

What Do People Do When They Have Affairs? Associations Between Extradyadic Infidelity  
Motives with Behavioral, Emotional, and Sexual Outcomes

Dylan Selterman <sup>a</sup>

Justin R. Garcia <sup>b</sup>

Irene Tsapelas <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Maryland; Twitter: @seltermosby

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dylan-selterman-30844010/>

<sup>b</sup> The Kinsey Institute, Indiana University & Department of Gender Studies, Indiana University;

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/justingarcia>

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology, Stony Brook University; LinkedIn:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/irene-tsapelas-phd-73939333>

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**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:**

Dylan Selterman, Ph.D.  
University of Maryland, College Park  
1147 Biology/Psychology Building  
College Park, MD 20742  
Email: [Dylan.Selterman@gmail.com](mailto:Dylan.Selterman@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

In this study, we surveyed a sample of U.S. undergraduates and internet-based participants ( $N = 495$ ) about their experiences during/after romantic infidelity (affairs), and their initial motivations to engage in infidelity. Meaningful associations emerged between motivation and experience variables. Dyadic motivations (e.g., anger at one's partner, lack of love) were linked with longer affairs, more public dates with affair partners, and primary relationship dissolution. Conversely, non-dyadic situational motivations (e.g., feeling stressed or intoxicated) were linked with shorter affairs, less satisfying sex during affairs, and lower rates of disclosure and dissolution. These findings suggest meaningful infidelity typologies and may aid researchers and practitioners in helping others resolve relational conflicts.

Keywords: motivation, infidelity, interpersonal relationships, intimacy, extra-dyadic sex

## What Do People Do, Say, and Feel When They Have Affairs? Associations Between Extradyadic Infidelity Motives with Behavioral, Emotional, and Sexual Outcomes

In this paper, we extend on the scientific understanding of romantic relationship infidelity, also called *extradyadic infidelity*, *non-consensual non-monogamy*, *affairs*, and colloquially referred to as *cheating*. Because infidelity is considered a severe relationship transgression which often predicts relationship dissolution/divorce (Tsapelas, Aron, & Fisher, 2011), the bulk of prior research in psychology, communication, and family studies posits that infidelity stems primarily from sub-optimal relationship experiences, such as feeling neglected by a partner or spouse (e.g., Barta & Kiene, 2005), though some work suggests that infidelity is both a cause and consequence of poor relationship health (Previti & Amato, 2004). Researchers have typically attempted to capture these deficits in relationship quality by measuring dissatisfaction or negative emotions such as anger (Barta & Kiene, 2005), jealousy (Arnocky, Pearson, & Vaillancourt, 2015) and anxiety (Arnocky, Sunderani, Gomes, & Vaillancourt, 2015).

We previously reported a new conceptualization of motivations for extradyadic infidelity, showing that individuals having affairs can be motivated by a variety of psychosocial factors, including to boost their self-esteem and autonomy, for their own sexual variety, or by situational variables such as being intoxicated (Selterman, Garcia, & Tsapelas, 2019). These motives are conceptualized as orthogonal to relationship health motivations. The current paper reports on additional results and exploratory findings which expand on those reported earlier. Here we present data on participants' self-reported actions both during and after their infidelity, including disclosures, sexual behaviors, and relationship dissolution/initiation, alongside their subjective accounts of the infidelity (affair satisfaction). In a sample of U.S. undergraduates and internet-based participants, the present study examines how these infidelity activities – what people do, say, and feel when they have affairs – vary as a function of people's motivations for having those affairs. These findings suggest

that there may be meaningfully different infidelity typologies, characterized by both different underlying motivations, different relational processes, and different behavioral outcomes.

Extradyadic infidelity is widely understood as an intimate relationship transgression (Guitar et al., 2017; Jankowiak, Nell, & Buckmaster, 2002; Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016), with considerable consequences for those involved, including dissolution of relationship bonds (Hall & Fincham, 2006; Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002) and in some cases interpersonal violence and even death (Kaighobadi et al., 2008; Nemeth et al., 2012). The putative costs and benefits of infidelity may vary, however, depending on individual motives that underlie an infidelity occurrence in the first place. Inasmuch, infidelity is commonly cited as a justification for divorce; in some samples, infidelity is more commonly cited as a reason for divorce than incompatibility or problematic drug use (Amato & Previti, 2003). Given that infidelity is so problematic<sup>1</sup> for the long-term health of intimate relationships and the individuals within these dyads, it is crucial for social and behavioral scientists to illuminate in detail people's experiences during and outcomes following infidelity.

Several theoretical explanations for infidelity exist. Some highlight the need to consider individual differences in demographics and psychological traits, others point to the importance of addressing gender and power dynamics, and others consider the interaction of sex and relationship function (e.g., Barbaro et al., 2019; Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011; Schmitt, 2004; Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Evolutionary perspectives suggest that while posing risk, infidelity can be a facultative strategy to obtain new partners or increase reproductive success, an ancestral potential that explains high degrees of jealousy, mate guarding, and infidelity avoidance in many exclusive

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that an increasing number of people are showing interest with and engagement in consensually non-monogamous relationships (Moors, 2017). In such relationships, the behaviors which are normally considered transgressive in monogamous relationships are far less problematic and often affirmative or joyful (Conley et al., 2017; Moors, 2017). Although many people engage in some form of consensual non-monogamy at some point in their lives, research to date shows that most American's practice and expect social monogamy and sexual exclusivity in their romantic relationships (Haupt et al., 2017). We will return to this topic in the Discussion.

relationships (Buss, 2018; Buss et al., 1999). These models also suggest that men would be more inclined to maximize their number of reproductive partners given low investment, while women would benefit from securing good genes through mating with an affair partner while retaining stable resources through a primary partner (Schmitt, 2015). Infidelity experiences are also driven by access to available partners, which are a function of intrapersonal variables such as income or urban residence, and interpersonal variables such as social acceptability of affairs and the presence of interested partners (Allen et al., 2005). Most of these models recognize infidelity as a relationship transgression, an interpersonal violation of trust and commitment with negative consequences for individuals and couples.

For the purposes of this paper, we focus our attention on a theory with the explicit relevance to the present study, which is the *deficit model* of infidelity (Thompson, 1983). This theory suggests that sub-optimal relationship experiences (e.g., low satisfaction, high conflict, lacking communication) play the most significant role in predicting infidelity. Put another way, this theoretical perspective suggests that people have affairs because some aspect of their primary relationship is not meeting expectations. Consistent with this notion, research has uncovered a variety of psychological, biological, and social factors that have been associated with engaging in infidelity, most of which pertain to relationship quality in some direct or indirect way (e.g., Allen et al., 2005; Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Garcia et al., 2010; Schmitt, 2004). For instance, attachment avoidance and anxiety, which are trait-like variables linked with negative emotion and conflict in romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and relationship dissolution (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), also predict the likelihood of infidelity (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). In summary, most existing models often treat infidelity as a symptom of deeper underlying relational difficulties experienced by couples or within individuals who are in dyads that suffer affairs.

There are limitations to this theoretical perspective however, one of which is that all infidelities are inadvertently treated as psychologically monolithic, presumed to be a rooted in negative dyadic experiences such as insecurity, conflict, and dissatisfaction. But recent evidence has emerged demonstrating that some people are motivated to have affairs because of variables that are independent from poor relationship health (see below), and the purpose of our current work is to better illuminate the nuances within people's experiences of infidelity. We argue that it is necessary to consider diverse emotional and behavioral outcomes for those who commit infidelity.

The current study is predicated on the findings reported in our previous analysis, in which we developed a questionnaire to assess motivations for extradyadic infidelity in a way that allowed for people to indicate possible motives beyond poor relationship health (Selterman et al., 2019). In that analysis, we expanded on results from Barta and Kiene (2005), and surveyed participants on a variety of additional motivations they may have had for committing infidelity. We reported evidence for 8 statistically distinct infidelity motivation variables: (1) Anger, or feeling upset with a partner's actions, (2) Sexual Desire, or wanting to have more sex, (3) Lack of Love, or feeling an absence of intimacy or affection for a partner, (4) Low Commitment, or not orienting actions around the future of the relationship, (5) Esteem, or a desire for greater autonomy or self-worth, (6) Situation, or clouded judgment due to intoxication or stress, (7) Neglect, or feeling mistreatment from a partner, and (8) Variety, or desiring a greater number of sexual partners.

Selterman et al. (2019) also reported theoretically consequential associations between these motives and individual difference factors (personality traits and gender identity). For example, *sociosexual orientation*, which is the degree to which people are comfortable with uncommitted or casual sex (Simpson, Wilson, & Winterheld, 2004), was associated with increased motivation to have an affair because of a desire for sexual variety. Beliefs in *romantic destiny*, which is a preference toward initial romantic compatibility rather than relationship success through effort (Knee, Patrick, &

Lonsbary, 2003), predicted infidelity motivated by lack of love and by neglect. Men were more likely to report infidelity motivated by sexual desire, sexual variety, and situational factors, whereas women were more likely to report infidelity motivated by neglect. In contrast to previous findings (i.e., Barta & Kiene, 2005), we did not find meaningful associations between infidelity motivations and the Big Five personality traits. In sum, our findings illuminated an array of motivations for infidelity, supporting the notion that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to understanding infidelity is flawed.

In this vein, we sought to further investigate a range of infidelity experiences, and to examine how these experiences vary as a function of the motives for such affairs. We utilized the questionnaire data from Selterman et al. (2019), which assessed participants’ infidelity experiences, to examine previously unreported findings on interpersonal outcomes of infidelity, tapping into participants’ feelings of emotional intimacy, intimate dialogue, and sexual satisfaction with their affair partners, specific sexual behaviors (e.g., oral sex) during affairs, disclosure of the affair, and relationship status/breakup with their primary partners and affair partners. We sought to examine how the infidelity motives identified above might predict particular infidelity experiences. Though this investigation was exploratory, we generally expected a conceptual alignment between initial motivations and infidelity outcomes. For instance, we anticipated that infidelity motivated by relationship deficits (e.g., lack of love) would predict greater emotional engagement and intimacy with affair partners. Conversely, situational motivations for affairs might predict less intimate engagement with affair partners.

More specifically, here we examine the following research questions:

RQ1a: Do deficit-related motivation variables (Neglect, Anger) correlate negatively or positively with emotional satisfaction and intimacy during affairs?

RQ1b: Do non-deficit motivation variables (Situation Autonomy) correlate negatively or positively with emotional satisfaction and intimacy during affairs?

RQ2: Do sexual motivation variables (Sexual Desire, Sexual Variety) correlate with sexual satisfaction and specific sexual behaviors during affairs?

RQ3: Do deficit-related motivation variables (Neglect, Anger) predict disclosure of the affair to primary partners, or relationship dissolution?

## Method

### *Participants*

Drawing from the same original dataset, as reported in Selterman et al. (2019) a total of 495 participants fully completed the study materials ( $M_{Age} = 20.36$  years; 259 women, 213 men, 23 not reporting gender on a binary scale; 87.9% identified as heterosexual). Approximately half (51.8%) reported currently being in a romantic relationship, with 11.7% casually dating, 34.5% exclusively dating, 2.0% cohabiting, and 3.6% engaged/married, and 4.4% not reporting. There was significant variability in relationship length, ranging from 1 month to 28 years ( $M = 12.12$  months;  $SD = 30.90$ ;  $Median = 12$ ).

Data were collected from an additional 67 participants who failed an attention check and were therefore excluded from analyses. We had estimated statistical power with the original goal to examine the factor structure of 77 infidelity motivation items (Selterman et al., 2019), and thus estimated a sample size of over 300 to be sufficient for a variable-factor ratio of at least 6, even if communality was low, based on simulations by Mundfrom, Shaw, and Ke (2005). Power analysis using G\*Power estimates (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) also suggested that a sample of 450 would be sufficient for linear multiple regression analyses with 8 predictors to detect small effects ( $R^2 = .05$ ). We conducted all analyses after data collection ended, and after data exclusions.

Participants were recruited through the Psychology Department subject pool at a large American Atlantic coast university and through relationship themed message boards on *Reddit*. Student participants received extra credit in their courses upon completion. Inclusion criteria for



participation was to be over 18 years of age and have committed at least 1 instance of extradyadic relationship infidelity. We did not limit our sample to participants who are *currently* in a romantic partnership, which ultimately meant that participants would report on an instance of their infidelity within either a past or current partnership. We did not provide a specific definition of infidelity behaviors for inclusion criteria, given that infidelity behaviors vary across individuals and can involve some mixture of emotional intimacy, romance, and/or sexual contact. All participants reported an instance of their own infidelity in the context of some type of romantic relationship, which could be a dating relationship, marriage, etc., and most (94.3%) indicated that their infidelity included sexual contact.

### *Materials and Procedure*

The study was administered online via Qualtrics software, and measures were completed during a single study session. Participants responded to a specific instance of their own infidelity, with items assessing their motives, emotions, and behaviors during their affair. As indicated above, we developed a questionnaire to assess motivations for extradyadic infidelity in a way that allowed for people to indicate possible motives beyond poor relationship health (Selterman et al., 2019). Based on exploratory factor analysis on 77 items (some original and some included from prior research), we found evidence for 8 infidelity motivation variables, some of which overlapped conceptually with the four previously identified by Barta and Kiene (2005). These were: (1) Anger (e.g., “*My primary partner had been unfaithful to me*”; “*Before my affair, my primary partner and I got into an argument, which led me to seek revenge*”), (2) Sexual Desire (e.g., “*My primary partner had lost interest in sex*”; “*My primary partner refused to perform certain acts during sex that I normally enjoy*”), (3) Lack of Love (e.g., “*I was not sure if I really loved my primary partner*”; “*I was not sure if my primary partner was the right person for me*”), (4) Low Commitment (“*I was not very committed to my primary partner*”; “*Even though we were seeing each other, we were not technically ‘in a relationship’ publicly*”), (5) Esteem (e.g., “*I wanted to feel better about*

*myself*"; "I wanted to assert my independence and autonomy"), (6) Situation (e.g., "I was drunk/intoxicated and I was not thinking clearly"; "I was overwhelmed at the time due to external stressors (e.g., school, work, family issues) and was not thinking clearly"), (7) Neglect (e.g., "I felt neglected by my primary partner"; "My primary partner was emotionally distant"), and (8) Variety (e.g., "I wanted a greater variety of sexual partners"; "I am the kind of person who cheats").

Participants reported on specific experiences and outcomes with their extra-dyadic affair partner: sexual satisfaction, emotional/intellectual satisfaction, intimacy, sexual behaviors (e.g., oral sex, vaginal intercourse), subjective sexual frequency, public displays of intimacy or affection, intimate dialogue (e.g., saying "I love you"), relationship status/breakup, and disclosure of the affair. Some of these questionnaire items tap into participants' subjective experiences (e.g., "Please indicate the level of satisfaction you feel/felt with the sexual aspect of the relationship with your affair partner" on a 1-7 scale; 1 = very dissatisfied; 7 = very satisfied), while others prompted participants to consider their actions (e.g., "My primary partner and I: (a) Broke up as a direct result [of the affair] (b) Broke up for other reasons, (c) Maintained being in a relationship"). Full questionnaire materials, including instructions and scale items, are openly available here: <https://osf.io/4jpgs/>.

## Results

We utilized the 8-factor model for infidelity motivations (Selterman et al., 2019) for all analyses. Thus, our motivation variables included (a) Anger, (b) Sexual Desire, (c) Lack of Love, (d) Low Commitment, (e) Esteem, (f) Neglect, (g) Situation, and (h) Variety. Because the findings reported below are exploratory and because of the potential for a higher familywise false-positive rate, we sought to utilize a more stringent cutoff for statistical significance. We employed Benjamini and Hochber's (1995) method to control for the false discovery rate with the formula  $(i/m)*Q$  and a false discovery rate of .10. We retained the results that both (a) emerged significant with this statistical correction and (b) for which the 95% confidence interval did not include zero. The Beta

coefficients reported below emerged in multiple regression models that included all motivation factors simultaneously.

We organized all statistical tests according to families of conceptual variables (i.e., length of time, sexual behaviors, intimacy, relationship status, disclosure). Within each family of conceptual results, we first describe findings based on categorical predictors (e.g., gender) with t-tests,  $\chi^2$  tests, and ANOVAs, then we describe findings based on continuous variables (e.g., sexual satisfaction, affair motivations) with Pearson correlations and multiple regression models.

### **Time/Length of Affair**

Participants reported that their infidelities lasted anywhere between less than a day to 5 years ( $M = 68$  days;  $SD = 173.60$ ; *Median* = 14 days; *Mode* = 1 day). We performed a log-transformation on the affair duration variable to increase normality. Women reported longer affairs ( $M = 75.40$  days) compared to men ( $M = 52.84$  days),  $t(467) = -3.02, p = .003$ , [95% CI: -.40, -.09],  $d = -.28$ . Affair duration variable was associated with motivations Lack of Love ( $\beta = .13, p = .011$ , [95% CI: .02, .15]), Esteem ( $\beta = .19, p = .036$ , [95% CI: .01, .20]) and Variety ( $\beta = .19, p < .001$ , [95% CI: .07, .22]), and inversely associated with Situation ( $\beta = -.21, p < .001$ , [95% CI: -.24, -.09]).

### **Sexual Behaviors and Sexual Satisfaction**

Participants reported an array of physical and sexual activities with their affair partners: 86.7% reported kissing, 72.9% cuddling/close touch, 53.5% mutual masturbation, 45.9% performing oral sex, a similar percentage 46.9% receiving oral sex, 53.3% vaginal intercourse, and 6.1% anal intercourse, whereas only 5.7% reported that their affair was not physical/sexual in nature.

Men were more likely than women to report having engaged in mutual masturbation,  $\chi^2 (1)$

= 9.62,  $p = .002$ , received oral sex  $X^2(1) = 55.72$ ,  $p < .001$ , and had vaginal intercourse  $X^2(1) = 11.49$ ,  $p = .001$ . There were no gender differences in kissing, performing oral sex, or anal intercourse. Women were more likely than men to say that their affair was not sexual  $X^2(1) = 4.26$ ,  $p = .039$ . The percentage breakdown of sexual actions by gender can be found in Table 1.

Compared to women, men reported stronger agreement with the statement that sex with their affair partners was better than sex with primary partners  $t(452) = 2.40$ ,  $p = .017$  [95% CI: .07, .71]. Men were also more likely to report having sexually explicit dialogue with their affair partner  $X^2(1) = 19.57$ ,  $p < .001$ . On a subjective frequency scale, men and women did not differ in their perceptions of sexual frequency with their affair partners  $t(467) = .53$ ,  $p = .594$ ,  $d = .049$ , nor did they differ in affair sexual satisfaction  $t(466) = 1.65$ ,  $p = .100$ ,  $d = .153$ . Overall, participants reported subjectively having more frequent sex with primary partners ( $M = 4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) compared with affair partners ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ),  $t(483) = 11.38$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = .52$ , [95% CI: .42, .61].

**Table 1.** Percentage of Participants Reporting Specific Sexual Behaviors with Infidelity Partners, Split by Gender ( $N = 472$ ). Different subscripts across columns denote a statistically significant difference for the two groups at the  $p < .01$  level.

<b>Sexual Behaviors</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
<i>Kissing</i>	187 (87.8%)	227 (87.6%)
<i>Mutual Masturbation</i>	130 (61.0%) <sub>a</sub>	121 (46.7%) <sub>b</sub>
<i>Perform Oral Sex</i>	105 (49.3%)	109 (42.1%)
<i>Receive Oral Sex</i>	140 (65.7%) <sub>a</sub>	81 (31.3%) <sub>b</sub>
<i>Vaginal Intercourse</i>	132 (52.4%) <sub>a</sub>	120 (46.3%) <sub>b</sub>
<i>Anal Intercourse</i>	14 (6.6%)	11 (4.2%)
<i>No Sexual Contact</i>	7 (3.2%) <sub>a</sub>	20 (7.7%) <sub>b</sub>

Affair sexual satisfaction was positively correlated with agreement that having sex with affair partners was better than having sex with primary partners  $r = .62, p < .001$  and affair duration  $r = .27, p < .001$ . Affair sexual satisfaction was also positively associated with motivations of Sexual Desire ( $\beta = .15, p = .003$ ), Lack of Love ( $\beta = .12, p = .022$ ), and Variety ( $\beta = .16, p = .001$ ), and negatively with Situation ( $\beta = -.17, p < .001$ ).

### **Love and Intimacy**

In terms of frequencies, 37.6% of participants reported engaging in intimate conversations with their affair partners, while 61.2% reported sexually explicit dialogue, 62.8% reported expressing fondness and affection, and 11.1% reported exchanging the words, “I love you.” Women and men did not significantly differ in their rates of intimate conversations  $X^2(1) = 3.39, p = .066$ , expressing fondness/affection  $X^2(1) = 1.47, p = .226$ , or saying, “I love you”  $X^2(1) = 2.43, p = .119$ . Women and men also did not significantly differ in their intimacy with affair partners  $t(470) = -1.77, p = .077, d = -.16$  or emotional satisfaction with affair partners  $t(470) = -.60, p = .549, d = -.06$ , although women did report higher intimacy with primary partners before their affairs  $t(470) = 2.18, p = .030, d = .20$ .

Participants’ felt closeness/intimacy with their primary partners did not significantly differ as a function of having intimate conversations with affair partners  $t(482) = 1.69, p = .092$  [95% CI: -.05, .62], or feeling fondness and affection toward affair partners  $t(482) = .40, p = .688$  [95% CI: -.27, .41]. If participants exchanged the words “I love you” with their affair partners, they reported feeling more intimacy with their affair partners  $t(482) = -5.85, p < .001$  [95% CI: -2.02, -1.01], and higher emotional satisfaction during the affair  $t(482) = -5.97, p < .001$  [95% CI: -1.77, -.89] compared to those who did not verbally express love. Furthermore, those who reported saying, “I love you” to their affair partners had longer affairs ( $M = 194.73$  days) compared to those who did not ( $M = 52.23$  days),  $t(481) = -4.68, p < .001$ , [95% CI: -.83, -.13],  $d = -.67$ .

Participants' felt closeness/intimacy with their primary partners was unrelated to felt closeness with their affair partners,  $r = -.01, p = .908$ . However, participants' intimacy with primary partners was inversely associated with emotional satisfaction with their affairs ( $r = -.14, p = .002$ ). In addition, felt closeness with affair partners was linked with affair emotional satisfaction ( $r = .55, p < .001$ ), and affair emotional satisfaction was also linked with affair sexual satisfaction ( $r = .45, p < .001$ ). Affair duration was associated with emotional satisfaction with the affair partner ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ) and felt closeness with affair partners ( $r = .34, p < .001$ ).

Having more public dates (e.g., dinner, movies) with affair partners was positively linked with Lack of Love motivation  $\beta = .16, p = .001$ ; 95% CI: .07, .31 and inversely with Situation motivation  $\beta = -.14, p = .004$ ; 95% CI: -.34, -.07. Public displays of affection with affair partners was positively linked with Lack of Love  $\beta = .13, p = .011$ ; 95% CI: .04, .29, Esteem  $\beta = .13, p = .023$ ; 95% CI: .03, .40, and Variety motivations  $\beta = .13, p = .010$ ; 95% CI: .05, .33, and inversely with Situation motivation  $\beta = -.12, p = .013$ ; 95% CI: -.33, -.04. Those saying "I love you" scored higher on Lack of Love  $t(493) = -2.38, p = .018$  [95% CI: -.83, -.08], and Neglect motivations  $t(493) = 2.63, p = .009$  [95% CI: -.91, -.13]. Intimacy with affair partners was linked with Lack of Love motivation ( $\beta = .16, p = .003$ ) but not the other motivations. Emotional/intellectual satisfaction during affairs was linked with Lack of Love motivation ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ) and negatively with Situation motivation ( $\beta = -.21, p < .001$ ).

### **Breakup/Dissolution**

About one-fifth (20.4%) of participants broke up with their primary partners as a result of the affair, while 27.3% reported breaking up for other reasons, while 21.8% maintained the primary relationship even though their partner found out about the affair, and 28.3% maintained the relationship with their partner not finding out about the affair. Women and men did not differ

significantly in their breakup rates  $\chi^2(1) = .74, p = .389$ .

Those who broke up with their primary partners after their affairs scored higher on emotional satisfaction with their affair partners  $t(480) = 4.15, p < .001$ , [95% CI: .31, .88],  $d = .38$ , and they reported lower intimacy with their primary partners  $t(480) = -4.01, p < .001$ , [95% CI: -.98, -.35],  $d = -.37$  compared to those who remained in their primary relationship. Those who broke up also went on more dates (e.g., dinner/movie) with their affair partners  $t(478) = 2.55, p = .011$ , [95% CI: .08, .63],  $d = .23$ , agreed with the idea that the affair sex was better than sex with their primary partners  $t(464) = 4.13, p < .001$ , [95% CI: .34, .96],  $d = .38$ , reported subjectively less frequent sex with primary partners  $t(478) = -3.27, p = .001$ , [95% CI: -.80, -.20],  $d = -.30$ , and subjectively more sex with affair partners  $t(479) = 2.29, p = .023$ , [95% CI: .06, .80],  $d = .20$ , and higher sexual satisfaction with their affair partners  $t(477) = 2.44, p = .015$ , [95% CI: .08, .75],  $d = .22$ , relative to those whose primary relationships remained intact. Participants did not score differently as a function of breakups in terms of their intimacy with affair partners  $t(480) = 1.12, p = .262, d = .10$ , duration of affairs  $t(478) = -.22, p = .829, d = -.02$ , or public displays of affection  $t(477) = 1.26, p = .210, d = .12$ .

As for infidelity motivations, those who broke up with their primary partner scored higher on Anger  $t(482) = 2.48, p = .013$ , [95% CI: .06, .51], Lack of Love  $t(482) = 7.71, p < .001$ , [95% CI: .66, 1.11], Neglect  $t(482) = 2.94, p = .003$ , [95% CI: .12, .61], and Low Commitment  $t(482) = 3.30, p = .001$ , [95% CI: .15, .59], but lower on Situation  $t(482) = -2.27, p = .024$ , [95% CI: -.42, -.03]. The breakdown for infidelity motivations as a function of breakup status is displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Means and Standard Deviations for Infidelity Motivation Factors Based on Primary Relationship Status following Infidelity ( $N = 472$ ).

<b>Infidelity Motivation Factors</b>	<b>Broke Up (N = 236)</b>	<b>Stayed Together (N = 248)</b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>d</i></b>
<i>Anger</i>	3.07 (1.25)	2.79 (1.27)	2.48*	.23
<i>Sexual Desire</i>	2.59 (.99)	2.49 (1.10)	1.15	.05
<i>Lack of Love</i>	4.42 (1.31)	3.54 (1.22)	7.71***	.70
<i>Neglect</i>	4.03 (1.34)	3.66 (1.41)	2.94***	.13
<i>Low Commitment</i>	2.89 (1.23)	2.52 (1.25)	3.30***	.15
<i>Situation</i>	3.4 (1.11)	3.66 (1.08)	-2.27*	-.10
<i>Esteem</i>	3.15 (1.04)	3.08 (1.00)	.73	.03
<i>Variety</i>	3.62 (1.23)	3.75 (1.13)	-1.20	-.05

### Affair Relationship

With regards to affair partners, 29.9% of participants remained friends with their affair partners after the affair ended, 31.1% reported seeing their affair partners occasionally, 25.3% opted for no contact after the affair, and 11.1% began a committed romantic relationship with their affair partners. Gender was not associated with affair relationship status  $\chi^2(4) = 3.97, p = .411$ .

Affair partner status was associated with affair emotional satisfaction  $F(4, 475) = 6.11, p < .001$ , intimacy with affair partners  $F(4, 475) = 10.94, p < .001$ , and public displays of affection  $F(4, 472) = 4.20, p < .002$ . Post-hoc Bonferroni-corrected analyses for these omnibus effects showed a general pattern that those who began a committed relationship with their affair partners scored differently compared to those who avoided contact with affair partners, but all other group comparisons (e.g., occasional contact, friendship) were not significantly different from each other. Specifically, those who began committed relationships with affair partners scored higher on emotional satisfaction compared to those who avoided contact  $t = 3.87, p = .001$ , [95% CI: .29, 1.68], but not more than those who were friends with their affair partners  $t = 1.31, p = .686$ , or those who had occasional contact  $t = 1.53, p = .542$ . A similar pattern emerged for intimacy with affair partners, which was higher for those who began committed relationships compared to those



who did not have contact  $t = 3.73, p = .002$ , [95% CI: .29, 1.87], but not more than those who were friends with their affair partners  $t = 1.09, p = .810$ , or those who had occasional contact  $t = .62, p = .972$ . Public displays of affection was higher amongst those who began committed relationships compared to those with no further contact  $t = 3.14, p = .018$ , [95% CI: .11, 1.55], but not more than those who were friends with their affair partners  $t = 1.89, p = .595$ , or those who had occasional contact  $t = .27, p = .999$ . Aside from these variables, affair partner status was not associated with affair duration  $F(4, 473) = .969, p = .424$ , affair sexual satisfaction  $F(4, 472) = 2.08, p = .082$ , agreement that sex with affair partners was better than primary partners  $F(4, 459) = .78, p = .539$ , subjective frequency of sex with primary partners  $F(4, 473) = .31, p = .869$  or affair partners  $F(4, 459) = .69, p = .603$ , or intimacy with primary partners  $F(4, 474) = 2.10, p = .080$ .

As for infidelity motivations, affair partner status was associated with Situation  $F(4, 477) = 3.41, p = .009$ , Esteem  $F(4, 477) = 3.40, p = .009$ , and Variety  $F(4, 477) = 3.47, p = .008$ . Post-hoc Bonferroni-corrected analyses showed that those reporting occasional contact with their affair partner scored higher in Situation motivation compared to those who formed a committed relationship  $t = 3.36, p = .009$  [95% CI: .11, 1.10], and no significant differences emerged for the other groups. Those reporting occasional contact with their affair partner scored higher in Esteem compared to those who remained friends  $t = 3.44, p = .006$  [95% CI: .09, .79], and no significant differences emerged for the other groups. Finally, those reporting occasional contact with their affair partner scored higher in Variety motivation compared to those who formed a committed relationship  $t = 3.58, p = .004$  [95% CI: .20, 1.48], and no significant differences emerged for the other groups.

## Disclosure

Some participants confessed their affairs to their primary partners (34.34% of the sample), while others kept their affairs secret (46.26%). Women (40.927%) were more likely than men

(29.58%) to confess  $X^2(1) = 6.55, p = .010$ , while there were no gender differences in keeping affairs a secret  $X^2(1) = .77, p = .381$ . Those who confessed were more likely to start a committed relationship with their affair partners compared to those who did not confess  $X^2(1) = 5.97, p = .015$ , but confessions were unrelated to whether participants broke up with their primary partners  $X^2(1) = 2.39, p = .122$  remained friends with their affair partners  $X^2(1) = 3.33, p = .068$ , or cut off contact with affair partners  $X^2(1) = .18, p = .674$ . Secrecy was unrelated to breaking up with primary partners  $X^2(1) = 3.44, p = .064$ , remaining friends with affair partners  $X^2(1) = 2.82, p = .093$ , starting a committed relationship with their affair partners  $X^2(1) = 2.44, p = .118$ , or having no contact with affair partners,  $X^2(1) = 2.21, p = .137$ .

Those who confessed were less likely to report subjectively frequent sex with their affair partners  $t(493) = -2.37, p = .018$  [95% CI: -.85, -.08] and less likely to say that sex with affair partners was better than sex with primary partners  $t(493) = -2.36, p = .019$  [95% CI: -.72, -.07]. Confessing was unrelated to affair duration  $t(493) = -1.51, p = .132$ , dates (e.g., dinner/movies)  $t(493) = -.04, p = .968$ , public displays of affection  $t(493) = .04, p = .968$ , subjective sex frequency with primary partners  $t(493) = 1.92, p = .055$ , intimacy with primary partners  $t(493) = -.34, p = .732$ , intimacy with affair partners  $t(493) = -1.52, p = .130$ , or emotional satisfaction with affair partners  $t(493) = -.72, p = .475$ .

Secrecy was associated with agreement that sex with affair partners was better than sex with primary partners  $t(483) = 2.65, p = .008$  [95% CI: .11, .73], but secrecy was not associated with affair duration  $t(481) = .40, p = .691$ , dates  $t(481) = -.35, p = .728$ , public displays of affection  $t(481) = -.75, p = .451$ , subjective frequency of sex with primary partners  $t(481) = -1.88, p = .060$ , intimacy with primary partners  $t(481) = -1.58, p = .114$ , intimacy with affair partners  $t(481) = 1.35, p = .179$ , or emotional satisfaction with affair partners  $t(481) = 1.60, p = .111$ .

Those who confessed reported higher motivations of Anger  $t(493) = 3.04, p = .002$  [95% CI: .13, .59] and Neglect  $t(493) = 2.49, p = .013$  [95% CI: .07, .58], but lower motivations of Sexual Desire  $t(493) = -2.45, p = .015$  [95% CI: -.44, -.05] and Variety  $t(493) = -4.57, p < .001$  [95% CI: -.72, -.29], compared to those who did not disclose. Confessions were unrelated to lack of Love  $t(493) = .30, p = .768$ , Low Commitment  $t(493) = 1.10, p = .273$ , Situation  $t(493) = 1.25, p = .211$ , or Esteem  $t(493) = 1.67, p = .096$ . Those who kept the affairs a secret from their partners scored lower on Anger  $t(493) = -3.02, p = .003$  [95% CI: -.56, -.12], Low Commitment  $t(493) = -2.36, p = .019$  [95% CI: -.49, -.04], and Esteem  $t(493) = -2.98, p = .003$  [95% CI: -.46, -.09], but higher Variety motivation  $t(493) = 2.38, p = .018$  [95% CI: .04, .46]. Secrecy was unrelated to Sexual Desire  $t(493) = 1.46, p = .144$ , Lack of Love  $t(493) = .11, p = .914$ , Neglect  $t(493) = -1.28, p = .203$ , or Situation  $t(493) = -1.45, p = .149$ .

The full dataset for this study can be found on OSF: <https://osf.io/edcba/>.

## Discussion

Our findings illuminate specific infidelity experiences, which include a wide range of interpersonal outcomes including behaviors, communications, and felt emotions. We explored how these experiences were associated with participants' motivations for engaging in their extradyadic infidelity. These findings deepen our understanding of what people commonly do, say, and feel during and after episodes of infidelity, and may suggest a need for theoretical innovation to conceptualize typologies for infidelities, which we discuss further below.

Though nearly all participants reported physical/sexual engagement with their affair partners, only 53.3% reported intercourse or mutual masturbation, and fewer reported oral sex. Men were more likely to report engaging in these sexual behaviors. Those motivated by sexual desire, lack of love, and variety expressed greater sexual satisfaction with their affairs. By contrast, those motivated by situational factors reported being *less* sexually satisfied with the affair. This type of

affair, motivated by situational factors, was also more short-lived. There are a number of possible explanations that warrant further investigation. It is possible that because participants whose affairs were shorter had less time/experience to become sexually acclimated with affair partners, and this could explain why affair sexual satisfaction was relatively lower. It is also possible that those motivated by situational factors may not have a relatively high degree of romantic and sexual attraction or sexual interest in the affair partner, which could serve as a barrier to connection and sexual satisfaction (Mark & Herbenick, 2014; Sprecher, 2002). Similarly, situational infidelity may result in less interpersonal communication about sexual preferences, and having less post-sex affection, which are both linked with sexual satisfaction in committed relationships (Babin, 2013; Muise, Giang, & Impett, 2014). This finding is also consistent with prior research showing that while uncommitted sexual encounters can be intimate and satisfying, they are relatively less so than sex in committed relationships (Garcia et al., 2018; Mark, Garcia, & Fisher, 2015). It is also possible that guilt associated with a relationship transgression weighs more heavily on those whose infidelity was motivated by situational factors as opposed to discontent emotional states, further limiting overall sexual satisfaction. These findings highlight the need for further research on the role of sexual satisfaction in infidelity motivations and outcomes.

Consistent with deficit models of relationship infidelity, emotional and romantic variables were linked with poor relationship health (Thompson, 1983). Specifically, lack of love and neglect motivations predicted participants' reported intimacy with affair partners, saying "I love you," going on dates, public displays of affection, and longer affairs, while situation motivation was inversely associated with these experiences. This suggests that when people feel emotional shortfalls in their primary relationships, they may be seeking a deeper quality of romantic connection or intimacy in their affairs to augment feelings of missing or insufficient intimacy from their primary partners. Furthermore, the closer people felt with their primary partners before the affair, the less

emotional/intellectual satisfaction they felt with their affair partners. This suggests that for some, when infidelity occurs in the context of high degrees of primary relationship closeness, this closeness may hinder emotional satisfaction with affair partners, although a causal or longitudinally predictive pattern was not accessible in the present study.

Some individuals are motivated to use their affair as a means to hurt their primary partners or end their relationships (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007). Consistent with this idea, participants scoring higher in anger, lack of love, low commitment, and neglect were more likely to break up with their primary partners and to disclose their affairs. By contrast, situation, sexual desire, and variety motivations were inversely linked with primary relationship breakup and infidelity disclosure. These results suggest that different types of motivations for infidelity predict whether or not participants were honest with their partners about it, and whether they attempted to maintain their primary relationship despite the affair. Given the devastation that infidelity can cause to individuals and romantic relationships including marriages (Fife, Weeks, & Stellberg-Filbert, 2013; Hall & Fincham, 2006; Yuan & Weiser, 2019), these findings may indicate that while some participants wanted their primary partners to suffer, others had no intention to hurt their partner or terminate the relationship. For the latter, those participants' motivations seemed to stem from a desire for sex and variety, and after the affair, wanting to preserve their primary relationship and (perhaps) spare their partner from hurt feelings.

Some participants remained in contact with their affair partners. Those who did not maintain contact showed higher levels of commitment to their primary partners, and may have viewed affair partners as a threat to their primary relationships. This is consistent with clinical approaches with couples who attempt to work through infidelity and preserve their relationship, focusing on the ways in which they value their spouses/partnerships, which in turn can even lead to experiences of positive growth following such transgressions (Perel, 2017). By this line of reasoning, the continued

presence of an affair partner would stand in the way of such reconciliation and potential growth. However, others in our sample began committed relationships with their affair partners. Those participants who initiated a new relationship with the affair partner scored lower on sexual desire, variety, and situation motivations, and higher on lack of love motivation. This suggests that deficits in the primary relationship are a predictor of wanting to begin anew with affair partners. This may further suggest that there are certain relationship conditions that make the success of attempted mate poaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2004) more favorable.

As noted above, infidelity is one of the most commonly cited reasons for relationship distress and dissolution, and it is a significant factor in predicting mental health outcomes and divorce (Tsapelas, Aron, & Fisher, 2011). Infidelity is also one of the most challenging variables for marital counselors to assist their clients with (Hertlein, Wetchler, & Piercy, 2005; Olmstead, Blick, & Mills, 2009; Snyder & Doss, 2005). It is critical for scientists to develop a detailed conceptualization of infidelity that allows for understanding subtleties and nuances in such experiences. We hope our findings will guide future research into more of the various reasons why people engage in infidelity, and how those initial motivations for affairs predict relationship outcomes. Being that we used a cross-sectional design, we cannot conclude to what extent participants' initial motives caused or predicted their experiences. Future clinically-focused research can also investigate to what extent having knowledge of a cheating partner's motivations is helpful for resolving dyadic distress and promoting relationship satisfaction and stability. Infidelity motivations and experiences are worth studying from the vantage point that not all infidelities are created equal. The existing evidence suggests that underlying motivations for infidelity are differentially associated with the likelihood of specific outcomes, including whether or not relationships will function healthily and whether partners will remain together. The current findings highlight the importance of researchers and clinicians avoiding the characterization and treatment of infidelity as monolithic and primarily

stemming from relationship deficits. While this may be true in many cases, many others report being motivated by non-dyadic factors, and those affairs appear very different behaviorally and emotionally compared to affairs motivated by dyadic factors. It may also be the case that combinations of infidelity motivation factors, or interactions between them, would uniquely predict relationship outcomes. Future researchers can explore the application of latent class analyses to examine how clusters of motives predict such outcomes.

It is also worth noting that there is a growing interest in *consensually non-monogamous relationships* (CNM; Moors, 2016), which includes open relationships, polyamory, swinging, and other non-exclusive arrangements where members of a couple agree that they will engage romantically and sexually with other partners (Conley, Matsick, Moors, & Ziegler, 2013). It is possible that there is a spillover that affects how monogamous couples view infidelity, which could in turn affect the associations between variables such as the ones we examined in the current study. It will be important to study how attitudes toward and experiences with CNM affects infidelity (*non-consensual non-monogamy*) across different relationship structures. Perhaps attitudes toward infidelity will become less negative and partners will be more forgiving of such transgressions even if they are not consensual. Perhaps motivations to have affairs will be less likely to stem from dyadic factors such as lack of love, if people view their monogamous relationships as strong enough to withstand an affair. As we noted elsewhere (Selterman et al., 2019), it would be interesting to compare and contrast the motivations/outcomes of people in monogamous relationships to have affairs with the motivations/outcomes of CNM practitioners. Perhaps some overlaps would emerge, such as the need for sexual variety and excitement, but alongside some important differences, such as with commitment or satisfaction (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014). However, all of these ideas are speculative and future research is needed.

Regarding generalizability, we are limited by the demographic characteristics of our sample,

which was skewed toward non-married young adult individuals located mainly in North America, most of whom were recruited through a university psychology department. Thus, we caution against overgeneralizing across age, relationship status, and cultural variables such as *tightness* (Gelfand et al., 2011). Specifically, students on a campus may be developmentally prone to (sexual) novelty and risk-taking, have more opportunities to engage in infidelity if they are physically close to many available and willing affair partners, and live in social environments that do not necessarily stigmatize or penalize affairs to a painful degree. Our findings are most likely to generalize to other human populations with similar features, such as older adults in urban environments with abundant access to affair partners and permissive social environments that condone such behaviors (Atkins et al., 2001). In more socially restrictive, rural, or sparsely populated areas, when opportunities are lower, perhaps these motivations for infidelity would not have as much predictive impact on relationship outcomes.<sup>2</sup> However, the findings that emerged are largely consistent with other findings in the literature on sexuality and infidelity across demographic groups. For instance, our finding that men were more likely than women to report receiving (rather than performing) oral sex is consistent with other work showing similar patterns for casual sex encounters (Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Thus, we are cautiously optimistic in the generalizability and reproducibility of these results and encourage more empirical work on these constructs.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

These exploratory findings should be taken as an initial step in better understanding the pathways to different behavioral, emotional, and sexual outcomes following infidelity. These findings demonstrate that diverse motivations for engaging in infidelity are associated with what

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<sup>2</sup> See Selterman et al. (2019) for a developmental perspective on how infidelity research on young adults may partially generalize to other age groups, and see Tsapelas et al. (2011) for a summary of findings regarding infidelity and demographic variables.



people do, say, and feel during and after affairs, Hopefully our work will inspire replications and extensions to ascertain confidence in generalizability and to better inform research and clinical practice related to the impact of infidelity on individuals and relationships.

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