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## An Investigation of the Relationship between Narcissism and Forgiveness of Imagined Relationship Infidelity in College Students

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### Abstract

*In this study, participants (N = 74) read a scenario about an imaginary romantic partner cheating on him/her by having sex with someone else and responded to a short survey concerned with infidelity forgiveness and a measure of narcissism. The method of how the infidelity was revealed to the victim was manipulated between participants. A high narcissism score was predicted to be indicative of a low forgiveness score regardless of the method of infidelity discovery. A significant main effect was predicted in the infidelity discovery method; specifically that unsolicited partner discovery will be more likely to be forgiven than "red-handed" discovery. A significant main effect was predicted for participant sex, with males showing lower scores overall on the forgiveness scale. A significant interaction effect for sex and forgiveness was predicted, with males in the "red-handed" discovery condition being the least likely to forgive their partners. Results indicated that forgiveness was most likely when the imaginary partner openly confessed to the infidelity as opposed to the participant catching the partner in the act of cheating. Male participants were more likely to forgive partners who were caught "red-handed" in the act of cheating, as opposed to having their partners admit to the infidelity. The findings suggest that more research should be conducted with an adequate range of narcissism scores to determine the relationship that specific personality traits, such as narcissism, play in the role of predicting the likelihood of forgiveness.*

*Keywords: forgiveness, infidelity, narcissism*

### Introduction

Romantic relationships are generally a source of great joy in people's lives (Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008). However, people are typically bound to violate, or hurt, their partners in some way over the course of the relationship. When such violations occur, the victims may be deeply hurt and feel betrayed by their partners. The victims may be motivated to seek revenge, or wish to avoid further contact. In some cases, the victims might excuse the offensive behaviors and be willing to forgive their offenders. Forgiveness is a process in which victims experience a change in the way they think and feel about the transgression and their offenders (McCullough et al., 1998). The act of forgiving another allows the victim to release any feelings of hate and resentment towards the offender, and replace these feelings with more positive feelings of compassion and understanding. The victims will no longer have feelings of seeking revenge or avoidance towards the offender. However, specific personality traits can play a role in predicting how likely an individual will forgive another for any transgressions committed against the individual. If a person has narcissistic tendencies, the person may be less likely to forgive their romantic partner for any violations of trust.

Forgiveness consists of many different components; cognitive, behavioral, and emotional, which are all necessary for true forgiveness to occur (Gordon & Baucom, 1998). People are more willing to forgive their partners for any transgressions

committed if they are satisfied in their relationship with this other person (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). The process of forgiving another person allows the victims to view their relationship as strong and resilient, and their partners as redeemable. Perhaps the most common form of betrayal in a relationship is infidelity, which may include sexual behavior outside of a relationship. Wiederman and Hurd (1999) found that 68% of women and 75% of men had admitted to engaging in some form of relationship infidelity.

The overall likelihood of forgiving a partner's infidelities is affected by the method in which the cheating was revealed to the victim. Afifi, Falato, and Weiner (2001) studied the relation between forgiveness and the method of discovery. Four different discovery methods were studied:

- (1) *unsolicited partner discovery*, where the offender openly admits to the infidelity;
- (2) *solicited partner discovery*, where the offender admits to the infidelity only after he or she has been questioned by the victim;
- (3) *"red-handed" discovery*, where the victim catches the offender in the act of cheating on them; and
- (4) *unsolicited third-party discovery*, where the victim is informed of the infidelity by another person telling him/her. A relationship was found between the four discovery methods and the likelihood of forgiveness. The method of discovery that was least likely to be forgiven was *unsolicited third-party discovery*, and the method of discovery that was the most likely to be forgiven was *unsolicited partner discovery* (Afifi et al., 2001).

Apparently, a partner admitting to the infidelity openly and without being questioned posed the least severe threat to a relationship. This act of honesty may be viewed by the victim as an attempt to salvage the relationship, and as an expression of genuine regret over the infidelity. When victims walk in on their partners during the sexual cheating act, their levels of embarrassment are increased, and they feel deceived by their partner. This allows higher levels of vengeful thoughts and emotions to form, and the likelihood of forgiveness is decreased.

According to evolutionary psychologists, sexual jealousy arose as a natural way to avoid any infidelities committed by a potential mate, and emotional jealousy evolved as a way to prevent the loss of resources (Harris, 2003). Traditionally, men are more jealous over sexual infidelities, and women become more jealous over emotional betrayals (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Harris, 2003). Women are concerned, more so than men, about obtaining a suitable partner who will be able to support her offspring. Differences in men and women in terms of how they react to relationship infidelities have been fairly consistent across many studies. While any type of infidelity is a threat to a relationship, women overall find sexual infidelities easier to forgive than men, and are less likely to end the relationship over the infidelity (Shackleford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002). However, women are found to be more likely to experience jealousy in response to the emotional components of relationship infidelities, while men are found to be more likely to show jealousy in response to the sexual act over any emotional attachment (Harris, 2003). Another variable to consider is personality. An individual's personality can be a significant factor predicting a person's likelihood to forgive another for any transgressions committed. Possessing a specific personality trait, such as narcissism, can affect how easily someone is able to forgive another person.

Narcissism can be explained as a personality trait characterized by selfishness, egotism, vanity and conceit. When considering narcissism and forgiveness, previous research suggests that people with high levels of narcissism are incapable of forgiving others, because they are unable to see the situation beyond their own interest (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989). Narcissism is generally characterized as a reduced capacity for empathy (Emmons, 2000). People with higher levels of narcissistic traits are typically unable, or unwilling, to empathize with others, either because of an inability or simply because they do not care enough about other people to take their feelings into consideration. Also, narcissists are generally more likely to become

aggressive and adopt a vengeful attitude towards any individual whom they feel has wronged them (Twenge & Campbell, 2009), and are more likely than non-narcissists to take offense when they feel personally betrayed (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick & Mooney, 2003). An individual possessing narcissistic tendencies can even be predicted to exhibit an anger response following a romantic rejection (Besser & Priel, 2009). A narcissistic person is more likely to become aggressive when experiencing a relationship infidelity or romantic rejection. Furthermore, couples who have experienced infidelities in their relationships show a higher level of narcissism in one or both partners (Atkins, Yi, Baucom, & Christensen, 2005).

The current study examined how narcissistic tendencies were related to the likelihood of a person forgiving their partner for imagined relationship infidelity. Four main hypotheses were tested: (1) participants who demonstrated a greater score on the narcissism scale were predicted to be less likely to forgive their partners for imagined infidelity regardless of the method of infidelity discovery; (2) a significant main effect was predicted in the imagined infidelity discovery method, specifically that *unsolicited partner discovery* will be more likely to be forgiven than *“red-handed” discovery*; (3) a significant main effect was predicted for participant sex, with males showing lower scores overall on the forgiveness scale than females; and, (4) a significant interaction effect for sex and forgiveness was predicted, with males in the *“red-handed” discovery* being the least likely of all the groups to forgive their partners.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 74 undergraduate students (60 women, 14 men;  $M_{age} = 20.15$  years old,  $SD = 5.51$ ) from a public university in the Southeastern United States participated in this study. Among these individuals, 79.7% were Caucasian, 4.1% Hispanic, 12.2% African American, and 4.1% Asian/Pacific Islander. Thirty four percent of participants admitted experiencing cheating in a previous relationship, and 48% of these participants reported forgiving their partners for the infidelity. Fifty five percent of participants reported being in a relationship at the time of testing. Participants were recruited for this study from the psychology department research pool. Students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology were required to participate in research studies as part of the requirements for that course and earned research participation credits. All participants were treated in

accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 2002).

### Materials

The Narcissism Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006) was used to measure participant's levels of narcissism. This inventory is a shortened form of the NPI-40. Two passages were written specifically for this study, describing an imaginary scenario about relationship infidelity. The passages included approximately the same amount of words. The first part of the passage was identical for all participants describing a hypothetical long-term relationship between the participant and a significant other. The passage stated that the imaginary significant other cheated on the participant by having sex with another person. The second part of the passage differed for participants according to which group they were randomly assigned. For half of the participants, the passage stated that the imaginary significant other confessed to the infidelity without being questioned about it. The other half of participants had the passage stating that they caught their imaginary significant other in the act of cheating on them, specifically walking in on them while having sex with another person. These scenarios were based on two methods of discovery used in Afifi, Falato, and Weiner's (2001) research, namely: (a) *unsolicited partner discovery*, partner admits to infidelity openly and without questioning; and (b) *"red-handed" discovery*, partner is caught in a sex act.

After reading the imagined infidelity scenario, participants rated six statements pertaining to forgiveness along a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*). Participants were also asked if they had ever previously experienced an infidelity in a personal relationship, and if so, if they were able to forgive their partner. Participants also provided demographic information concerning their age, sex, ethnic background, and current relationship status.

### Procedure

Participants volunteered to participate in a study about "Forgiveness Patterns in Typical College Students." Participants read over and signed the informed consent form before starting the study. Participants then completed the NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006). Next, participants read one of two different scenarios which featured an imaginary cheating incident. Half of participants received the scenario which featured the imaginary partner openly confessing to the infidelity, and the other half of

participants received the scenario which featured the participant catching their imaginary partner in the act of cheating on them. Immediately following the scenario, participants were asked to complete a forgiveness scale. Participants then completed a demographic survey and were debriefed.

### Results

The probability level used to determine significance was  $\alpha = .05$ . A reliability analysis was performed which revealed that the six question forgiveness survey was reliable and the survey measured one dimension of forgiveness,  $\alpha = .71$ . The six forgiveness questions were then averaged to obtain an overall forgiveness score. To create a total narcissism score, the responses for each question in the scale were totaled and then a median split was performed to create two groups consisting of either high or low narcissism scores. The median was found to be 4.5, with 13 being the highest score obtained; any participants who scored higher than 4.5 were placed into the high narcissism group.

A 2 (discovery method: "red-handed" or partner admits) x 2 (narcissism score: high or low) ANOVA was conducted on overall forgiveness scores. The analysis revealed a marginally significant discovery method main effect,  $F(1, 72) = 3.65, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .07$ ; participants in the partner admits condition ( $M = 2.09, SD = .73$ ) were more likely to forgive the infidelity than participants in the "red-handed" condition ( $M = 1.75, SD = .69$ ). A non-significant narcissism score main effect was found,  $F(1, 72) = .55, p = .86$ , and the interaction between discovery method and narcissism was non-significant,  $F(1, 72) = .95, p = .50$ . The means are presented in Figure 1.

To test the hypothesis that discovery method and participant sex interact to influence the dependent variable forgiveness, a 2 (discovery method: "red-handed" or partner admits) x 2 (participant sex: male or female) ANOVA, using narcissism as a covariate, was conducted. The analysis revealed a non-significant discovery method main effect,  $F(1, 72) = .10, p = .76$ , and a non-significant participant sex main effect,  $F(1, 72) = .19, p = .66$ . However, the interaction between discovery method and sex was statistically significant,  $F(1, 72) = 3.96, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . Male participants in the "red-handed" condition had higher forgiveness scores when compared to male participants in the partner admits condition. See Figure 2 for results of this analysis.

Additional 2 x 2 ANOVAs were conducted for each dependent variable question on the

forgiveness scale. Main effects were obtained for discovery method and participant sex, specifically on question two and three of the forgiveness scale. Participants who read that their partner admitted cheating on them openly ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ), rather than being caught in the act of cheating ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), were marginally more likely to consider forgiveness an important factor following the incident,  $F(1, 72) = 3.40$ ,  $p = .07$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . A marginally significant main effect for sex was obtained on question three of the forgiveness scale. Female participants ( $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) were slightly more likely to find it easy to forgive their partners following this incident, than males ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = .49$ ),  $F(1, 72) = 3.05$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . An interaction effect for discovery method and sex was obtained for question six on the forgiveness scale,  $F(1, 72) = 5.02$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . Male participants ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ) who read the scenario where they caught their partner cheating "red-handed" were more likely to agree with ending the relationship than female participants ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ); and female participants ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 1.137$ ) who read the scenario where their partner admitted openly to the infidelity were more likely to agree to end the relationship than male participants ( $M = 1.71$ ,  $SD = .951$ ). All other main and interaction effects were not significant. See Table 1 for a summary of selected descriptive statistics.

To determine the relationship between narcissism and forgiveness, a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed. A 2-tailed test was used with  $p < .05$  to determine significance. Results suggested that no significant relationship exists between narcissism and the overall forgiveness score,  $r(72) = -.14$ ,  $p = .24$ , although the correlation was negative. See Table 2 for individual correlations between narcissism and each individual forgiveness question. No significant correlations were found, but there was a marginally significant negative relationship between forgiveness and the question regarding the likelihood of ending the relationship,  $r(72) = -.21$ ,  $p = .07$ .

## Discussion

Forgiveness of a sexual infidelity in a relationship is an indication that the relationship is satisfactory and both partners are committed to the relationship (McCullough et al., 1998). Cheating in a relationship, particularly of a sexual nature, is indicative of the relationship being in jeopardy. If one or both romantic partners in the relationship have a jealous personality, or are narcissistic, then forgiveness may be harder to grant, regardless of the satisfaction derived from the relationship. The

current study examined the influence of the method of discovery and narcissism levels on the likelihood of people forgiving imagined infidelity.

The first hypothesis, which stated that participants who showed higher narcissism scores would be less likely to forgive their partners regardless of the discovery method, was not supported. No significant evidence was found suggesting that people with narcissistic tendencies also showed more reluctance to forgive their partners. This could be due to the fact that the majority of participants in this study scored relatively low overall on the narcissism scale. A median split was performed to create two groups on the narcissism measure, a high scoring group and a low scoring group. Relatively low levels of narcissism were obtained, so this could account for why the correlation between narcissism and forgiveness was negative, but not significant. Participants who showed lower scores for narcissism had higher scores overall on the forgiveness scale, which supported our prediction that high levels of narcissism would be related to low levels of forgiveness. Additionally, there was also a marginally significant relationship between narcissism and the forgiveness question about the likelihood of ending the relationship.

How participants discovered the sexual transgressions were found to be different with regard to how likely they would be to forgive their hypothetical partners for the infidelity committed. For participants who read that their imaginary partner admitted openly to the infidelity, the likelihood of forgiveness was higher; which is consistent with the findings discovered by Afifi et al. (2001). This result supports the second hypothesis made, which predicted that the unsolicited partner discovery method would be easier to forgive than the "red-handed" discovery method.

The third hypothesis, which stated that males would show lower forgiveness scores, was partially supported. Males were more likely to forgive the scenario which featured the imaginary partner being caught "red-handed" over the condition where the partner admitted to the infidelity openly. This is opposite of what was predicted; the discovery method of being caught "red-handed" was predicted to be the least likely to be forgiven. The caught "red-handed" discovery method was predicted to attain the lowest rates of forgiveness overall, however, results showed that male participants were more likely to forgive this condition over the partner admits condition. This could be explained by the male participants experiencing higher levels of jealousy after their partner admits to the infidelity as

compared to catching their partner committing the infidelity. The high levels of jealousy may have contributed to the male participants being less willing to forgive the partner admits condition. Female participants showed higher levels of forgiveness for the partner admits condition, while males showed higher levels of forgiveness for the caught "red-handed" condition.

Several marginally significant main effects for discovery method and participant sex were found for each individual question on the forgiveness scale. Participants who read that their partner admitted to the infidelity openly without being caught in the act were found to be more likely to consider forgiveness an important aspect to consider following the incident. This supports what we predicted, that the condition featuring the partner admitting to the infidelity would be easier to forgive overall. Female participants found it easier to forgive their partners overall following the incident, which helps support the third hypothesis; stating that females would have higher forgiveness scores overall than males.

Limitations of the current study are that there was not an even distribution of high and low narcissism levels to adequately examine the relationship between narcissism and forgiveness of relationships. Also, the current study tested only participants from one university. Perhaps testing students from a variety of regions would produce different results. The majority of participants in the current study were younger, *M* age was 20.15, so including participants with a larger range of ages may also produce interesting results since more relationship experience may influence results. There was not a high enough level of male participants in the study to fully test the hypotheses regarding predicted sex differences. The current study also only tested 74 individuals, the majority of which showed relatively low narcissism levels, so increasing the number of participants with an even range of narcissism scores may produce more significant results. The hypothetical scenarios used may not have been vivid enough or provided enough details to be truly believable, which would have made it hard for participants to fully envision themselves in such a scenario, and thus would have decreased the honesty of responses. Future research may investigate personality effects within the context of real-life infidelity and forgiveness. Also, some participants may have not answered the questions concerning forgiveness with completely honest answers because they may have been concerned about the anonymous nature of the study.

For future studies, participants should be pre-screened for narcissism levels to ensure that adequate groups of high and low narcissism levels are present in the study. Also, the presence or absence of an apology should be considered when assessing forgiveness, as previous research shows that the presence of an apology can help facilitate forgiveness for any infidelity committed (McCullough et al., 1998). Generally, the more strongly the victims feel that their offenders truly regret the situation, the more likely they are to grant forgiveness. Also, looking at how often the infidelity occurred would be an interesting aspect to study when related to narcissism levels. If the infidelity occurred only once, it may be easier to forgive than if the infidelity was an ongoing occurrence (Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008). An isolated cheating incident when paired with an apology may be shown to be the most likely scenario to be forgiven, for participants with both high and low levels of narcissism. Generally, people with narcissistic traits find it harder to forgive any transgressions against them in absence of any other factors which may influence forgiveness.

Applications of this study could include utilizing the results in family and/or couples' therapy to help people who are experiencing a similar scenario come to terms with what occurred and perhaps even forgive their partners for the infidelity. Understanding that admitting to infidelity can help facilitate forgiveness and help the victim feel that the offender is truly regretful may help couples who are receiving therapy for a similar situation. Also, future studies testing the addition of an apology on levels of forgiveness would add to the application of this research in couples' therapy and for individuals who are finding it hard to grant forgiveness upon their offenders. For couples or individuals with a moderately high narcissism level, being aware of their tendencies towards narcissism may help them relate to their partners more, especially in situations concerning an infidelity.

In closing, the incident of cheating was discovered by either unsolicited partner discovery, with the partner admitting openly to the infidelity, or by the participant catching the partner "red-handed" in the act of cheating. Results suggested that for the majority of participants, the unsolicited partner discovery would be easier to forgive over the "red-handed" discovery method. No significant relationship was found between levels of narcissism and the likelihood of forgiving the partner, however, participants who had lower scores for narcissism had higher scores overall on the forgiveness scale.

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Table 1

*Mean Rating on Forgiveness Responses Based on Discovery Method*

	<u>DISCOVERY METHOD</u>	
	"Red-Handed"	Partner Admit
Forgiveness question:		
1. I would forgive my partner after this incident.	1.62 (.89)	2.15 (1.14)
2. Forgiveness would be important to consider after this incident.	2.44 (1.60)	3.52 (1.57)
3. I would find it easy to forgive my partner after this incident.	1.29 (.58)	1.73 (.78)
4. I would be able to trust my partner as much as I did before the incident.	1.53 (1.38)	1.43 (.68)
5. I would worry about my partner's future behavior.	1.53 (1.08)	1.48 (.68)
6. I would end the relationship because of my partner's cheating.	2.12 (1.45)	2.22 (1.12)

*Note.*  $N = 74$ . Forgiveness questions were answered on a 6-point Likert scale; larger values indicate greater forgiveness. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

Table 2

*Correlations between Forgiveness Questions and Narcissism Score*

Forgiveness Question	Narcissism Score
1. I would forgive my partner after this incident.	.013
2. Forgiveness would be important to consider after this incident.	-.157
3. I would find it easy to forgive my partner after this incident.	.074
4. I would be able to trust my partner as much as I did before the incident.	-.013
5. I would worry about my partner's future behavior.	-.125
6. I would end the relationship because of my partner's cheating.	-.208*

*Note.*  $N = 74$ . Forgiveness questions were answered on a 6-point Likert scale; larger values indicate greater forgiveness. All tests were 2-tailed. \* $p < .10$ .



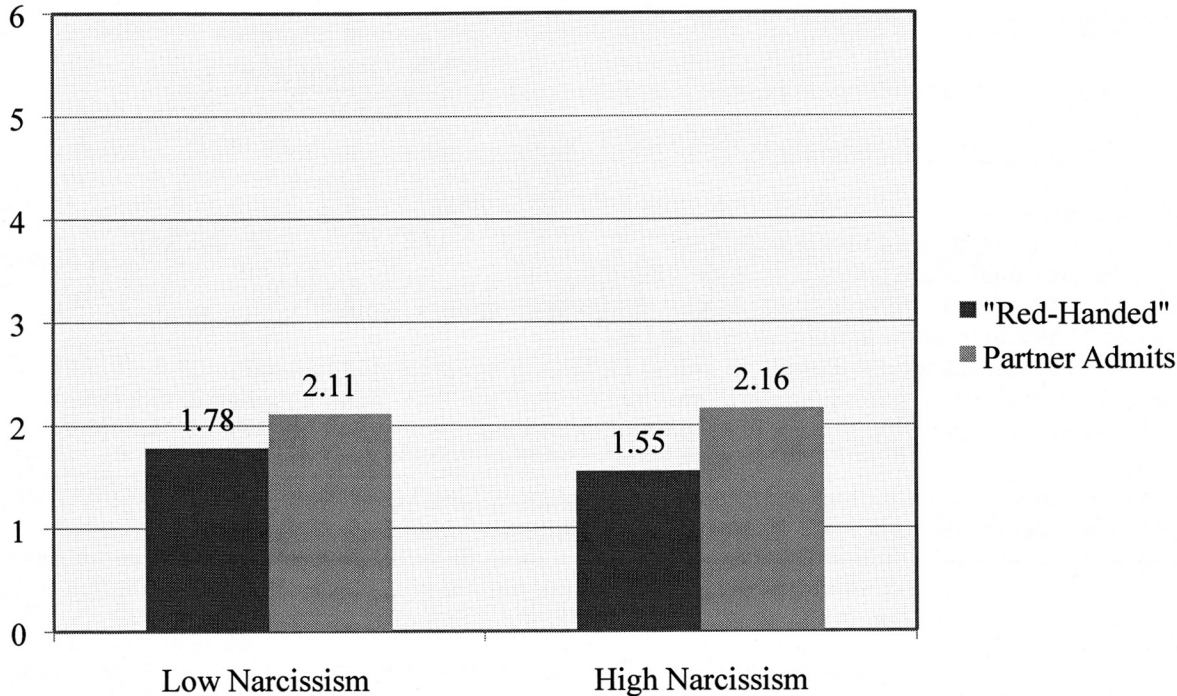


Figure 1. Mean forgiveness rating by infidelity discovery method and high or low narcissism categories.

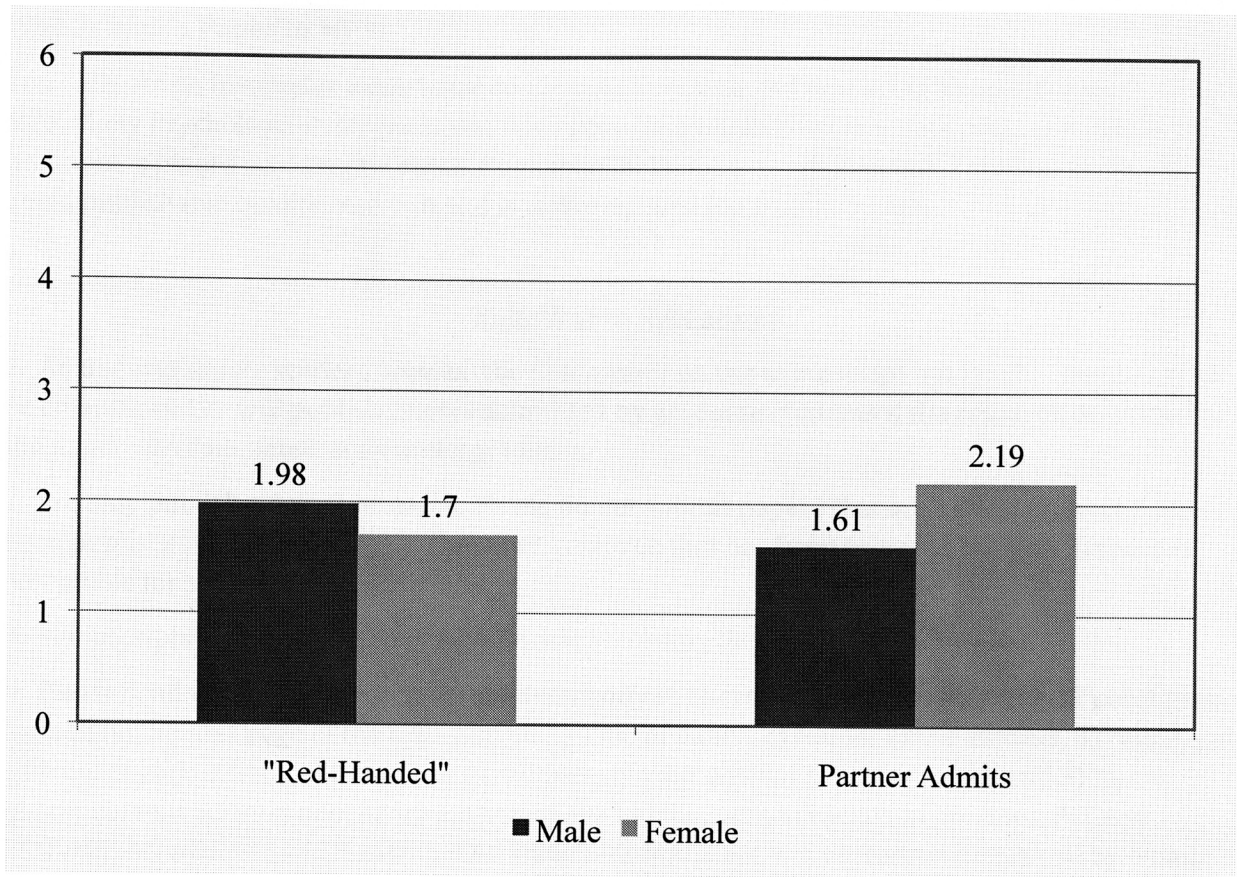


Figure 2. Mean forgiveness rating by infidelity discovery method and participant sex.

