

A QUALITATIVE STUDY INVESTIGATING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS  
OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MARITAL INFIDELITY

by

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B.A., Wright State University, 1997  
M.S., University of Southern Mississippi, 2002

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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## **Abstract**

This study used a qualitative approach as a means of exploring the decision-making process of women's participation in marital infidelity. Due to the growing prevalence and negative effects of marital infidelity, it is important for both clinicians and researchers to understand its occurrence. Although there has been a significant amount of research on marital infidelity in recent years, there is not any significant research that looks at the process occurring in both the marital and extramarital relationships. This study focused on examining the process an individual goes through when making the decision to have an affair, particularly, how they were able to give themselves permission to have an affair. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four female participants who had participated in marital infidelity. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed using the transcendental phenomenological model (Moustakas, 1994). Four categories and 14 themes emerged, regarding the decision-making and permission-giving processes of women's participation in marital infidelity. The women reported a lack of quality time spent with their husbands, as well as a lack of attention they received from their husbands. The women also discussed an inability to solve conflict within their marriage. The women reported developing relationships, outside of their marriage, either with ex-flames, old friends, or new friends, all of whom became their affair partner. The women reported the support of family and/or friends for the extramarital relationship, along with receiving positive attention from their affair partner. The women discussed the moral values as being a deterrent to marital infidelity, but did not perceive enough barriers or protective factors as preventing them from moving forward with the affair. Finally, the women described ways in which they were able to limit cognitive dissonance as a means of

giving themselves permission to move forward with the affair. Clinical and research implications were discussed, as well as, the limitations of the current study.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, especially.....

To my mom and dad for instilling the importance of hard work  
and higher education;

To my brother and sisters for showing unconditional love and support

To my wonderfully patient husband, who pushed me and always believed in me

To my two beautiful boys, Vincenzo and Lucca, may you be motivated and  
encouraged to reach your dreams

# CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The mass media often make it sound like extramarital sex is really no more than “an intimate handshake”. Television shows like ‘Californication’ and ‘Swingtown’ report extramarital sex as being consequent-free recreation. The truth is quite different. Although there are people who have sexually open marriages or engage in swinging lifestyles, they are in the minority. For the vast majority of couples, sexual infidelity, especially when combined with secrecy, causes untold pain and suffering.

## Defining Marital Infidelity

All individuals have their own perceptions of what marital infidelity means. To some it is having a sexual relationship outside of the marriage. To others, having an emotional relationship with the opposite sex is considered marital infidelity as well. Blow and Hartnett (2005) have addressed the inconsistency, which exists in extant research literature, of an operational definition for infidelity. They stated, “infidelity is defined in a myriad of ways and can comprise a number of activities including: “having an affair’, ‘extramarital relationship’, ‘cheating’, ‘sexual intercourse’, ‘oral sex’, ‘kissing’, ‘fondling’, ‘emotional connections that are beyond friendships’, ‘friendships’, ‘internet relationships’, ‘pornography use’, and others” (186). For the purpose of the current study, marital infidelity will be defined as a secret sexual, romantic, or emotional involvement that violates the commitment to the marital relationship. The reason I choose this definition was because I think there has been a shift in the idea of marital infidelity as just a sexual relationship outside of the marriage to also involving an emotional component.

## **Importance of Studying Marital Infidelity**

Infidelity has been shown to have severe negative effects on a marriage, such as depression and divorce. Several studies will be presented that confirm that infidelity has a harmful effect on marriages. In a study of 214 individuals (107 men and 107 women) who had been married for less than one year, Shackelford (1998) assessed expectations of dissolution as a consequence of an extramarital affair. Each participant was asked to complete an instrument entitled *Events and Others*. This instrument had participants estimate the likelihood that they would end the marriage as a consequence of six types of sexual affairs, including flirting, passionately kissing, going on a romantic date, having a one-night stand, having a brief affair, and having a serious affair. The results showed that 4% of the husbands estimated they would end their marriages if their wife flirted with another man, 21% would divorce if their wives engaged in a passionate kiss with another man, 36% would divorce if their wives went on a romantic date, 49% would divorce if their wives had a one-night stand, 55% would divorce if their wives had a brief affair, and 67% would end their marriage if their wives had a serious affair. The results for women showed that 3% would end their marriages if their husbands flirted with another woman, 21% would divorce if their husbands engaged in a passionate kiss with another woman, 37% would divorce if their husbands went on a romantic date, 49% would divorce if their husbands had a one-night stand, 58% would divorce if their husbands had a brief affair, and 69% would end their marriages if their husbands had a serious affair. Although this study did not specifically look at actual divorces filed as a consequence of an extramarital affair, the results are powerful in saying that in a relationship in which a spouse has been unfaithful, the consequences could be severe.

Amato and Rogers (1997) investigated the extent to which reports of marital problems in a 1980 study predicted divorce between 1980 and 1992. The original study had telephone interviewers use random-digit dialing to locate a national sample of 2,033 married individuals under the age of 55. When compared with the data on married individuals from the U.S. census, the sample was representative with respect to age, household size, race, religion, presence of children and home ownership. Approximately 78% of the participants completed the interview. In 1983 telephone interviewers contacted 1,592 of the original respondents and approximately 86% supplied information on subsequent divorce. Amato and Rogers (1997) then had telephone interviewers reach 1,341 original participants, 71% of the original sample in 1988, and again obtained marital status information. Finally, in 1992 the original sample was again telephoned by interviewers to obtain marital status information, this time 1,189 original participants were reached, 61% of the original sample. For inclusion in the study, Amato and Rogers (1997) analyzed participants who had information on marital status at two or more points in time. The final sample included 86% of the original sample done in 1980. Amato and Rogers (1997) found, throughout the 12 years of the study, that there had been 231 divorces and 33 permanent separations. The study also found infidelity as one of the most consistent predictors of divorce. Amato and Rogers (1997) stated that “infidelity was associated with an especially large increase in the odds of divorce”, and “extramarital sex is a particularly powerful predictor of divorce” (p. 679). This result is consistent with South and Lloyd’s (1995) finding “that in at least one third of divorce cases, one or both spouses had been involved with another person prior to marital disruption” (p. 622).

Christian-Herman, O’Leary and Avery-Leaf (2001) did a study using 50 married women who reported a severe negative marital event that had occurred or become known to them within

the previous month of the study. The participants had to meet the following criteria: they were married, between 18 and 44 years of age, had no history of major depression, and had experienced a severe negative event in the marriage within the past month. The selected participants were then given the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) to measure marital satisfaction, a Structured Clinical Interview for the DSM III-R (SCID) to assess for the presence of major depression and dysthymia, and, finally, the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) to measure depressive symptomatology. The top three negative events which triggered these symptoms reported were separation/divorce, affairs, and acts of physical aggression. Christian-Herman et al. (2001) found that 36% of the women among the affairs group reached diagnostic criteria for depression. The authors' results showed that highly stressful events, such as extramarital affairs, are associated with depressive symptomatology.

In another study by Cano and O'Leary (2000), a sample of 50 women was used to compare the rates of major depressive episodes in women, who had recently experienced a humiliating marital event, to women, who had not experienced such events but reported similar levels of marital discord. The 50 women were separated into two different groups. One group was made up of 25 women, who experienced one of the following events within two months of phone contact: discovery of husband's infidelity, husband's initiation or completion of a separation, or divorce or separation or divorce from a husband, as a result of his infidelity or marked violence. In this group, 44% discovered a husband's infidelity and 20% became separated, following a husband's infidelity or marked physical violence. The control group consisted of 25 married women who did not experience a humiliating marital event but did have similar marital discord to the other group. Cano and O'Leary (2000) found a significant difference between the two groups, with 72% of the group who experienced a humiliating

marital event being diagnosed with a major depressive episode, compared to 12% of the control group. This study showed that the occurrence of a humiliating marital event, such as marital infidelity, increased a women's risk for a major depressive episode.

A final study, looking at how extramarital sex impacts depression was done by Beach, Jouriles, and O'Leary (1985). They used a sample of 120 couples that presented for marital therapy at State University of New York at Stony Brooks University Marital Therapy Clinic. Of the 120 couples, 20% (n=24) reported that infidelity was an active issue for them at the time of the intake. The 24 couples were then used to conduct the study. Beach et al. (1985) found that "couples presenting with extramarital sex as an issue in marital therapy are more likely than couples presenting other marital difficulties to have a member who evidences clinically significant levels of depression" (p. 105). They also found that women reported higher levels of depression than men. With an increased level of depression found in those who had experienced marital infidelity, there is a greater likelihood for divorce to follow. For those where issues of the extramarital affair cannot be resolved, and levels of depression do not subside with treatment or time, the next option could be to end the relationship.

Because infidelity poses negative effects, including depression and divorce, more research must be done to find out what occurs in the marital relationship that forces individuals in the direction of marital infidelity and makes them decide to have an affair, rather than seek marital therapy. We also need to explore the factors external to the marriage which may lead to extramarital sexual affairs.

## **The Purpose of this Study**

Due to the growing prevalence and negative effects of marital infidelity, it is important for both clinicians and researchers to understand its occurrence. The purpose of this study was to examine the process women go through when making the decision to have an affair.

Particularly, I was interested in how they were able to give themselves permission to have an affair. In order to do this, I studied the narratives (obtained from interviews) from individuals who participated in marital infidelity and analyzed how they heightened their attraction to marital infidelity, minimized their repulsions, and overcame their barriers in order to give themselves permission to have an affair.

## **CHAPTER 2 - Review of the Literature**

### **Prevalence of Marital Infidelity**

Studies have found infidelity to be prevalent in many marriages. Although some of the work is dated, much of the current research cites the significant data that was found in the previous research studies. Several studies will be reviewed in this chapter, all showing the significance of the issue of marital infidelity in marital relationships.

In their historic research on sexual behavior in both men and women Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) and Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard (1953) found that approximately 26% of women and 50% of men had engaged in extramarital activity. In an effort to test the validity of these numbers, many studies have been done to determine if these original findings would remain true. Using respondents from the General Social Survey (GSS) of 1994, Wiederman (1997) included a questionnaire inquiring about sexual experience. Six hundred and sixty three married men, and 760 married women were asked, "Have you ever had sex with someone other than your husband or wife while you were married?" (Wiederman, 1997). Wiederman (1997) found 22.7% of men and 11.6% of women reported having experienced extramarital sex. Another study also looked at the GSS but combined responses from 1991-1996 and found 13.3 % of people, married at the time of the interview, reported having had extramarital sex (Atkins, Jacobson & Baucom, 2001).

A study looking at the 1991 National Survey of Women consisted of 1,235 women between the ages of 20 and 37 (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). This study examined the sexual behavior of married, cohabitating, and dating women. Married women were asked, "Since you got married, have you engaged in any sexual activity with other men?" (p. 36). Non-married

women who were in a committed relationship were asked, “Since your relationship with him began, have you engaged in any sexual activity with other men?” (Forste & Tanfer, 1996 p.36). They found that 10% of the women interviewed had a secondary sex partner by the date of the interview. Married women were the least likely to have a secondary sex partner, at 4%, followed by 18% of dating women and 20% of cohabiting women.

Treas and Giesen (2000) conducted a study looking at sexual infidelity among married and cohabiting Americans. The samples used in this study were pulled from 3,432 respondents to 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey. The final analysis focused on 2,598 men and women who reported being married or had lived with a person (in a heterosexual relationship) with whom they had a sexual relationship at one time. The self-reports of extramarital sex were consistent with those from the GSS (Laumann et al., 1994). Treas and Giesen (2000) found that 15.5 % of married individuals reported having extramarital sex (8% who married without first cohabiting and 11% of those who married after cohabiting together) and 12% of current cohabiters reported extramarital sex.

In summarizing findings from previous research, Glass and Wright (1992) estimated between 30% to 60% of men and 20% to 50% of women have been involved in some type of marital infidelity. Shackelford and Buss (1997) provided even higher estimates based on the research, with estimates ranging from 33% to 75% of men and 26% to 70% of women having been involved in an extramarital relationship. These estimates may be higher because the research summarized was dated and the researchers may have defined infidelity in an unclear way or used a sample of the population that was at an elevated risk for marital infidelity. It is possible that more current research is showing higher percentages of affairs because of emotional infidelity that may not include sexual involvement.

There have been other authors who report a significantly lower prevalence of marital infidelity. Smith (1991) analyzed a questionnaire on sexual behavior put out by the National Opinion Research Center's 1988 and 1989 General Social Survey. The University of Chicago sponsored the addition of questions on sexual behavior, which respondents answered on a form and handed back in a sealed envelope. Smith (1991) found only 1.5% of married people reported having had a sexual partner other than their spouse in the year before the survey. It was also stated that men and women did not differ significantly in their levels of infidelity. Another study, using 2,058 individuals selected from random housing units in 100 primary sampling units, found results similar to Smith (1991). Leigh, Temple and Trocki (1993) stated that, because a small number of respondents reported extramarital sex, a statistical comparison, to other research, would be problematic. It must be noted that differences in the types of questions asked and definitions of infidelity may be why the numbers of the previously mentioned studies were significantly lower than a majority of the existing research.

It is clear that marital infidelity is occurring in our society, although to what extent may be debatable. The large difference in the research percentages may be due to sampling issues, different research designs, or the researchers' different definitions of marital infidelity. Although some discrepancies in the numbers do exist, this does not undermine the importance of continued research in this area because it is obvious, no matter what the statistics, that marital infidelity is occurring within our society. Some individuals are making the decision to have a marital affair. I tend to believe that the studies that report a higher incidence of infidelity provide a more accurate picture of extramarital relationships than those that report lower incidents rates. Most research is designed with specificity being a key element of the research. Therefore, many research designs and operational definitions of marital infidelity tend to be circumscribed to

achieve research purity. However, this may make the estimate of extramarital affairs lower than what actually exists. When sampling for research on marital infidelity, many subjects, because of social desirability factors, will give false negative answers, thereby, providing a picture of lower incident rates than actually exist. Most researchers define marital infidelity in ways that are much more restrictive than the marital partners affected by the extramarital affair. Once again this lowers the incident rates of marital infidelity. It is important to move the focus from, how many people are having affairs, to how people are making the decision to begin an affair. If researchers and clinicians can begin to understand the processes occurring within the marital dyad, and in outside relationships, we can develop more clear ways of preventing and treating marital infidelity. The goal of this study is to identify the process one undergoes while making the decision to have an affair. This process has been largely overlooked by researchers but has been continually mentioned as an area for future research (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Hurlbert, 1992; Thompson, 1984). It is essential to learn and understand the process in order to develop effective ways of working with couples in preventing the occurrence of marital infidelity and also helping couples recover from an affair.

### **Gender Differences in Marital Infidelity**

In the current study I chose to interview women rather than men because there is previous research that suggests that men and women view affairs differently. Atkins, Yi, Baucom and Christensen (2005) found that men who had affairs were considerably more sexually dissatisfied within their marital relationship than the women in the study. This is supported by Glass & Wright's (1985) research which suggests that men are more likely to have affairs for sexual reasons and women are more likely to have affairs for emotional reasons. Spanier and Margolis

(1983) also found that, for women, the emotional support occurring in the extramarital relationship was more important to them, than it was to men. This is of grave importance when studying the decision making process surrounding marital infidelity because, according to previous research, men and women may make the decision to have an affair in two different ways. Consequently, I only interviewed women in this study.

### **Types of Marital Infidelity**

There have been several types of infidelity cited throughout the literature, although many have not been empirically tested. Most are based on clinicians' experiences of working with clients who have experienced marital infidelity. Pittman (1989) identified four main types of affairs in his book *Private Lies*. The first type discussed is called accidental infidelity and is defined as "incidents that were outside the usual patterns of behavior, happening in extraordinary situations, or offhandedly and without consideration of the consequences" (p. 135). An example of accidental infidelity could be when male and female friends or coworkers find themselves in a life crisis, talking more intimately than normal and becoming closer with each other because of the talk of this crisis. They begin to share thoughts and feelings with each other that they do not share with their respective spouses. This draws them toward each other and away from their spouses. As things progress one person looks to the other for support and, before they realize it a kiss starts things off, leading the two friends to an extramarital relationship. These types of occurrences are more likely to occur when one or both friends are having marital or relationship problems and their friendship boundaries become blurred because of the unexpected intimacy they are sharing with one another. The second type of infidelity is called romantic infidelity. According to Pittman (1989), this type is the most dangerous and destructive to the marital

relationship because the betraying spouse actually falls in love with the affair partner. When affairs begin, neither partner typically plans on falling in love. Romantic infidelity usually follows one of two patterns. In the first pattern, the intimacy, at first only physical and subsequently psychosocial, begins to increase the attractiveness of the affair partner and decrease the attractiveness of the spouse. In the second pattern, the spouse who has the affair is infatuated with the romantic excitement of being in love. As Pittman (1989) stated, the spouse having the affair falls in love with love. This type of affair involves an emotional connection to the affair partner, which pulls him or her further away from his or her spouse. The third type of affair is called marital arrangements, which most people refer to as, swingers. The marital arrangement allows for each spouse to obtain sexual gratification outside of their marriage. Different arrangements have different rules for engaging in the sexual behavior outside the marriage. Some spouses agree to not ask about their outside behavior, whereas others must partake in the sexual activity with their spouse and the other person together. Usually, these types of arrangements have been discussed prior to marriage but, in some cases, they have developed over the course of the marriage. These couples compartmentalize their sexuality into intimate sex, which they share only with their spouses, and recreational sex which they share with others outside the marriage. To them, because there is no psychosocial intimacy, there is no violation of their marriage contract. However, some view the breaking of the marital arrangement, which allowed outside sexual behavior, as a type of infidelity, because sexual exclusivity was not a vow made by the couple. The final type of marital affair, as described by Pittman (1989), is called philandering. This is when the sexual activity outside of the marriage becomes 'a hobby', typically by one spouse, and the affair partner is seen as inferior to them. In many, but not all,

cases this tends to be the male in the marital relationship. The philandering is a way of making the person, having the affairs, feel good about her or himself.

Glass (1981) identified three different types of marital infidelity, the first consisting of emotional involvement but not involving sexual intercourse. In the second, sexual involvement consists of sexual intercourse but no emotional involvement. The third and final type is a combination of the previous two types consisting of both a strong sexual and emotional relationship. The later has been found to be significantly more damaging to the marriage than the other two types alone. It is much more difficult to repair the marital relationship when the spouse having the affair is both emotionally and sexually connected to the affair partner. Many times this experience and the feelings he or she is having resemble the time he or she fell in love with his or her spouse, which gives the illusion of a happier life with the affair partner. It is also damaging to the marital relationship because the spouse, who is having the affair, is giving the affair partner the majority, if not all, of the time, energy, emotional connectedness, talking, and sexual pleasure, rather than sharing this with his or her spouse. This creates a large gap in the marital relationship.

Although similar to Pittman's (1989) types of affairs, Subotnik (1999) also identified types of infidelity in. The first type discussed is serial affairs and usually lacks emotional investment. Serial affairs "can be a series of one-night stands and/or a series of many affairs" (p. 23). This type of affair lacks intimacy and the spouse having the affair does not have a desire for emotional closeness but is looking for the "excitement of the here and now" (p. 23). Flings are the next type of affair discussed. They also lack emotional investment in the affair relationship. These differ from serial affairs because flings are a onetime act of infidelity with no commitment to the new sexual partner. Romantic love affairs are fatal to marriages, because they involve a

high degree of emotional investment on the part of the spouse having the affair and the affair partner. The longer these types of affairs continue, the more serious the relationship becomes and the greater the threat to the spouse's marriage. Finally, Subotnik (1999) identified long-term affairs as lasting for years, causing both partners in the affair relationship to be emotionally invested. Once the couple has reached the romantic love stage they have difficulty making a decision to stay with the spouse or divorce them for the affair partner. The relationship continues to progress into a long-term affair. Many times the spouse and family know about the affair partner but choose to 'look the other way'. Often they are comfortable in the situation because they feel little in the way of attraction or caring for the spouse and the spouse spends more time in the affair, leaving them to lead their own life on their own terms. In other cases they fear what the consequences will be if they bring the affair into the forefront. Long-term affairs become a way of life for all those involved. Subotnik (1999) places her types of affairs on a continuum in which they could build and grow from one type into the next type of affair, each time gaining more emotional involvement. An affair may begin as a fling but then gradually progress into a series of meetings. Once a connection is established it can quickly move to a romantic love affair that ends up lasting for years. Each time the relationship with the affair partner progresses, more emotion is put into the affair relationship and a greater threat to the marriage is created.

Brown (2001) used the interaction pattern between the two spouses as a way of identifying the types of affairs that occur. "Conflict avoidance affairs" happen when the couple is unable to talk about its differences and disappointments. The affair is used as a way to "get out from under a blanket of controlled amiability" (p. 30). "Intimacy avoidance affairs" protect against hurt and disappointment and each spouse has a fear of becoming emotionally vulnerable.

They substitute sexual energy for emotional closeness. This type of affair sends the message to the spouse that, “I don’t want to need you so much (so I’ll get some of my needs met elsewhere)” (p. 35). “Sexual addiction affairs” occur when one spouse deals with his/her “emotional neediness by winning battles and making conquests in the hope of gaining love” (p. 37). The dynamics of this type of affair deal with power and the affairs are used as a way fill up emptiness and personal inadequacies. “Split self affairs” are “an attempt to experience the emotional self that has been denied for a lifetime in the service of doing things right” (p. 40). An example of the dynamics would be people who learned that they were supposed to do the right thing by putting their own needs and feelings aside. In order to allow themselves to meet their own needs, they seek the personal affirmation from affair partners who are willing to fulfill their needs, while their marriages affirm the other part of themselves that is selfless. In that way both parts of their personality are validated. The final type of affair discussed by Brown (2001) is called an “exit affair” and is used as a way to “avoid taking responsibility for ending the marriage” (p. 45). The individual has an affair, prompting the spouse to divorce him or her in retaliation. Therefore, the spouse having the affair can rationalize that he or she was not responsible for the end of the marriage.

Clearly, there are many different views on the types of marital infidelity. All of the different types of affairs have one thing in common: they look at the process in the marital relationship and/or the individual’s motivation as a way of explaining the dynamics of an affair. Some research has been done to test these types of affairs, but most remain unsupported by research and are backed only by clinical observation. It is difficult to say if one type of affair is more valid than any others because of the lack of empirical support for the types of marital affairs discussed because most are based on the clinical observation. Authors discussed the

description of types of affairs but they have not been tested for validity. Understanding the decision-making process of affairs will give us better insight into the different types of affairs that occur and help lend support for the clinical observations made by the authors.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The purpose of this study is to understand the process through which an individual gives him or herself permission to engage in an extramarital affair. Field theory (Lewin, 1942) will be explained and related to marital relationships in an attempt to understand the permission-giving process that occurs with regards to entering into an extramarital affair. In understanding Kurt Lewin's field theory, one must first understand the principle that behavior is a function of both the person and the environment (Muuss, 1988). This is important because the way in which we act has to do with our personality and experiences, along with the context of each situation in which we are behaving. A decision made one day may be very different the next because of those we are around, how we are feeling, where we are, how much sleep we got the night before, etc. "Life space" is the total of all the environmental and personal factors in interaction. An individual's behavior is a function of his or her life space. Things such as physical, environmental, social, and psychological factors are included in the life space. Examples of each include; how we are feeling at a specific time, the setting in which we are at a given moment, the people with whom we are interacting, and the mood we are in at a given time.

Needs, motives, goals and obstacles all determine an individual's behavior. Muuss (1988) summarized field theory as follows "within the life space, objects or goals can have a positive (attraction) or negative (repulsion) valence" (p. 161). As this relates to marital relationships and specifically marital infidelity, goals that allow the fulfillment of needs and

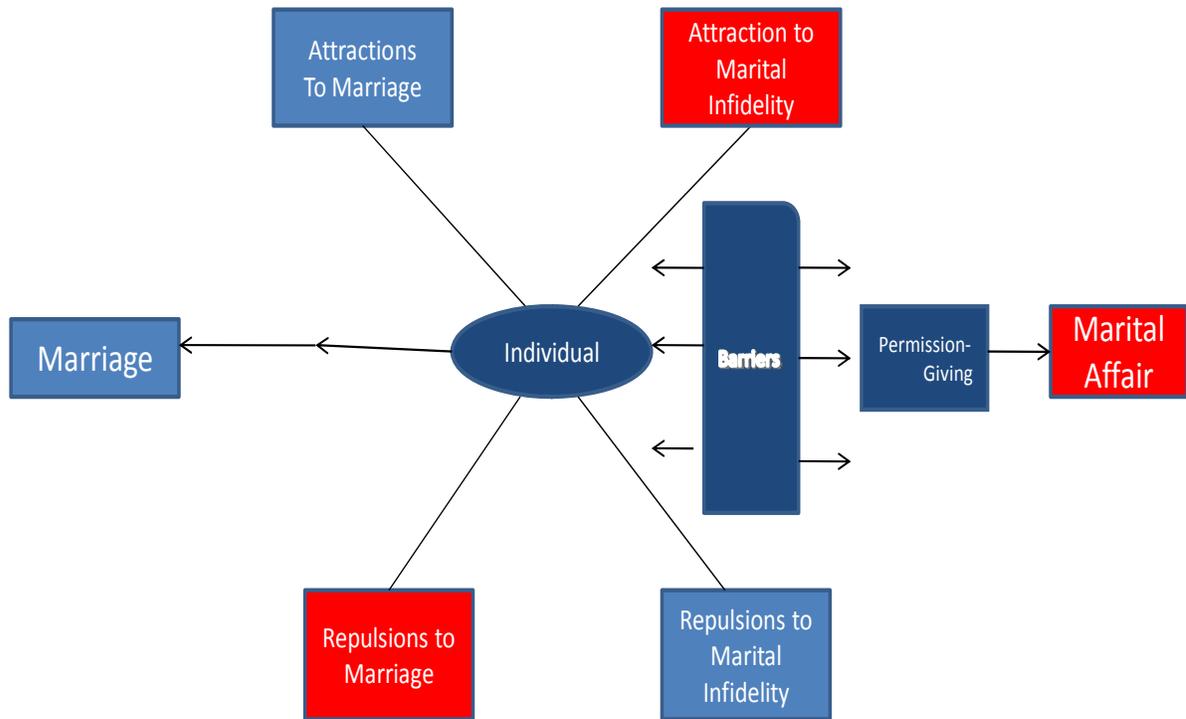
desires (i.e. sexual satisfaction), by means of an extramarital affair, will have attractions and repulsions. Examples of attractions to the marital affair may include: 1) a woman who may look elsewhere to get her emotional needs met because they are not being met in the marital dyad; 2) a man who looks to an alternative partner as a way of become involved in different types of sexual activities in which his spouse may not be interested. An example of a repulsion to having a marital affair could be a person's attitude toward marital infidelity as being a violation of marital vows. According to Muuss (1988), a balance in attracting and repulsing forces causes conflict (being unsure of the direction to go), whereas unbalanced forces allow for movement toward or away from one of the goals, such as marital infidelity or having an affair. At this point a person may encounter barriers to reaching his or her desired goal, in this case having an affair. An example of a barrier could be the person's children. Having children could make it difficult to meet a partner for a sexual encounter because the children may be around at the times a spouse wants to meet the affair partner. The barriers between the individual and the goal will either cause frustration or increase an individual's efforts to reach the goal. (Refer to figure 1.)

Field theory, used in understanding the process of permission giving with regard to marital infidelity, is applicable to different individuals and cultures because it recognizes that the factors in a person's life space differ from person to person and from situation to situation, providing for a conceptualization of different experiences (Muuss, 1988). Lewin (1942) identified two aspects that remain stable but are quite different from culture to culture: (1) the ideologies, attitudes and values that are recognized and emphasized by the individuals' effective culture and (2) the way in which different activities are seen as related or unrelated by that culture. Attitudes, such as "marital fidelity" and "the pursuit of individual goals" are examples of values that bridge most subgroups in our culture. However, some activities may be

differentially related, depending on a given subculture. For example “family” and “religion” are more closely related in the Church of Latter Day Saints than in American Society as a whole (Muuss, 1988). The ideas and concepts of Lewin’s theory can help us better understand how an individual makes a decision to have an affair and what he or she may be going through while making that decision.

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to begin developing ideas on the process by which an individual gives him or herself permission to have an affair. With the use of field theory we can begin to identify what specific attractions, repulsions, and barriers people have to marital infidelity. We also can begin to understand what heightens their attractions and dampens their repulsions as they move in the direction of marital infidelity.

Figure-1  
An Individual's Life Space in Conflict  
Deciding on Commitment to the Marriage or Marital Infidelity



## **Attractions to Marriage**

Marriage is a tradition practiced, in some form, in all cultures throughout the world. Brubaker and Kimberly (1993) suggested that the desirability of marriage is high and as many as 90% of Americans will choose to marry at some point in their lives. Karney, Garvan and Thomas (2003) found that, for 92% of their studied population, “a happy, healthy marriage is one of the most important things in life” (as cited in, Huston & Melz, 2004, p. 947). According to Aldous (1996, as cited in Rosen-Grandon, Myers & Hattie, 2004), a good marriage provides individuals with a sense of meaning and identity.

What is it about marriage that makes it so desirable? Research suggests there are many different variables that make marriage desirable, including a sense of commitment, intimacy, being friends, and the ability to communicate openly with his or her marital partner. Many of these variables are easy to identify with but hard to research. Looking at the research on marital happiness and satisfaction will help us understand what it is that attracts human beings to marriage.

### ***Intimacy***

Greeff and Malherbe (2001) used a sample of 57 married couples from a Protestant congregation to determine the connection between intimacy and marital satisfaction. The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) questionnaire was used to identify the degree of intimacy that each spouse experiences towards his or her partner. The questionnaire measures the degree of the desired and actual intimacy across five dimensions; (1) emotional intimacy – the ability to feel close to someone, (2) social intimacy – the ability to share mutual friends and similarities in social networks, (3) sexual intimacy – the ability to share general

affection and/or sexual activities, (4) intellectual intimacy – the experience of shared ideas, and (5) recreational intimacy – shared interest in hobbies or joint participation in sport.

The marital satisfaction of the couples was measured in three ways, (1) the discrepancy score between the experienced and the desired level of intimacy, (2) a subscale of the Enriching & Nurturing Relations Issues, Communication, & Happiness (ENRICH) Scale covering ten categories including personal characteristics of the spouse, role responsibility, communication, conflict resolution, financial issues, handling of spare time, sexual relationship, parental responsibility, relationship with family and friends and religious orientation, and finally (3) a single-item assessment of marital satisfaction included in the biographical questionnaire.

Greeff and Malherbe (2001) found a significant positive correlation between the experience of intimacy and marital satisfaction. This research suggests that one of the reasons individuals are attracted to marriage is because of the level of intimacy a marital relationship can generate. Affairs may generate more excitement than a marriage but seldom do they allow for as many types of intimacy and the quality of intimacy which marriage affords. The commitment and longevity of marriage are fertile ground for intimacy and the marital satisfaction that it brings.

### *Communication*

Communication is a key factor in all relationships. That being said, it should be of no surprise that research has shown a connection between effective communication and marital satisfaction (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; and Gottman & Levenson, 1988, 1998 Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Rosen-Grandon, Myers and Hattie (2004) stated, “Loving relationships are those in which open communication and agreement on the expression

of affection are important” (p. 65). As individuals, we look for a partner we can open up with and share our feelings, dreams, desires and fears. Communication makes the individual vulnerable, which will eventually lead to trust and commitment. Although communication seems like a simple topic, it is very complex. When looking for a loving relationship, individuals should be challenged by their partners, be able to resolve conflict, and verbalize a life plan together.

The process of communication involves qualities of mutual respect, forgiveness, romance, and sensitivity (Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004). Being able to openly communicate and make oneself vulnerable to another person attracts individuals to marriage.

### *Commitment*

When people make the decision to marry, many, in turn, make a commitment to each other “until death do us part”, and to remain together “for better or for worse”. As Swensen and Trahaug (1985) stated, “Commitment of one person to another in marriage necessarily gains security in the relationship ..... people value that security that such a commitment brings” (p. 940). When couples have a sense of commitment to each other, they are more likely to be more open and intimate. They feel freedom to be open, honest, and vulnerable without fear the other person will disappear.

Swensen and Trahaug (2003) measured the expression of love and level of commitment between husband and wife and found that those whose commitment was to each other as persons had significantly fewer problems. Making the marital relationship a priority over other aspects of his or her life will show a commitment to the marital relationship. Cuber and Harroff (1965)

term this type of commitment “intrinsic” because, when the two individuals marry, they make a commitment to the other person as a unique and irreplaceable person.

That intrinsic sense of worth allows married partners to stay together through times that are difficult. Commitment is an important factor that attracts individuals to marriage because it gives people a sense of security, safety, and freedom to be who they are, without worry of judgment and isolation.

## **Attractions to Marital Infidelity**

### *Characteristics of the marriage.*

Several different models have been developed to explain the incidence of marital infidelity, based on characteristics of the marital relationship. Some of these models are supported by empirical research, while others are based on logic and tied into existing research that is not specifically related to infidelity. All the models discussed are used as a suggestion for why infidelity occurs in relationships. Need fulfillment (Aron & Aron, 1996; Drigotas & Rusbuilt, 1992; Lewandowski Jr. & Ackerman, 2006), the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1996; Lewandowski Jr. & Ackerman, 2006), the investment model (Digotas & Barta, 2001; Drigotas, Safstrom & Gentilia, 1999), equity theory (Glass & Wright, 1992; Sprecher, 1998; Walster, Traupmann & Walster, 1978), the deficit model (Glass & Wright, 1985; Shackelford & Buss, 2000; Thompson, 1984) and the personal growth model (Boekhout, Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000; Bukstel, Roeder, Kilmann, Laughlin & Sotile, 1978) all associate characteristics within the marriage as the cause for marital infidelity occurring.

### ***Need Fulfillment***

Drigotas and Rusbuilt (1992) identified seven needs that relationships help people pursue: sexual needs, intimacy needs (self-disclosure), companionship needs (joint activities), intellectual involvement (sharing ideas, discussing values and attitudes), emotional involvement needs (one's sense of emotional connection), security needs (depending on the relationship to add predictability and contentment), and self-worth needs (a relationships that makes a person feel good about him or herself). The possibility of fulfilling these needs forms the basis of an attraction (Lewin, 1942) towards one's spouse. If there is an area in the relationship that is unable to fulfill a certain need, it is possible that the partner with the unfulfilled need will be more likely to give him or herself permission to have the need fulfill by someone else, which could lead to marital infidelity.

### ***Self-Expansion Model***

The self-expansion model is based on the premise that people are motivated toward the goal of enhancing the self through close relationships and seeking new experiences, resources, perspectives, skills, abilities, and insights (Aron & Aron, 1996; Aron, Norman, & Aron, 1998). Aron and Aron (1996) stated that, once a relationship becomes well established, the rate of expansion will slow down and possibly create a decrease of satisfaction and feelings of love in the relationship. If a person is unable find new ways of enhancing the self in his or her current relationship, her or she may begin to look to other individuals to meet these expansion needs and be attracted to another individual, possibly resulting in marital infidelity.

Lewandowski and Ackerman (2006) conducted a study to test the need fulfillment theory and self-expansion models using 109 students from a private university, ranging from 18-24

years in age, with a majority (84.4%) being Caucasian. Each participant filled out a questionnaire about his/her current relationship. The authors investigated whether a person's motivations that were related to need fulfillment and self-expansion within a romantic relationship could predict self-report susceptibility to infidelity. The results of the study concluded that when a relationship was not fulfilling required needs (sexual, intimacy, companionship, security, and emotional), individuals were more likely to engage in extradyadic relationships and that, when relationships provided lower amounts of self-expansion, inclusion of the other in the self, and potential for future self-expansion, there was greater susceptibility to infidelity (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). These theories support the proposition that, when needs are not met by a spouse, this may become a repulsion in the marital dyad and the needy partner may become attracted to an alternative partner to meet those needs in the form of an extramarital affair. The needy partner is able to rationalize his or her behavior because s/he has unmet needs which allows him/her to give him/her permission to have the affair.

### ***Investment Model***

The investment model identified the process by which individuals become committed to their relationships and the forces that serve to make an individual more or less committed (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Drigotas and Barta (2001) identified the forces as follows: satisfaction (how happy the individual is with the relationship), alternative quality (potential satisfaction provided outside the relationship), and investments (things the individual would lose if the relationship ended). High levels of satisfaction and investments in the relationship will lead to greater commitment; whereas, high levels of alternative quality will lead to less commitment in the relationship (Campbell & Foster, 2002). More satisfactions and investments in the marital

relationship would indicate a greater attraction to the spouse. Lower satisfaction in the marriage and higher alternative quality would increase attraction outside the marriage. High investment within the marriage would act like a barrier to keep the spouse from seeking others.

In a study using 120 couples, seeking marital therapy at a university marital clinic, it was hypothesized, based on the authors' own clinical experience, that couples presenting for marital therapy with marital infidelity as an issue were more likely to have one spouse in the relationship who was not motivated to work on things and had a low level of stated commitment to the relationship (Beach, Jouriles & O'Leary, 1985). The authors found that, when comparing couples with marital infidelity issues and couples with other marital problems, the couples with infidelity as an issue had a significantly lower level of commitment to the relationship than their non-infidelity counterparts.

Drigotas, Safstrom and Gentilia (1999) conducted two studies using the investment model to predict instances of both physical and emotional infidelity in dating relationships. The first study used 74 university students and the second used 38 university students. The participants filled out questionnaires designed to assess demographics, along with the levels of commitment and satisfaction with the relationship, alternative quality, and investment size. The second study differed slightly in the methods. Drigotas et al. (1999) reported that both studies provided relatively strong support for the investment model as a predictor of infidelity and that the investment model measures used significantly predicted subsequent extradyadic behavior. In both studies, infidelity acts were related to declines in satisfaction, investment, and commitment and an increase in perceptions of alternative quality (Drigotas et al., 1999) Furthermore, the authors indicated the investment model effectively predicted dating infidelity. The investment

model allows those contemplating the affair to legitimize the affair and give themselves permission to have an affair because of the low levels of commitment in the relationship.

### *Equity Theory*

Another theory used to explain the occurrence of marital infidelity is equity theory. Sprecher (1998), in her review of equity theory as it relates to sexuality, summarizes equity as the level of perceived balance in the relationship between partners' inputs (positive and negative contributions to the exchange leading to rewards or punishments) and outcomes (the reward or punishment received in the relationship). Regardless of what is contributed to a relationship, if both individuals are receiving the same level of rewards and punishments, the relationship will be considered equal (Sprecher, 1998).

According to equity theory, participating in an inequitable relationship will cause distress to both partners. The more inequity, the greater the distress becomes (Walster, Traupmann & Walster, 1978). Both partners begin to experience their relationship as having fewer attractions and more repulsions. As the relationship suffers from distress, both partners will want to eliminate the distress. According to equity theory, individuals choose one of three ways to restore the equity and decrease the distress in the relationship: (1) restore actual equity by changing behavior (an example would be seeking marital therapy to facilitate the behavioral changes needed for both spouses to feel as if they were in an equitable marriage), (2) restore psychological equity by changing their cognitions of the inequity (such as changing their thinking about what contributions or sacrifices are made to the relationship and decide on what holds more equity, such as minimizing the importance of sexual fidelity and maximizing the importance of personal self-fulfillment), or (3) abandon the relationship (one way would be to

have an extramarital affair) (Walster et al., 1978). As a test of this theory, Walster et al. (1978) sampled 2000 questionnaires of a *Psychology Today* study. After their analysis of the sample, it was clearly significant that “over-benefited men and women” had the fewest extramarital experiences, “equitably treated men and women” had a few more, and the “deprived men and women” engaged in the most number of extramarital affairs.

Glass and Wright (1992) also found that an extrinsic motivation for extramarital sexual behavior was “getting even with spouse”. A spouse seemed to feel that an extramarital sexual affair was justified as a response to his or her spouse’s extramarital affair. In essence, one infidelity seems to justify another. Based on the literature (Glass & Wright, 1992; Sprecher, 1998; Walster et al., 1978), it is clear that, if one partner in a marital relationship feels as if he or she does not have equity within the marriage, he or she may seek to balance the inequity by having an affair. The affair spouse is able to give him or herself permission, by legitimizing the affair, because it can justify their behavior since they may see the spouse as sinful for the inequity in the marriage.

### ***Deficit Model***

Just as the previous theories/models discussed have been applied to the incidence of marital infidelity, the deficit model suggests that individuals begin to have extramarital affairs due to problems and dissatisfactions in their marriage (Thompson, 1984). Their repulsions to their marriage make alternatives look more desirable by comparison. Lending support to this model, Thompson (1984) identified emotional relating, sexual relating, and communicating as the three major areas of relationship problems. Partners who feel unaccepted, discouraged, unsupported, and not respected within the relationship will suffer emotionally. Those who are

unhappy with their ability to give and/or receive sexual satisfaction will suffer sexually. Relationships with limited honesty and openness will suffer from communication issues (Thompson, 1984). Thompson (1984) also stated that, based on previous research findings, “the lower self-reported marital satisfaction and the lower the frequency and quality of marital intercourse, the more likely the occurrence of extramarital sex” (p. 246).

Another study supporting the deficit model looked to identify relationships between marital dissatisfaction and extramarital involvement. Glass and Wright (1985) used a purposive, nonrandom sample of 148 men and 153 women, and had the participants fill out questionnaires to assess marital dissatisfaction and involvement in extramarital relationships, including justifications, and level and type of involvement (emotional/sexual). The results of the study indicated that both sexual and emotional affairs for men and women were correlated with greater marital dissatisfaction. They also found that a combination of both sexual and emotional involvement yielded greater marital dissatisfaction than did either type alone. More repulsions within the marriage led to more dissatisfaction with the marriage.

Shackelford and Buss (2000) hypothesized that people, who anticipate spousal infidelity, would be less satisfied with their marriage than those who did not anticipate infidelity. The participants were 107 couples, who had been married less than 1 year, who filled out self-report questionnaires related to marital satisfaction, personality, mate guarding (tactics used to guard the spouse from other sexual contenders), and susceptibility to infidelity. Shackelford and Buss (2000) found support for their hypothesis. Men who were less satisfied sexually and emotionally, perceived their partners to be more susceptible to marital infidelity. Whereas women who were generally less satisfied with their marriage perceived their partners to be susceptible to infidelity. Men would be more likely to give themselves permission to have an

affair by rationalizing the affair because of not feeling sexually and emotionally satisfied, whereas women were more likely to give themselves permission to have an affair by rationalizing the affair because they are generally unhappy in the marriage. Being unhappy sexually and emotionally in the marriage will heighten a man's attraction to having an affair, whereas being unhappy in the marriage, as a whole, will heighten a women's attraction to having an affair.

### ***Personal Growth Model***

The final model used in explaining the occurrence of marital infidelity is the personal growth model which suggests that individuals engage in extramarital behaviors to enhance their sense of self (Boekhout, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2000). Boekhout et al. (2000) stated that individuals look to a wide range of activities and companions as a way of increasing their self-discovery. If people find themselves in a marriage that does not encourage self-discovery, they may be attracted to the idea of marital infidelity as a way of finding someone who will partake in different activities with them as a means of affirming their quest for self-discovery. Lending support to this model, Bukstel, Roeder, Kilmann, Laughlin and Sotile (1978) looked to determine whether or not college students would project future extramarital sexual behavior and identify the variables that might influence the projections. The results indicated that individuals who sought a variety of premarital sexual partners were more likely to project that they would seek a variety of sexual partners after marriage and they expected to find extramarital sex (1) more emotionally and sexually satisfying than marital relations, (2) more adventurous (3) likely to increase feelings of inner security (4) increase their social status and (5) increase feelings of independence (Bukstel et al. 1978). One can assume that an individual with a variety of

premarital sexual partners would have these expectations s/he may have a more liberal view of sexuality, may feel that a variety of partners will lead to satisfaction, rather than the experience of being with one individual, which s/he may have never experienced over a long period of time. If nothing else, the exposure to more than one sexual partner while dating opens people up to the possibility of non-monogamous sex after marriage. Atwater (1979) found similar results with her sample of 40 women, with about half citing reasons for the situational motivation to be reasons pertaining to personal needs for growth, knowledge and sex. Furthermore, Atwater (1979) stated that “humanistic-expressive EMS is characterized by women motivated to involvement by pull factors of curiosity, new experience, and personal growth more so than push factors like unsatisfactory marriage” (p. 63). An individual in a marital relationship who was looking to form a wider range of intimacies and to become involved in new activities may begin to engage in marital infidelity as a way of enhancing his or her sense of self. Both of these would be considered to be external attractions according to field theory (Lewin 1942). The individual wanting the affair would depersonalize the affair and make it acceptable because he or she would separate their individual goal from their marriage, making them two separate entities, thus allowing the individual, wanting the affair, to give himself or herself permission.

### ***Personal characteristics***

Just as characteristics within the marriage may contribute to an individual engaging in an extramarital affair, an individual’s personal characteristics also could lead to the development of an affair. Narcissistic traits, attachment and self-esteem issues, and depression have an influence on the development of marital infidelity. Social networks also play a role in the development of marital affairs and can be viewed as a type of personal characteristic because individuals make a

choice as to with whom they associate, and aspects of people's personalities draw them to certain types of individuals.

### *Narcissistic Traits*

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder* identifies narcissism as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy. In order to meet the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder and individual must possess at least five of the following: (1) possess a grandiose sense of self-importance, (2) be preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love, (3) believe s/he is "special" and unique and can only be understood by or associate with high-status or special people, (4) require excessive admiration, (5) have a sense of entitlement, (6) take advantage of others to achieve own goals, (7) lack empathy, (8) be envious of others or believes others envy him/her, and (9) show arrogant behaviors or attitudes (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Individuals with narcissistic traits will be more likely to have a marital affair because they are unable to see repulsions to an affair due to their lack of empathy for others and their perception that the reality of the world is all about them (Lewin, 1942). Narcissists are unable to see barriers to infidelity because they are able to see only their own needs and feel there is no reason those needs should not be met, even if others are hurt in the process. They are able to give themselves permission to have an affair because they feel as if one person cannot meet their needs. Therefore, they depersonalize from the marriage by compartmentalizing their behavior.

In their first of two studies, Campbell and Foster (2002) predicted that narcissists would display less commitment in romantic relationships and be mediated by less satisfaction, fewer investments, and greater alternatives. They also predicted that narcissists would be associated

with decreased accommodation than non-narcissists. Accommodation referred to making a positive effort to cope with conflict in the relationship by altering one's own behavior and attitudes. Narcissists were less likely to change their own behavior to help the functioning of their romantic relationships. Participants, 119 university students, were asked to fill out several questionnaires to assess narcissistic traits, self-esteem, commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and accommodation. Satisfaction referred to the rewards of the relationship minus the costs, investments were the energy commitments the individual had staked in the relationship, and alternatives referred to the options the individual had outside of the relationship. The results of the study concluded that narcissists were less committed to their romantic relationships because they perceived themselves as having less accommodation and having better alternatives to their relationship (Campbell & Foster, 2002). They saw their relationship as disposable and subject to their own idiosyncratic needs. A second study was used to confirm and extend the first study, using 304 students given the same questionnaires as the first study with the addition of a measure of attention to alternatives. Campbell and Foster (2002) concluded that the second study reconfirmed the findings in the first study and added that narcissists not only perceive they have alternatives to the relationship but also attend to and flirt with these alternatives.

The results of these two studies suggest that individuals who have narcissistic personality traits will be more likely to engage in marital infidelity due to the lack of commitment to the marital relationship. According to Lewin's (1942) field theory, narcissists perceive fewer barriers to leaving the marital relationship, and their tendency to perceive and attend to alternatives, enhances the attractions of possible alternative partners. Campbell and Foster (2002) hypothesized that narcissists (1) are constantly looking for a higher status partner and (2) may

enjoy having fun finding new partners. Both of these suggest people who are narcissistic would have increased infidelity in relationships, as opposed to those who are not narcissistic.

### ***Adult attachment***

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) identified three different styles of attachment that appear in infants, based on the type of parental care given. First is a “secure attachment” seen in those given consistent care and emotional support. Second is an “anxious or ambivalent attachment,” presented when an infant is given care that is sometimes overprotective and other times inattentive. Finally, the third and final style is “avoidant attachment,” seen when an infant’s needs are not recognized or met by the caregiver. Those with a secure attachment will have fewer attractions to, and greater repulsions for, marital infidelity, because they will feel confident and comfortable in their marital relationship which would act as a barrier to starting an affair. If an individual has an ambivalent attachment there will be times they will feel secure in the marital relationship and times they will not. During the times they do not feel secure, they will be more likely to have higher attractions to marital infidelity, more repulsions to the marriage, and the insecurity they are experiencing will lower their barriers. Finally, those individuals with avoidant attachment styles are more likely to say they have no needs or are more likely to try to meet their needs themselves, so as not to rely on others. Their experience involves not getting their needs recognized or met by those closest to them, so they are likely to seek support from others towards whom they have less commitment and closeness. As they age, they grow up taking care of their own needs. This experience will make them less attracted to, and more repulsed by, the marriage.

Based on the three attachment styles, two studies will be discussed relating marital infidelity to adult attachment. In the first study, a sample of 792 men and women were given a questionnaire assessing demographic information, attachment styles, and sexuality (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Bogaert and Sadava (2002) found that adult relationships with individuals with secure attachments were confident and trusting, developed closeness with others easily, felt stable and committed in their relationship, and rarely worried about being abandoned. Those with anxious or ambivalent attachments had relationships consisting of conflict and dependency; viewed others as being untrustworthy, undependable, and unwilling to develop intimacy with them, and worried that they were not loved by their partner and would be abandoned. The avoidant individuals had difficulty trusting and depending on others, were uncomfortable with intimacy, and remained distant as to avoid getting too close with anyone (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). The results indicated a modest but significant relationship between anxious attachment and sexuality. "Anxious attachment is associated with (a perception of) lower physical attractiveness, early first intercourse (and more lifetime partners), more infidelity, and higher condom usage" (p. 200). Allen and Baucom (2004) found similar results with their two sets of samples, stating that attachment styles in both males and females were related to intimacy-regulating functions of extradyadic involvement, with avoidant style men and anxious style women reporting the highest rates. Those who did not develop a secure attachment during childhood are more likely to encounter feelings of insecurity and feelings that their partner may abandon them. This will make them more vulnerable to marital infidelity, because they may use sex as a way of feeling emotionally connected to others without the danger of intimacy. This will increase their attractions to having an affair, while their insecurities will lower the protective barriers they have around the marriage. These studies lend support for the effect of attachment

on an individual's intent to begin an extramarital affair. Those individuals, who did not develop a secure attachment style as adults, were more likely to engage in marital infidelity.

### *Self-Esteem*

Individuals with lower self-esteem will be at an increased risk for marital infidelity because they will be more likely to use infidelity as a way of increasing their self-esteem. Individuals with low levels of self-esteem will let down their barriers around the marriage because an outside individual may make them feel good about themselves and, instead of thinking about the needs of the marriage, they will want to satisfy their own need to gain self-confidence. This need for self-affirmation will increase their attractions to having an affair.

In a study assessing self-esteem in the marital relationship, Shackelford (2001) evaluated 214 individuals, based on self-report measures of self-esteem, marital conflict, and marital satisfaction. His findings identified a correlation between husbands' self-esteem and wives' sexual infidelity. This suggests either (1) women married to men with low self-esteem have an increase likelihood of engaging in an extramarital affair or (2) a wife's sexual infidelity will cause a decrease in the self-esteem of her husband. Lending support to this, Glass and Wright (1992) identified enhancement of self-confidence and self-esteem as an emotional justification for extramarital behavior. Allen and Baucom (2004) also found support for this by reporting in their two sample study that a motivation for extradyadic involvement was to experience an increase in self-esteem and sense of desirability. Based on these studies, when an individual suffers from self-esteem issues and lacks confidence in him or herself, it will increase his/her extramarital attractions, dampen his/her barriers, and eliminate the repulsions to marital infidelity. S/he will look to increase his/her self-esteem by engaging in an extramarital affair.

## *Social Networks*

An individual's social network also may contribute to the involvement in an extramarital relationship. In one study using 345 participants from the Northeast and Midwest, researchers found that individuals who lacked social support for their spousal relationship from family and friends would be more likely to engage in extramarital behaviors (Zak, Coulter, Giglio, Hall, Sanford & Pellowski, 2002). Field Theory (1942) would identify this as having a lack of barriers. Friends and family typically act as a support system to the marriage and aid as a deterrent from marital infidelity. If a couple did not have support for their marriage, the barrier would be lowered or let down entirely, allowing more room for an affair to occur. In another study conducted by Atwater (1979), 40 women were interviewed with open-ended questions to investigate the transition of women into their first extramarital sex. The results of the study were that about half of the women knew a person who had engaged in extramarital activities (peers, parents or relatives). Fifty-five percent of the women reported specific conversations about extramarital sex before their own involvement, with one-half of those feeling that the conversation had been "significant" to them (Atwater, 1979). This is important because knowing a person who has engaged in marital infidelity would attract an individual to having an affair. It introduces the idea of an affair as a possibility. It also makes the idea of an affair a real possibility with real people, as opposed to a television or movie fantasy. Many times when others talk of infidelity (even when portrayed on television), they glorify the affair and do not discuss the downsides and shortcomings. Both studies validate the importance of surrounding the relationship with friends of the marriage. Those who do not share the same morals and values of the relationship may influence individuals in different directions than they might have considered on their own. If an individual spends time listening to others' experiences of marital

infidelity, it may dampen their repulsions to the infidelity and make them feel as if it has become a normative behavior within society and attract them to having a marital affair.

### **Barriers to Marital Infidelity**

Although there are several types of marital infidelity and many ideas about the causes of marital infidelity, there are also several barriers that can be identified that may protect a marriage from experiencing the trauma of an extramarital affair. Although there has not been any research to specifically discuss barriers in this way, some assumptions will be made, based on the theoretical framework being used. Field theory (Lewin, 1942) explains that barriers exist between an individual and a goal (in this case marital infidelity). These barriers act to defend the sacredness of the marital relationship and deter an individual from becoming involved in an extramarital relationship. The barriers identified include religiosity, the presence of children, judgment of family members and/or friends, and lack of opportunity. Each of these can act as a barrier and prevent a person from giving him or herself permission to participate in an extramarital affair.

#### ***Religiosity***

The empirical research has shown that those who attend religious services regularly show a lower rate of extramarital sexual affairs (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Atkins et. al., 2001; Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat & Gore, 2007; Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Treas & Geiesen, 2000; Whism, Gordon & Chatav, 2007). Burdette et al. (2007) stated, “Virtually all religious groups and traditions condemn extramarital sexual relations, although they differ in the strength of these norms” (p. 1554). It has been implied that those who have a greater religious affiliation are exposed to religious messages associated with condemning marital infidelity and place greater emphasis on

the sanctity of exclusivity in marriage and the family. Burdette et al. (2007) found several links between religious involvement and extramarital sexual activity:

1. Holding any religious affiliation is associated with reduced odds of marital infidelity, compared to those with no religious affiliation.
2. Frequency of religious attendance is inversely associated with the likelihood of having engaged in marital infidelity.
3. Specific theological beliefs, such as agreeing that the Bible is the literal or inspired word of God, lead to a decreased chance in engaging in marital infidelity.

As cited in Blow and Hartnett (2005), Atkins et al. (2001) speculated that religious behavior might impact the likelihood of extramarital sex by its emphasis on relationship happiness, commitment to the family, and obligation to religious values, taken along with couples being continually exposed to messages condemning extramarital sexual involvement. Religion can act as a barrier, protecting the marital relationship and turning an individual away from infidelity.

### *Children*

Liu (2000) stated, “childrearing is a form of human capital investment that increases a person’s stake in his or her family” (p. 369). Whisman et al. (2007) found that the presence of children was not predictive of infidelity. The assumption that children will act as a barrier to marital infidelity can be made, because it can increase a person’s investment in his or her marital relationship. Lusterman (2005) discussed the importance for parents to provide children with security, guidance, and good models for behavior. When parents fall short of these qualities, children may experience discomfort, disillusion, confusion, and despair (Lusterman, 2005).

Though not found in the research, children also may make it difficult to engage in extramarital affairs because of their presence in the home. It is difficult to bring an affair partner home for a sexual encounter if there are children in the home. Marital affairs are very time consuming and having children would make it more difficult to find time to be involved in an extramarital affair. Children will act as a barrier to marital infidelity in two ways, (1) they increase the investment in the marital relationship and (2) they will make it more difficult to find time to become involved with someone outside of the marital relationship.

### ***Opportunity and work environment***

Individuals who have more opportunities to have an affair are more likely to engage in marital infidelity (Atkins, Jacobson & Baucom, 2001; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Burdette, Ellison, Shekat & Gore, 2007; Liu, 2000; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Glass and Wright (1988) encouraged partners to contain the opportunities for infidelity so that the primary relationship, marriage, can be the focus. Glass (2003) identified avoiding risky situations and not flirting or fantasizing about another person. However, she also emphasized the importance of knowing that attractions are normal as ways to contain opportunities. Glass and Wright also imply that even strong relationships can experience infidelity, if the right opportunity came along, and that all couples are vulnerable. Burdette et al. (2007) believe that those who attended religious services regularly have limited exposure to social environments that may facilitate marital infidelity and the congregational networks provide positive social activities, including family activities. Maintaining good personal boundaries and not putting oneself in situations that may lead to the opportunity of having an extramarital affair can act as a barrier to infidelity.

### *Social networks*

Sometimes a good means of judging the character of someone can be by looking at the people with whom individuals surround themselves. Glass (2003) wrote, it is important to have “friends of the marriage”. The idea here is that, when a person feels he or she needs to discuss personal things within his or her relationship with others, he or she should only talk with people who will want to encourage the person’s marital relationship and not talk down or belittle that person’s marriage. It is also important because individuals who experience social support for their relationships are less likely to commit infidelity (Zak, Coulter, Giglio, Hall & Sanford, 2002). In the case of marital infidelity, having family and friends who are supportive of a person’s marital relationship can act as a barrier to marital infidelity.

The previous examples discussed as barriers to marital infidelity are variables that are already set in place and are relatively constant. These are specific examples of things that will discourage an individual from having an affair. As a person moves closer to having an extramarital affair, one may think of the damage it may cause to children, moral values, beliefs, based on religious affiliation, and the disappointment and disgust of family and friends. When this occurs, the variables act as barriers which hold a person to be sexually and emotionally exclusive in his or her marriage.

### **Repulsions within the Marriage**

To help explain the complexity of marital infidelity it is important to understand what is going on within the marriage and the predisposing factors that make the idea of having an extramarital affair enticing. I have touched on some issues within marriage that may repel an individual away from his or her marriage and increase the possibility of having a marital affair.

Now I will present four domains within the marriage that may drive an individual away from his or her own marriage.

Allen and Atkins (2005) discussed four domains when looking at why marital infidelity occurs. The intrapersonal domain includes the qualities of the individual who is engaging in the affair, such as demographic or psychological issues. In the second domain, the spouse/primary partner looks “at the qualities of the spouse or primary partner that may have contributed to the context in which the participating partner decided to have an affair” (p. 1372), such as not being emotionally available to his or her partner. The third domain emphasizes the marriage/primary relationship and the characteristics occurring that may have contributed to the development of an affair, such as low sexual satisfaction. The final domain, discussed by Allen and Atkins (2005), is contextual and focuses on external factors (outside of the primary relationship), such as culture, work environment, peer networks or the behavior of the outside affair partner.

Events or actions occurring within the previously discussed domains are seen as repulsions within the marriage. When these repulsions within the marriage occur, an individual will be more attracted to marital infidelity because it will give the individual a different experience than he or she is having within his or her own marriage. For example, if the individual having the affair is grandiose, they will think they are entitled to participate in any behavior they choose without remorse. On the other hand, if an individual is married to someone who is emotionally withdrawn and unable to connect intimately with him or her, the affair will act to compensate for unmet needs within the marriage and s/he will find a more intimate connection in an affair partner. If the marriage is unstable and full of conflict or there is low sexual satisfaction, an individual may have an affair to express his or her hostility toward the spouse or to find sexual satisfaction with a different partner. Finally, contextual factors, such as,

having friends who are having or have had an affair, may encourage extramarital behavior by hearing the exaggerated experiences from friends or family members.

## **Repulsions to Marital Infidelity**

### *Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity*

When thinking about marriage, most individuals consider extramarital affairs to be wrong and expect to remain faithful to their spouse. This is explicitly mentioned in most marital vows. Most individuals also expect their spouse to remain faithful to them and to view marital infidelity as immoral. In one study, 77% of a large representative sample in the United States thought that having sexual relations with someone, other than the marriage partner, was “always wrong” (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994). In another study, using 378 subjects from Australia, Thompson (1984) reported, “On average, the three types of extradyadic relationships (emotional, sexual and emotional and sexual) were not approved of by participants” (p. 40).

Wiederman and Allgeier (1996) conducted a study using 45 married graduate students and found that 87% of the participants would never find extramarital sex to be acceptable for them. The most frequently cited reasons for the unacceptability of extramarital sex were that the behavior would damage the trust and commitment in the relationship and be a breach of their marriage vows. The respondents felt as if extramarital sex was likely to cause serious and irreparable harm to the marriage, once they were carried out. Another study found that 90% of women and 80% of men surveyed at the beginning of their first marriage expected sexual exclusivity (Lawson, 1988). Lieberman (1988) surveyed 131 university students and found that 87.8% agreed that extramarital intercourse was wrong.

Based on the results of these studies, it is safe to say a majority of individuals disapprove of marital infidelity. A person's attitude can cause a strong dislike for marital infidelity and turn him/her away from actually participating in the behavior. Field theory suggests that, although there may be an attraction to having the affair, repulsions will push the individual in the other direction, moving him/her away from the desire of actually having the affair. It is important to maintain stability between the attractions and the repulsions in order to keep the marital relationship secure. If a balance is not maintained and the repulsions within the marriage and attractions to marital infidelity outweigh the repulsions to marital infidelity and attractions to marriage, an individual will be more likely to move forward with an affair.

### **The Idea of Permission Giving**

Most of the research to date deals with the causes and consequences of marital infidelity and treatment modalities for couples recovering from an affair. This leaves us wondering, what makes a person choose an affair over other options, such as marital therapy or openly communicating with their spouse. Although previous research discussed shows that there are a lot of reasons for having a marital affair, there are no accounts in the research for how an individual gives himself or herself permission to move forward with an affair. Cognitive dissonance is the conflict or anxiety resulting from inconsistencies between one's beliefs and one's actions or other beliefs. I believe that one has to reduce cognitive dissonance to move forward with having a marital affair. A way in which an individual can reduce the cognitive dissonance is by giving him or herself permission to have an affair. By giving him or herself permission to have an affair they are able to successfully relieve the anxiety or tension by creating new, less conflicting cognitions. How is it that a person heightens the attractions to

marital infidelity, minimizes the repulsions, and dampens the barriers that are protecting the marital relationship in order to give him or herself permission to proceed with an affair? It is my assumption that it is far easier for a person to have an excuse (i.e. marital dissatisfaction) for why they had an affair. I find it more interesting to know what s/he was thinking when they said, “To hell with it I’m moving forward with this.” Maybe the problem is, they do not think about it as deeply as I am assuming and gave themselves permission to “go with the flow” and not examine why they took that course of action. In this case they would have given themselves permission by not thinking about it.

One model that has been used in reducing cognitive dissonance for societal disapproved behavior was created by Nevitt Sanford and Craig Comstock. In their book entitled *Sanctions For Evil (1971)*, they explored the phenomena of societies trying to reduce cognitive dissonance in their soldiers while they were preparing for war. Societal restriction against killing people created cognitive dissonance in the soldiers who were asked to perhaps fight and kill the enemy. Sanford and Comstock explored the mechanisms that were used to reduce this cognitive dissonance. Although society’s restrictions against marital infidelity are not as absolute or extreme as society’s restrictions against murder, the mechanisms for reducing cognitive dissonance may be similar. It is an extreme example and by no means is my intention to compare murder to marital infidelity but instead examine the mechanisms the soldiers used to reduce cognitive dissonance and in turn give themselves permission to kill during times of war. One of the main foci of the current study is the idea that at some point a person has to give him or herself permission to have an affair and it is that which interests me. Sanford and Comstock identified several concepts, which I found related to permission giving and one of the goals of the current study was to apply their mechanisms, which were studied in reducing cognitive

dissonance in killing, to see if they apply to reducing cognitive dissonance with marital infidelity. One of the issues with using the concepts derived by Sanford and Comstock is their framework was derived by focusing on soldiers who were being asked to kill people in combat and reframing that action as something other than murder. It is my intention, in my discussion section, to alter the language to fit with marital infidelity, once I determine if the concepts fit into the current study.

The first concept is one of *legitimizing evil*, in this case marital infidelity. One legitimizing ingredient is to hold a belief that the spouse is simultaneously evil. It is fair to say that an individual can justify his or her actions of having an affair, if he or she feels their spouse is unpleasant and sinful themselves. In this case, the spouse is not worthy of their loyalty and this belief allows them to feel repulsed by their spouse's negative characteristics. This, in turn, will heighten their attraction to having a marital affair.

The second concept is *rationalization*. This is the way in which the perpetrator (the person wanting to have the affair) of evil (marital infidelity) comes to terms with his or her own consciences and with the value systems that condemn their behavior as illegitimate. They will create an intellectual line of logic which will redefine the values or morals of their marriage so that an affair is more acceptable as a choice. This will begin to dampen the affects of the barriers protecting the marital relationship, such as the importance of their marital vows, and minimize their repulsions to the idea of an affair.

Next, is the idea of *guilt-free* infidelity. The individual, who is considering having the affair, denies the humanity of his or her spouse (i.e. calling names). In doing this their spouse is not seen for who they are but for the ugly person they are being made out to be (i.e. "nagging bitch"). In order to be guilt-free they use *justifications*, such as "they deserved it", to place the

guilt on someone else, in this case, their spouse. This will allow the person to be more attracted to the idea of an affair and lessen their attraction to their marital partner.

The use of *depersonalization* is a concept explaining an individual's way of "switching hats", or changing their personal definition of him or herself. In essence, an individual wears one hat (marital relationship) and acts a certain way but, as soon as they change hats (affair), they act in a different way. Their *civilian superego* does not have to be worried, ashamed, embarrassed, or be made to feel guilty for whatever is done while they are wearing their "affair hat". Behavior which otherwise would be guilt ridden is now "ok". This will again influence an individual to having an affair, because it will allow them to compartmentalize their behavior as two separate entities, without any crossover contamination.

Finally, the idea of *dehumanization* protects the individual from the guilt and shame they would otherwise feel from primitive or antisocial attitudes, impulses and actions that they direct toward those they manage to perceive as *bad humans* or less than human. If they are bad humans, their maltreatment is justified, since their defects in human qualities are their own fault. Two types of dehumanization exist: (1) *object-directed*, which is when an individual perceives others as lacking in those attributes that are considered to be most human, and (2) *self-directed*, which relates to self-image and denotes the reduction of an individual's sense of their own humanness and empties them of human emotions and passions. Furthermore, when an individual considering an affair dehumanizes their spouse, it will increase their emotional distance from them and diminish their sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The process of dehumanizing will minimize the repulsions and heighten the attractions to having a marital affair.

People will resort to marital infidelity when they have or think they have no alternative, no other means of coping with a situation, or when they regard the affair as an appropriate, legitimate, and approved method of dealing with a situation (Sanford & Comstock, 1971). These sanctions for evil provide a spouse with the tools to maximize his or her repulsions towards the spouse, minimize the attractions towards the spouse, enhance alternative attractions towards potential partners in an affair, and diminish any barriers which would keep the spouse from seeking an affair (Lewin, 1942).

## **CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The approach used in the current study is a qualitative research method. The goal of qualitative research is to understand social processes in context and to understand the meanings of social events for those who are involved in them (Esterberg, 2002). The alternative method, quantitative research, would not be as useful in this study because it is less focused on getting at the meanings people ascribe to particular events or activities; nor is it suited to understanding complicated social processes in context (Esterberg, 2002). Some qualitative researchers focus on themes and patterns that contribute to how individuals make meaning for the processes he or she experiences. According to Esterberg (2002), there are three ways in which qualitative data can be collected: (1) observation: participant and otherwise, (2) interviews, and (3) unobtrusive measures, such as analyzing texts and material artifacts. The goal of the current study was to look at the process of giving one's self permission to have a marital affair. I conducted open-ended in-depth interviews, which gave the participants an opportunity to describe the processes that occurred before engaging in the affair, allowing for the identification of patterns and themes experienced by the sample of women who have had an affair.

### **Theoretical and Philosophical Frameworks**

Qualitative methods offer researchers several methodologies of inquiry, including focus group evaluation, naturalistic observation, social constructionist exploration, and critical theory research (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). The theoretical/philosophical framework which corresponds best with the present study is phenomenology which falls under naturalistic research.

Phenomenology allows the researcher to focus on the experience of a particular phenomenon as experienced by the people who live this phenomenon, in this study, marital infidelity.

The aim of the current study is to identify how an individual gives herself permission to have an affair and the process that occurred while making the decision. The qualitative investigation used was a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is an approach that focuses on how human beings make sense of an experience and transform that experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning (Patton, 2002). This methodology requires being able to capture the essence of a person's experience, "how they perceived it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (p. 104). Phenomenologists are "rigorous in their analysis of the experience, so that basic elements of the experience that are common to members of a specific society, or all human beings, can be identified" (Eichelberger, 1989 p. 6 as cited in Patton, 2002). In the current study, phenomenology aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the decision-making and permission-giving processes an individual experiences with regards to marital infidelity. In this study, phenomenological methodology was used to discover and identify key themes and patterns of the decision-making and permission-giving processes that occur in the participant's experience of marital infidelity.

Under this phenomenological approach, the theory utilized in this study is Kurk Lewin's (1942) field theory, which will provide a framework for understanding both the decision-making and permission-giving processes that occur with regards to entering into an extramarital affair. Although not a theory, concepts from *Sanctions for Evil*, by Nevitt Sanford and Craig Comstock (1971) will also be used as sensitizing concepts in order to understanding how individuals limit cognitive dissonance as a means of giving themselves permission to have an affair.

## **Research Questions**

Qualitative research focuses on five types of purpose: (1) basic, (2) applied, (3) summative evaluation, (4) formative evaluation, and (4) action (Patton, 2002). The purpose of the current study was basic research, which is research to gain knowledge, understanding, and explanation, with the most prestigious contribution being to generate new theories (Patton, 2002). The overarching research questions used to guide this investigation were: How does one give herself permission to have an affair? How does one make the decision to have an affair?

The specific questions that will be addressed in the study include:

1. What are the attractions to marital infidelity?
2. What are the repulsions to marital infidelity?
3. What are the barriers to marital infidelity?
4. How is permission given to have a martial affair?

## **Sampling Strategy**

Qualitative research lends itself to purposeful sampling. This type of sampling typically focuses on a relatively small sample “selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth” (Patton, 2002 p. 46). Patton (2002) explained that the logic and power of using purposeful sampling comes from the importance of an in-depth understanding, which requires selecting information-rich cases, from which the researcher can learn about issues of central importance. The type of purposeful sampling that was employed in the current study was criterion sampling. Patton (2002) described the logic of this type of sampling as “to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance, a strategy common in quality assurance efforts”, Patton continues by stating that “the point of

criterion sampling is to be sure to understand cases that are likely to be information rich” (p. 238). Another important component of the sampling was to gain a homogenous sample, which is when a small group of people is chosen with similar backgrounds and experiences for the purpose of describing a particular subgroup in depth (Patton, 2002). The unit of analysis, will be individuals, who were recruited through word of mouth. I used the curiosity of those around me as an opportunity to describe my research and ask if they knew of any individuals they may have known that would be interested in participating in the study. The individuals were recruited from the Gulf Coast area of Mississippi. Participation criteria included the following: participants must (1) be female, (2) be between the ages of 24 and 55, (3) have been involved in a marital affair during some point in their marriage, that (4) was not part of an open marriage agreement, (5) occurred more than one night, and (6) are no longer involved with the affair partner. Finally, (7) it has been at least one year since the affair has ended. I decided on the participation criteria based on my sampling method. In order for the research to provide information-rich cases to provide an in-depth understanding of marital infidelity I must have participants with that experience. Criteria 1 and 2 serve the purpose of narrowing variables so the data will be more consistent from case to case. It was also important to study only women because previous research suggests differences in the views and occurrence of marital infidelity, based on gender. Criteria 3, 4, 5 are important because actually having the affair is the experience. If the affair occurred in the form of a mutually agreed upon marital arrangement, it will change the decision-making and permission-giving processes that occur. Excluding one night stands helps to ensure that the women participating had to actively make a decision and not claim to have been “swept up by the moment” on one occasion. In some instances, a one night stand can be written off as a behavior that occurred when they were not in their right mind. The

final two criteria, 6 and 7, are important because the individual has had time to gain insight on the occurrence of the marital infidelity. If a participant was still actively engaged in an affair or had recently ended the affair, other factors, such as situational anger, may come into play that may take away from the insight of her experience. For the purpose of the current study, the operational definition of marital infidelity is a sexual and emotional relationship with someone other than his or her spouse during the time of marriage.

Patton (2002) explained, “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 245). For the current study, the goal was to recruit four individuals and to collect data that elicited each individual’s experience of marital infidelity. The rationale for choosing a small number of people is because of the value being placed on the richness of the information, which will yield an in-depth analysis of the decision-making and permission-giving aspects of marital infidelity.

The participants were chosen based on the selection criteria. The researcher used the media generated from the research topic to recruit participants for the current study. As the researcher, I took the opportunity, when asked about the research topic, to inform individuals, inquiring about the research about the participation criteria. I also used the inquiry as an opportunity to inform them that participating would allow the participants to share the story of their experience, and take part in new research about the process of marital infidelity. This would then, hopefully, lead to new information that could help clinicians work with couples who have experienced marital infidelity and use the information as a tool in educating individuals and couples before infidelity occurs. Once this technique had begun, it continued to grow until the sample size of 4 individuals was reached.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection began once I obtained approval from The Kansas State University Internal Human Subjects Review Board. A copy of the approval was maintained for personal records. Individuals were given a consent form to sign prior to the interview process explaining the purpose and focus of the study, my background as the researcher, permission to be audio taped, that there are no “right or wrong” answers, and if at any time they began to feel uncomfortable or no longer wanted to participate in the study they had the right to end the interview.

Demographic information, such as age, ethnicity, length of marriage, education, income level, occupation, age when married, religious background, and number of children was collected using a form compiled by the researcher and completed by each individual prior to the interview. Paring the demographic information with the participant’s age allowed the researcher to identify similarities and differences (see appendix).

### ***In-depth interviews.***

Janesick (1998) defined an interview as “a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic” (p. 30). This was the core method of data collection in the present study.

Data were collected through the use of in-depth interviews. The goal of semi-structured interviews is to explore a topic openly and allow the participants being interviewed to express their own opinions and ideas in their own words (Esterberg, 2002). Patton (2002) labeled this type of semi-structured interview the general interview guide approach, which was utilized for

the current study. The general interview guide provides topics, a list of questions or issues, or subject areas related to the area of research, and gives freedom to the interviewer to explore, probe and ask questions that will clarify or shed light on that particular subject. The semi-structured interview was selected because it allowed the research to follow the lead of the participant if new information was offered that was not anticipated for the interview guide. The interview guide was pretested using a pilot mock interview resulting in the rewording of some of the questions and the addition of more questions.

Interview questions focused on the relational background and dynamics of the couple, (e.g. what attracted her to her spouse, marital communication and conflict, how conflict was resolved, and level of commitment), the marital affair (What turned you away from your spouse? How did you meet the affair partner, how they started, continued, and ended the affair, consequences of the affair), relationship with family and friends, stresses (if any) occurring in their life at the time of meeting the affair partner/having the affair, and their thoughts and perceptions about the affair once it had ended. Examples of the questions are as follows: What attracted you to your spouse? How long were you married before you engaged in the marital affair? Tell me about the “turn-ons” and “turn-offs” in your marriage? How did you manage conflict and stress in your marriage? What attracted you to having an affair? Prior to the affair did you have any negative thoughts about having an affair? Were there any barriers that made having the affair difficult? How did the affair end? What happened next? How do you perceive the affair now that it is over?

The interviews were conducted by me and held in a neutral location that was agreed upon by both parties. Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes to an hour and a half per each individual. All interviews, aside from the debriefing session, were audio taped.

Confidentiality was maintained by assigning each piece of identifying information a code. All interviews including the audiotapes, transcriptions, consent forms and computer disks remained locked in a file cabinet located in the researcher's home. The master list connecting each individual to the codes has been kept separate from the other data and files in a different locked area. After the interview, a list of referrals for local professionals was offered to each participant due to the chance that the discussion of the issues in the interview might have stirred up emotions the participant may want to discuss with a professional.

### **Researcher as a Measurement Tool**

A key factor in qualitative research is the credibility of the researcher. This will affect the way the interview is conducted and the way findings are perceived (Patton, 2002). My experiences and training affect the credibility of the current study. Due to my involvement in the research process, a brief description of my background is provided. I am a white female in my thirties and was raised in the North. My ethnic background is Italian and is of great importance to me. I come from a middle working class family, where my parents instilled the value of education.

I am a novice researcher, but have had training in qualitative research via several methodology classes. I also have participated in the collection and analysis of qualitative research. I have of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Wright State University, and a Master of Science degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from the University of Southern Mississippi. I also am currently working on my Doctorate degree in Marriage and Family Therapy at Kansas State University. I have seven years of experience as a therapist and have worked with a diverse group of individuals, couples, and groups. I have been married for eight

years to a man from the South, where we currently reside and have two children and numerous pets for whom we love and care.

Due to the nature of the current study and the emersion in the data, as a means of understanding the process of decision-making, with regards to marital infidelity, it is important that you understand my bias as the researcher, as I will be the one drawing conclusions about the study. Therefore, I tried to be aware of my potential bias. It was crucial for me to stay in the researcher role and slide into my therapist role, which would be my natural tendency. Once I became an adult and my father's father passed away, we were told about my grandfather's history of having girlfriends, while still being married to my grandma. I was told by my dad and uncle that he did not even try to hide it and would spend his money and time with his girlfriends, rather than my grandma. My grandmother was so embarrassed that she would not even leave the house. I never asked how my dad and uncle handled it, but I figured they were too young to say or do much. Still even today, I could tell in their voices it was a painful experience for them. Once I got into my Master's program and learned more about marital infidelity, I realized how common infidelity is, and understood that there was a lack of research in this area. It became an interest of mine to look at the process that occurs in order for marital infidelity to happen. Although, I feel I have the power to be in a neutral stance about marital infidelity because, I know how hurtful it can be, I also know that couples can recover from marital infidelity and go on to have a happy marriage. Where most people may view marital infidelity as an event that ruins and ends a marriage, because of my background as a Marriage and Family Therapist, I see it as more manageable issue that the couple must deal with, while continuing to move forward in their marital relationship. Both as a researcher and clinician, I have found both clients and subjects to view marital infidelity as a difficult ordeal but one that can be overcome with hard

work and help of a therapist. I feel my neutral position allowed me to provide an unbiased stance in my research. My intention in the current study was not to determine if marital infidelity was right or wrong, but to identify the processes of decision-making and permission-giving of marital infidelity, so therapists can better understand the phenomenon, provide education and aid couples in affair proofing their marriage, and help in recovery if they have a client that presents with marital infidelity.

I feel that, while working on this research project, I have been able to develop a better understanding of the difficulties of marriage and how much work it takes to stay committed in a society that makes it difficult to do so. Usually, infidelity is glorified by movies and presents an attitude of “if you are not happy find someone that will make you happy” instead of working through “the good times and the bad”. The media presents, “do what is best for you, rather than do what is best for your family”. As a therapist, I realize that marriage takes hard work and that it is impossible for things to be handled in a perfect manner all the time. Furthermore, I feel my experience with clients who have worked through marital infidelity has influenced my perspective by showing me that healing from such a negative event can occur. It has also influenced my decision to do research in this area so that, as therapists, we can work with our clients before an affair occurs.

The impact I feel I had on the participants in this study may have come from my being a therapist and their feeling that I was judging them and their decision to have an affair. This may have hampered the participants’ willingness to be open and honest about their experience. I do feel that my disclosure of my commitment not to judge them and that I was looking to learn more from them about the process of marital infidelity, may have offset any uncomfortable feelings that may have hampered the research/interview process.

## Analysis

The analysis for this study included four main aspects: (1) organization of the data, (2) protecting the data, (3) coding and finding themes, patterns, and categories, and (4) determining substantive significance.

The data collection method used in the current study was in-depth interviews so both the audiotapes and transcripts of the interviews were the source of data. As the researcher, I interviewed each participant. I used a college student with research experience to transcribe the audiotapes using a transcription program available for computers. I set this standard to ensure that the individual transcribing the data had previous experience in this area. It was important that as the researcher, I systematically recorded (in the form of memos) any ideas or categories that emerged, as I collected and analyzed the data. Rafuls and Moon (1996) stated “memos allow the researcher to write up theoretical ideas related to coding of phenomena (i.e. incidents or indicators) and their relationships” (p.71)

The data were protected by making multiple copies on computer disks and jump drives, saving data to the computer’s hard drive, and emailing data (without identifying information) to myself and my major professor. I also made several hard copies, all of which were kept in a locked file cabinet for confidentiality and back-up purposes.

The method used for coding of the data included the primary steps of the Moustakas transcendental phenomenological model (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) described a four-step method; (1) *epoche*, (2) phenomenological reduction (3) imaginative variation, and (4) synthesis of texture and structure. The purpose of the current study is exploratory and the goal is to describe and understand the experience of the participants. During the first step of the analysis, “*epoche* requires the researcher to look before passing judgment and that judgment of

what is “real” or “most real” be suspended until all the evidence is in (Ihde, 1977) The research questions led the analysis. The second step in the data analysis involved phenomenological reduction, using “bracketing”. Within each question I began looking for key phrases and statements that spoke directly to the phenomenon (marital infidelity) in question (Denzin, 1989). The questions were developed to help the researcher identify patterns, themes and concepts within each category of question. Finally, “bracketing” included interpreting the meanings of the key phrases and statements, inspecting the meanings for what they revealed about the essential, recurring features of marital infidelity, and finally, offering a tentative statement of marital infidelity, in terms of the essential recurring features (Denzin, 1989). After phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation included examining all the data as equal, then organizing it into meaningful clusters, eliminating any irrelevant data and identifying the invariant themes within the data (Patton, 2002). Once the themes were identified, the researcher developed “enhance or expanded versions of the invariant themes” (Patton, 2002 p. 486) by looking at them from “different views” (p. 486). The final stage of the analysis was to provide “a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994 p. 144). This involved the researcher giving a deeper meaning to the participant’s experiences as a group by showing patterns and relationships between the participants experiences (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenological data analysis involves a back-and-forth movement from one participant’s stories to another’s, while looking for meanings that connect and meanings that differentiate between the stories (Hess & Handel, 1959, 1967).

Prior to analyzing the data, sensitizing concepts, which refer to categories that the analyst brings to the data, were used in order to provide the researcher with a “sense of direction along which to look” (Blumer, 1969). Sanford and Comstock’s (1971) ideas were used as sensitizing

concepts with regards to permission giving (legitimizing evil, rationalization, guilt-free, depersonalization, dehumanization). They allowed me to give meaning and understanding to the process of limiting cognitive dissonance as a way of the participants giving themselves permission to have a marital affair.

## **CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS**

There have been numerous studies on marital infidelity but still relatively little is known about it. Most studies focus on factors that predict the occurrence of marital infidelity or what occurs to the relationship once an affair has taken place. The purpose of this study was to examine the decision-making process one goes through, prior to having the affair. It also focuses on how a person is able to give herself permission to have the affair. I wanted to explore marital infidelity from the perspective of the spouse having the affair by examining the process that occurred, leading up to the development of the affair. This chapter provides a comprehensive description of the four participants involved in the study who had previously engaged in an extramarital affair. Each completed an in-depth interview. According to Patton (2002), the two primary sources to draw from to organize the analysis include the questions generated and both the analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection. My goal was to get at the process that occurred prior to the women having the affair and how they gave themselves permission to keep moving forward toward the affair. Data regarding these areas were from the narratives of the women who were interviewed. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews are presented below.

### **Description of the Sample**

A total of four participants completed the semi-structured interview. Pseudonyms are used to protect their privacy. I interviewed them in person after they were recruited through criterion sampling. Figure 2 summarizes the demographics of the participants (each of whom has been given a fictitious name).

Figure 2 – DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Pseudonym	Lexi	Isabel	Liza	Kara
Age	51	48	24	36
Race	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Age at time of 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	19	18	23	19
# of years married when affair began	6 years	3 years	7 months	6 years
# of marital affairs while married to 1 <sup>st</sup> husband	“A Few”	2	1	1
Divorced	X	X	X	X
Remarried		X		X
# of Children	3	5	0	2
Education	Some College	High School Diploma	Graduate Degree	College Degree
Income Level	\$16,000 - 30,000	\$16,000 - 30,000	\$31,000 - 45,000	\$31,000 - 45,000
Occupation	Sales	Disabled	Education	Curriculum & Training Specialist
Religion	Baptist	Baptist	Baptist	Baptist

## Description of Individual Participants

### *Lexi*

At the time of the interview, Lexi was 51 years old and divorced from her husband after 21 years of marriage. She had never remarried but was hopeful that she would meet the right man one day. She reported getting married at the age of 19 and stated she had been married for approximately six years when she began having an extramarital affair. She reported that she met her husband when she was in high school and, while they were dating, she found out she was pregnant with another man's child. They broke up for a while but then resumed dating. Lexi reported that her husband accepted the child as his own and adopted her when she was 9 years old. Lexi made it clear that both she and her husband were from abusive homes and felt that both she and her husband were eager to get out of their parents' homes and on their own. Lexi reported that things started to change about 4 or 5 years into the marriage and that her husband began drinking and doing drugs. At the time, she did not know of his drug use. Her husband started spending more time away from home and they had difficulty resolving conflict. A majority of the time he would just give in to whatever she was saying.

Lexi reported that she never thought about having an affair but, while spending time with friends drinking and smoking a joint, they began joking about what it would be like to be single again. She spoke of an ex-boyfriend, and Lexi reported that she did not have the affair with him but that reminiscing about him got her started thinking about other people. The man with whom she did have the affair was an old friend with whom she grew up. Lexi reported that he was there for her and showed her attention at a time when she felt alone and rejected. During that time, Lexi reported that she was unhappy in her marriage and there were a lot of arguments and

fights taking place. She also shared with me that her husband was physically and emotionally abusive to her at times and that she was afraid for her life because he had threatened her in the past. Lexi also shared that she went on to have a “few” more affairs and said she would leave it at that. Lexi did make it clear that she loved her husband very much, when they married, and wished that things could have gone differently.

Lexi presented as a bright and insightful woman who was willing to share her story. She appeared interested in the topic of marital infidelity and expressed an interest in being able to contribute to research. Lexi displayed an appropriate range of affect. She was sad at times to the point of shedding tears, but was also able to find the humor in certain situations. She was open and honest during the interview and was willing to share details of her marriage and marital infidelity. Lexi described herself as a very religious person and, at times, I could hear the guilt she felt about the decisions she had made in the past. On the other hand, she was very positive about her future, especially now that God was involved in her life.

### *Isabel*

At the time of the interview, Isabel was 48 years old, and had been divorced from her first husband; remarried her second, which ended in divorce; and then remarried to her third husband, to whom she is currently married. Isabel was married at 18 years old to her first husband and reported being married for approximately three years before having a marital affair. She also reported being pregnant when they got married.

Isabel reported that when she first met her husband, they enjoyed being together and having fun together. She reported that there was not much conflict in their relationship, but when there was some, it involved the issues of her husband’s drinking and being gone all the time. She

reported feeling as if the responsibility of running the household and raising the children was solely on her shoulders, while her husband worked, took naps and then went out partying. She felt as if he was not spending time with her or the children.

Isabel stated that after having their second child, she had spent time with a close friend who had introduced her to a man who began showing her attention. She reported that it started out as a friendship, just talking, and, after about month, moved into an affair. She reported feeling as if her husband was “doing his own thing”, so she got tired of it and started “doing her own thing”. She reported finding the affection and the feeling of being wanted that she needed.

Isabel reported that her husband saw her with the other man, and they made an effort to get back together but they went through a series of episodes of being split up and then getting back together. After trying to work things out about five or six times, they decided to divorce after four years of marriage.

Isabel presented herself as cautious and nervous. She was a woman of few words, only answering the interview questions with brief responses. She needed prompts to elaborate. She was difficult to engage in conversation but I did not get the sense that she was being guarded. Instead I got the sense she was just very to the point about things, not a story teller. Toward the end of the interview she shared that she had recently found out that her daughter’s real father was her affair partner and not her first husband. She reported that she and her husband were on and off so many times, but it never crossed her mind to think that it could have been the affair partner’s child. This new discovery has caused conflict with her daughter and at the time of the interview, was not on “speaking terms” with her. She expressed regret in getting married just because she was pregnant at 18, not trying harder to work things out with her first husband, and, finally, about not finding out, for sure, who the father of her daughter was until recently.

## *Liza*

At the time of the interview, Liza was 24 years old, and was currently divorced from her husband but was hopeful that they might be able to reconcile and get back together at some point. She reported getting married at the age of 23 and having a marital affair seven months after they had been married. Liza and her husband had met in high school and had dated six years before getting married. She reported that they had broken up a couple of times when she was in college because of the stresses associated with their long-distance relationship.

Once the couple married, they had difficulties from the start. Her husband was a new police officer and had a nontraditional work schedule that left the couple on opposite shifts for work and life. When they were home together, usually one was sleeping to get ready for his/her next day of work. Liza reported that the communication in the marriage was really good about big issues but difficult and limited when it came time to discuss the daily routines and “odds and ends” issues.

Liza reported that she had remained friends with an ex-lover she had, while she and her, at the time boyfriend, were split up. She had continued the friendship even after she and her boyfriend got married. Liza reported that the relationship was platonic, but at some point she said she began feeling more emotionally connected to her affair partner because she could talk to him and she felt as if her own husband could not even give her five minutes. She reported talking with the affair partner about both “everyday things” and also personal information about her and her marriage. Liza reported that she never thought about having an affair but described it as an ongoing process, because she began to feel an excitement with him that she was not feeling with her husband.

Although Liza and her affair partner continued to communicate through emails, she reported that the physical aspect of their relationship occurred only one time. After some time had passed, her husband began to suspect something but never had any proof. Liza reported that her conscience bothered her everyday and she decided to tell her husband the truth, even though she knew it would tear apart the relationship. Liza wanted to repair the relationship and took the initiative to speak with her pastor and attend therapy. Her husband acted as if he wanted to repair the relationship, at times, but quickly followed through with the divorce. Liza continues to have a relationship with her ex-husband and hopes that they will be able to work things out one day.

Liza presented herself as a very intelligent and insightful woman. She was very open and honest during the interview and displayed appropriate affect. She was easily engaged in conversation and cooperative throughout the interview. Liza had attended therapy/counseling after the affair and I felt as if she was able to recognize a lot of relationship issues that were occurring in her marriage because she had talked, in depth, about the affair and her marriage prior to the interview. Additionally, Liza suggested that her Christianity and faith helped her work on self-forgiveness and deal with the issues of guilt surrounding the affair.

### ***Kara***

At the time of the interview, Kara was 36 years old and currently married to her second husband. Kara reported marrying her first husband at 19 and having an affair about five to six years into their marriage. She reported that he was real nice and that he wined and dined her and liked to take her out on nice dates. She also reported that she thought he was cute and sexy.

Kara reported that the early part of the marriage was great, but then she began to notice it declining when he got a job in livestock sales. She reported that he started coming in late at night and leaving in the early morning. She reported that they rarely saw each other and they began arguing about the amount of time they spent together. They began living two separate lives, he was “doing his thing” and she was “doing her thing”. After about five years of battling and begging him to spend time with her, she became frustrated and moved out after a fight they had about his being with another woman. After he begged her to come back she got pregnant and reported that he was a good husband for a few months, but it did not last. After her husband admitted to having an affair, she reported spending more time with a friend on whom she had a crush when she was younger. She reported that the affair partner was showing her attention and made her feel good about herself. The emotional relationship progressed quickly to a sexual relationship and she reported that she moved back in with her parents and began seeing her affair partner, privately, on a regular basis. At this point, Kara asked for a divorce but then decided to go back to her husband one more time. The relationship with her affair partner continued and lasted about five months. After moving back in with her husband, she had found drugs on him and then decided, enough was enough, and filed for divorce. She ended both her marriage, after about 6 years and the relationship with her affair partner.

Kara was very cooperative and presented herself as very confident. She was open to discussing her experiences and easily engaged in conversation. She never appeared to feel guilty about the affair and she reported that she would have done it again, if the circumstances had been the same, because she felt like the affair had given her the confidence to move on with her life, get out of a bad marriage, and find the man of her dreams, to whom she is currently married and with whom she has a wonderful relationship.

## **Research Question One: What are the attractions to marital infidelity?**

All of the women interviewed viewed marital infidelity as immoral and as a negative component to their marital relationship. None of the women intended for the marital infidelity to occur, but, instead, described their marital relationship as a key component for making the decision to move in that direction. This brings us to the first category, **repulsions within the marriage.**

### *Repulsions within the marriage*

Each of the women described **a lack of quality time** for the marriage as an issue in their marital relationship. After being married for four years, Lexi explained that the marital relationship began to change: “He started drinking and he started doing drugs too. But I didn’t know he was doing drugs, I just thought he was drinking a lot, he’d stay gone all the time. He’d work two or three jobs.” Similarly, Isabel said, “After we had our first child, he’d come in from work, take his bath. I had supper ready, take him a little nap, get up and go out partying all the time and leave me home with the kids.” When asked how it made her feel, she responded, “Angry, he didn’t spend time with me and our child”.

Liza discussed her husband’s work schedule as a contributing factor as to why they were having difficulties being a newly married couple. She compared her relationship with her husband to that of a father and daughter. She explained:

He worked a lot of night shifts, at first his schedule was a month of days and a month of nights but was.... kind of like three days on, two days off. But the nights and days would shift....then he got [a new position], that half the week was days and half the week was nights. So it was constant change....I was by myself a lot. Even if he was off he would say he had to keep his schedule..his body time clock or whatever. So when I would go to bed at like ten or eleven, you know, he would come up there tell me goodnight and then he would might go to bed at like

four or five. So it was we never went to bed at the same time. I mean, I felt like I was being tucked in by my dad.

Liza also stated, “I would have to schedule in a time to talk to him...(and) when we would have time for us, like on his days off, he was always wanting to do stuff with other couples, which, to me, was fine sometimes, but not every single day that you’re off.”

In Kara’s case, she became more susceptible to an affair after her husband started a new job a year into their marriage. She explained, “He started coming in late at night and he would leave early in the mornings and it’s like we never saw each other.” She continued, “We would always argue. I wanted him to spend time with me and he would always make other plans....do his thing.”

Three of the four women discussed the use of drugs or alcohol by their spouses. Since it was too late for me to pursue this further, the evidence I have does not yield enough data to say conclusively that this was a repulsion in their marital relationship. The assumption could be made that anytime spent doing drugs or drinking was time taken away from paying attention to their spouse.

Each woman described negative components of her marital relationship that allowed her to be drawn towards marital infidelity. They found comfort in their affair partners because the affair partners were able to fulfill needs that were not being met in their marital relationships.

Previous to becoming involved in an extramarital relationship, the women all expressed the **inability to resolve conflict** within their marriage. Two of the four women discussed ignoring conflict, while the other two tried, but were unsuccessful at discussing the issues with their husbands. Both of these women explained that their husbands would hear them and agree to work on the issues, but things would never get better. When asked how conflict was resolved,

Isabel responded with, “I’ll say really ignored it...went on about our own little way, do what we did.” Similarly, Lexi stated, “I’d usually just leave until he cooled off and then I’d come back and pout and not say nothing to him.” When I followed up with a question about finding a solution, she responded, “we would kind of make up at the end....he would probably wind up giving in to whatever I said.” Kara, on the other hand, stated, “We would try and he would say, you know, I’m (going) to do better....and he never would.” Similarly, Liza stated,

resolving conflict, when he would actually sit down and listen to what I was saying and think about it, he was able to see it...it was just the point of sitting down or having the time to do it...There was never a solution for his schedule.....or for spending time with the other couples. He would try...if it was an ongoing issue, maybe the next time he was off, he would do something with me, but it would seem like then it would be back at the same point

Liza also discussed issues that she said bothered her for years, such as issues with his family and wanting everything to be his way that she said she had just swept under the rug.

When discussing how solutions to conflict were reached, none of the women talked about coming to an agreement with their husbands. Instead they explained that things would either get pushed under the rug, even if they did make up, or it involved one partner unilaterally giving in to the other. The attraction to marital infidelity began to grow for the women, because the unresolved issues continued to be a source of conflict in the marital relationship, pushing the spouses further away from each other.

The women in the study explained that the **lack of attention** they received from their husbands was a large contributing factor to why they were unhappy in their marriages. This became apparent as they discussed their extramarital relationships and the void that was being filled by the affair partner. Lexi explained:

I want somebody in my life that would love me for me. That would just show attention to me for me...And you know made me feel like I was worthwhile. It was just somebody there to have attention with, show me attention...make me feel better about myself.

Isabel explained starting to think about having affair when “somebody started showing me the affection that I needed....the touching and feeling and being wanted.” Similarly, Liza stated, “Most of the time (my husband) wasn’t giving me five minutes in a day to talk to him and, if I did, he would just be like tell him what I had to say and it’d be like okay...there was no conversation about anything.” Liza continued by explaining her relationship with the affair partner:

Just to know that there would be attention you know and that, even though he would probably not want to hear anything I had to say, but no matter what I wanted to talk about he would talk about it to me, you know.

Kara also experienced the lack of attention in her marital relationship by stating, “I felt like he (affair partner) was giving me the attention that I was not getting from my husband”. She went on to describe that the affair partner “would call me and sweet talk me, just, he even sent me roses to work....it was the attention that I never got.”

None of the women described actively seeking to have a marital affair. The women’s susceptibility to having an affair involved an ongoing process that included an inability to spend quality time in their marital relationship, resolve conflict, and a lack of attention from their husbands, all of which increased the repulsions within their marriage. In turn, the repulsions within the marriage, at the same time, began to act as an attraction to marital infidelity. The reason the repulsions also acted as attractions to marital infidelity was because of the level of dissatisfaction the women were experiencing in their marriages, which was created by the repulsions. Therefore, these repulsions gave rise to dissatisfactions which made the affair partner

appear to be more desirable than the spouse. The women began having affairs when the opportunity arose and they started to receive the positive attention from the affair partners that they were not receiving in their marital relationships. This leads us to the second category, attractions to marital infidelity.

### *Attractions to marital infidelity*

Although none of the women discussed actively seeking an affair partner, even though all four of the participants became actively involved in a relationship outside of their marriage. Each of these relationships began as a friendship, in which, they could disclose issues with which they were dealing in their marriage. None of the women was looking to have an affair and, prior to having the affair, viewed her affair partner as a friend and innocent relationship. In this study, several components played into the participants' attractions to marital infidelity, including; the "just friends" illusion, the support of family and/or friends to have an affair, and the positive attention each of the women received from the affair partner.

All of the women interviewed became involved with someone they believed was **"just a friend."** Three of the four women interviewed had an affair with either an ex-flame or friend, and the fourth woman developed a friendship with a man that turned into an affair. One of the women discussed how spending time with friends and reminiscing about the "single days" had sparked her interest about other people. Lexi stated, during this time "my friends came over and we started drinking...just goofing off and talking about how it would be like if we were single and stuff like that. So umm, my sister-in-law at the time knew where my ex-boyfriend was, so we went (and) looked him up." Although this did not turn into anything, she explained "so, I

went to my friend, to my old friends that I grew up with, that's the one I had the affair with...there wasn't nothing between us, it was just that he was there." Similarly, Liza stated:

Okay, the guy I cheated on my husband with was a guy who, during our senior year of college, when we were broken up, I kind of, you know, not quite dated him, but you know, almost [to that] point and hung out with him.

When asked if she had a sexual relationship with this guy, she stated that she was sexually involved with him but it was in the context of having fun and hanging out, as opposed to dating. Liza went on to say, "I mean the communication continued, even when me and (my boyfriend) got back together, not that often, but you know, like more on a friendly basis." She went on to say, "even when (her current husband) picked up on it, he read some e-mails (but) had no clue that anything had happened. I mean it was just innocent." When asked if she felt like she was ever crossing the line of friendship she responded,

I didn't get that feeling...I felt extremely close to him, and it's just from that time period that we dated when [my husband] and I weren't together. we were extremely close during that time, so it was like, I am sure if it's somebody who I just met or some guy, you know I would have felt like conversations would have been crossing the line, but because of the history you're like; well he's been a great friend to me.

Finally, Kara discussed a crush she had in the past who became her affair partner. She discussed keeping in touch with a man, whom she called her "young sweetheart" or crush, "I've always kept in touch, we've always been friends....and I still keep in touch with him today."

Another similarity between the women interviewed was the **support of their family members and/or friends** to have a marital affair. Only one of the women, Liza, kept her affair quiet and did not involve the knowledge or efforts of others. Although she did state, "my sisters knew that we were good friends, so they probably knew that there was an emotional connection there, but they didn't know about the affair." The other three women had friends and/or family

members who supported the affair relationship. Kara explained, “so of course I lied to my momma and daddy, I said I’m going out with my cousin, so they (would) babysit for me cuz I didn’t want them to (suspect)...so my cousin, I (would) ride with her, I meet the guy, and anyway...my cousin would cover up for me.” She continued to talk about the close relationship with her cousin and stated that her cousin “was glad because she didn’t like my husband...she encouraged me, she’s like, ‘I’ll take you anywhere’. You know, just she would take me to meet him.” Lexi discussed that two of her sisters-in-law knew about her affair, she said, “One of them would go with me because she had an affair too.” When asked about the effect it had on her, she stated, “They wanted me to leave. They said, ‘you need to get away from [your husband], he’s gonna kill you’.” Similarly, Isabel stated that she had both friends and family members who knew about her affair and one, in particular, who she stated “told me, ‘go ahead’; cuz they was, she was having one....she knew everything I was going through, like I knew everything she was going through.”

The influence of ex-flames, friends and family members played a significant role in the opportunity for marital infidelity to occur. For all of the women, this had an effect on both how they viewed their marital relationship and on their affair relationship as well. In this study, the final component that had an effect on the attraction to marital infidelity was the **positive attention** the women received from their affair partners.

The level of attention each of the women received from her affair partners was a common theme for each of the interviewees. At moments it was difficult to listen to and again to read through in the transcripts because of the sadness each of them portrayed. Liza explained:

You know, so it’s not that I had planned for the affair or thought it was gonna happen, but I at some point, I was more emotionally connect to [the affair partner] than I was to my husband...because I could talk to

[him] and you know most of the time [my husband] wasn't giving me five minutes in a day to talk to him and, if I did, he would just be like tell him what I had to say and it'd be like okay, there was no conversation about anything.

Lexi stated: "I want[ed] somebody in my life that would love me for me. That would just show attention to me, for me, and you know made me feel like I was worthwhile." When asked about the affair, Lexi continued by saying, "I think it was an attention thing....I could go do things and his whole family accepted me and they accepted my kids." Kara discussed similar attention from her affair partner: "I felt like he was giving me the attention that I was not getting from my husband, and like one night we went to, after we ate, we went to the mall and he like bought me clothes and bought me stuff and he was giving me the attention." Finally, Isabel explained what attracted her to the idea of having an affair, "I guess the affection that I needed. The touching and feeling and being wanted...the hugging, the holding my hand, just you know."

One of the participants described her participation in the marital affair as a positive experience. I feel that it is important to present this in the results for two reasons: (1) she was on the opposite side of the spectrum, compared to the other women in the study and (2) there is previous research to support what she reported. When I asked Kara, if looking back at that time in her life, she would have the affair again she was the only one of the women to say "yes". She stated:

Yes, I would if at that time, I would do it all over again because I look back and it got me out, you know. I feel like that is what really got me out of my marriage. Having the affair showed me that I am a very strong person and I am somebody. The guy I was having the affair with, he like brought the best out in me because he encouraged me...taught me I could be somebody, I could make something of myself. I feel like I need to give the guy credit. He was the solid rock at the time that I stood on and, if it wouldn't have been for him, I would probably still, and I can't say [for sure], be in that relationship.

The support and encouragement the affair partner gave to Kara attracted her to marital infidelity because it made her a stronger person than she was in her marital relationship.

Each of the women described the positive attention she was getting from what started out as friendship and moved to an affair. None of the women stated starting a sexual relationship prior to an emotional relationship. The sexual component came after the emotional relationship was established, which served to progress the relationship further. The positive attention each woman received only made the connection in the extramarital relationship stronger because she had a shift in focus from the negative qualities in her marriage to the positive attention she was getting in her extramarital relationship. This allowed the women to feel satisfaction they were not feeling in their marriage, which made them more committed to developing an extramarital relationship.

This section demonstrated how the women, interviewed for this study, became involved in marital infidelity, when the dissatisfaction they were feeling in their marriage was replaced with positive attention from a friend or ex-flame. The affair partner was fulfilling needs that were not being met by husbands. Although each of the women did not intentionally seek to engage in an extramarital affair, the illusion of being “just friends” with the other person allowed her to experience positive attention, which, in turn, pulled her toward an extramarital commitment and made it increasingly difficult to stay committed to her marriage.

### **Research Question Two: What are the repulsions to marital infidelity?**

Three of the four participants in the current study discussed having to deal with the conflict between having a marital affair and their moral values that told them it was not the right thing to do. Lexi reported knowing that having an affair was the wrong thing to do. During this

point of the interview, she became very emotional. She cried and was upset. She said, “I think that, for many years, I beat up myself, thinking how bad I was for having an affair.” Similarly, Liza stated; “I mean I knew it was wrong, I knew from the get go that it was wrong. I mean I am a Christian and I know I messed up and my conscience bothered me every day.” She also commented, “going to talk to [my minister] was probably worse than telling my dad what I did, you know, because it’s just the whole stigma of an affair.” Later in the interview Liza stated, that after the sexual component of her affair, “[it] was a huge, huge secret to carry, it just ate away at me so much.” Isabel commented,

If I could go back in time there’s a lot of things I would change, wouldn’t lead to no affairs. I would try to get the counseling that we would both need and do what’s best for our kids and for us. I would have stayed home with my kids like a mother should.....I shouldn’t a done that, it made me look bad as a mother.

Marital infidelity is looked down upon in traditional American culture. Most individuals view marital infidelity as immoral and do not get married with the intention of seeking comfort, both emotionally and/or physically, outside their marriage. Our morals enable us to distinguish right from wrong and to make decisions, based on that knowledge. Our morals come from our religious and cultural beliefs, family members, and experiences that we have. As we grow and develop our social contexts aid in our own creation of what we view as acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Three of the four participants also mentioned that ‘getting caught’ and ‘their children’ were also deterrents to having a marital affair. Isabel stated, “the thought of getting caught and him taking my kids away” was a fear she had considered. Lexi stated, “my kids, because I didn’t want to do anything to hurt them....and that’s what kept me married for so long because there where many times I wanted to divorce him...and I didn’t want them to grow up without a dad.”

Although she had no children, Liza said, “The fear of being caught bothered me every single day.” One of the women also mentioned being concerned she may catch a sexually transmitted infections.

When asked to look back at that time in their lives, but knowing what they know now, whether they would have the affair again within the same circumstances in their marriage, three of the four women said they would not have an affair again. They also discussed some things they would do differently. Liza stated that she would not have the affair and she stated, “the amount of time you spend together; the quality of it is important....I think it’s so important to be at home at the same time”. She continued, “being able to connect, talk and listen, communicate.” Isabel stated, “I wouldn’t cheat again...I would sit down and try to talk things over with him instead of he going his way and me going my way. If we went out we would go together, instead of us going out separate.” Finally, Lexi responded “no, I wouldn’t have stayed married, I would have left first.” The one woman who said she would do it again at that time in her life, did make a point to say, that, in the context of her current marriage, she would never have a marital affair. She stated, “if he was not communicating with me we would sit down and talk...not let things escalate.” This may mean that, once the women had time to reflect on their experience with marital infidelity, they realized, the repulsions they had for marital infidelity.

### **Research Question Three: What are the (barriers) to marital infidelity?**

All four of the women discussed that keeping the extramarital relationship a secret was difficult at times, even though, in three of the four cases, either a friend or family member knew of the affair. Kara stated, “I was very confidential, I didn’t tell anyone anything. Act just like I was happily married.” Keeping a secret of marital infidelity is an obstacle because of the work

and time it requires. The women had to remember to constantly lie about their whereabouts and who they were spending time with. This can also lead to having to cover up the spending of finances. Kara also discussed lying to her mother, stating, “I was very manipulating to get what I wanted, so she would always babysit.” Ironically, having a close friend or family member, who knew their secret affair, also helped to them overcome the barriers because this person would cover things up for them or help out with children and babysitting if need be.

Another barrier that was discussed was making sure they were not seen in public settings with the affair partner for fear that someone may see them and tell their spouse what was going on. Lexi identified, “sneaking away, meeting him at different places” and “make[ing] sure I knew where my husband was in a different little town” as obstacles with which she had to deal. Similarly, Kara and Liza both mentioned meeting the affair partner out of town. Kara stated, “My big thing was, somebody might see us.” In every case, the women discussed meeting with the affair partner in different cities that were away from the community they were involved with on a daily basis.

The final barrier was children. Isabel said that she had to “make sure my kids [were] taken care of at the babysitter”. Similarly, Kara stated, “of course I lied to my momma and daddy. I said [I was] going out with my cousin so they [would] babysit for me”. Finally, Lexi stated,

I went [talking about meeting the affair partner] mostly when [my husband] was working late. If it was my kids and they were there, I wouldn't never go out when they were there. They'd be spending the night at momma's or spending the night at somebody's. If they were home I didn't. I would have stayed home.

Three of the 4 women discussed having to find babysitters for their children as a barrier to marital infidelity.

## **Research Question Four: How is permission given to have a marital affair?**

Sensitizing concepts were used as a way of understanding how the participants limited cognitive dissonance as a means of giving herself permission to have an extramarital affair. When reviewing the participant's transcripts, I continually asked myself if what the participant was saying fit within one of the sensitizing concepts. If it did, I reviewed the rest of the participant's response to confirm or disconfirm its placement under the category of a specific sensitizing concept in my presentation of the results in this chapter.

The first concept was one of *legitimizing evil*, in this case marital infidelity. One legitimizing ingredient was to hold a belief that the spouse was simultaneously evil. Lexi stated:

Because I said.....well he don't love me he just won't let me leave and...I can't leave because if I leave he is going to kill me. So I thought well he's worked 24/7 and that's fine, you see because I thought he was having an affair. And I...I remember telling him this...I remember saying if you're having an affair on me just remember, I said whatever you're doing, I'm one step ahead of you, I'm one step ahead of you. And I would say that all the time because I had a couple, a few affairs, and I remember thinking that...the reason I felt because the first few times I guess it'd eaten me up, but after that I was thinking you know what, just like the guy was telling me. "Well you know what Lexi, if he loved you; he'd be there with you. Y'all could talk. Y'all wouldn't be fighting all the time. You wouldn't be scared for your life."

It seems fair to say that Lexi could justify her actions of having an affair, because she felt her spouse was unpleasant and sinful. In this case, her spouse was not worthy of her loyalty and this belief allowed her to feel repulsed by her spouse's negative characteristics.

The second concept was *rationalization*. This was the way in which the person wanting to have the affair came to terms with her own conscience and with the value systems that questioned her behavior as being illegitimate. Lexi stated:

I think when you get married, when you move out of your parent's house and you get married, I think you think everything should be happy ever after. And you don't realize that it's not gonna be like that. So when you finally realizing that it's not that way your thinking, God something must be wrong with this because this ain't the way marriage is supposed to be. It ain't supposed to be this much work. It's supposed to be he loves me and I love him and we're happy together and we raise a happy family. That's the way you think it's gonna be. But that ain't the real life.

Liza focused on how she felt with the affair partner as a means of rationalizing her behavior. When asked what made her want to go and meet the affair partner, after talking on the phone and through email, she replied, "I guess really the excitement, just to know that there would be attention and that, even though he would probably not want to hear anything I had to say. But no matter what I wanted to talk about, he would talk about it to me."

Both of these women created an intellectual line of logic which redefined the values or morals of their marriage so that an affair was more acceptable as a choice. This began to dampen the affects of the barriers protecting the marital relationship, such as the importance of their marital vows, and minimized their repulsions to the idea of an affair.

Next, was the idea of *guilt-free* infidelity. It assumes that the individual, who was considering having the affair, denied the humanity of his or her spouse (i.e. calling names). In doing this, the spouse was not seen for whom s/he is but for the ugly person s/he is being made out to be (i.e. "nagging bitch"). Kara stated,

I was thinking the whole time, I'm like ok he done it, you know  
and I'm like, I'm gonna show that, I'm gonna show him...I'll get more than  
he could ever get (laughing)

She continued by saying, "The whole time I was thinking I've got to get over on him, I'm gonna show him, I'm not gonna sit at my momma's like he thinks I am. I'm gonna get out and show him I can get more. I can do just like what he's doing." In order to be guilt-free she used *justifications*, such as "He deserved it, because he did it to me," to place the guilt on her spouse.

The use of *depersonalization* was a concept explaining an individual's way of "switching hats", or changing one's personal definition of him or herself. Isabel commented, "It seemed like it was just all about me at the time." When I replied "Then you would leave that life and go back to [talking about the affair life]" Isabel stated, "to my other life with my kids, you just thought about you and how it made you feel." Isabel was able to give herself permission by "switching hats". When she was wearing her affair hat, it was all about her and how she felt in the moment. When she would "switch hats" back to her marriage, she would not think about the affair life she was leading. Similarly Lexi stated,

You separated your life. You thought, I'm living this life and nobody knows about it. I mean there might have been a few people that knew about it, but you're thinking nobody knows about it, I'm not hurting nobody, and somebody else is showing me attention, and their happy, and I'm happy, and who am I hurting, you know? But when it came down to it, and you went back to reality, you went back to your house and all that, then the guilt would be so bad, and stuff, that you'd just think, oh, uh, it's just overwhelming., And then it's just, and then it just gets, just got really bad. Where you don't want to deal with, I don't know, You didn't want to deal with everyday life, I guess. Cuz I know there was a lot of times that I was very very very depressed.

In essence, these two women wore one hat (marital relationship) and acted a certain way but, as soon as they changed hats (affair), they acted in a different way. Their *civilian superego* did not have to be worried, ashamed, embarrassed, or be made to feel guilty for whatever was done while they are wearing their "affair hat". The behavior, which otherwise would have been guilt ridden, was now "ok". This influenced the women into having an affair, because it allowed them to compartmentalize their behavior as two separate entities, without any crossover contamination.

Finally, the idea of *dehumanization* protected the individual from the guilt and shame they would otherwise have felt from primitive or antisocial attitudes, impulses, and actions that they directed toward those they managed to perceive as *bad humans* or less than human. If they

were bad humans, their maltreatment was justified, since their defects in human qualities were their own fault. Two types of dehumanization existed: (1) *object-directed*, which was when an individual perceived others as lacking in those attributes that were considered to be most human, and (2) *self-directed*, which related to self-image and denoted the reduction of an individual's sense of their own humanness and emptied them of human emotions and passions. Although I did not feel that this form of permission giving was directly stated by participants in the current study, I did see how it may apply indirectly. Three of the four women interviewed discussed forms of physical and verbal abuse they endured within their marital relationship, which could have, in turn, led them to perceive their spouse as lacking in the nurturing and caring attributes that we associate with being human beings. This would then fit with object-directed dehumanization.

## CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

Due to the growing prevalence and negative effects of marital infidelity, it is important for both clinicians and researchers to understand its occurrence. The purpose of this study was to examine the process individuals go through when making the decision to have an affair, particularly, how they were able to give themselves permission to have an affair. The primary goal of this qualitative study was to gain greater insight into the decision-making process of women who have participated in marital infidelity. Marital infidelity has been a large focus in recent years and previous research has suggested that as many as 50% of woman and 60% of men have engaged in marital infidelity (Glass & Wright, 1992). Although there has been a significant amount of research on marital infidelity done in recent years, the research on the process of decision-making is nonexistent. This study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how women gave themselves permission to begin and continue to have an extramarital affair, so that we can begin to understand the process that occurs leading up to an affair, along with how one gives herself permission to have an extramarital affair.

The present study included four female participants who, during the time of their first marriage, were involved in an extramarital affair. Each of the women recalled information from her first marriage and discussed the marital relationship looking back at their ex-husbands, along with information about the extramarital partner and relationship. A total of 14 themes were identified regarding the decision-making experiences of the women. These themes provide insight into the decision-making and permission-giving processes that take place in the movement away from marital commitment and into marital infidelity from the perspectives of women who had a marital affair. The themes were organized into four categories, according to

Field Theory (Lewin, 1942) and one category of permission-giving according to the concepts of Sanford and Comstock (1971). The discussion that follows analyzes the themes in the context of existing literature and research, provides theoretical explanations of themes according to field theory, draws conclusions about how participants were able to give themselves permission to have an affair, using concepts (that were subsequently reworded to fit the context of the current study) derived from Sanford and Comstock (1971), and discusses a model for women's participation in marital infidelity. Finally, implications for clinical practice will be presented, along with the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

### **Evaluation of Research and Theoretical Application**

Marital infidelity proved to have a significant impact on the lives of the woman in the current study. To better understand the women's experience of marital infidelity, the themes were organized into four categories according to field theory (repulsions within the marriage, attractions to marital infidelity, repulsions to marital infidelity, and barriers to marital infidelity) and one category according to the concepts of Sanford and Comstock (1971), which is permission giving.

#### ***Repulsions within the marriage***

The women in the study explained that the lack of attention they received from their husbands was a large contributing factor as to why all of them were unhappy in their marriages. All four of the women described feeling a yearning for intimacy that they were not getting from their husbands and that each of their affair partners was able to fulfill. The women described wanting to have a stronger connection with their husbands, whether it was by being shown more attention, physical affection, or simply by spending more time talking. According to the

participants' perceptions, their husbands did not reciprocate the feelings the women were having for the stronger connection within their marriage.

Research suggests there are many different variables that make marriage desirable, including a sense of commitment, intimacy, and the ability to communicate openly with his or her marital partner. Greeff and Malherbe (2001) found a significant positive correlation between the experience of intimacy and marital satisfaction. Examples of intimacy included social intimacy (which is the ability to share mutual friends and similarities in social networks), emotional intimacy (which is the ability to feel close to someone), and recreational intimacy (which is shared interest in hobbies or joint participation in sport). Marital satisfaction was based on issues such as communication, conflict resolution, handling of spare time, relationship with family and friends and religious orientation. Their research suggests that one of the reasons individuals are attracted to marriage is because of the level of intimacy a marital relationship can generate. Individuals in the current study expressed feeling that their spouses were not giving them the appropriate level of attention or intimacy they needed, which led to the repulsion of the spouse within the marriage.

All four of the participants believed that there was a lack of quality time for the marriage. The women used various examples to describe the lack of quality time they had in their marriage, including their spouse being gone all the time either working too much or going out with friends. It appeared as if the participants' husbands had commitments that took precedence over their marital relationship. Swensen and Trahaug (2003) measured the expression of love and level of commitment between husbands and wives and found that those whose commitment was to each other as persons, as opposed to a job or social group, had significantly fewer problems. In the current study, the participants discussed feeling as if their marriage was a

second or third priority to their husbands' jobs or social lives. The results of this study suggest that low levels of commitment from the participants' husbands acted as a repulsion to their marriage.

Previous to becoming involved in an extramarital relationship, the women all expressed the inability to resolve conflict within their marriage. Two of the four women discussed ignoring conflict, while the other two tried discussing the issues with their husbands but, after the discussion, things would continue to be the same. None of the women discussed finding solutions to conflict, so resolution was made by either sweeping things under the rug or both partner's just letting the conflict go. Research has shown a connection between effective communication and marital satisfaction (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman & Levenson, 1988, 1998; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Communication enables individuals to challenge each other, resolve conflict, and verbalize a life plan together. In the current study, the lack of communication surrounding conflict within the marriage served as repulsion within the marriage.

Overall, the findings from this study suggest that dissatisfaction within the marriage, which derives from lack of quality time, inability to resolve conflict, and lack of attention within their marital relationship, is a key contributor to the participants' repulsions within their marriages. These results correspond with the literature on marital happiness and satisfaction. If an individual is lacking in the areas that attract her to marriage in the first place, then the previous three themes identified will act as repulsions within the marriage.

### *Attractions to marital infidelity*

All of the women interviewed became involved with someone they believed was “just a friend” and three of the four women had an affair with either an ex-flame or old friend. The women explained being able to seek comfort in these relationships because they never felt it would lead to anything beyond friendship. Even the one participant who did not have an affair with someone in her past described developing an innocent friendship that turned into marital infidelity. None of the participants set out to have a marital affair. All four of the women believed in the innocence of their friendships. This theme was supported in the literature pertaining to the different types of marital infidelity. Pittman (1989) identified “accidental infidelity” as a type of marital infidelity and defined it as “incidents that were outside the usual patterns of behavior, happening in extraordinary situations, or offhandedly and without consideration of the consequences” (p. 135). For all of the participants’ “accidental infidelity” could be described as follows: the female participants found themselves in a life crisis (marital dissatisfaction), talking more intimately than normal with men who were old friends or ex-flames, and became much closer with each other because of the talk of this crisis. They began to share thoughts and feelings with each other that they did not share with their respective spouses. This drew them toward each other and away from their spouses. As things progressed they began looking to each other for support and, before they realized it, a kiss started things off, leading the two friend’s/ex-lovers, right down the path of infidelity. This type of occurrence was more likely when one or both friends/ex-flames were having marital or relationship problems and their friendship boundaries became blurred because of the unexpected intimacy they were sharing with one another. In the current study, each of the participants turned to a person outside of her marriage to deal with issues occurring within her marriage. When the level of intimacy in

these friendships surpassed the level of intimacy in their marital relationships, it became an attraction to marital infidelity. Support for the other types of infidelity was not found in this study.

Another similarity between the women interviewed was the support of the participants' family members and/or friends to have a marital affair. Only one of the women kept her affair quiet and did not involve the knowledge or efforts of others. The other three women had friends and/or family members who supported the affair relationship. Although there is not a lot of research connecting an individual's social networks to marital infidelity, two studies were found. In one study, researchers found that individuals, who lacked social support for their spousal relationship from family and friends, would be more likely to engage in extramarital behaviors (Zak, Coulter, Giglio, Hall, Sanford & Pellowski, 2002). In another study conducted by Atwater (1979), women were interviewed with open-ended questions to investigate the transition into their first extramarital sex. The results of the study were that about half of the women knew a person who had engaged in extramarital activities (peers, parents or relatives). Fifty-five percent of the women reported specific conversations about extramarital sex before their own involvement, with one-half of those feeling that the conversation had been "significant" to them (Atwater, 1979).

Having friends and/or family members, who were supportive of the affair relationship, further attracted the women in the current study to marital infidelity. While the friends and/or family members supported the affair relationship, they did not support the marital relationship, which would have acted as a barrier to marital infidelity. Lowering that barrier allowed movement away from the marital relationship and attracted them toward the marital affair. I believe the findings of the current research, along with the findings of the two previous studies

on social networks, validates the importance of establishing a network of friends and family members who are supportive of the marital relationship. Surrounding herself with people who do not share the same morals and values as she does, when it comes to relationships, may influence an individual and lead her in a different direction (in the context of the current study, attract them to marital infidelity), than she may have considered on her own.

The positive attention the participants received from their affair partners was also an attraction to marital infidelity. The four women described positive attention as things such as: emotional connection, listening, spending time together, being accepted, and physical affection. The positive attention made the connection in the extramarital relationship stronger than in their marital relationship, because each woman had a shift in focus from the negative qualities in their marriage to the positive attention they were getting in their extramarital relationship. This allowed the women to feel satisfaction they were not feeling in their marriage, which made them more committed to developing an extramarital relationship.

According to the investment model, there are forces that serve to make an individual more or less committed (Drigotas & Barta, 2001) in their marital relationship. Drigotas and Barta (2001) identified the forces as follows: satisfaction (how happy the individual is with the relationship), alternative quality (potential satisfaction provided outside the relationship), and investments (things the individual would lose if the relationship ended). High levels of satisfaction and investments in the relationship will lead to greater commitment; whereas, high levels of alternative quality will lead to less commitment in the relationship (Campbell & Foster, 2002). More satisfactions and investments in the marital relationship would indicate a greater attraction to the spouse. Lower satisfaction in the marriage and higher “alternative quality” would increase attraction outside the marriage. In the current study, the results support the

investment model. Each of the participants was receiving higher levels of satisfaction, in the form of positive attention, from an individual outside of her marital relationship. That, together with the low level of satisfaction she had in her marital relationships, created an attraction to marital infidelity.

The final attraction to marital infidelity for the women in the current study was the repulsions within their marriages. As discussed earlier, the lack of quality time they had with their spouses, the inability to solve conflict in the marital relationship, and the lack of attention the participants experienced from their husbands all served to lower the quality of the marital relationship leading to marital dissatisfaction. The marital dissatisfaction the women experienced, from the repulsions within their marriage, in turn, led to a greater attraction to marital infidelity.

Kara described her participation in the marital affair as a positive experience. I feel that this is important for two reasons, (1) she was on the opposite side of the spectrum, compared to the other women in the study and (2) there is previous research to support what she reported. Individuals with lower self-esteem will be at an increased risk for marital infidelity because they will be more likely to use infidelity as a way of increasing their self-esteem. Individuals, with low levels of self-esteem, will let down their protective barriers around the marriage because an outside individual may make them feel good about themselves and, instead of thinking about the needs of the marriage, they will want to satisfy their own need to gain self-confidence. This need for self-affirmation will increase their attractions to having an affair. Glass and Wright (1992) identified enhancement of self-confidence and self-esteem as an emotional justification for extramarital behavior. Allen and Baucom (2004) also found support for this by reporting that a

motivation for extradyadic involvement was to experience an increase in self-esteem and sense of desirability.

Due to the amount of positive attention experienced by the female participants from the affair partners, it is not surprising that they had an attraction to marital infidelity. According to field theory, goals that allow the fulfillment of needs and desires, by means of an extramarital affair, will have attractions and repulsions (Lewin, 1942). The results of this study suggest that the positive attention the participants received from their affair partner fulfilled their needs and desires, which attracted them to marital infidelity.

### ***Repulsions to Marital Infidelity***

Three of the four participants in the current study discussed having to deal with the conflict between having a marital affair and their moral values that told them it was not the right thing to do. Previous research suggested that most individuals consider extramarital affairs to be wrong and expect to remain faithful to their spouses. Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels, (1994) found that 77% of a large representative sample in the United States thought that having sexual relations with someone, other than the marriage partner, was “always wrong”. Similarly, Wiederman and Allgeier (1996) found that 87% of the participants in their study would never find extramarital sex to be acceptable for them. The most frequently cited reasons for the unacceptability of extramarital sex were that the behavior would damage the trust and commitment in the relationship and be a breach of their marriage vows.

When making a connection of the previous research to the current study, the underlying issue that is common is the idea that most individuals do not agree with marital infidelity and do not see it as an appropriate behavior within the marital relationship. In the case of the current

study, all factors considered, although the women discussed the issues that repelled them away from the idea of having a marital affair, other forces were stronger. For the women in this study the repulsions within their marriage and the attractions to marital infidelity outweighed the repulsions to marital infidelity, allowing them to move forward with the affair.

### ***Barriers to Marital Infidelity***

All four of the women discussed that keeping the marital affair a secret and making sure they were not seen in public settings with the affair partner was difficult at times. Two of the barriers found in the current study did not fit with the presumptions made in the literature review. The presumptions included religiosity, children, opportunity, work environment, and social networks. According to field theory, these barriers will exist between an individual and marital infidelity and act as a defense, protecting the sacredness of the marital relationship and deterring the individual from becoming involved in an extramarital relationship. Support for only one of the presumed barriers was found in the current study. Three of the women discussed having to find childcare as a barrier to marital infidelity. Liu (2000) stated, “childrearing is a form of human capital investment that increases a person’s stake in his or her family” (p. 369). The assumption that children will act as a barrier to marital infidelity can be made, because it can increase a person’s investment in her marital relationship. Though not found in the research, it was presumed that children may also make it difficult to engage in extramarital affairs because of their presence in the home. It is difficult to bring an affair partner home for a sexual encounter if there are children in the home. Marital affairs are very time consuming and having children would make it more difficult to find time to be involved in an extramarital affair.

Perhaps, because the barriers did not act to protect these women from having a marital affair, in the future it would be more beneficial to study women who had the opportunity to have a marital affair but chose not to do so. This type of study would serve to highlight the protective factors or barriers that were able to act as a defense to keep the marital relationship intact.

### ***Permission-giving***

Previous research shows that there are a lot of reasons for having a marital affair but there are no accounts in the research for how an individual gives himself or herself permission to move forward with an affair. Cognitive dissonance is a conflict or anxiety resulting from inconsistencies between one's beliefs and one's actions or other beliefs. As discussed above, these women experienced a great deal of cognitive dissonance between the repulsions within their marriages and attractions to the affair, as opposed to, the repulsions to having the affair and barriers blocking access to affairs. I believe that the women in the current study reduced their cognitive dissonance to move forward with having a marital affair by giving themselves permission to have an affair. The study showed support for each method of permission giving. Each sensitizing concept will be identified and re-labeled to fit within the context of the current study.

The first way of limiting cognitive dissonance for the women in the current study was holding the view that their spouse was *not worthy of loyalty*. Sanford and Comstocks concept was *legitimizing evil*. In essence the meaning is the same, the spouse was not viewed as worth being loyal to because they are viewed, instead, as unlikable. One of the women justified her actions of having an affair, because she felt her spouse was as unpleasant and immoral

themselves. In this case, the spouse was not worthy of her loyalty and this belief allowed her to feel repulsed by her spouse's negative characteristics.

The second concept was *rationalization*. According to Sanford and Comstock, this was the way in which the perpetrator of evil came to terms with his or her own conscience and with the value systems that condemned their behavior as illegitimate. I agree with their use of the term rationalization, but an explanation that fits the content of the study more accurately is as follows: the person wanting to have the affair was able to intellectually reframe their view of the marriage and the marital partner in order to come to terms with her own conscience and the value system that condemned their behavior as outside the bounds of society's rules. One woman focused on how she felt with the affair partner as a means of rationalizing her behavior. Another discussed her ideal view of marriage that was not met. Both of these women created an intellectual line of logic which redefined the values or morals of their marriage so that an affair was more acceptable as a choice. This began to dampen the affects of the barriers protecting the marital relationship, such as the importance of their marital vows, and minimized their repulsions to the idea of an affair.

The next concept by Sanford and Comstock, was the idea of *guilt-free* infidelity. Here the participants, who were considering having the affair, denied the humanity of her spouse. In doing this, the spouse was not seen for whom he was, but for the ugly person he was being made out to be. Again, the guilt-free infidelity is an appropriate term, but when looking at it in terms of marital infidelity it makes more sense to say that the women, who were considering having an affair, began to see their husbands in an unattractive way. In order to be guilt-free she used *justifications*, such as "he deserved it, because he did it to me", to place the guilt on her spouse.

The use of *depersonalization* was a concept Sanford and Comstock used in explaining an individual's way of "switching hats" or changing their personal definition of themselves. For a better fit, *compartmentalization* will be used instead. Two of the women in the current study were able to give themselves permission by "switching hats." When they were wearing their affair hat, it was all about them and how they felt in the moment. When they would "switch hats" back to their marriage, they would not think about the affair life they were leading. In essence, these two women wore one hat (marital relationship) and acted a certain way but, as soon as they changed hats (affair), they acted in a different way. Their *civilian superego* did not have to be worried, ashamed, embarrassed, or be made to feel guilty for whatever was done while they are wearing their "affair hat." The behavior, which otherwise would have been guilt ridden, was now "ok." This influenced the women into having an affair, because it allowed them to compartmentalize their behavior as two separate entities, without any crossover contamination.

Finally, Sanford and Comstock's idea of *dehumanization* protected the individuals from the guilt and shame they would otherwise have felt from primitive or antisocial attitudes, impulses, and actions that they directed toward those they managed to perceive as *bad humans* or less than human. If they were bad humans, their maltreatment was justified, since their defects in human qualities were their own fault. Rather than using dehumanization, I felt that *depersonalization* was a better fit for the current research. The individual participating in the marital affair will perceive their spouse as lacking in basic positive human qualities such as caring and nurturing. Two types of depersonalization exist: (1) *object-directed*, which was when an individual perceived others as lacking in those attributes that were considered to be most human, such as love and caring, and (2) *self-directed*, which related to self-image and denoted

the reduction of an individual's sense of their own humanness and emptied them of human emotions and passions. Although I did not feel that this form of permission giving was directly stated by participants in the current study, I did see how it may apply indirectly. Three of the four women interviewed discussed forms of physical and verbal abuse they endured within their marital relationship, which could have, in turn, led them to perceive their spouse as being lacking in the nurturing and caring attributes that we associate with being human beings. This would then fit with object-directed depersonalization and justify their own actions in engaging in an affair.

Each of the women gave herself permission to have the marital affair in different ways, while some of the women gave themselves permission using several of the different purposed methods. Although the results of the current study are based on a small sample size, the findings definitely suggest that more research in this area could prove to be beneficial.

## **Model of Women's Decision-Making Process in Participating in Marital Infidelity**

The model developed, in this study based on field theory and the findings of this study, facilitates a greater understanding of the women's decision-making process in participating in marital infidelity (see figure 1). The model can be used by clinicians, who are working with married individuals or couples, as a way of accessing the level of risk for marital infidelity to occur within the marital relationship. This model is meant to provide a guide for clinicians and future researchers dealing with marital infidelity.

According to field theory, "life space" is the total of all the environmental and personal factors in interaction (Lewin, 1942). An individual's behavior is a function of his or her life

space. In the current study, the women encountered a conflict within their life space, to stay committed to their marriage, within society's traditional definition, or to engage in an extramarital affair. Muuss (1988) summarizes field theory as follows "within the life space, objects or goals can have a positive (attraction) or negative (repulsion) valence" (p. 161). As this relates to the current study, goals that allowed the fulfillment of needs and desires (eg. positive attention), by means of an extramarital affair, had attractions, repulsions and barriers.

In any relationship an individual will evaluate the viability of their relationship. Spouses weigh the assets and liabilities of their spouses in their relationship. For women in a marriage, they are engaged in a continual evaluation of the assets and liabilities of their husbands and of stay in the marriage, according to the traditional precepts of their society.

Prior to beginning an extramarital relationship, the women in the current study experienced liabilities or negative factors within their marital relationship. The negative factors included a lack of quality time for the marriage, inability to solve conflict with their spouse, and a lack of attention from their spouse. The liabilities within the marriage were experienced as repulsions to the marriage and also served to create an attraction to marital infidelity because the repulsions changed the view the participants had of their husbands and their marriage. This created a choice between a marriage filled with liabilities or an affair with potential assets.

The women entered into a position in their marriage in which they were dissatisfied. At some point after the participants began experiencing the dissatisfaction in their marriage, three of the four women began interacting with an ex-flame or opposite sex old friend. One of the women developed a new friendship with a man outside of her marriage, which she defined at the beginning of that friendship as being "just friends". The interactions in the "just friends" relationships' began to fulfill the women's needs for positive attention and they begin spending

more time together, in order to experience more assets. Three of the four women were supported, either overtly or covertly, by friends or family members to continue seeing the friend. In most cases the friends or family members were helping arrange the visits (with the affair partner), babysitting children, or covering up for the women when they were spending time with the affair partner. Therefore, these friends and family members helped the women overcome potential barriers which would have lessened the assets of engaging in the affair. The positive attention the women received from a friend with whom they felt close and safe, the support for the extramarital relationship from friends or family members, and the repulsions within the woman's marriage led the women to become attracted to the assets of marital infidelity and, for at least a time, a respite from the liabilities they were experiencing in their marriages.

According to the model, as the women moved in the direction of marital infidelity, they would encounter barriers that served to protect the commitment to marriage. If the barriers are dampened the women found ways around them, either on their own or with the help of family members or friends, and continued in the direction of marital infidelity. Finally, to deal with the internal conflict between moral values and beliefs about marital infidelity and the behavior of having an extramarital affair, the women limited the cognitive dissonance they experienced giving themselves permission to have the affair. The way in which women limited cognitive dissonance, fell into one or several of the following categories; not worthy of loyalty, rationalization, guilt-free infidelity, compartmentalization, or depersonalization.

In contrast to the model of the current study, if women experienced a greater level of repulsions (liabilities) to marital infidelity and had greater attractions (assets) in their marriage, they would have moved in the direction of staying committed to their marital relationship. If a balance exists between all of the attracting and repulsing forces and they began to move in the

direction of marital infidelity, when they encountered the barriers, they would have gone back in the direction of staying committed to their marriages, which would afford the higher level of assets.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This was a qualitative study investigating the decision-making and permission-giving processes of four women who participated in an extramarital affair. The purpose of this study was to examine the process individuals go through when making the decision to have an affair. Particularly, I was interested in how they were able to give themselves permission to have an affair. Through the use of in-depth interviews, several themes emerged, providing an opportunity to begin to understand the decision making process the women went through when dealing with the conflict of staying committed to their marriage or beginning a marital affair.

The information shared by the participants provided valuable insight into how the process of decision making to have a marital affair occurs in women. The participants revealed issues they were having in their marital relationship that led to a repulsion of the marriage. The women discussed not spending quality time with their husbands, a lack of attention or intimacy in their marital relationship, and an inability to resolve conflict as key contributing factors that led to their dissatisfaction in the marriage. At some point in their marital relationship the key components that attracted them to the marriage, including intimacy, commitment, and communication were replaced with the repulsions to marriage found in the current study.

Another important finding was the attractions to the marital affair. Each of the women began intimate friendships that fulfilled the needs that were not being met in their marital relationship. Although they had not set out to have a marital affair, as the friendship became

more intimate and the positive attention they received from their “friend,” they began to question their commitment to their marriage. In three of the four cases the women had a friend or family member who supported the relationship with their “intimate friend” over the relationship with their spouse, even encouraging the affair. In this study either the barriers or repulsions to marital infidelity did not exist or they had become so minimal, because the heightened repulsions to the marriage and attractions to the affair, that they did not stop the women from moving forward with the affair. At this point, the women were able to reduce cognitive dissonance by giving themselves permission to have a marital affair, thus leading them into an extramarital relationship.

This study presented a look at the process occurring in making the decision to have a marital affair. The responses provided by the women were significant to this area of research. By examining that process it gives insight into the patterns of interaction that surround the marriage and the extramarital affair.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Choosing a qualitative design offered many advantages but also had limitations. According to Patton (2002), any time qualitative methods are chosen for the research design there are tradeoffs, “there are no perfect research designs” (p.223). A qualitative design was the most suitable for the purpose of examining the participants’ experiences in depth. However, only four participants were included in the study, which is a small sample size. The exploratory method of the study required the use of a homogenous sample to ensure more consistency from case to case to help identify themes and patterns of the women’s experience of marital infidelity that were similar and different. The participants do not represent the larger population of

females with different education levels, ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, cultural differences, and ages.

Furthermore, this study included only women who had experienced marital infidelity within a heterosexual marriage, which means that the results do not apply to women who cohabitate, are engaged, dating, or involved in non-traditional marriages. Therefore, there is little possibility to generalize findings based on sample size, participation criteria, and types of participants. Also, because this was an exploratory qualitative study; no confirmatory results can be given. Verification of the results will have to be confirmed in future studies.

All the participants in this study volunteered to share their stories, as opposed to their being randomly selected. The possibility exists that the individuals, who are willing to discuss the personal details of their life and marriage for psychological research, may give way to different results than those who would not volunteer for such research. It is also important to point out that the age differences of the sample could have had an effect on the participant's ability to recall the information from their first marriages. The women, who experienced more time between the experience of the marital infidelity in her first marriage and the time of the interview, may have had more difficulty remembering the circumstances surrounding the decision-making process of marital infidelity.

Although this study sought to obtain an accurate description of the participants' experience, it is possible that interview data limitations, such as distorted responses due to participants' personal views, anxiety, and embarrassment, may distort the accuracy of the results. The participants' self reports were subjective and it is also possible that some of the participants may not have been as forthcoming, when answering or discussing certain questions. In addition, marital infidelity is a relational phenomenon, affecting both partners of the marital relationship.

Another limitation of this study is that only the female spouse was included. Therefore, only the wives' perspectives of their experience were collected. Their ex-husbands may view the phenomenon of the affair quite differently. In addition, males, who have had affairs, may answer the questions in a very different manner. It is possible that the relationship inferences, made from the results of the study, may not be very generalizable.

One way in which the researcher helps establish validity and reliability in qualitative research is by having a person, who is not connected directly to the research, code the data. In the current study a different coder was not used because the validity and reliability was checked against the theoretical frameworks used. However, using an outside coder could have helped in identifying any researcher bias.

Another limitation of the current study was the unexpected findings that were not pursued by the researcher. Because I did not expect to find anything, with regards to, drinking, drug use and abuse, I did not pursue it in my research questions. I did not become aware of it clearly until I began analyzing the transcriptions of the participant's interviews. This is a limitation because I may have not represented them as significantly as they may have needed to be.

Finally, the researcher may have bias in terms of her interpretation of the data. The data was analyzed by comparing the similarities and differences of the participant's responses, which required the researcher to become deeply involved in the data collection and in forming the interpretation. It is possible that past experiences and knowledge of the research may have influenced the results. If another research replicated the study, different themes may emerge.

## **Implications for Clinical Practice**

This research generated valuable information which can be used to build a greater understanding of the decision-making and permission-giving processes of women who participated in marital infidelity. Many of the themes give insight into the process occurring in the marital relationship and the extramarital relationship. The themes that emerged may be helpful in a clinical setting. Specifically, related to premarital education, prevention of marital infidelity, and identifying at-risk relationships within the marital dyad. The implications for clinical practice are discussed below.

Before launching into a discussion of the specific implication for clinicians which may be drawn from this study, I feel the need to highlight the task of any therapist to enhance the self-esteem and promote the differentiation (Bowen, 1971) of the clients in therapy. Clients with low self-esteem are very vulnerable to the effects of repulsions within their marriage. They are more likely to focus on small negatives and also more likely to see any liabilities as being major. Likewise, they are more likely to be swayed by the promise of potential attractions from others outside the marriage. Therefore, clients with low self-concepts are more vulnerable to the effects of liabilities within their marriage and temptations to engage in relationships outside of their marriage.

Similarly, Bowen's (1971) concept of differentiation is important when doing therapy with clients' struggles with extramarital affairs. An individual is differentiated from his or her family of origin when he or she can intellectually reflect upon their relationships within their family of origin, as opposed to automatically emotionally reacting to those in his or her family of origin. Consequently, these individuals find themselves either being emotionally cut-off from their family of origin or enmeshed with them. Such individuals, who would be labeled as

undifferentiated, would be far more susceptible to either real or perceived liabilities within their marriages and would be tempted to look outside the marriage for people to meet their needs.

This would occur because of the person's emotional over involvement with unresolved issues from their family of origin. Consequently, therapists need to work on their clients levels of differentiation from their families of origin, in order to strengthen their personal sense of self. In that way clients will be more likely to chose courses of behavior to meet their needs, both present and future, rather than feeling controlled by unresolved issues from their past. Murray Bowens (1971) theory of intergenerational family therapy suggests many methods of accomplishing this.

All of the participants in the current study discussed repulsions occurring within their marriage prior to and during the marital affair. It is possible that these repulsions can serve as a red flag to clinicians that something is wrong within the marital relationship. They could help clinicians assist individuals and couples identify protective measures for minimizing the chances of marital infidelity occurring within the marriage. In order to deal with the lack of quality time being spent in the marital dyad, I would recommend using behavioral approaches that include, having the clients schedule in date nights, making sure the children are in bed at a reasonable time to ensure private time for the couple in the evenings, scheduling lunch dates during the week, and re-evaluating their participation in outside activities that are taking away from spending time together. Establishing the marriage as the top priority in their lives will encourage that the quality of time in the marriage is more important than other aspects of their lives. If, for extenuating reasons, this cannot be done, the therapist can negotiate with the couple how both the needs of the marriage and the needs of other priorities (e.g.; work) can be balanced, so as to minimize the potential for repulsions to develop within the marriage. Clinicians need to make sure the needs of both partners are being met, which will increase the positive attention within

the marital relationship. In order to do this, clinicians should use communication skills training, which will serve to open the lines of communicating the needs of both partners and serve to increase their problem-solving skills. Communication skills training should include working with the couple to ensure appropriate active listening skills, such as making eye contact, not interrupting, nodding their head, and paraphrasing what they have heard back to the speaker, to ensure accuracy of the message. Active listening would also include asking clarifying questions when needed. Another component to teaching the couple communication skills would be teaching them to be aware of the nonverbal messages they are sending, either through silence, body language, facial expressions, and/or tone and pitch of voice. A lot of times people are unaware of the nonverbal cues they are giving. The last component of communication skills training is making sure that the partners are able to communicate effectively. It is important for clients to speak clearly and make the overt covert. A lot of couples expect their spouse to be a mind reader but that is an expectation that will set the couple up for failure. If you have specific needs, wants or desires, the only way to ensure that your partner will know what they are, is to tell them. Clinicians would need to focus on making sure the couple was not communicating in a way that is attacking. Teaching the clients to use “I” statements versus “you” statements, will help with not putting their partner on the defense.

Finally, although communication skills training will also help with solving conflict, clinicians should also incorporate conflict management techniques, such as, anger management, teaching the couple the skills of negotiation and compromise, making sure the couple can find the appropriate time and place to solve issues surrounding conflict, and setting a date to revisit the solution that was reached, in order to assess its effectiveness.

It is important for clinicians to recognize what attracts individuals to marital infidelity because this will enable them to help individuals and couples establish appropriate boundaries outside of their marital relationship. Three of the four participants discussed becoming involved in an extramarital affair with ex-flames or old friends and one participant developed a friendship that led to a marital affair. It is important that clinicians educate clients on the potential harm of maintaining such relationships and help the individuals and couples establish appropriate boundaries to protect their marital relationship. Clinicians should work with the clients on establishing boundaries, such as, not flirting, putting themselves in a situation where they are alone with someone of the opposite sex, and making sure that their friendships do not become too personal, by limiting the amount of personal, intimate information they share. The clinician might establish a rule such as: never discuss with someone outside the marriage a topic which has not been discussed previously with the spouse within the marriage. Again, communication skills training will also help in this area, because, if they have the skills they need, they will know not to triangle in a third, outside person, to stabilize their marriage. Instead, they will deal with issues within the marriage, directly.

Another important factor is having friends and family members who are friends of the marriage. It is important that clinicians help clients to recognize people who may be damaging their marital relationship and encourage them to surround themselves with people who are supportive of them and their marital relationship.

The final attraction to marital infidelity in the current study was the positive attention the women received from the affair partner. Clinicians should again focus on boundary development and increase the amount of positive attention within the marriage as discussed above.

In order for clinicians to increase the aversion to marital infidelity, it is important to discuss the role that marital infidelity has taken in our society and encourage the clients to reiterate the moral values that guide their lives. Discussing marital infidelity is important, because most clients will think that is not an issue for them, because they do oppose it. The reality is that infidelity happens because of a lack of acknowledgement to the possibility of its occurrence. If clinicians would take the time to openly discuss with clients the prevalence of marital infidelity, it would open the couple up to discussing, the negative consequences of infidelity on their marriage and family, along with the message and model they would be conveying to their children. Clinicians should help the couple strengthen the view that marital infidelity had the ability to cause distress to their marriage and their family as a whole.

Based on the research presented in the study which discussed barriers to marital infidelity, clinicians should encourage their clients to increase the amount of family time spent together to ensure an increased investment to their family (Liu, 2000). They should surround themselves with friends and family members who are supportive of their marriage and family (Glass, 2003; Zak, Coulter, Giglio, Hall & Sanford, 2002). They may be actively involved with spiritual or religious organizations and participate in religious activities (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Atkins et. al., 2001; Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat & Gore, 2007; Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Treas & Geiesen, 2000; Whism, Gordon & Chatav, 2007), if applicable. Finally, clinicians should discuss the importance of decreasing the likelihood of marital infidelity by limiting the opportunities for its occurrence (Atkins, Jacobson & Baucom, 2001; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Burdette, Ellison, Shekat & Gore, 2007; Liu, 2000; Treas & Giesen, 2000).

The idea of permission giving is a new concept brought to the literature on marital infidelity by this study. It is important for clinicians because, if their clients are considering, or

at risk for, having a marital affair, they could use strategic intervention and take the covert means of permission giving and makes it overt to the couple in the marriage, thereby lessening the power of the permission giving. If clinicians can get their clients to deal with the conflict of staying committed to their marriage versus having a marital affair, it would eliminate the need for the client to lessening cognitive dissonance as a means of giving him/herself permission to have an affair. If one partner in the marital dyad is being tempted to consider starting a marital affair, the therapist may search their conversations for examples of that partner's use of cognitive permission-giving to reduce their cognitive dissonance toward having an affair. This will give the therapist clues as to their desire and plans (even if they are subconscious) of starting an extramarital sexual affair. All permission giving has, at its root, a selective perception which emphasizes some aspect of the marital partner or marital relationship, while it minimizes other aspects of the marital relationship. For example, in using depersonalization as a permission-giving mechanism the spouse, who is considering an extramarital affair, may emphasize the poor qualities of their spouse. She might focus on his lack of anger control or name-calling; he may see her as scolding and acting like shrew. The therapist can broaden this perception to include the good qualities and actions of the spouse. The husband may be a good provider and be very generous on special occasions. The wife may be a great care taker and be much more supportive of her husband than he remembers her being. Clinicians will have the opportunity to discuss this directly with both partners, leading to an increase in communication between the marital dyad and, in turn, lessening the need of one spouse to deal with it alone by lessening cognitive dissonance as a way of giving him/herself permission to have an affair.

## Suggestions for Future Research

To allow for an in depth exploration of the women's decision-making process leading to a marital affair, it was decided that for this study a qualitative research design would be used. Qualitative research lends itself to research that focuses on processes occurring within relationships. The next step in researching the decision-making and permission-giving processes of marital infidelity could involve validating the results of the current study using quantitative research methods, which would allow for a larger sample size and results that could be generalized to the larger population. In order to do quantitative research, a questionnaire would have to be developed around the findings of the current study. The questionnaire could include questions on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 asking participants;

At the time prior to having the affair, how would you rate.....

- The amount of quality time you spent with your spouse.
- Your ability to solve conflict within your marriage.
- The level of positive attention you received from your spouse.
- Your level of participation in religious activities.
- The amount of family time you spent together.
- The level of support you had from friends and family for your marriage.

During the affair, how would you rate.....

- The level of support you had from friends and family for your affair partner.
- The level of positive attention you received from your affair partner.

How do you use each of the permission giving mechanisms to justify your affair?

- Dehumanization
- Justification
- Guilt free

Other questions may include yes or no type questions, such as, was your affair partner an ex-flame or old friend? Was your affair partner a person, with whom, you developed a friendship

first, that later turned into an affair? It would also be helpful to incorporate open-ended questions that would give the participants opportunities to explain or offer new information, such as, can you think of anything that “turned you off” about your marriage? Did you ever feel like you should NOT have an affair? Why or Why not? Finally, what made you say “I am going to have an affair”? As stated earlier, quantitative research would allow the researcher to increase the sample size which would increase the validity of the study and allow the research to draw conclusion.

This study focused on the decision-making process of women who experienced having an extramarital affair. A study that focused on men’s experience is recommended to determine if the results of this study would differ according to gender. It would also give us a male perspective of the decision making process.

Due to the small sample size, it was impossible to get a sample that included a wide range of cultures and ethnicities. In future research, it would be important to examine cultural and ethnic differences in the decision making process of marital infidelity.

This study focused on married heterosexual couples. I would recommend that future research study the decision making process of cohabitating, dating, or engaged individuals. Also, it would be beneficial to study non-traditional marriages along with un-married, gay, lesbian, or transgendered individuals.

Finally, there are three research suggestions, based specifically on the results of the study. First, a study of women, who had the opportunity to have a marital affair, but chose not to have an affair, would help identify barriers to marital infidelity that would offer a protective factor to the marital relationship, could prove to be beneficial for clinicians. Second, further exploration should be done into the affects of drinking, drug use, and abuse (physical, sexual and emotional)

within the marital relationship and how it impacts the decision making process for marital infidelity. Third, more research on the types of marital affairs will be helpful in understanding which types are the most common and lend empirical support for the clinical observations that have been made in the existing literature, which is where the types of affairs have been derived.

“Is nothing sacred anymore?

If forever just another word?

Is a promise something people used keep, when love was worth fighting for?”

These are the song lyrics, but one of my favorites, Meatloaf. Every time I hear them, I can't help but be saddened by the way society views the sanctity of marriage and its portrayal in the media and movies. Somewhere, as a nation, we seem to have lost the meaning of our marital vows. Unfortunately, marital infidelity has found a place in today's society. There needs to be a shift from a nation which focuses on individual needs first, to one which focuses first on the “us” of a marriage and a family. It is important that the research continue in this area so we can understand this phenomenon, minimize its occurrence, and help the therapist effectively treat couples who have experienced the trauma of infidelity. A stronger push for healthy marriages and families will ensure a better future for our relationships, our children, and our nation.

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## Appendix A - Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the following questions. Your personal information and answers to these questions will be kept confidential.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age at time of first marriage:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Length of marriage (when the affair occurred):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of marriages:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of marital affairs:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of children:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Level of education:**

Graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade

Some High School

High School Diploma

GED

Some College

College Degree

Technical or Trade School

Graduate School or Higher

**Occupation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Income level:**

\$0 - \$15,000

\$16,000 - \$30,000

\$31,000 - \$45,000

\$46,000 - \$60,000

\$61,000 - \$75,000

\$76,000 or higher

**Religious background:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B - Interview Guide**

1. What initially attracted you to your spouse?
2. How would you explain your level of marital communication? Conflict? In the months leading up to the marital affair.
3. How was conflict resolved during this time?
4. What are some things that “turned you off” about your spouse?
5. How long had you been married when you met the affair partner?
6. What pulled you towards the idea of having an affair?
7. What cautioned you about the idea of having an affair?
8. At what point did you meet the affair partner? What was your marriage like at that time?
9. How did the affair begin?
10. What obstacles did you have to overcome to continue the affair?
11. How did you give yourself permission to have an affair?
12. How did the affair end? What were the consequences?
13. Tell me about the family and friends who knew of the affair?
14. What effect did your connections to friends or kinship have?
15. Talk about those close to you who had had an affair?
16. How did the affair end? What happened next?
17. Now that the affair has ended what are your perceptions on its occurrence?
18. How were you able to come to terms with having the affair? Tell about how you were able to forgive yourself.



## **Appendix C - Informed Consent Agreement**

### **A QUALITATIVE STUDY INVESTIGATING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF**

### **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MARITAL INFIDELITY**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FOR RESEARCH**

**Project Title:** A Qualitative Study Investigating the Decision-Making Process of Women's Participation in Marital Infidelity

**Approval date of project:** November 24, 2008    **Expiration Date of Project:** November 24, 2009

**Principal Investigator:** Anthony P. Jurich, Ph.D, Professor 785-532-1488

#### **What is it?**

- The purpose of this study is to examine the process individuals go through when making the decision to have an affair.

#### **What will I have to do?**

- Agree to be interviewed about and tell your story of the marital affair. The interview will take about 1 – 1 ½ hours.
- Allow your interview to be audio taped.

#### **What are the benefits and risks?**

- You will be helping provide information that may help other couples work through the difficulty of healing from infidelity.
- You will have an opportunity to share your story.
- You will help by giving new information in the marital infidelity research arena, which can be used for educational and treatment purposes.
- Emotional stress.
- Negative recollection of the affair.
- Increased cognitive dissidence about the affair.

#### **Is it private?**

- All information we collect for research is confidential.
- The information about the other parties involved in the situations discussed during the interviews will also be treated as confidential and any identifiers will be changed.
- During transcription all identified parties will be given a pseudo name and identifying information deleted.
- The only remaining identifying information will be for those who wish to have a summary of the results mailed to them once the study is complete. This information will be kept separate from the transcripts and destroyed once the results are mailed.
- Only individuals involved in the study will have access to confidential files.

- All files will be kept in a locked file cabinet and after the initial interview the participants name will be substituted with a file number.
- All identifying information will be changed.

**Can I quit if I want to?**

- Your participation in the interview and study is voluntary. You may choose not to complete the interview and drop out of the study at any time. Simply let me know that you no longer want to participate and all of your information will be destroyed and not used in the study.

**Who should I speak with if I have any questions?**

- Should I have any questions about this project or its conduct, I can contact any of the following:
  - Dr. Anthony Jurich, Principal Investigator, 113 Campus Creek Complex, KSU, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-4377
  - Dr. Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, KSU, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224
  - Dr. Jerry Jaax, Associate Vice Provost for Research Compliance and University Veterinarian, 203 Fairchild Hall, KSU, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224

**Participant’s Agreement and Responsibilities**

- I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.
- I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.
- (Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness to Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

