

ADULT CHILDREN OF PARENTAL INFIDELITY AND
THEIR PERSPECTIVES OF LOVE, INTIMATE
RELATIONSHIPS, AND
MARRIAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined how a parent (s) infidelity can/will potentially impact their children's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The study consisted of interviewing five adults from a west central Wisconsin area. The study was conducted in the fall of 2001, and explored the impact of a parent (s) infidelity on adults through a review of literature and critical analysis of the information in an ethnographic, qualitative manner.

Hypotheses were considered in this study. They were; 1) there will be a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships, 2) there will be a relationship between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships, 3) there will be a relationship between gender of the adult child, and degree of distress in the above stated areas.

Research has suggested that a relationship does exist between parental infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. There has been however, controversy as to the extent of the impact. Divorce has received much attention as an agent that evokes negative feelings related to love and marriage in adults who have parents that separated. Of interest during this study was how a parent (s) modeling of relationships has/has not influenced an adult child's perceptions and views of love, marriage, and intimate relationships.

This study served as a pilot for future research to build on. An interview format was utilized, and the study was confidential in nature.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The experience of loss is universal....yet, loss of trust through betrayal, particularly betrayal produced by sexual infidelity can be a particularly poignant loss (Boekhout, Hendrick, & Hendrick 1999).

This study will explore the impact of parental infidelity on an adult child. Specifically, on the adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. Consistent with literature regarding the effects of parental infidelity on adult children, there is controversy surrounding the extent to which the distress in the above stated areas is due to the parent(s) infidelity.

Parents typically serve as role models for their children. Children may look at their parents as the ideal or perfect couple. It is when that ideal is shattered that their perceptions may begin to change. The child may not initially understand the change. Research by Greenberg and Nay 1982; Tren and South 1992 (cited in Larson, Benson, Wilson, and Medora ,1998) has suggested that in recent years, family of origin influences on late adolescents' attitudes toward marriage has received much attention. The research of Benson, Larson, Wilson, and Demo , Fine and Hovestadt, and Jennings, Sarts and Smith (cited in Larson et al.,1998), has focused more on parental conflict, emotional health of the family as influences on a child's attitudes and feelings about marriage. If a

family is not emotionally healthy, the child's views of marriage may suffer. This could lead to replication of patterns in families where infidelity was present. It could also lead to an avoidance of intimacy. Perhaps the child believes that if their parents were allowed to be unfaithful, they too can justify that behavior. This may mean a series of brief, superficial relationships that avoid and hurt. A review of the literature indicates promiscuity can be seen as a behavioral response to high conflict between parents and divorce. Another possibility may be to jump in with both feet and commit to another person in an effort to prove that you are capable and what happened to your parents will not happen to you. Jet magazine (1997) reported on a 2001 Nicholas Wolfinger study that stated among adults whose parents had two or more divorces, 67% divorced themselves and 26% had two or more divorces. Among adults whose parents divorced and remarried once, 58% divorced themselves and 9% divorced two or more times. This research hopes to show that both exist, and determine the extent to which the infidelity of the parent (s) contributed to the behavior and distress. Also to be considered will be the gender of both the parent and the child. Response and coping strategies will be discussed.

Researching this area will hopefully provide insights into the impact of this specific event on an adult child's perceptions of love and marriage and intimate relationships. What has their experience been thus far in these areas, what are their thoughts related to the above stated areas? Other things to consider are the age of the child when infidelity occurred, means by which infidelity was discovered, outcome of situation, was infidelity perceived or proven, and which parent was involved in unfaithful act (s). This may prove

to be a significant area in a child's life. Parental relationship modeling can be critical in the child's future relationships. The patterns can be replicated based on what the child saw as she/he grew up, and either viewed as acceptable or not. Another option may be subtle inferences in relationship decisions and patterns that formed as a result of experiencing infidelity as a child that are now just surfacing, leaving the now adult child confused about the ideas of an intimate relationship, love, or marriage. Breaker and Kelley 1979 (cited in Arriaga 2001) reported that newly initiated relationships may be experienced in vastly different ways. For some individuals, early stages are characterized by consistent feelings and experiences making it possible to know that the relationship is worth pursuing. For others, the early period of time in a relationship is that of significant uncertainty marked by times of intense attraction and stark disappointment.

This study will attempt to determine if gender plays a role in the adult child's experience of parental infidelity. The research will explore the differences in coping response and style following the discovery of their parent (s) infidelity as it relates to gender. Gender of the parent will also be taken into consideration. Research tends to support the notion that women and men participate in extramarital relationships for different reasons. Men are more likely to not be as emotionally attached to the affair, while women, are more likely to seek that emotional attachment from someone other than a spouse. Consistent with that research, Heaton and Blake (1999) reported that women perceive intimacy as emotional warmth, expressiveness, vulnerability and sensitivity, whereas men "express their love through sex, shared activities, practical help, economic support or just being in the others presence" (Thompson and Walker, 1989, p.847).

This study will attempt to explore how a parent(s) infidelity may/may not affect an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. A focus on gender of the adult child in relation to gender of the unfaithful parent will be studied. It may provide some understanding into emerging relationship patterns in families who have experienced infidelity. Evans and Bloom (1996) reported that not only does parental divorce have a meaningful negative effect upon psychological well-being and heterosexual relationships and heterosexual trust, self-esteem and general attitudes toward marriage and the family, but also that heterosexual trust is higher among adults who have had consistently affectionate and accepting fathers. Favorable attitudes toward divorce and pathological disturbances in dating relationships are more common only among men. Evans and Bloom (1996) further reported that women whose parents have been divorced have significantly less secure attachment styles than do women whose parents are in intact marriages. It may also give some hope that there is help and you can overcome the obstacles from the past by first learning how it has affected you, and secondly, what you can do with that knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study will be to review, analyze, criticize, and draw sets of implications from literature on the subject of perceptions of intimate relationships, love, and marriage of adult children of parental infidelity. This study will be conducted in the fall of 2001 at the University of Wisconsin-Stout campus through a critical analysis of the information in a qualitative format.

Research Hypotheses

There are three hypotheses this research wishes to address. They are:

1. There will be a relationship between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships.
2. There will be a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in the above stated areas.
3. There will be a relationship between gender of the adult child and degree of distress experienced in the above stated areas.

Definition of Terms

For clarity and understanding, the following terms will be defined:

Adult Child-A person at least age 18.

Adultery- Sexual intercourse between a married person and another not the spouse.

Extramarital Intercourse-Sexual relations with a person other than one's spouse.

Infidelity-Unfaithfulness, especially in marriage.

Assumptions and Limitations

There are several Assumptions and Limitations apparent to this research. They are:

1. There may not be a relationship between infidelity of a parent and level of distress experienced by an adult child in the areas of love, intimacy, and marriage.
2. There may not be a relationship between gender of an unfaithful parent and coping skills of a adult child related to the infidelity.
3. The sought after sample size may not be achieved.
4. There may not be a relationship between gender of an adult child and level of distress experienced related to a parents' infidelity.

CHAPTER TWO

A Review of the Literature

In recent years the subject of infidelity has received much attention. Former President Clinton found himself in the media for his own ventures in this area. Infidelity has become not only more public, but more frequent in its occurrence. Olenick (2000), reported that some 11% of adults who have ever been married or lived with someone have been unfaithful to their partners. The survey further reports that most respondents expected their partners to be sexually exclusive, and believed their partners expected the same of them. Wiederman (1997) reported that men were more likely than women to report ever having had extramarital sex. The lifetime incidence also indicated an increase for men with age. Wiederman further stated that women had their greatest incidence for extramarital sex between the ages of 30 and 50. Evans and Bloom (1996) reported that women may be more adversely affected by their parents' divorces than men.

This study hopes to further explore the subject of infidelity. More specifically, the impact of parental infidelity on adult children. Perspectives will be discussed, rationales for engaging in the infidelity itself and level of distress related to the infidelity as experienced by the adult child. Also patterns of relationships and attitudes toward love and marriage in families will be addressed.

It is known that adult children of divorce can be prone to negative effects in the areas of love, intimate relationships, and marriage. Booth and Amato (2001) reported that

there is evidence that suggests parental conflict and divorce have adverse effects on children that often persist into adulthood. Duran-Aydenug (cited in Booth & Amato, 2001) reported that in a study of college students, they reported high levels of stress related to parental separation and the fact that they were “kept in the dark” about the marital conflict. It is suggested that these students were more likely than others to report having relatively low levels of trust in intimate relationships. This appears to be consistent with parental modeling of relationships. Children may see their parents’ relationship as the “ideal” to which they compare all others. How a parent contributes and participates in that relationship can significantly impact how children will do the same in their own adult relationships. If the relationship is filled with conflict and lack of communication or trust, those attitudes and beliefs may be brought into future relationships with the knowledge that “my parents were this way so that is the way relationships work.”

Earlier, it was stated that 11% of adults who had ever been married or cohabitated have had extramarital sex (Olenick, 2000). Boekhout, Hendrick & Hendrick (1999) reported that people in committed relationships (marriage, exclusive dating) expect to have certain relationship needs met by their partner, and they also expected these needs to be met exclusively within their relational bond. Treas and Giesen (2000) reported that previous research has linked personal values, sexual opportunities and quality of the marital relationship to extramarital sex. Pestrak, Martin and Martin (cited in Boekhout, Hendrick and Hendrick, 1999) reported that an analysis of the literature indicates that between 70-85% of Americans disapprove of extramarital sex. Smith (1994) (cited in

Treas and Giesen 2000) reported that more than 90% of the general public say it is “always” or “almost always” wrong for a married person to have sex with someone besides the marriage partner. Despite this percentage, a sizeable percentage of people are still engaging in extramarital affairs. Thompson (cited in Boekhout, Hendrick & Hendrick, 1999) reported that men engaged in more “sexual only” involvements, and women more “emotional only” involvements. Glass and Wright, and Prins, Buunk and Vanyperen (cited in Boekhout, Hendrick and Hendrick ,1999) reported that women were more likely to link their affairs with marital dissatisfaction, which suggests that women enter into these relationships when they are not content in their marriage. Men, however, may view an affair as having little consequence for their primary relationship. They are more likely to separate love and marriage from sex (Glass and Wright, cited in Boekhout, Hendrick and Hendrick, 1999).

In their study of college student’s attitudes toward infidelity, Knox, Zusman, Kaluzy and Sturdivant (2000) reported that 69% of respondents said they would end a relationship with a partner who was unfaithful. This study did not report on familial infidelity.

Gardner (cited in Sinclair & Nelson, 1998) reported that difficulty establishing and maintaining mutually satisfying heterosexual relationships is a common outcome for adult children of divorce. Gardner further stated that parental conflict can affect ones ability to form stable, healthy relationships. It is suggested in a review of the literature that a possible explanation for negative attitudes expressed by children of divorce is that they developed negative images of marriage (parental modeling) and fear a failed

relationship.

It is not assumed that all cases of infidelity end in divorce. The research presented on divorce correlates with the negative behavioral patterns and conflict present in some families, and also with intergenerational patterns of relationships that may exist in families. Kitson (1992), reported that at least one-third, and likely considerably more of recently dissolved marriages were preceded by the formation of a non-marital romantic relationship involving one of the spouses. Kitson, Babre and Roach, 1985 (cited in South, Trent, and Shen, 2001) stated that divorced persons frequently cite marital infidelity as a reason for dissolution of the marriage and sexual infidelity is a strong predictor of divorce. For these reasons, it is included in this chapter. Sprecher, Cate and Levin (1998) reported on patterns of relationships in families. Theories that explain intergenerational transmission of relationship instability through processes such as role-modeling, communication of negative attitudes were addressed (Amato cited in Sprecher, Cate, and Levin, 1998). Children watch and learn about relationships from their parents. When there is negativity and conflict present, children will take notice. Children may form attitudes and orientations toward love and relationships based on what they saw as they grew up.

Wolfinger (2000) reported that people experiencing multiple parental relationship transitions were likely to reproduce these behaviors as adults by dissolving one or more marriages. This evidence appears to support the replication of negative relationship patterns in families. Wolfinger further reported on Glenn and Kramer's research that stated that the more children experience conjugal relations as transitory, the less

commitment they will have to their own relationships later in life.

Clark and Korrel (1999) hypothesized that females with divorced parents experienced lower dating satisfaction and trust, and higher dating anxiety. This of course is only speculation, but certainly evident in some adult relationships. Much attention has been focused on divorce and later life effects for adult children. Ross and Mirowsky (1999), reported that compared with individuals who grew up with both parents, adult children of divorce more often marry young, divorce and remarry, find themselves in unhappy relationships, and mistrust people in general. A 2001 study by Nicholas Wolfinger revealed that adult children of divorce may also fare poorly in less formal relationships. Amato and DeBoer 2000; Glenn and Kramer 1987 (cited in Wolfinger, 2001) reported that one way unhealthy interpersonal skills interfere with marital stability is by reducing commitment, so divorce may be used as a solution to marital difficulties. White and Mullen 1989 (cited in Stryzewski and Comstock 1997) found that jealousy results from the perception of a romantic involvement between ones partner and a real or imaginary rival.

Larson, Benson, Wilson, and Medora (1998) reported on family of origin and attitudes toward marriage. They utilized Bowenian family systems theory to explain how dysfunctional family processes could have a negative effect on a late adolescent's feelings/attitudes toward intimate relationships and marriage. The findings found that individuals who perceive their family of origin as less healthy were more likely to have negative perceptions of marriage. Cottles' 1990 book, Children's secrets, recalls a story of a child who unknowingly stumbles upon his own mother's infidelity:

“So, that’s the story of the little boy who by nature of a little accident realized that everything he thought about his mommy and daddy, everything he thought about life and living.....was totally wrong” (p.53).

The boy, now an adult, was finally able to share his “secret” with his therapist. He never has told his parents what he saw that day. Cottle’s book devoted an entire chapter to stories like the one just described. It brings the impact of a parent’s infidelity to a very realistic place. The effects of parental infidelity can for some, be profound. The adult child may be aware of the event and be forced to keep a “secret.”

There may be marital conflict, which translates into negative relationship messages for a child to carry with them into their own adult relationships. Johnson, LaVoie, and Mahoney (2001) reported that disruptions in the closeness of parent-adolescent relationships may be associated with higher levels of social and personal distress for females than for males, and this sensitivity may be associated with adolescent females reports of depression and feelings of exclusion. Schmidtgall, King, Zarski, and Cooper (2000) reported that for adult female children of divorced parents, there was a statistically significant relationship between parental conflict in the family of origin and adult depressive symptomology. Sun (2001) researched the pre-divorce environment and family relations. That research suggested that there is significance in the parental conflict prior to divorce that has long-term effects on adults. Sun stated that adolescents in predisrupted families showed lower levels of well being in multiple areas and lived in a less favorable family environment. Thornton (1991) reported that marital disruption weakens the abilities of parents to reinforce each other. Divorce may/may not be the

outcome of parental infidelity. Research supports both ending the relationship due to betrayal and loss of trust or love, and working things out for want of staying together. In either case, the adult child may pick up messages, view communication styles, and more importantly relationship patterns/norms. What is/is not acceptable behavior when you are in a marriage, or when you love someone? It is these beliefs and attitudes that they will carry with them if they are not encouraged to explore and discuss their feelings in order to prevent the patterns from repeating themselves again. With new insights can come greater understanding. Education can bring comfort and ease of mind. Awareness can bridge gaps between what is not understood and what is known.

Research by Jaquet and Surra (2001) discussed marital relationships of young adults from divorced families. Lauer and Lauer, 1991 and Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989 (cited in Jaquet and Surra 2001) stated that young adults who perceive potential divorce as a breach of trust may be cautious about trusting their dating partners. Uncertainty about the performance of relationships coupled with fears of abandonment, could erode trust as a relationship deepens. Lauer and Lauer, 1991; Wallerstein, 1985; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein and Corbin, 1985 (cited in Jaquet and Surra 2001) reported that some adult children from divorced families feared repeating parents' mistakes in marriage, whereas others had many short-lived relationships rather than commit to long-term relationships. This appears to correlate with earlier hypothesis that stated potential reactions to a divorce can result in either making a commitment when maybe not ready, or avoiding commitment by engaging in a series of more superficial relationships that in essence avoid intimacy altogether.

Research by Johnston and Thomas-McCombs (1996) revealed parental modeling as an explanation for some negative long-term effects of witnessing parental arguments that lead to eventual divorce. They reported that through this process, the child may vicariously experience the painful emotions of divorce thus becoming less enthusiastic and more apprehensive about marriage for themselves. Results of the study suggested that children from divorced families share various attributes, which appear to hinder initiation of intimate relationships, namely fear of being rejected and lack of trust.

Buehler , Griffin, and Ross, 1995 (cited in Gagne' and Lydon 2001) reported that people in budding relationships tend to be overly optimistic when predicting how long their relationships will last. This study took into account bias and mind-set. It was not accounting for divorce or intact families. A similar study by Kurdek and Schnopp-Wyatt (1997) reported that there is significant evidence to support the notion that how people think about close relationships influences what happens in these relationships. An adult who comes from a family where infidelity has occurred, will likely view intimate relationships in a somewhat different light. As discussed earlier, familial relationship patterns pass through generations. This experience may lead to an almost self-fulfilling prophecy where relationships are concerned. Pre-conceived notions and fears about relationships can contaminate the relationship before it begins.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will describe the subjects involved in this study and how they were selected for inclusion in this study. Also discussed will be specific instruments used to collect data. Information related to content, validity, and reliability will be presented. Procedures for data collection and analysis will also be discussed. This chapter will conclude by discussing some of the methodological limitations.

Description of Subjects

The subjects involved in the study will be adults living in the west central Wisconsin area. This study will take place during the fall semester of 2001, at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, WI . Ages of participants will vary. Subjects will be asked to participate and told what their involvement will entail. This study is confidential and no names will be used in the actual paper. Participants will sign an informed consent form acknowledging their willingness to participate and understanding of the nature of the study.

Selection of Subjects

Subjects were elicited by speaking in General Psychology classrooms at the University of Wisconsin-Stout and asking for participants. The process remained confidential as the subjects were directed to a classroom website where they could obtain this researcher's e-mail address.

Instrumentation

Data will be collected through the use of qualitative and ethnographic methods. A series of four sessions will be conducted, each approximately one hour in length. Subjects will be selected through recruitment in classrooms and throughout the area. All subjects must be 18 years or older to participate. Subjects will be invited to share their experience related to the study at their own pace and comfort level. Topics to be discussed during the sessions include questions related to personal experience of infidelity, possible reactions to perceived or real infidelity will also be covered. Specific questions related to parental infidelity will be included as will questions regarding length and number of marriages of participants' parents. The subjects' own relationship history will be discussed including number of marriages, divorces, serious relationships and dating patterns. This information will be compared to the parental information to determine if a pattern exists and what role the parental infidelity played in contributing to that pattern formation.

Data Collection

Instruments such as the Extra Relationship Involvement Survey may be utilized in order to gain perspective on a subjects' view on infidelity. Other information relevant to this study will be gathered through a series of interviews with the subjects.

When the sessions are completed, the information gathered will be organized and placed appropriately in the paper itself.

Data Analysis

All appropriate means of analyzing the data will be utilized.

Limitations

Several limitations have been identified as part of this study:

1. No measures of validity or reliability exist for the instrument used.
2. Sample may not be as representative as initially thought.
3. Cluster sampling method only includes those students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Stout or living in the immediate area.
4. Not all identified age brackets may be represented.
5. No follow-up survey will be conducted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter will present the results of the study conducted on adult children of parental infidelity and their perceptions of love, intimacy, and marriage. Data collected for each of the research hypotheses will be given for each case. No descriptive statistics were utilized.

Demographic Information

The sample consisted of five female subjects. All subjects were residents of West Central Wisconsin. The subjects ranged in age from 19-43. Four of the five subjects were undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. No graduate students were included in the study. All subjects identified parental infidelity as having occurred in their families of origin. The study was conducted in an ethnographic manner using qualitative methods. The subjects were asked to participate by this researcher during General Psychology classes held at UW-Stout. The participation was confidential and voluntary. Subjects were directed to the class website where this researcher's e-mail address could be obtained. The subjects then contacted this researcher and indicated a desire to participate. Once participation was agreed on, meeting times and places were arranged. At the first meeting, the purpose and content of the study was reviewed and an informed consent form was signed. Meetings were in private rooms to ensure confidentiality.

Case One

Subject was a college freshman. Subject has never been married. Subject described her family of origin as experiencing little conflict while growing up. She reported that her relationship with her parents has ranged from moderately close to distant. Subject reported that her parents are still married, and have been for 24 years. This was the only intact marriage in the study. When discussing the infidelity, the subject reported that it was her father who had been unfaithful. This occurred after a separation which both parents supported. This separation lasted 4 years. Subject talked about her father possibly having a drinking problem and that contributed to the separation. After moving out of the house, the subject's father began to see another woman. This lasted approximately 2 months. Her parents remained in contact while separated, and eventually started to date again. The separation occurred 20 years into the marriage. It was the first marriage for both parents. The subject talked about her discovery of the unfaithful act. She reported feeling very angry and upset. She described her mother as having similar feelings.

When asked about her father's reaction to being caught, the subject reported that he expressed remorse. While separated, the father impregnated the woman he was seeing. He has a child with her and is presently exploring seeking full custody. Subject reports that her mother has forgiven him for the unfaithful act, and supports his seeking full custody of the child. This case was an exception in that the marriage did not break up, and the infidelity was forgiven. The family appears to have adjusted as well as possible given the circumstances. This was a departure from other subjects. The subject reports

that her Parent's relationship appears to be stronger now than before. This is supported in Boekout, Hendrick, and Hendrick (1999) who stated that there are a significant number of people who reported having positive effects on their relationship as a result of infidelity. This subject discussed that the infidelity is not usually talked about at this time in the family.

When asked about her reaction to the unfaithfulness of her father, the subject reported feeling hurt, she also felt a loss related to the separation and no longer having her father at home. She has a lot of hatred toward the woman her father was with.

Included in our sessions were questions related to the subject's own relationship history. She talked about dating sporadically in High School. This was her choice. She has not experienced infidelity in any of her own relationships. She did not present with any significant issues related to trust or commitment. When asked if there is ever an acceptable situation for infidelity to occur, the subject replied no, stating that infidelity is wrong and marriage should hopefully be forever.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a relationship between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. This subject's experience did not appear to support this hypothesis. This subject reported that infidelity is wrong and there is no acceptable situation that would allow it. What is not known, is the degree to which having experienced actual infidelity had shaped that view. The subject did not appear to have significant issues related to commitment or trust. She is currently in a serious relationship and reported feeling positive about it. This subject was the only one in this study who had parents that were still married. The degree to which

this contributed to her views on infidelity is unclear. There appears to be evidence to support that the modeling of her parent's relationship had a positive impact. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in love, marriage, and intimate relationships. There was some evidence, though not significant, that supported this hypothesis. The subject appeared to have a positive outlook on the above areas, showing a positive relationship between the variables. The subject described her relationship with her father as somewhat better than before the infidelity. Worth noting also would be that having a male role model while growing up may have contributed to more dating success as an adult. This may have allowed her to form more positive relationships with other men. The modeling of relationships presented by her parents appeared to be a positive variable in her own dating history. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a relationship between gender of the adult child and degree of distress experienced in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated that there was no significant difference, although some evidence to support exists. The subject reported that she was very angry and upset over her father leaving and also holds an intense hatred toward the woman he met while separated. One area where trust was an issue was where drinking was involved. This subject reported an instance where a friend betrayed her trust while drinking and that is something she felt strongly about. Insufficient evidence exists as to whether there is a correlation between that instance and her father's drinking and subsequent infidelity.

Case Two

Subject was a student at UW-Stout. Subject was in her late 20's and was female. Subject reported that her parents are divorced and have been for 10 years. She talked about their marriage and said they were high school sweethearts. She reported it was the first marriage for both parents. They were married for 21 years. The subject described the quality of their marriage as terrible. There was much conflict in the home. She talked about her mother being a stay-at-home mom for years and her father working. She reported that her father was the unfaithful parent. We talked about how she came to know of the infidelity. Subject reports she was approximately 13-15 years of age at the time. The affair had been going on for about two years. She reported that the woman with whom her father was having the affair called her mother and told her of their relationship. This subject reported that her father denied the affair when confronted. The woman was a neighbor and her husband was a good friend to the subject's father. The subject talked about the neighbor's marriage as having much conflict and the woman being unhappy. This situation is supported in research that suggested women enter into extramarital affairs when the quality of their own marriage is poor. As the infidelity was discovered, the subject reported her mother found out she was pregnant. For the next few years, the subject's parents had an occasional relationship. The subject reported that it was her father who always pursued the relationship. When this situation was discussed within the family, it was usually described as an angry, bitter event. This subject's mother

entered into a period of anxiety and depression following the separation. During this time, the two older daughters were put into more parentified roles. They were taking care of their younger sister, as well as their mother. The subject reports that there was a large age difference between herself and her youngest sister, and that her mother raised her much differently. The infidelity has never been discussed with the subject's father. She reported a period of 8 years where there was no contact with him. She reported that their relationship today is much better.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a relationship between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated that there was a moderate relationship. When asked about her own relationship history, this subject talked of her current separation from her husband of nine years. She reported that her husband had been unfaithful on approximately twenty-five occasions. We talked about her feelings and she reported that initially she felt as though it was her fault. She became very sad and believed she somehow drove him to cheat. They have been separated for five years. It has been more than a year since they have been on a more back-and-forth basis with their relationship. The subject reported that her husband offers no concrete explanation for his behaviors. His first extramarital affair was a "date" his own mother set him up on. He has a family history that appears to support his rationale for behaving as he did. The subject reported that he has five other siblings, each have a different father. The subject discussed her husband as having little respect for his mother while growing up.

This case offered many interesting insights. The subject came from a family where

infidelity had occurred, and subsequently married her own high school sweetheart, who then proceeded to be unfaithful. The subject's husband came from an environment where his mother may have modeled relationships in such a way as to somehow condone behavior consistent with infidelity. Another topic of interest is that the subject reported that her husband takes on a different, almost opposite role in his extramarital affairs. She described him as a really good father, considerate of her and generally respectful. She reported he called her when he would go places and check in etc. She talked of his other relationships and reported that he takes on the dominant role and control. His very first extramarital relationship of approximately two months ended when his partner cheated and he caught them. The subject reported that her husband was very hurt by this, yet continued to engage in these relationships and remained unable to offer any explanation as to why. This subject offered some information about her husband's siblings and their relationships. She reported a brother who had also been unfaithful, and two sisters who had a series of short-term relationships. The research hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated that there was significance. This subject reported much distress related not only to her parent being unfaithful, but concern about the replication of patterns in her own relationships. She reported that she had a very close relationship with her father and after he left, the loss led to some self-mutilating behavior.

This case was interesting in that it provided some insight into how patterns transmit through generations, not only with the subject's family of origin, but her husband's family as well. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a relationship between gender of the adult child and Degree of distress experienced in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated that there was moderate significance. This subject reported that she is currently separated from her husband. She presented with trust issues related to her husbands repeated infidelity. The subject expressed concern over the replication of relationship patterns in her family. Similarities exist between her parents courtship and marriage and her own. Both were high school sweethearts, both were many "firsts" for each other, both husbands were unfaithful. Subject reported that infidelity is wrong and that marriage is a committed institution. This subject today, appeared stronger and more aware of the impact her father's infidelity has had on her. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Case Three

Subject is a married female in her early forties. Subject reported that her parents have been divorced for seventeen years. She reported that her father died three years ago. When asked to describe her parent's marriage, this subject said it appeared to have phases. When she was younger, she remembered participating in family traditions, and routines. She remembered a happy, tight-knit family structure. At age twelve, things began to change. Subject reported that her mother began to work outside of the home and began to contact friends. This resulted in distance within the family. The subject talked

about her father as having a drinking problem. He was also sixteen years older than her mother. It was the first marriage for both.

The subject's mother was the unfaithful partner. The infidelity was discovered by the subject at age twelve or thirteen. The subject was noticing that a family friend appeared to be coming over quite frequently. On one occasion, the subject talked of her mother's friend giving her a kiss good-bye on the lips, not the cheek, and at that point, she knew. The affair had been going on for approximately two or three years. This man was also married. An interesting note in this case, was the involvement of a younger brother. The subject talked about her mother bringing him along on dates with this other man. The little boy knew what was going on, yet may have been too young to conceptualize the actual events. The subject reported that her father was very hurt and angry over the affair. After the initial separation, the wife initiated the divorce.

This case included the variable of alcohol abuse as a factor in the marital conflict. While the affair started what would be the end of the marriage, there was conflict present many years before divorce occurred. When asked about her own relationship history, this subject discussed having been married twice. She is currently married, and has been for ten years. Her early dating history included more distant relationships with women, and having more male friends. She talked about turning to men for companionship. This subject had a closer relationship with her father after the divorce. She talked of being a caretaker for him especially when he took ill and needed more assistance. Some conclusions may be drawn regarding the relationship with her mother prior to the infidelity, and after. She found out about the affair at age thirteen. She

proceeded to date frequently and became sexually active in her early to mid teens. She reported that she always is the one to end a relationship. She feels a need to have that control. This could be viewed as consistent with research that suggests people from either divorced families or families where there was infidelity, have abandonment issues that may subconsciously lead them to end a relationship before a partner does to avoid getting left or hurt.

Talking about her marriages, this subject reported her first marriage lasted three years. She reported that there was alcohol, physical, and emotional abuse present. This was a time in her life that led to a downward cycle that ended in her checking into a treatment facility. She reported that this event was the beginning of a new more positive phase in her life. She remained single for eight years after that. She learned how to do self care and gained insights into her destructive behaviors. She married her second husband and talked about having to adjust to a different lifestyle and a different type of man. She had to get used to a new way of life. She found out that her husband had an affair with someone at work. She was very angry, he denied the affair. Subject reported that her husbands mother had cheated on his father.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a relationship between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated there was a relationship. The subject recognized the impact that her mother's infidelity had on her own relationships. She saw patterns that paralleled her parent's relationship. She married someone with a drinking problem, her father had a drinking problem. She experienced infidelity as a child, and again as an adult. This subject turned to men for

companionship and held more distant relationships with women.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated that there was some significance. This case was one where the mother had been unfaithful. Of interest, is the possible correlation between the mother's infidelity and this subject's subsequent relationships with both sexes. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a relationship between gender of the adult child and degree of distress experienced in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results showed that there was some significance. This subject began dating shortly after discovering her mother's infidelity. She reported that she became sexually active in her mid-teens. She also talked of a need for control in a relationship, almost always initiating an end to relationships. Worth noting would be parallels present between subject's own relationship history and her parent's marriage. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Case Four

The subject was a female in her early twenties. She was not married. The subject reported that her parents are divorced. They have been for nine years, and had been married for twenty-one years. Both have since remarried. When asked to describe her parent's marriage, the subject talked of the family as "All-American," having little

conflict. The subject believed that her parents had a really good marriage. She reported that her father had been unfaithful. This was discovered when the subject was approximately eleven years old. The subject's older sister inadvertently saw her father driving toward what she assumed was there home, and he turned a different way and went to see his mistress. It came as a big surprise to her family. The subject talked about sensing some tension prior to the discovery of the affair. There were suspicious phone calls and time away from home that offered little explanation. Her father accepted full responsibility and showed remorse for his actions. He married the other woman two months later, and they have been married now for approximately eight years. The subject reported that the family was angry when this topic was discussed, and they are now more of a "holiday family," seeing each other less frequently.

When talking about her own relationship history, the subject reported that she has had serious relationships in the past, and wants marriage in the future. She talked about there being no guarantees with regard to relationships; you may believe in love and marriage, but you cannot be certain because people change. She had two instances where men she had been in relationships with cheated. She currently is involved with a man who she cares a great deal for, but is uncertain of their future.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a relationship between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated that there was moderate significance to support this. The subject talked of there being no guarantees with regard to relationships. You may believe in forever, but people change and the possibility of men cheating always exists. The subject reported always initiating an

end to her relationships, stating that the hurt will not last as long. She reported that to her, if you truly loved someone, you would not cheat. She wants marriage in the future, and reported further that once trust is betrayed, it is very difficult to regain. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results showed a relationship. This subject reported that her relationship with her father prior to the affair, was normal. During the divorce, she would cling to him, now their relationship is better. Of interest here would be the issues related to trust and the control this subject exercises in ending relationships. This subject appeared to have lost some faith in the institution of marriage and her belief in the “ideal marriage” had been strained. She has the capacity to commit, but maintains a degree of emotional distance as a protective measure. The research hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a relationship between gender of the adult child and degree of distress experienced in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicated little significance. This subject’s views in the above areas have been contaminated. There has been impact, evidenced in her own relationship history. What remains unclear, is the degree to which this is solely a result of gender. The research hypothesis was rejected.

Case Five

The subject was a female in her early twenties. She was not married. She reported her parents are divorced and were married for approximately ten years. It was the first marriage for both partners. She described the marriage as average. She reported that her father was a construction worker who was only home on weekends. The affair was discovered by her father when he came home early from work and found another man in his home. The subject reports there was a lot of anger surrounding this and she remembers her father packing and leaving shortly thereafter. She talked of her mother having already filed for divorce when this took place, her father was unaware and assumed it was due to the other man. The subject's mother denies the affair.

Subject discussed her own relationship history. She had recently ended a long-term relationship with a man with whom she has a child. She reports her partner was unfaithful. She talked about being with her partner since the ninth grade. She talked about his being more and more distant and spending less time with her. He denies an affair took place, but has since married the woman he was spending time with.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a relationship between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results indicate some significance. The subject talked about the need to take marriage seriously and it should be forever. She also reported that if one should recognize a desire to be with someone else, you should divorce first before acting. The subject also talked about wanting to live with someone long-term, exchange rings, but not officially marry. She reported that this would save you the trouble of a potential divorce. The research

hypothesis was not rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a relationship between gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results showed little significance. There was distress in the above stated areas, however sufficient evidence does not exist to show a direct correlation between the two variables. The research hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a relationship between gender of the adult child and the degree of distress experienced in the areas of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. The results again, showed little significance. The subject has experienced distress in the above areas in her own relationships and her views appear to have been contaminated, but there is not enough evidence to support the exact source of the distress. The research hypothesis was rejected.

Chapter Five

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will include a discussion of the results of the study, and conclusions. The chapter will conclude with some recommendations for further research.

Summary

According to the research findings, there appeared to be a moderate positive correlation between a parent (s) infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. Each case brought a unique set of variables. Similarities were replication of relationship styles and patterns, lack of trust and faith in marriage as an institution although this was still desired by most subjects. Four of five cases included situations where the partner of the intended subject engaged in a relationship outside of the marriage. None of the subjects reported having been unfaithful to a partner. The degree of impact on the subject's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships directly related to the parental infidelity is unknown. There was found to be a relationship between the two variables, the significance varied with each case. The relationship between the gender of the adult child and the degree of distress experienced in the studied areas appeared to be the least significant. One possible explanation could be the all female sample. Females are traditionally more emotional beings and this should be considered when looking at traumatic situations. It was difficult to discern between degree of distress experienced and female response to stress.

The third hypothesis dealt with gender of the unfaithful parent and degree of distress experienced by the adult child in the studied areas. This held some significance. Three subjects reported their father was unfaithful, while two reported it was their mother. Differences were expected based on relationships with the respective parent prior to the affair. Some cases reported distancing themselves from that parent following the discovery of the infidelity. Still others said that there was little effect on the relationship. Some significance was found in the relationships between the subjects and persons of the same gender as the unfaithful parent. Some subjects reported distant relationships with women, having more male friends when it was the mother who had been unfaithful. In the cases where the father of the subject was unfaithful, it was found that subjects tended to have periods of no contact with their father and were at one time involved in a relationship where their partner had been unfaithful.

This study looked at views of infidelity based on a common experience of parental infidelity. Trust was viewed as very important and once broken, difficult to regain. Marriage was viewed by some of the subjects as important and by others as not necessary. Intimate relationships were experienced by all subjects, each with a different degree of comfort. Control in a relationship and initiating an end to a relationship were common characteristics of the subjects in this study. Love was experienced by all subjects and viewed as desirable. However, love brings with it potential conflict and hurt.

Conclusions

Although the sample size was small, and only one gender was represented, the results support most previous research conducted in this area. Motivation for engaging in affairs

was consistent between the sexes, with males more able to separate love and sex and females seeking something that was missing in their marriages. Patterns emerged in families over generations. Amato (cited in Wolfinger 2000) reported on observable marital behaviors in children of divorce. He stated that having a sexual relationship with someone else is a characteristic of that situation. In four of the five cases studied in this research, the subjects were involved with someone who engaged in a relationship outside of the marriage. Although this study found there to be a relationship between a parent's infidelity and an adult child's perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships, it is difficult to determine the exact impact of the modeling of the parental relationship modeling alone had on the subject's perceptions.

Recommendations for further research

Several suggestions are offered for further research on adult children of parental infidelity and their perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate relationships. They are:

1. Replication of this study using a larger sample could enhance the results for possible generalization.
2. Replication of this study isolating the parental modeling of relationships variable to determine a more exacting knowledge of its impact.
3. Replication of this study including male subjects would allow for insight into different coping styles and degree of distress experienced by males.

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