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## CLINICIAN'S PERCEPTIONS OF AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO ONLINE INFIDELITY

Pieterneel Dijkstra\*, Heleen de Zeeuw\*\*, Dick P.H. Barelds\*\*\*, Abraham P. Buunk\*\*\*\*

### ABSTRACT

Aim of the present study was to examine the degree to which mental health workers perceive twelve online partner behaviors as different types of infidelity and to examine the degree to which these behaviors evoke two types of jealousy, that is, fait accompli and anxious jealousy among mental. 248 heterosexual mental health workers filled out an online questionnaire describing twelve potentially unfaithful online partner behaviors, assessing perceptions of types of infidelity and types of jealousy. Results showed that participants viewed most partner behaviors consistent with a priori expectations regarding their sexual and emotional nature. Interestingly, 65% of the participants thought that a partner watching porn on the Internet did not engage in any form of infidelity. In addition, most scenarios evoked more fait accompli jealousy than anxious jealousy. Age and gender differences are discussed, as well as implications of these findings for the treatment of jealousy.

**Key Words:** Online infidelity, Emotional Infidelity, Sexual infidelity, Fait accompli jealousy, Anxious jealousy, Perceptions of Clinicians

### INTRODUCTION

Clinician's Perceptions of and Emotional Responses to Online Infidelity

As a result of the widespread availability of the Internet, the possibilities of engaging in extra-dyadic behavior has grown explosively in the last two decades (Mileham, 2007; Dijkstra, Barelds, & Groothof, 2010, 2013). Individuals in established relationships may use the Internet to meet strangers, flirt, and engage in sexualized conversations or sexual behaviors, with or without using a webcam (e.g., Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). There are even chat rooms specifically geared towards married people who wish to engage in sexual conversations and activities with someone else (e.g., Yahoo's *Married And Flirting*; MSN's *Married But Flirting* chat rooms).

Once discovered, a partner's extra-dyadic involvement usually has serious consequences for the primary relationship: the betrayed partner often feels angry and jealous, leading to conflicts and lowered relationship satisfaction, and, when unresolved, to relationship breakdown or divorce (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2005). The fact that extra-dyadic behaviors take place online, rather than offline, does not seem to soften these consequences. Dijkstra et al. (2013) showed that partner behaviors such as falling in love with someone else or having sex evoked high amounts of upset regardless of whether these behaviors took place online or offline. Likewise, Docan-Morgan and Docan (2007) and Whitty (2003) found that most people view, for instance, cybersex and using Instant Messenger to tell someone else they met online that they care for them, as serious forms of

infidelity (see also Schneider, 2003; White, 2003). Despite the grave consequences that online infidelity may have for the quality of intimate relationships, still relatively little is known about how individuals perceive potentially unfaithful online behaviors of their partner and how they respond emotionally to these behaviors.

According to Jones and Hertlein (2012), one of the challenges for researchers is to appropriately classify potentially problematic behaviors concerning, among other things, Internet infidelity. This is important, because the online partner behaviors that are perceived as unfaithful behaviors and that may evoke upset may differ from relationship to relationship. For instance, whereas some couples may perceive online flirting with someone else as an innocent pastime, others may experience it as a serious violation of the trust they put in their partner. A study by Docan-Morgan and Docan (2007) partially examined this issue by asking participants to rate, for 44 online behaviors, the severity of the infidelity that took place. Their study, however, did not investigate the perceived *nature* of the infidelity of these acts, that is, whether these acts, for instance, were seen as acts of sexual or emotional infidelity. Individuals may perceive their partner to be sexually unfaithful when he or she has sexual contact with someone else. Emotional infidelity can be said to occur when individuals perceive their partner to invest emotionally in someone else (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). Although sexual and emotional infidelity often co-occur, there are also many situations in which they do not (see for instance Thompson, 1984). The present study's first research question focused on these different types of infidelity,

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examining how individuals perceive different potentially unfaithful online behaviors of their partner. Do they perceive these acts as signs of infidelity and, if so, as what type of infidelity would they classify these acts: as emotional, sexual or general (i.e., not specifically emotional or sexual) infidelity? Knowledge on this issue may help counselors to more precisely identify the nature of a partner's infidelity, and to focus treatment on those behaviors that are perceived as signs of infidelity, particularly those aspects of these behaviors – sexual or emotional – for which betrayal is experienced as most salient.

If individuals perceive their partner's behaviors as unfaithful, they will usually respond with upset, especially with feelings of jealousy. Feelings of jealousy are usually defined as an emotional response that individuals experience when confronted with a threat to, or the actual loss of, a valued, mostly sexual, relationship with another person, due to an actual or imagined rival for one's partner's attention (e.g., Bringle & Buunk, 1985; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Dijkstra & Buunk, 1998). According to Sharpsteen (1991; see also Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004; Parrot & Smith, 1993) jealousy is a compound emotion that is a blend of the basic emotions of anger, sadness and fear. Which of these emotions becomes the most salient at any given moment is determined by the aspects of the situation individuals focus upon. More specifically, Buunk and Dijkstra (2004) found that when sexual contact between one's partner and someone else has not yet occurred, in particular feelings of anxiety and insecurity concerning a mate's extra-dyadic sexual involvement color the jealousy experience, a type of jealousy that centers around feelings of *threat* and has been referred to as 'anxious' jealousy (Parrott, 1991; DeSteno & Salovey, 1994). In contrast, when extra-dyadic sex has already occurred, the jealousy experience is usually strongly colored by feelings of *betrayal/anger* (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004), a type of jealousy that has been referred to as 'fait accompli' jealousy (Parrott, 1991).

To date, little is known about the emotional content of jealousy in response to infidelity that takes place through the Internet. A recent study by Dijkstra et al. (2013) was the first to explicitly distinguish between these two types of jealousy in response to six scenarios that depicted a partner engaging in potentially unfaithful online behaviors, such as watching Internet porn and falling in love through the Internet. The present study extends this research by studying the extent to which twelve scenarios depicting a partner engaging in potentially unfaithful online behaviors evoke fait accompli and anxious jealousy. Our second research question therefore is: to what extent do individuals experience fait accompli jealousy and anxious jealousy

when they are confronted with important types of infidelity-related online partner behaviors? As noted by Dijkstra and colleagues (2013), knowledge on this issue is highly relevant: it may help counselors identify the most prominent emotional consequences of (suspected) Internet infidelity and help focus treatment on those emotional issues that matter the most.

The present study also examines age and sex differences with regard to the perceptions of online infidelity and the responses that are triggered by it. Research has shown both age and gender to be related to how infidelity is perceived and the responses that are evoked by it. With regard to gender differences, for instance, many studies have shown that, when confronted with the choice between emotional and sexual infidelity, men, more often than women, choose sexual infidelity as the most upsetting event, whereas women, more often than men, choose emotional infidelity as the most upsetting event (e.g., Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Buss et al., 1992; Dijkstra, Groothof, Poel, Laverman, Schrier, & Buunk, 2001). This finding has been replicated for online infidelity (e.g., Groothof, Dijkstra & Barelds, 2009). Studies also suggest that age is related to perceptions of a partner's behaviors as being unfaithful, and the responses that are accompanied by it. Dijkstra and Buunk (2002), for instance, found older women to experience less jealousy in response to their partner flirting to an attractive rival than younger women.

### **The Present Study**

The present study examines perceptions of and emotional responses to twelve short scenarios in which the partner engages in different potentially infidelity-related online behaviors. Whereas many studies on jealousy and infidelity are conducted among university students, the present study took another approach, and collected data in a sample of professionals working in the field of clinical counseling (psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses and counselors). This population may be of interest for several reasons. First, clinicians are usually trained to self-reflect on their emotions and perceptions (Moffett, 2009), and, as a consequence, may be more aware of their emotional functioning and the emotionally charged aspects of situations. Schutte et al. (1998), for instance, found clinicians to be relatively emotionally intelligent. As a consequence, clinicians may be relatively accurate at estimating their emotions and perceptions when asked how they would feel if a certain scenario would occur in real life. A related reason for studying this population is that this population deals relatively often with individuals experiencing relationship problems, among which infidelity-related problems. Due to this experience and the understanding of relationship functioning and dynamics that may result from it, these individuals may

have evolved a more thoughtful understanding of their own intimate relationship. Studying clinicians may therefore result in interesting insights in how individuals who have a relatively well-developed understanding of intimate relationships experience infidelity-related situations.

Summarizing, the present study examined the following research questions:

1. How do clinicians perceive different potentially unfaithful online behaviors of their partner: to what extent do they perceive these behaviors as infidelity and, if so, as what type of infidelity – emotional, sexual or general - do they perceive these behaviors? In addition, does clinicians' age and gender affect these perceptions?
2. To what extent do clinicians experience fait accompli jealousy and anxious jealousy in response to different potentially unfaithful online behaviors of their partner? In addition, does clinicians' age and gender affect the degree to which they experience these two types of jealousy?

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited by sending clinicians (psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses or counselors) working in diverse settings in The Netherlands an invitation letter or an email invitation asking for their participation. The invited participants were working at the Dutch Institute of Psychologists (section health care) and/or working at a university and/or a center for (mental) health care. In addition, participants were recruited by means of an advertisement in a university newspaper. The first 50 participants were eligible for winning a gift certificate of €50 in a raffle.

Individuals willing to participate in the study could fill in an online questionnaire. A total of 753 individuals visited the questionnaire's website, of which 369 participants completed the whole questionnaire. These participants were retained for analyses. Because the present study focused on mental health care professionals, participants that could *not* be identified as psychologist, psychiatrist, psychiatric nurse or counselor were removed. This meant that the data of 39 participants who had not indicated their occupational status were removed, as were the data of 34 participants with an administrative function, 14 managers, 9 scientific staff, and 7 students. Finally, the data of 18 homosexual participants were removed, leaving a sample of 248 heterosexual mental health care professionals. The majority of this sample was female (204 women, 44 men), and the mean age was 40 years ( $SD = 11.7$ , range 23-68). Most participants were currently involved in an intimate relationship ( $N = 204$ , of which 108 were married).

## MATERIALS

**Jealousy Evoking Scenarios.** Participants in the present study were asked to imagine the following situation: "*Your partner spends a lot of time on the computer. When your partner unexpectedly has to leave in a hurry, he/she leaves on his/her computer. When you decide to look something up on the Internet on his/her computer, you discover that your partner has been involved in all sorts of activities on the Internet that you were not aware of.*". Following this situation twelve scenarios describing (potentially) unfaithful online partner behaviors were presented to the participants. Nine of these scenarios were based on a previous study by Dijkstra et al. (2010), in which a list of 42 jealousy evoking partner behaviors (both online and offline) was used. These nine scenarios all deal with online behaviors: (1) Your partner undresses for someone else in front of the webcam, (2) Your partner sends sex-related chats or emails to someone of the opposite sex, (3) Your partner falls in love with someone with whom he/she communicates through the Internet, (4) Your partner has cybersex with someone else, (5) Your partner visits a chat box on sex, (6) Your partner has sex with someone else in a virtual community such as Second Life, (7) Your partner watches pornographic pictures or movies on the Internet, (8) Your partner shares his/her feelings and secrets with someone of the opposite sex by chat or email, and (9) Your partner shares a strong emotional bond with someone of the opposite sex he/she communicates with through the Internet. Based on other literature, three additional scenarios were used in the present study: (10) Your partner shares deeply emotional and intimate information with someone of the opposite sex on the Internet, (11), Your partner flirts online with someone of the opposite sex (e.g., Docan-Morgan & Docan, 2007; this scenario was used as an offline behavior in Dijkstra et al., 2010), and (12) Your partner discusses his/her problems online with someone of the opposite sex (e.g., Docan-Morgan & Docan, 2007).

The twelve scenarios were classified a priori as acts of sexual infidelity (scenarios 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6), pornography (scenario 7), emotional infidelity (scenarios 3, 8, 9, and 10), and general infidelity (scenarios 11 and 12; these two scenarios do not fit well with the other categories). The scenarios were presented in a randomized order. Participants were asked to indicate for each of the twelve scenarios whether they perceived this partner behavior as an act of sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity, general infidelity or no infidelity.

**Jealousy Ratings.** In addition to the ratings of the twelve scenarios in terms of the type of infidelity involved, participants were also asked to indicate, for each of the twelve scenarios, how they would feel if they would be confronted with the situation described in the

scenario in real life. For this purpose, participants filled out a multiple-adjective rating scale for each of the twelve scenarios, that included the adjectives *suspicious, betrayed, worried, distrustful, jealous, rejected, hurt, anxious, angry, threatened, and sad* (e.g., Dijkstra et al., 2013; Parrott & Smith, 1993). These eleven adjectives were assessed on 5-point scales ranging from 1 ('not at all') to 5 ('very strongly'), and were administered directly after each of the twelve scenarios. According to Parrott and Smith (1993), these adjectives distinguish jealousy from other negative emotional states (such as envy). Previous research (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004; Dijkstra et al., 2013) has shown that these eleven adjectives may be split into two subscales. The first subscale can be labelled *fait-accomplis* jealousy, and is composed of the items *hurt, sad, rejected, angry, and betrayed*. The second subscale

can be labelled *anxious* jealousy, and consists of the items *anxious, worried, distrustful, suspicious, threatened, and jealous*. We calculated the mean *fait-accomplis* jealousy and *anxious* jealousy scores for each of the twelve scenarios for further analyses (reliability estimates are listed in Table 2). Because of the relatively large number of statistical tests, we adopted a significance level of  $p < .01$ .

## RESULTS

### Perceptions of sexual and emotional infidelity

We first examined for each of the twelve potentially unfaithful partner behaviors the extent to which these behaviors were perceived as acts of infidelity, and if so, as what kind of infidelity (emotional, sexual or general). The frequencies are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Perceptions of (Type of) Infidelity for the Twelve Potentially Unfaithful Partner Behaviors*

	Emotional infidelity	Sexual infidelity	General infidelity	No infidelity
<b>Sexual infidelity</b>				
<i>engages in cybersex</i>	7.7%	66.1%	23.0%	3.2%
<i>undresses in front of webcam</i>	3.6%	72.6%	21.0%	2.8%
<i>sends sex related chats/emails</i>	13.3%	51.2%	26.6%	8.9%
<i>visits chatbox on seks</i>	8.5%	38.1%	17.4%	36.0%
<i>engages in virtual seks</i>	10.5%	43.1%	27.0%	19.4%
<b>Pornography</b>				
<i>watches pornography</i>	4.8%	23.0%	7.3%	64.9%
<b>Emotional infidelity</b>				
<i>shares strong emotional bond</i>	43.5%	0.0%	11.3%	45.2%
<i>falls in love</i>	53.6%	1.6%	36.3%	8.5%
<i>shares feelings and secrets</i>	47.0%	0.8%	16.6%	35.6%
<i>shares emotional/intimate information</i>	51.2%	0.8%	21.8%	26.2%
<b>General infidelity</b>				
<i>Flirts</i>	31.0%	10.9%	27.0%	31.0%
<i>discusses problems</i>	34.3%	0.4%	12.1%	53.2%

Consistent with the a priori classification, the sexual infidelity scenarios were mostly perceived as acts of sexual infidelity, with percentages ranging from 38.1% (visiting a chat box on sex) to 72.1% (undressing in front of a webcam). Visiting a chat box on sex was not considered to be an act of infidelity by 36.0% of the participants. A substantial part of the participants rated the sexual infidelity scenarios as being indicative of general infidelity (i.e., not specific for emotional or sexual infidelity; range 17.4% to 27.0%).

The large majority of the participants (64.9%) rated watching pornography on the Internet as *not* being indicative of infidelity. Of the remaining participants, most rated this scenario as being indicative of sexual infidelity (23.0%). Consistent with the a priori classification, the emotional infidelity scenario's were mostly perceived as

acts of emotional infidelity (range 43.5% to 53.6%), with the exception of sharing a strong emotional bond with someone else, which was not perceived as an act of infidelity by 45.2% of the participants. Sharing feelings and secrets, as well sharing highly emotional or intimate information were also considered not to be infidelity behaviors by a substantial number of participants (35.6% and 26.2% respectively). Falling in love with someone through the Internet was, besides an act of emotional infidelity, also perceived relatively often as an act of general infidelity (36.3%).

For the two general infidelity scenarios mixed results were found. Flirting with someone online was perceived to an almost similar extent as either an act of emotional infidelity (31.0%), general infidelity (27.0%) or no infidelity (31.0%). The majority of the participants,

however, perceived this partner behavior as an act of infidelity (69.0% in total). Discussing problems with someone else through the Internet was not perceived as an act of infidelity by the majority of the participants (53.2%). Still, 34.3% of the participants perceived this partner behavior as an act of emotional infidelity.

**Age and sex differences**

Next, we examined whether there are sex and age differences with regard to the perceptions of infidelity for the twelve scenarios. To examine sex differences, Chi-square tests were conducted. The sex differences were generally very small. Only two marginally significant differences between male and female participants were found, for sending sex related chats or emails [ $C^2(3) = 9.11, p < .05$ ] and falling in love with someone through the internet [ $C^2(3) = 8.28, p < .05$ ]. Sending sex related chats or emails was rated as an act of sexual infidelity by the majority of women (54.9%), and as an act of either sexual (34.1%) or general (31.8%) infidelity by men. Falling in love with someone through the Internet was rated as an act of emotional infidelity more often by women (57.4%) than by men (36.4%), and as an act of general infidelity more often by men (47.7%) than by women (33.8%).

Age differences were examined by means of nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis tests (because the groups were of unequal sizes within scenarios), using the twelve scenarios as independent variables, and participant age

as the dependent variable. There were a couple of significant effects. Engaging in cybersex [ $C^2(3) = 13.64, p < .01$ ] and sending sex related chats or emails [ $C^2(3) = 15.00, p < .01$ ] were perceived more often as acts of sexual infidelity by younger participants, and more often as acts of general infidelity or no infidelity by older participants. Sharing a strong emotional bond [ $C^2(3) = 9.52, p < .01$ ] was rated more often as an act of emotional infidelity by younger participants, and more often as an act of general infidelity by older participants. Likewise, discussing problems was rated more often as an act of general or no infidelity by older participants, and more often as an act of emotional infidelity by younger participants [ $C^2(3) = 18.73, p < .001$ ]. The general picture that arises from these results is that younger participants are more likely to interpret these particular partner behaviors as signs of a specific type of infidelity, whereas older participants are more likely to interpret these partner behaviors as signs of general infidelity or even no infidelity.

**Fait accompli and anxious jealousy**

In order to examine the extent to which the clinicians in the present sample experience fait accompli jealousy and anxious jealousy in response to the twelve potentially unfaithful online behaviors of their partner, the mean jealousy scores were computed for each of the twelve scenarios (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mean Fait Accompli and Anxious Jealousy Scores for the Twelve Potentially Unfaithful Partner Behaviors

	Fait accompli jealousy			Anxious jealousy			t	p
	M	SD	α	M	SD	α		
<b>Sexual infidelity</b>								
<i>engages in cybersex</i>	4.22	0.90	.88	3.66	1.04	.88	11.51	< .001
<i>undresses in front of webcam</i>	4.07	1.00	.87	3.55	1.07	.87	10.76	< .001
<i>sends sex related chats/emails</i>	3.79	1.05	.91	3.45	1.03	.88	7.90	< .001
<i>visits chatbox on sex</i>	3.12	1.25	.93	2.90	1.13	.92	4.72	< .001
<i>engages in virtual sex</i>	3.48	1.29	.95	3.11	1.18	.92	7.68	< .001
<b>Pornography</b>								
<i>watches pornography</i>	2.39	1.22	.94	2.10	1.06	.92	6.96	< .001
<b>Emotional infidelity</b>								
<i>shares strong emotional bond</i>	2.76	1.24	.95	2.92	1.15	.94	-3.83	< .001
<i>falls in love</i>	4.18	0.93	.90	3.88	1.00	.88	6.50	< .001
<i>shares feelings and secrets</i>	3.18	1.23	.95	3.04	1.13	.93	3.59	< .001
<i>shares emotional/intimate information</i>	3.29	1.17	.93	3.13	1.13	.92	3.62	< .001
<b>General infidelity</b>								
<i>flirts</i>	3.11	1.21	.95	3.02	1.10	.92	2.01	< .05
<i>discusses problems</i>	2.68	1.22	.95	2.68	1.13	.93	-0.06	ns

Except for the general infidelity scenarios, significant differences were found for all potentially unfaithful partner behaviors. For nine out of the ten remaining potentially unfaithful partner behaviors, higher mean fait accompli jealousy than anxious jealousy was reported. The only exception was sharing a strong emotional bond with someone through the Internet, for which the mean anxious jealousy score was slightly but significantly higher than the mean fait accompli jealousy score.

To examine if participant sex affects the degree to which participants report fait accompli or anxious jealousy in response to the potentially unfaithful partner behaviors, a repeated measures MANOVA was conducted, using fait accompli and anxious jealousy as the dependent variables, the twelve scenarios as the repeated measures variable, and participant sex as an independent factor. A marginally significant multivariate scenario by sex interaction was found [ $F(12, 236) = 2.17, p = .014$ ], that could be attributed to a significant univariate interaction effect for the scenario in which the partner falls in love with someone else through the Internet [ $F(1, 247) = 8.09, p < .01$ ]. On closer inspection, it was found that women reported more fait accompli

jealousy [ $F(1, 247) = 26.38, p < .001, h^2 = .10$ ], and slightly more anxious jealousy [ $F(1, 247) = 6.43, p = .012, h^2 = .03$ ] in response to this scenario than men.

Finally, the relations between age and the fait accompli jealousy and anxious jealousy in response to the twelve scenarios were examined by calculating the correlations between these two jealousy scores. These correlations are listed in Table 3. Age was significantly and negatively related to fait accompli jealousy and anxious jealousy for the scenarios in which the partner engages in cybersex or undresses in front of the webcam. In these cases, older participants reported lower levels of jealousy than younger participants. In addition, age was significantly related to fait accompli jealousy when the partner was falling in love with someone through the Internet, with again older participants reporting less fait accompli jealousy than younger participants. An additional repeated measures MANCOVA using fait accompli jealousy and anxious jealousy as the dependent variables, the scenarios as the repeated measures variable, participant sex as the independent factor and age as a covariate revealed no significant multivariate or univariate age by sex interactions (all  $F_s < 1.63, p = ns$ ).

Table 3: Correlations between Age and Fait Accompli Jealousy and Anxious Jealousy for the Twelve Potentially Unfaithful Partner Behaviors

	Fait accompli jealousy	Anxious jealousy
<b>Sexual infidelity</b>		
<i>engages in cybersex</i>	-.271**	-.195**
<i>undresses in front of webcam</i>	-.302**	-.187**
<i>sends sex related chats/emails</i>	-.130*	-.128*
<i>visits chatbox on sex</i>	-.099	-.149*
<i>engages in virtual sex</i>	.051	-.007
<b>Pornography</b>		
<i>watches pornography</i>	.032	.059
<b>Emotional infidelity</b>		
<i>shares strong emotional bond</i>	-.013	-.078
<i>falls in love</i>	-.281**	-.135*
<i>shares feelings and secrets</i>	-.025	-.075
<i>shares emotional/intimate information</i>	-.019	-.081
<b>General infidelity</b>		
<i>flirts</i>	-.104	-.144*
<i>discusses problems</i>	-.067	-.148*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

## DISCUSSION

The present study set out to examine the extent to which twelve potentially unfaithful online partner behaviors are viewed as unfaithful, and, if so, as what type of infidelity they are perceived. It was also examined to what degree these twelve partner behaviors evoked fait accompli and anxious jealousy and whether sex and age differences could be observed. Our sample consisted of 248 clinicians, making it possible to examine jealousy-evoking partner behavior from a unique point of view. The five scenarios that were rated a priori as acts of sexual infidelity were indeed categorized most often as acts of sexual infidelity by the participants. Of three out of these five scenarios the majority of the participants (i.e., more than 50%) thought these were primarily acts of sexual infidelity, that is, a partner having cybersex with someone of the opposite sex (66%), a partner undressing in front of the webcam for someone else (73%), and a partner sending sex-related chats or emails to someone of the opposite sex (51%). Likewise, the four scenarios that were a priori rated as acts of emotional infidelity were categorized most often as acts of emotional infidelity by the participants. For two out of these four scenarios the majority of the participants (i.e., more than 50%) thought these were primarily acts of emotional infidelity, that is, the scenario that describes a partner who falls in love with someone of the opposite sex with whom he or she communicates through the Internet (54%) and a scenario that describes a partner who shares deep emotions or personal information with someone of the opposite sex on the Internet (51%).

Highly interesting was that, with regard to two scenarios, the majority of the participants (i.e., more than 50%) labeled these scenarios as 'no infidelity'. More specifically, 53% of the participants thought that a partner talking online about his or her problems with someone of the opposite sex was not a sign of infidelity. This may be explained by the fact that, during recent years, online help for all kinds of problems has become available. Especially clinicians may be aware of the existence of online mental health services and may have interpreted this scenario in this way. However, this explanation does not apply to the other scenario, that is, watching porn pictures or movies on the Internet, which was regarded by 65% of the participants *not* to be a form of infidelity. This finding is quite surprising since it contrasts with previous studies' results, that show that many individuals view a partner's pornography consumption as an upsetting event, and a form of infidelity that reduces the exclusivity of the relationship (e.g., Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Whitty, 2003). On first sight it seems that the clinicians in our sample hold relatively tolerant and open-minded views about Internet porn. It is, however, also possible that this finding is the result of the way the

scenario was formulated in the present study. That is, the scenario was worded relatively ambiguously – your partner watches pornographic pictures or movies on the Internet – and participants may have interpreted it in its most 'innocent' form, for example, a one-time incident of watching a pornographic picture for fun. Might they have interpreted it differently, for instance, as a partner's consistent way of satisfying sexual needs by repeated and possibly addictive porn consumption, many more participants might have labeled it as a form of infidelity. Future research may further investigate this issue by, for instance, presenting participants with more elaborate scenarios regarding Internet porn, that differ in aspects such as frequency of use, and underlying motive.

Nonetheless, the present finding that so many clinicians in our sample did not view Internet porn as a sign of infidelity is important. When counseling individuals or couples who deal with infidelity-related problems, perceptions and emotions of clinicians may play a role in the form of social projection, among which their views on Internet porn. Hamilton and Kivligan (2009), for instance, showed that clinicians projected their own core conflictual relationship themes on the pattern of themes they identified in clients' relations, which may result in biases in terms of a client's relationship and the conflicts and issues that are salient in this relationship (see also Markin & Kivlighan, 2007). Thus, by projecting their own liberal view of Internet porn onto their clients, clinicians run the risk of underestimating the degree of upset clients may experience due to their partner's pornography consumption. Viewing porn as a potentially important conflict theme between partners is also relevant since porn consumption may have grave consequences for the relationship: it has been found to weaken the commitment to the partner (e.g., Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012), and to decrease satisfaction with a partner's sexual performance, affection, and physical appearance (Manning, 2006). Thus, for all these reasons it is important that clinicians are aware of the fact that for many people a partner's porn consumption is upsetting and may undermine the relationship.

With regard to perceptions of infidelity, few sex differences emerged: only on two out of the twelve scenarios men and women held a different view. First, whereas more women than men (57% vs. 36%) viewed a partner who falls in love with someone else with whom he or she communicates through the internet as a form of sexual infidelity, more men than women (48% vs. 34%) viewed this partner behavior as a form of general infidelity. Likewise, more women than men (55% vs. 34%) perceived a partner sending sex-related chats or emails to someone of the opposite sex to be a form of sexual infidelity, whereas more men than women (18% vs. 7%)



thought this behavior did not constitute a form of infidelity. This latter finding is important because differences in opinion between the sexes – especially with regard to the question whether certain behaviors constitute infidelity or not – may lead to conflicts and misunderstandings between partners in intimate relationships.

Age also affected perceptions of type of infidelity. The interpretation of these effects is, however, somewhat difficult and seems to differ for the different scenarios. Somewhat of a pattern seems to emerge for the two online partner behaviors of which most participants thought it constitutes a form of sexual infidelity, that is, a partner having cybersex with someone of the opposite sex and a partner undressing in front of the webcam for someone else. Those who view these behaviors as signs of general or no infidelity are generally older than those who view these behaviors as acts of sexual or emotional infidelity. Thus, it seems that, with regard to these partner behaviors, older participants show a somewhat more nuanced (general infidelity) or liberal (no infidelity) view.

#### **Types of Jealousy**

Buunk and Dijkstra (2004) found that, when extra-dyadic sex has already occurred, individuals especially experience feelings of anger and betrayal, in other words, *fait accompli* jealousy. Consistent with this finding, we found most *fait accompli* jealousy to be aroused by two scenarios in which explicit sex-related behaviors in the contact with someone else had taken place (i.e., a partner having cyber sex and a partner undressing in front of the webcam). The other scenarios all aroused less *fait accompli* jealousy. Buunk and Dijkstra (2004), found feelings of anxious jealousy to be especially aroused when sexual contact between one's partner and someone else *might* occur but has not yet occurred. In contrast to this finding, however, in the present study, in response to most scenarios, also those in which sexual contact had not taken place (with certainty), such as a partner visiting a chat box on sex and a partner falling in love with someone else with who he/she communicates through the Internet, participants responded with more *fait accompli* than anxious jealousy. Only in response to the scenario in which the partner shared a strong emotional bond to someone else with whom he or she communicates through the internet, participants reported more anxious than *fait accompli* jealousy. With regard to two partner behaviors (i.e., flirting online and talking to someone of the opposite sex about problems), participants responded with about equal levels of both types of jealousy.

A possible explanation is that Buunk and Dijkstra (2004) used scenarios that were made mutually exclusive, that is, sexual infidelity was described to have occurred

in the absence of emotional infidelity and vice versa. Their emotional infidelity scenario for instance read (after the partner had flirted with someone else): '...On a personal level, they connected in a unique and very special way. Your partner, however, assures you that he/she does not feel sexually attracted to this other person and that he/she only feels emotionally attached to her/him (pp. 399)'. The scenarios that were used in the present study were not made mutually exclusive. Regardless of the exact content of the scenarios, in all of the scenarios the partner shows active behaviors that, eventually, may result in both emotional and sexual infidelity. Because of the prospect of a partner's potential sexual infidelity, also scenarios that describe a partner's potentially unfaithful emotional behaviors may evoke more feelings of *fait accompli* than anxious jealousy in the present study.

The present study also found age to be related to the extent to which clinicians experienced anxious and *fait accompli* jealousy, for instance, with regard to those scenario's that were most often seen as acts of sexual infidelity, that is, a partner having cybersex with someone of the opposite sex and a partner undressing in front of the webcam for someone of the opposite sex. Although correlations were low, when significant, relations showed that, as individuals were older, they responded with less jealousy in response to these scenarios. A possible explanation is that, for older individuals, the sexual component of their relationship may be less important. For instance, in general, with age, the frequency of sexual intercourse between partners declines, especially from the age of 50 (e.g., Schneidewind-Skibbe, Hayes, Koochaki, & Dennerstein, 2008). An alternative explanation is that due to their, on average, longer relationships, older individuals feel less threatened by a partner's potentially unfaithful behaviors, believing that, despite these behaviors, the relationship will last. That is, due to their already long-lasting relationships they may have more faith that their relationship will survive potential relationship problems.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

The present study showed that clinicians view many acts of potential online infidelity consistent with a priori expectations regarding their sexual and emotional nature. An important exception consisted the situation in which a partner watches porn on the internet. Surprisingly, and contradicting previous studies on perceptions of porn as acts of infidelity, the majority of the participants did not view this behavior as an act of infidelity. In addition, our study showed that many acts of potential online infidelity evoked more *fait accompli* jealousy than anxious jealousy. These findings contribute to the literature, since they concern new insights on how clinicians perceive and experience potentially jealousy-evoking situations regarding the Internet.

Our study also suffers from some limitations. Although it is important and interesting to examine the responses of clinicians in response to possible jealousy-evoking situations, our findings cannot be generalized to other populations. Compared to non-clinicians, it can be assumed that our participants are better able to self-reflect on their emotions and behaviors and, as a consequence, may respond differently to the jealousy-evoking scenarios in the present study than other individuals. Future studies may therefore repeat the present study in other populations. Another limitation is that the present study presented participants with scenarios, asking them how they would respond in the hypothetical situation that their partner would be unfaithful. In general, this may not generate responses that reliably reflect how individuals would behave if infidelity would actually occur to them. Nonetheless, these responses may provide an index of how subjects tend to react to a comparable situation in 'real' life (Shettel-Neuber, Bryson & Young, 1978), especially among clinicians who may be assumed to have relatively high self-awareness and are trained to reflect on their emotions and behavior. Despite these limitations, we hope our study contributes to a better understanding of the perception of and emotional responses to a partner's behavior on the Internet.

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