research is limited by the age in which participants first understood their parent's infidelity. Ranging from age six to twenty-two, the developmental impact of parent's infidelities is not addressed in this research. While the majority of themes elicited were experienced by all participants, there was a significant variation on some themes by both James (age 16 upon discovery) and Teresa (age 22 upon discovery) and this can be a potential limitation to the results of this study.

Thirdly, the presence of parental divorce / separation vs. the parents who chose to remain married may limit the results. While great efforts were made to distinguish differences between the impacts of divorce vs. infidelity in the interviews, it is difficult to determine how cleanly the co-researchers were able to separate these experiences as, in all cases of divorce and separation, the infidelity resulted in the dissolution of the marriage. In addition, the death of a co-researcher's mother may have impacted her experience of her father's infidelities and the meaning she made of them.

Fourth, the inability of the researcher to maintain contact with the co-researchers over the course the research was conducted limits the validity of the narratives produced in the Results section. One of the seven participants (Cathy) was unable to be reached through either phone or email contact and therefore, she was unable to endorse, clarify, or dismiss the narrative of her experience that was created by the researcher.

Fifth, this study is limited by culture. The data was collected by individuals living in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, which has a largely homogeneous population (upwards of 95+% Caucasian, Irish-British heritage). All of the co-researchers were Caucasian and had lived on the island of Newfoundland their whole lives. Newfoundland has a distinct culture within Canada

given its remote location and the difficulty of accessing mainland North America over several generations.

Sixth, this study may be limited by the volunteer nature of the participant selection. The interpretations or understandings of the co-researchers who self-selected for this study may be different than those of individuals who were unwilling to explore the meaning of their parent's infidelity. It is unclear at this point what motivates some individuals to participate and others to remain silent and how this might alter the results of such a study as this.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that all of the participants have not seen the themes that were drawn from their stories in this study. Therefore, there is no agreement or disagreement for these themes from the participants – this was done primarily because hermeneutic phenomenology does not require this level of reflection as the themes are derived from the interpretations of the narratives by the researcher.

### *Implications for Counselling Psychologists*

The results of this study greatly expand the research concerning the impact of parent's extramarital sexual affairs on their adult children and the adult children's romantic relationships. This can be said with such confidence as, up to this point, there has been no research conducted in this area apart from anecdotal evidence and speculation.

Most of the research on infidelity addresses: attitudes towards infidelity, participation rates and etiology of affairs, and how to heal infidelity within the relationship dyad. There are few references in peer-reviewed journals to the impact of infidelity on children and thus, there is a great need for more studies to focus on this population. Of the articles or selections from the many self-help books dealing with infidelity, the evidence described is limited to theoretical conjecture and anecdote.

The basic implications for this study are: First, it represents the first piece of research conducted on this population and, as such, begins to build a foundation from which future research on adult children of adulterous parents can be built. This study provides a 'voice' for the co-researchers to explicate their understandings and the meaning they make of this phenomenon. This study suggests that there may be an impact on children of adulterous parents that is similar to the trauma reaction that is seen in the non-participating spouse of a couple experiencing an infidelity. While some therapists have advocated for a separation of the children from the act of adultery and the process of healing the marriage, the experience of the co-researchers in this study suggest that this view may be short-sighted.

Secondly, counsellors could utilize the findings of this study to develop interventions to help this client population such as: (a) recognizing and validating this life experience as highly influential and important to their safety; (b) helping this population to explore and understand ways that their parent's adultery has impacted their bond with their parents and their current relationships; (c) to address unresolved emotions and / or cognitive dissonance they experience about growing up with the knowledge of their parent(s) infidelity, (d) addressing attachment interruptions that took place due to the infidelity and ways to heal individually or in their own romantic relationships, (e) to help participants understand and deal with the fear of infidelity occurring in their own romantic relationships and how to prevent their own participation in an affair, (f) how to address the feelings of loss that may have been experienced as a result of a parent's infidelities, and (g) how to heal the impact of infidelity in their own lives.

Finally, contrary to the thoughts of many researchers and practicing counselling psychologists who suggest that the events that directly impact the marital dyad (such as infidelity) are strictly the domain of the marriage, the participants of this study believe that as members of the family unit they are impacted and altered by knowing about their parents adultery. The author would agree that in cases of infidelity where the children are not aware of



these events, there can be no reason to involve them. However, once knowledge of the affair is attained, this study would seem to suggest that it's a matter of how, not if, to involve the children in the process of healing.

### *Future Research*

The findings in this study open up a wide variety of possible future explorations with this population. The future studies in this section do not exhaust the possibilities.

First, one might design studies that encompass a larger population and employ a methodology that would allow for some conclusive results that would allow for a greater generalizability of the impact of parental infidelity on children. This could be done through a focus group method, large scale one-on-one interviews, or national / multi-provincial / state surveys.

Secondly, one might limit the participation in the study to either age or gender to determine the influence that these two factors make in assessing the impact of infidelity. How does discovering your parent(s) infidelity at age six differ from age sixteen? How do males cope with this knowledge vs. females and does the gender of the parent make a difference to the meaning they make of this phenomenon?

Third, it may be important to conduct research that separates the marital outcome as a result of infidelity. How are children / adult children impacted by infidelity where their parents divorced? Separated? Stayed together? While the current study had participants from each of these categories, it remains unclear how marital status alters the meaning that adult children make of their parent's affairs.

Fourth, researchers may wish to consider exploring the relationship status of participants and how it affects their understanding of parental infidelity. In the current study participants

were dating, co-habiting, and married to their partners so it would be important to understand what, if any differences, there are between these populations. In addition, the presence of children within the adult child's relationships and how this impacts their understanding of parental infidelity would be important to explore.

Fifth, it may be important to employ a means of assessing the level of adult attachment of each participant to understand what role adult attachment plays in the impact of parental adultery. In the current study, participants indicated a lack of safety and security as a result of parental infidelity but it is unclear how this may relate to adult attachment difficulties.

Sixth, one might consider interviewing families who are currently experiencing an act of infidelity within the marital dyad and how it is being addressed within the family unit. This study could employ a therapeutic element as well to see how family therapy affects the short and long-term impact on children in the family and the parent-child bonds.

Seventh, the current study could be replicated with the addition of a visual recording device in the interviews to deepen the interpretation and meaning that is derived. As the majority of human communication is non-verbal, much more information on the impact of parental adultery may be uncovered and discussed in such interviews.

Eighth, as the current study was conducted with a very mono-cultural population, it may be important to include individuals from different religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds to assess any similarities and differences within these populations where parental infidelity is involved.

Ninth, one participant (James) indicated that it wasn't just his immediate family that was impacted by his father's infidelities. He stated that his extended family also felt some effect of these acts. It may be important to explore how the members of the extended family are influenced by the presence of infidelity and what meaning they make of the experience.

Tenth, some of the participants in this study were direct witnesses to parent's extramarital sexual activities while others were told second hand of the infidelity. It may be important to explore what impact being a direct witness to infidelity has and how this differs from second hand knowledge. Additionally, along these lines it may be important to discover if the way that these adult children found out about their parent(s)' infidelity alters the way they make meaning of this experience.

Eleventh, this study was limited to a heterosexual population whose parents had engaged in heterosexual affairs. It may be important to explore any differences / similarities in the understandings of homosexual adult children of adulterous parents or heterosexual children whose parents engaged in homosexual sexual affairs.

Finally, it is very important to focus specifically on the unique findings of this study and carry them forward into future research projects. As mentioned, there is anecdotal evidence supporting all four, however, these themes need to experience greater development, and they need to be tested in order to continue to build our understanding of the meaning adult children make of their parents' infidelities.

### *Summary of the Research*

The current study fills a gap within infidelity literature and adds a component of family impact to augment the plethora of studies exploring infidelity within the marital dyad. This is the first study to explore how a parent's extramarital sexual activity affects their child(ren) both at the time of discovery and beyond into early adulthood when they have begun to establish their own romantic relationships. The researcher's interpretations of the co-researcher's experiences have been presented in narrative form to convey the depth of meaning each participant made of their parent's adultery and to form a base of understanding from which more research and

therapeutic understanding of this topic will hopefully begin. Seven essential themes and three incidental themes were elicited from the stories of the co-researchers that describe the experiences of discovering a parent's adultery. From the residual emotions to the impact the adultery has on their own relationships and feelings of marriage, the co-researchers in this hermeneutical phenomenological study described the meaning they have made of parental adultery.

In the plethora of material (self-help books, research, etc.) that exist to explore, understand, or normalize the reactions of married individuals to their partner's extramarital sexual activity, great attention is paid to what is needed to heal the relationship or the cuckolded spouse. It remains a curiosity that the impact on the non-participating spouse has not been extended to those of the child(ren), if for no other reason than a position of logical conclusions. If a wife feels betrayed and rejected by her husband's infidelity, why wouldn't we assume that the children would share in this? If a husband needs to know the truth of what happened in the affair, or why their wife strayed from their marital vows, why would the children (who know of the affair) not need information as well in order to bring about forgiveness and healing? While the level of detail may differ from the cuckolded spouse, it is clear from the results of the current study that the adulterous parent needs to be accountable to the family as well as their marital partner.

Infidelity is not an activity likely to fade out of existence as it has been occurring for thousands of years in human society. Although the marital dyad has had a great deal of attention paid to it by researchers who explore the impact of infidelity, there has been little to no research exploring the impact on the children. For those married people who have engaged, are currently involved in, or considering an extramarital affair, this study appears to suggest that they consider opening up the lines of communication with their children to enhance understanding and trust as they remember that the marital relationship is not the only one impacted by adultery.

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# THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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Thank you for indicating an interest in participating in a research project that will examine the impact of your parent's extramarital sexual relationship. Jonathan McVicar MA (Co-Investigator) will carry out all research as part of the requirements for completing the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. The following outlines the study itself and information about your participation. If you require any further information or explanation, please contact me at (709) 737 8874. My dissertation advisor is Dr. Norm Amundson (Full Professor and Principal Investigator) who may be contacted at the Department of Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia at (604) 822 5259. My research supervisor at MUN is Dr. John Garland who may be contacted at (709) 737 8874.

The project is entitled: **The Impact of Parents' Extramarital Relationships on their Adult Children**

The objective of the research proposed is: To examine and understand the meaning that individuals make of their parent's extramarital sexual activity specifically with regard to their own sexual / romantic relationships.

**Rationale for the Study:** Over the course of their lives, 20 – 70% of men and 15 – 40% of women, will engage in extramarital sexual activity. Research has demonstrated that the results of this infidelity is often increased marital conflict and divorce. While there is a great deal of research exploring the impact of divorce and marital conflict on children as they grow into adulthood, there is very little discussion about the impact of the infidelity that may have influenced these negative outcomes.

As children witness their parent's struggles with infidelity we know and understand very little about how this experience impacts them as they begin to enter into their own romantic / sexual relationships. This research will seek to determine if there is a common experience that links these children as they move in adulthood.



A Brief Overview: Participants who commit to conducting the interviews will spend between 3 – 4 hours over a period of 1 – 2 months being interviewed one-on-one by Jonathan McVicar in his office at the Memorial University Counselling Centre. These interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed with no identifying data on either the tape or transcription. All interviews are strictly confidential and all data will be locked in a filing cabinet within a locked room. Interviewees will never be identified by name in any reports of the completed study.

Your involvement in the process will require you to do the following:

- Participate in 2 interviews of approximately 1 –2 hours in length.
- Reflect on the meaning you make of your experience being the child of a parent who has engaged in extramarital sexual activity.
- Be willing to discuss the meaning you make of your experience being the child of a parent who has engaged in extramarital sexual activity.

What are the benefits for you?

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to explore and understand any possible impact your parent's extramarital sexual relationship has had on your life, and in particular, on your own romantic / sexual relationships. This exploration may assist you in building stronger relationships in the present and the future.

What risks are there for you in participating in this study?

You may experience psychological discomfort in discussing a family event that may have challenging / hurtful emotions attached to them. This is the only perceived risk and no individual outside of the researcher and principal investigator will ever view the raw data nor have any knowledge of your name or that you participated in this research project.

Remuneration / Compensation:

In order to defray the costs of inconvenience/transportation/loss of wages, each participant will receive an honorarium in the amount of \$15 per interview (\$30 total based on 2 interviews).

Contact for information about the rights of research participants:

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604 822 8598. Additionally, you may contact the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University at (709) 737 8251.

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

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Subject Signature

Date

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Signature of a Witness

Date