

Facebook Infidelity: When Poking Becomes Problematic

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Abstract Recent research has focused on the Internet and relationships; however, little attention has been given to the specific role of social networking sites in relationship betrayal. Exploring the processes related to discovery of Facebook infidelity behaviors adds another layer to understanding Internet infidelity and highlights the behaviors unique to Facebook infidelity. Stories about cheating ($N = 90$), taken from the website FacebookCheating.com were analyzed using grounded theory methodology to create a process model of discovery. Researchers sought to answer four questions: (1) What is the experience of nonparticipating partners when their partners have engaged in infidelity behaviors on Facebook? (2) What are the basic social processes that occur when discovering the infidelity behaviors? And, (3) What are the basic psychological processes that occur? (4) What similarities or differences exist between the current research on offline and online infidelity and the process model from the current study? The categories are arranged in a process model, which depicts these processes as well as the emotional experience of the nonparticipating partner. The model highlights important phases through which the nonparticipating partner cycled following the discovery of the infidelity. These include appraising the boundary damage, acting on the appraisal, and making a decision about the relationship. Suggestions for clinical intervention based on this process are provided. Future research implications are also discussed.

Keywords Facebook · Infidelity · Social networking · Grounded theory · Process · Discovery

Introduction

A significant amount of research has been conducted on the phenomenon of Internet infidelity. Studies have examined the ways in which the use of pornography and chat rooms can damage marriages and relationships (Cooper 1998; Young 1998; Schneider 2000;

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Manning 2006; Whitty 2005). Recent media attention has focused on how social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, have added another medium that can facilitate Internet infidelity behaviors. However, little research focus has been given to the role SNS play in facilitating infidelity. Existing literature suggests that this phenomenon has substantial consequences. However, given the increase in social networking, it would be helpful to better understand how Facebook infidelity is similar or different to other infidelity behavior.

Scholarship has explored the definition of infidelity, what behaviors constitute infidelity, gender differences, rebuilding relationships following infidelity, and motivational factors (Blow and Hartnett 2005; De Stefano and Oala 2008; DiBlasio 2000; Olson et al. 2002). The consensus of these studies is that offline infidelity is harmful to relationships and is most often categorized into three groups of behaviors: sexual, emotional, or a combination of the two (Glass and Wright 1992). Wilson et al. (2011) suggest three types: (1) ambiguous, which includes going someplace, buying/receiving gifts, dancing, hugging, talking on the phone/internet, and eating/drinking; (2) deceptive, which consists of lying and withholding information; and (3) explicit, which includes heavy petting/fondling, dating, intercourse, and oral sex. Explicit behaviors directly related to sexual infidelity were identified as the strongest indicators of cheating, while Ambiguous and Deceptive behaviors fell more in line with emotional infidelity.

Whisman et al. (1997) found that marital therapists ranked extramarital affairs as the second most damaging problem to relationships, with domestic violence being the only relational issue more damaging. Other studies found that infidelity, especially sexual infidelity, was the strongest predictor of divorce (Amato and Rogers 1997; Amato and Previti 2003; Tulane et al. 2011). Olson et al. (2002) found that participants' experiences following the discovery of their partner's affair included three stages: (1) emotional roller coaster—a period of intense emotional reactions and uncertainty about the future of their relationship; (2) moratorium—where couples spent more time apart, engaged in meaning-making activities around the affair, and sought outside support; and (3) trust building—in which couples began to rebuild their relationship through better communication, and work towards forgiveness.

Offline Boundaries

Existing literature suggests that married couples develop rules about the acceptable or unacceptable behaviors in which they can engage. Often these rules are unspoken, and assumptions are made that one's partner shares her or his beliefs (Hesper and Whitty 2010). Wilson et al. (2011) found that women and men do not agree on what behaviors are acceptable and what constitutes infidelity, which helps explain their different reactions to infidelity and "suggests that cheating is comprised of more than just breaking the written or unwritten rules of sexual monogamy" (Wilson et al. 2011, p. 81).

The Internet and Infidelity

The past decade has shown a rise in Internet dating and issues with online infidelity (Cooper et al. 2003; Hertlein and Piercy 2006; Whitty 2005). Research has concluded that relationships suffer similar negative outcomes with online infidelity as they do offline infidelity, with one study showing that 22 % of participants divorced or separated as a result of the online infidelity (Schneider 2000). In Barak and Fisher (1999) predicted that

cybersex “will become a major factor in deteriorating marital relations and, therefore, a cause of relationship distress and divorce” (p. 270).

Motivational Factors

The rise in Internet infidelity has been partly explained by scholars, such as Cooper (1998) whose “Triple A” Engine (accessibility, affordability, and anonymity) explains the ease of accessing sexual material online. Young’s (1998) ACE model (Anonymity, Convenience, Escape), emphasizes the “addiction” component of online sexual behavior and discusses the role of Internet infidelity in providing relief from stressful or unfulfilling relationships.

Internet Boundaries

Hesper and Whitty (2010) studied 920 married couples to investigate whether couples had similar boundaries around Internet use. The authors refer to these rules as online netiquette. Couples most strongly agreed that falling in love, engaging in cybersex, flirting, and revealing personal details to other users are unacceptable online behaviors.

Discovery

Afifi et al. (2001) used an identity management framework to suggest that the manner in which infidelity is discovered impacts the effects on the relationship. They found the most damaging method of discovery was through third party sources, followed by “red-handed,” explicit information-seeking, and lastly though the partner’s unsolicited disclosure. The degree of threat to the nonparticipating partner’s identity is affected greatly by the degree to which the infidelity was made public (Afifi et al. 2001). Considering that Facebook profiles are often accessible to one’s family and friends, it is possible that this type of infidelity is known to many who know the nonparticipating partner. Such “public knowledge” would appear to increase the threat to the nonparticipating partner’s identity and subsequently affect the decision regarding the future of the relationship.

Whitty (2003) found that if a partner’s computer is left accessible or a spouse’s password is known, partners will often engage in investigatory behaviors that sometimes lead to the discovery of infidelity activities. Hesper and Whitty (2010) found that one in three couples reported monitoring their partners’ Internet activities; however, couples did not specify whether their monitoring behaviors were related to specific concerns about infidelity. In addition to investigatory behaviors, warning signs often lead to the desire to monitor a partner’s online behavior. Young et al. (2000) highlighted early warning signs of online infidelity including change in sleep patterns, demand for privacy, ignoring responsibilities, evidence of lying, personality changes, loss of interest in sex, and declining investment in the relationship.

Impact of Internet Infidelity

The existing literature about Internet infidelity focuses mainly on the experience of the person engaging in the affair and the reasons behind using the Internet for sexual relationships. Few studies touch on the systemic effects of these behaviors (Manning 2006). Those that do consider systemic impacts found that partners viewed the inappropriate online behaviors as a threat to their relationship, that trust was violated, and that often these

online affairs were just as emotionally damaging as offline affairs (Bridges et al. 2003; Schneider 2000). Several studies identified that the nonparticipating partner experiences a range of emotions, such as anger, depression, helplessness, shame, isolation, guilt, betrayal, loss of trust, hurt, rejection, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, humiliation, and jealousy (King 2003; Schneider 2003).

Social Networking Sites (SNS)

Social networking sites are web-based communities designed to allow users to search for and add other members of online communities. These sites allow users to post messages on one another's profiles, comment on one another's photographs, send private messages, poke other users (a feature that is intended to get the attention of another user, also known as poking) and chat online. This study will focus specifically on Facebook, one of the most popular SNS. The number of active Facebook users reached 1 billion in October 2012 (Associated Press 2012). In addition to the growing popularity of this site, the amount of media attention on the impact of SNS on couples' relationships has continued to increase. One reason for the media attention is the large number of divorces citing Facebook as a factor. In 2008, 20 % of divorce cases mentioned Facebook; however, as of 2011, that number rose to 33 % (Lumpkin 2012). The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers stated that the top Facebook concerns are inappropriate messages to friends of the opposite sex and cruel posts on comments between separated spouses (Lumpkin 2012).

The ubiquity of Facebook and its online nature have made it fertile ground for relationship betrayals. Just as pornography and chat rooms can be easily accessed from a variety of different technology sources, so too can Facebook. Furthermore, users are able to access their SNS at work or home without attracting suspicion or getting into trouble, as they might with a pornographic website. Also, unless Facebook users give their passwords to their partners, the SNS behavior can be kept private. Another motivational factor for Facebook is escape. For many Facebook users, the primary reason for logging on is to escape work or boredom (Cravens 2010; Pempek et al. 2008). The amount of time people spend on Facebook and its intimate nature led the researchers to question whether or not Facebook infidelity behaviors could be viewed as being on the more severe end of the infidelity continuum, in comparison to viewing pornography or chat room interactions. Based on their similarities, it is likely that the systemic effects of Internet infidelity and SNS infidelity will be comparable, but this is as of yet, poorly understood.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of Facebook infidelity behaviors from the perspective of the nonparticipating partner (those impacted by their partners' infidelity behavior). The orienting questions the researchers asked were: (1) What is the experience of nonparticipating partners when their partners have used Facebook to engage in infidelity behaviors? (2) What are the basic social processes that occur around finding out about the infidelity behaviors? (3) What are the basic psychological processes that occur with nonparticipating partners? (4) What similarities or differences exist between the current research on offline and online infidelity and the process model from the current study?

Methods

To answer the research questions, data from a website that collects posts about Facebook infidelity was analyzed using grounded theory methodology. This form of methodology is used to explain a given phenomenon when a theory is currently unavailable and when researchers seek to emphasize the process related to a social phenomenon (Charmaz 2006; Creswell 2007). The researchers aimed to inductively create a theory that was data driven, not constructed from pre-existing conceptualizations, making grounded theory the most appropriate methodology for this study. Grounded theory can be approached on a range between objectivist and subjectivist epistemologies (Daly 2007). The researchers utilized a subjectivist epistemology and a constructivist paradigm. These approaches value a “not-knowing” stance, suggesting that data is a representation (not an objective truth) of the phenomena, and that there are multiple realities that are shaped by interaction between researchers and participants.

Ethical considerations about the privacy of online authors' stories were considered based on Heilferty's (2010) guidelines for online data. Debates surrounding Internet research have come up with four main considerations for ethical issues: protection of participants, autonomy, confidentiality and privacy (Heilferty 2010). Each of these ethical issues was considered with the use of the FacebookCheating.com stories. For example, this study used passive analysis, in that data collection did not include any contact or interaction between researcher and online members (Eysenbach and Till 2001). All the stories and story comments used in this study were free of identifying information; therefore, even though a Google search of these quotations would lead interested readers back to the FacebookCheating.com website, the posts are generally anonymous.

Sample

Although the website data was not intended for research purposes, the stories posted on it provided rich descriptions of participants' experiences with Facebook infidelity. Demographic information was only known to the researchers when explicitly stated by the participants, making it difficult to provide extensive information about the sample used in this study. There appears to be a mix of younger and older participants and partners from a variety of backgrounds. The website designer states on the website that he created FacebookCheating.com as “a place for people to get it off their chest rather than hold it inside.” One section of the website is dedicated to “Cheating Stories,” where participants ($N = 33$) upload their cheating stories. Stories ranged in length from one paragraph to several pages. Those individuals who visit the website are able to comment on shared stories or the published articles that are posted on the site. One article: “What actions represent an online affair?” had over 200 comments. Of these 200 comments, an additional ($N = 57$) specifically discussed experiences with Facebook infidelity. It should be noted that some of the stories posted on FacebookCheating.com reference other forms of infidelity, both online and offline. Those stories that did not reference Facebook were not included in the collected data. In sum, this website provided a total of 90 stories about Facebook infidelity that were analyzed in this study.

Procedure

To determine the usability of the data, the first step was to investigate the origins of the website and nature of the postings. The website creator did not seek out participants; rather,

participants sought out the website. The website has been discussed on popular news shows such as ABC and CNN, which could have drawn in a diverse pool of users. The researchers used all the Facebook-specific data from the start date January 17, 2010, until December 14, 2011. These stories were compiled into a document for analysis.

Data Analysis

The first two authors were the primary coders, which allowed for reflexivity and comparison, since this process was interactive. The authors hand coded the data and did not use any qualitative software to manage the data analysis. Memos were used extensively in this process to track analytic decisions, code development and researchers' reflections.

Charmaz (2006) recommends four stages of coding when conducting grounded theory: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. Initial coding involved reading each transcript line by line and naming concepts, such as Secrets, Lying, Indecision, Denial, and Self-blame, within the stories. Focused coding involved synthesizing coded data to create categories that reflected and organized the initial codes. For example, focused coding led to the synthesis of "lying," "secrets," and "hiding" into "suspicious behavior." The organization of the categories evolved as it became clear that many of the codes were related to actions of discovery and response. However, there were also many emotional themes tied to these actions, and many *in vivo* codes were emotional in nature (e.g. "a family in ruin," "another victim," "a Facebook ruin," "heartbroken again," and "just plain ol mad"). Although emotional experiences could not always be paired with a specific phase of the process model, the researchers felt that emotions were an integral aspect of the stories. Therefore, in the next phase of coding the emotional category was situated as one that transected the whole process of discovery.

The third stage of coding used axial coding, where one asks, how do the subcategories and categories relate? (Charmaz 2006). For example, the relationship between secretive behavior, gut feelings, and suspicions was explored. Ultimately, it was decided that these categories represented warning signs. The final phase of coding was the theoretical coding stage, where researchers pieced together an analytic story that coherently broke down the process of finding out about Facebook infidelity and the individual and relational events that followed. After comparing all the model memos and revisiting the data in the codes, the researchers arrayed the categories and subcategories into a model.

Trustworthiness

In grounded theory research it is important to take steps to ensure the rigor, or trustworthiness, of the findings. Per Creswell's (2007) recommendation, several techniques were used. For example, the researchers attempted to approach the data with a "beginner's mind," without preconceived notions about this population or the constructs of interest. This process involved acknowledging roles as researchers, gaps in understanding this population, and assumptions about the process. For example, because relationships and trust were central in this study, the researchers were reflexive in regard to their beliefs about relationships and how these may have affected the analytic process. Also, the authors are in academic settings; therefore, biases of privilege were acknowledged and discussed among the coders and the internal auditor. Lastly, the resulting grounded theory is merely an interpretation based on the researchers' constructions; thus, it is important to understand the authors' contexts (Charmaz 2006). One researcher, J. Cravens, has several years of experience studying and reading about online infidelity. Both researchers have similar

beliefs that Facebook and other social networking sites could be used for infidelity behaviors. Attempts were made to acknowledge these values and biases and to avoid their influences in the coding process. Careful attention was paid to the line-by-line coding and focused coding to create categories that were reflective of the data, not the views of the researchers. Using reflexivity and memos also helped ensure rigor as the researchers attempted to understand the lived experiences of the participants.

Results

The results revealed that nonparticipating partners undergo a process from the beginning of the infidelity behaviors through the discovery, culminating in a decision about the future of the relationship. This process is visually shown in Fig. 1 and is described below.

Warning Signs

Warning signs were observable behaviors consisting of verbal or nonverbal cues that indicated the possibility of infidelity. Warning signs were often, but not always, present before or during the Discovery and Investigation phases, as well as the Boundary/Damage Appraisal phase. Some warning signs were noted a priori, whereas others were not realized until after the infidelity was discovered. This category consists of three subthemes: Gut feelings, Changes in behavior, and Suspicious or secretive behavior.

Gut Feelings

Nonparticipating partners often commented on an underlying “gut” feeling that something was amiss with their partner or in their relationship. Some referred to this suspicion

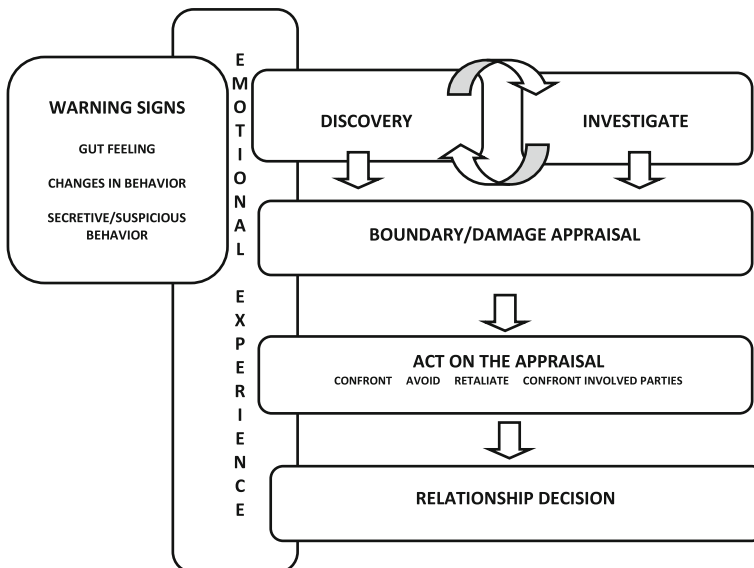


Fig. 1 Process model

directly as a “gut instinct,” while others used different wording such as “women’s intuition,” “a bad feeling,” or “... that empty feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you know you’re being played a fool.” For example, one person reported, “I have a strong feeling that something just isn’t right here.” Another said: “I don’t know why, but something made me get the WebWatcher program.” One participant provided advice to others: “... trust your gut. If something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t.”

Change in Behavior

Participants often noted changes in their partner’s behavior before or during the time when the infidelity behavior occurred.

My wife used to comment about married people being on FB and how ‘inappropriate’ it was. Then 1 day I walk into our living room and she is on the couch with her laptop and I notice she is on FB ... her time on FB became more and more frequent.

One participant summarized typical warning signs stating: “Things went from bad to worse, she became very resentful of me, lost weight, bought all new clothes, and exhibited every other behavior you find listed on websites that describe, ‘Signs of a cheating spouse.’”

Suspicious or Secretive Behavior

In addition to the general changes in behavior, nonparticipating partners noted suspicious or secretive behavior in particular. Examples include closing out computer windows when one’s partner came into a room, befriending past partners on Facebook, and concealing messages or text conversations. A participant shared: “My story, it seems, has most of the same signs that I’ve read about in other stories. Clicking out of a computer screen when I enter the room, on the computer hours on end, phony excuses about stupid things, no communication anymore.” These behaviors caused an increase in the nonparticipating partner’s suspicion of infidelity and often led to an increase in investigative behaviors. One commenter explained, “He was always on Facebook but I thought nothing of it. Until I started my Facebook page and my husband did not want to be my friend on Facebook. So that’s when I started to ask questions wondering why?”

One participant noted: “For years we were able to log into each other’s email accounts. Now she’s changed the passwords and has also put a password on her phone. We’ve always shared everything. This brought back a load of suspicion tonight.” Another reported: “I noticed she was spending a lot of time late at night hiding her chats, removed me her husband from her friends list, come to find out her own mother noticed her strange behavior for a married woman.”

Discovery

Discovery describes the point or event in which the infidelity behavior was realized. Discovery sometimes occurred accidentally, before any investigation was conducted and perhaps before any warning signs had been observed. “I accidentally stumbled across his messages on Facebook and I found out he had been conversating [sic] with a woman in Michigan telling her ‘good morning gorgeous, goodnight gorgeous, hope to talk to you

soon' and giving her his cell number!" Another participant noted: "When I sat down at our computer I noticed she had left her Facebook page open. To my bewilderment, I saw a message from an individual referring to her as 'babe.' Who would be calling my wife babe?"

Investigation

Partners often conducted investigations into their partners' behavior in an attempt to gather more information about their partners' plans or what infidelity behaviors may have already occurred. Partners may have multiple reasons for conducting an investigation, such as wanting to be certain, gathering more evidence, and potentially using the information in court later. This response was typical: "Before confronting my wife, I wanted to know more." Another said: "I learned one valuable lesson with my ex, when it came to her affairs I had to confront her with SOLID evidence because she was so manipulating that she made herself seem like a saint." Other participants described experiences in which they used technology to find out more information about their partners' behavior:

I felt the need to find out, but I knew I couldn't just ask her. I needed to be gentle to find out what was going on. Hiring a stranger to uncover her secrets would be embarrassing for me. I needed to do this myself and be very careful. Spying on people isn't something you learn in a college classroom. I did some research on the internet and figured out my strategy.

Another use of technology was described by this participant: "All the letters being typed are recorded; meaning I am able to know everything that is being typed whether a password or a message on Facebook. My wife could do nothing on the computer that I couldn't know about."

Boundary/Damage Appraisal

Boundary/Damage Appraisal was the process that occurred after the infidelity was discovered and the nonparticipating partner assesses the degree to which relational boundaries were crossed and the amount of damage the infidelity has done. In other words, is the infidelity behavior beyond the boundaries that the nonparticipating partner has for the relationship, or was this a one-time indiscretion that can be overlooked? For many people this was a struggle:

I know he won't do anything physically but it is the emotional side that hurts. Is it my fault? I don't know the answer—to me it is cheating whatever way you look at it. He lies to my face. Maybe I should just leave????

Another person commented on his boundary appraisal: "I discovered a highly inappropriate conversation between my wife and an ex-fling of hers. I took it hard even though they never met up and acted on anything." For another participant, the issue revolved around broken promises: "I feel like cheating in any form on your spouse is a deal breaker for me. We had always told each other what the rules were; I guess the bond with her was just empty words." Another participant focused largely on his feelings in assessing the damage:

It started out innocent enough, she messaged him cause she saw he is getting married soon...they were talking about our wedding. She said if she wasn't with me she

would ‘come see him in a second.’ This really bothered me. I understand that everyone gets tempted from time to time but it hurts me that she admitted this to him.

A last interesting aspect to the Boundary and Damage Appraisal phase was that participants sometimes did not agree on specific boundaries around Facebook use. “My husband just opened his Facebook 2 days ago, I didn’t want him to but he told me that I couldn’t get mad and I let him.” Another participant noted, “My husband friended his ex ... now she is messaging him back...I have demanded that he unfriend her and he won’t.”

Act on the Appraisal

Following the Boundary/Damage Appraisal phase, the nonparticipating partners engaged in a decision-making process about what to do with the newfound information. Common decisions that were made were to confront their partners with this information, to avoid bringing the information up, to retaliate, or to confront other parties involved in these activities. For example, “I don’t know whether to say I know about it or just leave it because it must be an addiction.”

Confront

Many partners confront their partners upon discovery of perceived infidelity behaviors. For example: “I confronted her saying that I believed that something was going on between her and this guy she was friends with on the game.” Another explained, “So I confronted her and she shrugged it off as nothing and said I’m imagining things. I just wish I know [sic] how to hack her FB password to get the real story.”

Avoid

Some partners ignored the discovery of infidelity and did not confront their partners. Perhaps they were worried about further damaging the relationship or they were willing to overlook the behavior in the hopes that it would not occur again. Several participants wrestled with this: “I saw a couple of messages, poems and some misleading information ... I don’t want to think something is going on ... I’m still with her, maybe some more communication.”

I want to confront her about this but I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt that she isn’t gonna cheat. However if I catch her talking to him again I will definitely bring it up. I just wish I would have asked her who she was talking to when she was talking to him.

Retaliate

Some nonparticipating partners chose to act out against their partners’ infidelity. One person angrily noted, “The divorce should be final in a couple of weeks. I wish there was a way to make his cyber whore pay for helping destroy a marriage and take a father away from his son!” One person acted on their desire to retaliate stating: “Finally found out she had TWO Facebook profiles. That was enough for me ... I copy and pasted the texts into a message and sent it to people. People she worked with that knew very little about her and

will hopefully spread the word around the office.” Another explained, “They’ve apparently been married 10 years, and I know it sounds cruel, but I want to humiliate him and ruin his relationship, as he has done to what I had.”

Confront Other Parties Involved

Some nonparticipating partners chose to confront other parties involved in the infidelity, such as other potential victims and the person with whom their partner was engaging. “I sent a message to her husband and told him to check what his wife was up to ... I’m being cyber cheated on so is he—he should know.” “I did confront the other person.” Several participants discussed contacting the person with whom their partner was cheating. “So I started contacting the girls letting them know who I was. So that they can forget about having any more contact with and they understood.” “I’m seriously thinking of somehow sending a copy of all the messages to this other bloke’s wife too.”

Relationship Decision

The final step in the discovery process for most participants was to make a decision about the future of the relationship. Some chose to stay together; others immediately ended the relationship, such as this participant: “The next day I threw him out and never looked back as I knew I would never trust him ever.” Some people were willing to stay together and work on the relationship, but their partners were not, as described here: “I offered marriage counseling, church, even to move out and pay for the apartment just so we could [have] time to figure all this out, but she said no to all and any options I offered.” Other people struggled greatly with how to proceed and were unable to decide the future of their relationship. One such participant described this: “I love him so much and don’t know how to let go because he says he is sorry and it will never ever happen again...I want to give him another chance but [I’m] not sure if he will do it again!!!” Another said: “I have my moments when I want to move on with my life and my marriage and then I have my down moments when I think about the deception.”

Emotional Experience

As discussed in the methods, the emotional experience of the participants was often strong and transected the discovery process. Participants’ emotional experiences were diverse, ranging from hurt, loss of trust, shock, jealousy, embarrassment, and anger.

Hurt

One of the most common reactions to a partner’s inappropriate Facebook behaviors was feeling hurt. Participants had creative ways of describing their pain. For example, participants stated: “my heart exploded,” “I was completely destroyed,” “A family in ruin. All the pain, the suffering, the hurt, and life changing damage...,” “I am heartbroken. I hate Facebook now,” and “She use[d] to be the reason I smile in the morning, now she’s the reason I cry at night.” Another said: “I have my moments when I think about the deception. It hurts, I know.” Some participants struggled with the ambiguity of the emotional betrayal in comparison to a physical betrayal: “I have no idea what else he’s doing. I have been so hurt by this-I wish he would just go out and get laid-so it would be

physical-this is killing me mentally.” “I know he won’t do anything physically but it is the emotional side that hurts.” When the participating partners did not change the problematic behaviors, the participants reported this as being a source of hurt. “What hurt the most was her leaving him on her FB even after I confronted her.” Additionally, participants discussed the hurt being enough to end the current relationship: “I am so hurt over this and I am thinking of leaving our relationship so he can pursue whatever he needs to with this chick.”

Loss of Trust

Violations of trust were another prevalent theme shared by participants. Many participants commented on how loss of trust has impacted their current relationship: “But I’m still wary and don’t trust 100 % even though we have now reconciled,” “Her account is deactivated. I love her very much, but it is hard to trust her,” and “I told him several time[s] how I feel about it how it’s making me sad and insecure about him but I guess he prefers Facebook more than me.”

Loss of trust in their partners also impacted monitoring behaviors: “I love her but I can never completely trust her again. And with all I know about what she did last year I am going to keep an eye on her for a while until she proves to me that I can stop checking.” “My trust is very slim. I am even considering a tracking system, to keep up with her ... ” and “... it always ends up with him going off on me for checking up on him and not trusting him. How can I trust him when continually he just tells me what I want to hear and then goes straight back to messaging, chatting and sending photos etc. to these women?”

Shock

Feelings of shock revolved mostly around the initial discovery of their partners’ behaviors. One participant stated: “He found something completely shocking. Lisa had been emailing a high school sweetheart she had not seen in 25 years!” Another participant discussed the shock that followed confronting their partner: “She asked, ‘Do you really want to do this at 2:30 a.m?’ I repeated myself ‘What is going on?’ ... She sighed, ‘What is going on is I want a divorce’ ... I couldn’t believe my ears.”

Anger

Participants often reported feeling angered after discovery: “But I was pissed and couldn’t contain my anger and confronted her.” “Man I’m angry!!! ... accounts done separately 1st mistake ... she signed in with her maiden name 2nd mistake.” And: “I was so mad and broken hearted.” Participants were often angered about the content on partner’s accounts. “She basically told him she wanted to meet up with him alone (WITHOUT ME) so she can share ‘her journey’ with him or whatever. That just got MY claws out in an instant.” Another participant described how the behaviors felt disrespectful: “Totally pisses me off and I feel it is really disrespectful. And these women are also married!! WTH!”

Some participants described interpreting their partners’ reactions to being confronted as anger. “...it always ends up with him going off at me for checking up on him and not trusting him.” “I confronted him. He turned it into me being crazy and psycho. All he claims he was doing was flirting.” “I have found out time and time again that I am at my wits end because it always ends up with him going off at me for checking up on him and

not trusting him.” “When I confronted her, about the call, she lied, and said she was speaking with her brother, then she became upset and accused me of spying on her.”

Discussion

These results suggest that finding out about one’s partner engaging in Facebook infidelity behaviors is a complex and interactive process. Most participants reported their experience in a linear way; however, several participants described a recursive process that would move between various stages of the model at different times. Although the model reflects the actions and decisions of the nonparticipating partner it also highlights the relational process inherent in this phenomenon.

Comparison of Models

To answer the fourth research question, the results of this study were compared to existing literature of online and offline infidelity to discern what similarities and differences exist in regard to Facebook infidelity behaviors. Comparing the impact of offline infidelity to the results of the process model, the emotional impact of the participants’ was similar to those reported in previous offline infidelity studies (Bridges et al. 2003; King 2003; Schneider 2000, 2003). When considering the boundary and damage appraisal stage of the process model, many participants struggled with how to interpret their partners’ online behavior and what impact it should have on their relationship. Wilson et al. (2011) discussed the three types of infidelity behaviors, ambiguous, deceptive, and explicit. Part of the difficulty of the boundary/damage appraisal stage was related to the nonparticipating partners’ behavior falling into the ambiguous category of infidelity, which Wilson et al. (2011) point out as being a less clear cut indicator of cheating and often being identified as an emotional affair.

Young et al. (2000) pointed out typical warning signs related to online infidelity behaviors. The process model created from this study specifies three subcategories of warning signs: gut feelings, changes in behavior, and secretive/suspicious behavior. The results of the Young et al. (2000) study found personality changes to be one warning sign, which is similar to the changes in behavior reported by the participants in this study. Despite this similarity, it was difficult to discern whether or not the nonparticipating partners in this study experienced issues with their partner ignoring responsibilities, demanding privacy or decreasing investment in their relationship.

Finally, the process model highlights the investigation and discovery stages that participants reported experiencing. Hesper and Whitty (2010) found that one-third of the participants in their study reported investigating their partners’ online activities if they had an opportunity to do so (e.g., knew partner’s password, computer left open). Many of the participants in this study discussed discovering their partners’ behaviors because their computers were left open with their Facebook accounts being logged into. It is unknown from the current study whether or not participants investigated their partners’ activities because warning signs motivated them to do so, or the opportunity to check out their partners’ account was too tempting to resist when the opportunity presented itself. Additionally, participants discussed their belief that boundary violations had occurred when their partners engaged in the Facebook behaviors; however, the struggle was often related to the fact that they did not know if their partner had similar rules or boundaries. Hesper and Whitty (2010) also found in their study that participants reported having unspoken

assumptions or rules about appropriate Internet use, but participants had not communicated these with their partners.

Clinical Implications

This model can assist clinicians in understanding the process nonparticipating partners go through after discovering Facebook infidelity. One important finding from this study is the link between Facebook infidelity behaviors, other Internet infidelity behaviors, and offline infidelity. Facebook has become an integral part of Western culture, yet little empirical research has targeted the relational implications of this aspect of online interaction. Participants in this study described similar emotional experiences as other nonparticipating partners in offline and online infidelity (King 2003; Olson et al. 2002; Schneider 2003). What set this study apart from other online infidelity studies were the Facebook-specific rules and boundaries highlighted by some of the participants. For example, there were references to “friending” one’s ex (friending is adding a person to your account so that you can view one another’s profile and interact), sending instant messages through the Facebook chat system, and commenting on other users’ pictures. There were also issues related to how people reported their relationship status on their home page.

Although this study looked primarily at one partner’s experiences of SNS infidelity, the findings have implications for couple’s therapy. Nonparticipating partners reported going through a diverse array of emotional experiences and uncertainty about the future of their relationship. This process is similar to the first stage of Olson et al.’s (2002) three stage process model of offline affair discovery, the emotional roller coaster. In order for the participants in Olson et al. (2002) to move to the second stage of the process model, a decrease in emotional reactivity needed to occur as well as meaning-making of the event. It is important for clinicians working with couples to help the nonparticipating partner identify and express these difficult emotions. Clinicians can also explore the warning signs and contextual and relational factors that precipitated the infidelity. These therapeutic goals could also assist couples in making meaning of the event. Additionally, the impact of the Facebook infidelity behaviors was damaging enough to cause many participants to question the status of their relationship, which is an important clinical issue.

Olson et al. (2002) reported that nonparticipating partners gathered information about the affair to help make meaning of the event. This was the process for our participants as well, as they took actions to investigate what happened and sometimes contacted the third party. In a therapeutic session, clinicians could assist in the meaning-making process by helping couples discuss the affair together. Creating space for an open discussion in session would allow the nonparticipating partner to seek answers to their inquiries, which may help to eliminate the nonparticipating partner’s need to gain information through online investigatory behaviors or monitoring the partner’s account. The therapist may need to help the couple establish clear boundaries on monitoring behaviors, as this behavior makes trust in their relationship contingent upon not “finding infidelity behaviors” instead of trust being based on the dynamics of their relationship.

In a study on treatment modalities and Internet infidelity, Hertlein and Piercy (2012) assert that it is crucial for therapists to assist the couple in defining the affair, with careful attention being paid to respect the feelings of the betrayed partner. One of the main themes of the present study was the boundary/damage appraisal stage, which details the difficulty the participants had in defining the transgressions of their partner. Many participants lacked consensus with their partners about what SNS behaviors constituted a boundary violation.

Participants commented on their struggle with what to do next when consensus on appropriate behaviors could not be reached.

A needed initial step in the treatment process is to help the couple discuss the Internet behaviors and reevaluate the couple's definition of infidelity, with a specific focus on online behaviors. Clinicians should facilitate communication with couples about setting agreed upon boundaries. For example, some nonparticipating partners reported issues with private messaging, others reported strong reaction to communication with or "friending" past partners, and some shared insecurities around "friending" any attractive member of the opposite sex. Additionally, some reported their partners had strong reactions to the invasion of their privacy by accessing their online accounts, which caused relational conflict.

Hertlein and Piercy (2012) also found that therapists reported the importance of investigating whether or not there was an identifiable third party. Therapists in their study recognized there was a qualitative difference between a partner using pornography and an actual person being involved. Several of the participants in this study pointed out concerns with their partners contacting ex-partners or interacting online with their ex-spouse. Additionally, Yarab and Rice Allgeier (1998) found that participants were more threatened by a sexual fantasy that included a person their partner knew (e.g., their best friend) than a movie star. Because a Facebook friend is known and may be interacting with the partner offline, as opposed to a virtual setting, SNS affairs may pose a greater threat to a relationship than a person met in a chat room or viewed on a pornography site. When considering the damage appraisal stage of our model, these findings highlight that the nonparticipating partner's reaction may be mitigated by the perceived threat of the third party.

Research Implications

A result of not knowing demographic information of all the participants was that the current study was limited in accomplishing this aim but future research could build upon the current findings. Researchers could build upon the findings of this study through theoretical sampling, taking into consideration the demographic information of the participants, specifically gender and relationship status. Additionally, researcher could further explore the process model by building upon these findings, especially in terms of the relational processes that occur following discovery. The focus of this model was on the nonparticipating partner's experience. The inclusion of both partners would provide the relational component. For example, what is the participating partner's experience and how does it differ from the nonparticipating partner? How do couples appraise online boundaries? How do couples create consensus around appropriate and inappropriate online behaviors? How do other relational factors (e.g. communication, age, relationship satisfaction, attachment) affect one's decision to maintain the relationship? Further qualitative or quantitative studies could examine these questions utilizing couple-level data and dyadic analysis to better understand the relational processes of this phenomenon.

Limitations and Conclusions

The nature of secondary data analysis and the researchers' lack of control over data collection with these participants caused some limitations in this study. Participants who posted their stories on this website had access to each of the pre-existing stories prior to composing and sharing their own stories. It is likely that some of the content on the website

was influenced by previous content, which is similar to a limitation found in focus group methods. The theoretical model derived from this data was based solely on the stories the participants shared, and it was difficult to determine the influence of the existing stories; however a comparison of earlier posting to later postings revealed that new categories and subcategories were still identified in the later postings. This finding provides support that pre-existing stories may not have had a strong influence over later postings.

Another limitation inherent in data sets that are not originally collected by the researchers is that theoretical sampling could not be conducted. Theoretical sampling allows for further elaboration from the participants, a refinement of theoretical categories, and the ability to “tighten up” one’s theory so that it “perfectly” matches one’s data (Charmaz 2006). This process occurs during the data collection process and may entail re-interviewing participants or recruiting specific participants who could speak about the existing categories created in the study.

The researchers acknowledge that all research, including this study, is partly driven by the values, biases, and questions of the researchers. According to the constructivist paradigm from which the researchers operated, these findings can be viewed as one representation of this phenomenon but not the final word. Other views and realities about this topic would be helpful and would vary from these. However, as mentioned, the researchers took steps to account for their influences in the analysis and interpretation of the results. They also let the participants speak for themselves and allowed their words to show the complex nature of this issue (Charmaz 2006). It is the researchers’ hope that these stories of Facebook infidelity provide insight into the processes related to the discovery of infidelity. Clinicians and researchers who better understand this process will be better equipped to assist the increasing number of couples who are navigating this area.

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