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Effects of Parental Infidelity on Adult Children's Relational Ethics With Their Partners: A Contextual Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study used the lens of contextual therapy to explore the influence of parental infidelity on adult children's perceptions of relational ethics in their relationship with their partners. A predominantly female sample ($N = 411$) completed a survey about trust, fairness, and loyalty within their current romantic relationship. Results showed a significant relationship between fathers' infidelity and lower levels of horizontal relational ethics, and participants' own participation in infidelity partially mediated the relationship between fathers' infidelity and horizontal relational ethics. The relationship between mothers' infidelity and relational ethics was not significant. Recommendations for clinical practice and future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Contextual therapy; infidelity; loyalty; relational ethics; trust

Introduction

It is estimated that between 20% and 40% of American married couples experience infidelity at some point during the relationship (Marín, Christensen, & Atkins, 2014). Couples who experience infidelity typically report high levels of distress, regardless of whether the infidelity is sexual or emotional in nature (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). As infidelity has more frequently been cited as a presenting problem in couple therapy, it has become a common topic of research. Sori (2007) provided a clinical perspective on the many ways in which children could become caught in the middle of loyalty conflicts between their parents when they are directly or indirectly exposed to the secrecy and lies that often accompany infidelity.

There is strong evidence supporting the link between family of origin experiences and adult children's relationships with their partners (e.g., Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, & Ragan, 2012). An individual's family of origin is where they first learn about components of relationships such as love, honesty, respect, communication (Crittenden, 1997), attachment (Dinero, Conger, Shaver,

Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2011), and conflict (Weigel, 2007). For example, parental relationships can negatively influence the attitudes of adult children regarding commitment and marriage (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011). Martinson, Holman, Larson, and Jackson (2010) demonstrated that adult children's abilities to resolve difficult family of origin experiences enhanced their ability to create and maintain satisfying romantic relationships. Thus, in order to build a healthy couple relationship, it may be important for partners to heal from painful events occurring in their families of origin that impact their views on what to expect from each other and the relationship.

Although there is ample evidence demonstrating the relationship between painful family of origin experiences and adult children's relationships, few empirical studies (e.g., Schmidt, Green, & Prouty, in press; Platt, Nalbhone, Cassanova, & Wetchler, 2008; Thorson, 2009) have been published using a systemic approach to understand the impact of infidelity on members of the family outside of the couple subsystem affected by the infidelity. Thus, this study used the lens of contextual therapy to answer the question, "How does parental infidelity influence adult children's relationships with their romantic partners?"

Key Concepts from Contextual Therapy

Contextual therapy is a transgenerational model of family therapy that focuses on the balance of trust, fairness, and loyalty within relationships. This model provides a natural fit for understanding how a trust-violating act of parental infidelity influences adult children's perceptions of trust and loyalty in their relationships with their own partners. In alignment with systemic thinking, contextual therapists assert that the consequences of an individual's actions can affect the lives of all those connected to him/her and that children are inevitably influenced by their parents' choices (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). To extend that concept to this study, adult children's intimate relationships are affected by the ways each of the partners have been shaped by their parents' relationships and experiences within their families of origin.

Contextual therapy explores the ways family members manage interdependence by recognizing their obligation to offer contributions of relational resources grounded in love, care, and support to meet each other's needs, as well as their entitlement to assert their need to receive demonstrations of support and caring from their family members (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). According to Hargrave and Pfitzer (2003), family members do not define a balance of giving and receiving in a stagnant way. Rather, healthy families seek a balance in motion, constantly adapting as a result of changes in the rhythm of intrafamily dynamics, external factors, and addition and loss of family members. When couples join together to create a family of their own, each partner brings the legacy of past generations to the newly created family (Adams & Maynard, 2010).

The cornerstone of the contextual therapy model, relational ethics, is embedded within the concepts of trust, fairness, loyalty, and entitlement (Böszörményi-Nagy &

Krasner, 1986). Ducommun-Nagy (2002) explained relational ethics as an acknowledgement that close family or romantic relationships are sustained by dynamics related to justice and a capacity for fairness and commitment, which is repaid by acting in a way that promotes loyalty. Relational ethics, the balance of giving and taking that ensures trustworthiness, is present in both vertical relationships, such as those between parents and children, and horizontal relationships, such as those between romantic partners (Hargrave, Jennings, & Anderson, 1991). In order for trust to be developed within relationships, all individuals involved must acknowledge their multilateral investment in both receiving from others in order to have their own needs met and acting on their obligation to contribute to others to meet their needs (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 1980). As systemic, intergenerational thinkers, contextual therapists assert that the development of expectations for trust, fairness, and loyalty in vertical and horizontal relationships are intertwined.

Individuals who experience their families as untrustworthy and unable to meet their needs often experience a profound sense of hurt and are at an increased risk of developing a sense of destructive entitlement (Goldenthal, 1996). When people rely on destructive entitlement to meet their own physical and emotional needs at any cost, and they become blind to how their actions are impacting others, especially partners and children (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Destructive entitlement provides an example of how an individual may try to “right” a wrong committed by seeking to correct an imbalanced ledger of giving and receiving (Adams & Maynard, 2010). However, for those whose needs are viewed as less valuable than others, there are likely to be lasting implications. For example, those whose needs are disregarded may experience problems related to continuing the cycle of injustice by acting on destructive entitlements, experiencing difficulties in defining the basis for one’s self worth and struggling to establish trust in others’ emotional availability. Highlighting the importance of individuals taking responsibility for the outcome of their decisions on others, Ducommun-Nagy (2002) wrote, “The ethics of fairness are inseparable from the ethics of accountability” (p. 463). Thus, individuals are to be held accountable for the ways in which their actions influence the balance of trust, fairness, entitlement, and obligation within relationships.

When working with individuals, couples, and families, contextual therapists use the intervention of multidirected partiality to acknowledge each individual’s claim to both giving and receiving within close relationships. Grounded in a foundation of empathy, multidirected partiality enables therapists to recognize injustices and betrayals of trust that clients have experienced while also holding them accountable for the consequences of their own actions in response to this breakdown of relational ethics. Therefore, this intervention is useful in working toward the goals of ending the cycle of injustice perpetuated by destructive entitlement.

Understanding Infidelity Using a Contextual Lens

From the perspective of contextual therapy, the balance of relational ethics within couple and family systems is threatened by infidelity. Multiple researchers (e.g., Blow

& Hartnett, 2005b; Previti & Amato, 2004) have noted the ways in which infidelity damages the foundation of trust within couple relationships. Contextual therapists expand this perspective by calling for additional insight into the ways in which infidelity impacts the balance of trust and fairness in the context of the greater family system. This is of particular importance since trust is an essential component of sustaining healthy family relationships, both within and between generations (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986).

Contextual therapists consider the impact of the act of infidelity and partners' responses to infidelity on the family system. While infidelity is not always related to relational distress (Scheinkman, 2010), infidelity is often associated with conflict and tension within relationships (Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan, & Schofield, 2012; Balderrama-Durbin, Allen, & Rhoades, 2012). Researchers have shown that people who kept infidelity secret from their partners have reported even higher levels of distress (Atkins, Eldridge, Baucom, & Christensen, 2005), have shown more pursue-withdraw behaviors (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2012), and have been at greater risk of divorce (Marin et al., 2014) than couples who had not experienced infidelity or couples who had knowledge of infidelity.

Rather than assuming a linear relationship between infidelity and conflict, it is more likely that infidelity is both a cause and a consequence of poor relational quality (Previti & Amato, 2004). Contextual therapists view this infidelity-associated conflict as related to the breach of loyalty and trust. The challenge for couples is to work through an initial period of intense conflict and disturbing emotions before reaching a stage of forgiveness and motivation to create meaning out of this painful experience (Abrahamson, Hussain, Khan, & Schofield, 2012; Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, & Miller, 2002). Viewed in a less pathologizing way, infidelity offers couples the opportunity to assess and renegotiate the systemic balance of trust, loyalty, and fairness to help increase relational satisfaction. In contextual terms, this forgiveness-based process of salvaging and restoring the relationship is known as exoneration (Hargrave, 2001).

In a systemic fashion, contextual therapists also assume that what occurs between partners inevitably influences their children. Many researchers (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006; Platt et al., 2008; Siffert, Schwarz, & Stutz, 2012) have demonstrated the influence of parents' expressions of conflict on their children's experiences of themselves and others. Interparental conflict affects the quality of parental involvement, choice of disciplinary strategies, and consistency of behavior. For example, parents in high-conflict relationships were less likely to be emotionally attuned to their children's needs (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006) and more likely to use harsh parenting techniques (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), which may prevent the child from developing a sense of trust in the parent as a caregiver.

Adult Children's Experiences of Parental Infidelity

A substantial amount of clinical literature concerning how to cope with infidelity has been published over the past several decades, and Blow and Harnett

(2005a) acknowledged the need for rigorous empirical research about the effects of infidelity on couple relationships and individual adjustment. Despite the understanding that infidelity is a detrimental event in couples' relationships and that what occurs between parents influences their children, very few studies within the field of couple and family therapy have explicitly addressed the effects of infidelity on adult or young children. Platt et al. (2008) found that adult male (but not female) children who reported a father's infidelity were more likely to report having engaged in infidelity themselves, suggesting the continuing influence of parental behavior. In addition, Thorson (2009) reported that regardless of the gender of the parent having the affair, adult children were more likely to talk with their mothers than their fathers about the occurrence of infidelity within the family. One study found that both higher levels of interparental conflict and the occurrence of fathers' infidelity were related to adult children's perceptions of lower vertical relational ethics within their families of origin (Schmidt et al., in press).

Research supported by the lens of contextual therapy has also been sparse. Several studies have identified a relationship between relational ethics and physical health and depression in married couples (Grames, Miller, Robinson, Higgins, & Hinton, 2008), couples' relationship satisfaction (Gangamma, Bartle-Haring, & Glebova, 2012), and family loyalty in children (Leibig & Green, 1999). Prior research has demonstrated that reports of relational ethics may be impacted by demographic variables such as age (Hargrave & Bomba, 1993), gender (Gangamma et al., 2012; Hargrave et al., 1991), and marital status (Hargrave & Bomba).

This study sought to answer the research question, "How does parental infidelity influence adult children's reports of relational ethics in their relationships with their partners?" It was hypothesized that:

1. The occurrence of parental infidelity would be related to lower levels of horizontal trust and justice, loyalty, entitlement, and total horizontal relational ethics.
2. The occurrence of the adult child's own infidelity would be related to lower levels of horizontal trust and justice, loyalty, entitlement, and total horizontal relational ethics.
3. The occurrence of the adult child's own infidelity would mediate the relationship between parental infidelity and total horizontal relational ethics.

Method

This article reports the results of the second part of a two-part study concerning the effects of parental infidelity and interparental conflict on adult children's perceptions of vertical and horizontal relational ethics. For this study, infidelity was defined as secretive emotional and/or sexual involvement with a person outside of a committed couple relationship that violated the partners' agreements with each other. Convenience and snowball sampling strategies were used to recruit participants through professional organizations, personal contacts, and social networking sites. The authors also recruited participants through an email sent to all students,

faculty, and staff at a midsize public university in the southern United States; this university has a reputation for serving a broad range of students who are typically older than the average college student and hold full or part-time jobs while completing their studies. The study was approved by that university's institutional review board, and all data were collected in November 2012. Potential participants received an email with a link to an anonymous, online survey about their relationships with their parents and their partners. After completing the survey, participants were given the option to enter a drawing to win a \$20 gift card.

Participants

To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to identify as (a) being 18 or older, (b) having biological parents who were married or living together for at least six months during the participant's life, and (c) currently living in the United States. The sample included both individuals who affirmed knowledge of their parents' participation in infidelity and those who reported no knowledge of parental infidelity. A total of 806 participants responded to the survey, and the final sample for this study included 411 participants from 20 states after selecting cases for participants who identified themselves as currently in a romantic relationship.

The majority of participants identified as female (91%), white (72.7%), and Christian (71.8%). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 70, with an average age of 31.38 years ($SD = 11.53$). The majority of participants reported being married (46.7%) or in a committed dating relationship (32.1%). The average length of participants' current relationship was 8.19 years ($SD = 9.14$), and the average age at the beginning of the relationship was 23.08 years ($SD = 6.68$). Participants reported an average household income of \$67,066 ($SD = 63,754$) per year, with a median of \$50,000. More detailed information can be found in [Table 1](#).

Measures

All participants completed an online survey. The survey included original questions about demographics, family of origin experiences, and partnered relationships. Original questions were also used to assess for the presence of infidelity for mothers, fathers, and participants themselves and contextual details about these affairs.

In addition, the survey contained items from the Relational Ethics Scale (RES; Hargrave et al., 1991), which measures the contextual construct of relational ethics. Although the original measure includes 24 items, this study included participants' responses to the 12 questions measuring horizontal trust and justice, horizontal loyalty, horizontal entitlement, and total horizontal relational ethics to provide information about how participants perceived their relationships with their partners. All questions used a Likert-style scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly*

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Female	376	91.5
Male	35	8.5
Race		
Black or African American	34	8.3
Native American or Alaskan Native	3	0.7
Asian or Asian American	24	5.8
White or Caucasian	299	72.7
Hispanic or Latino/a	37	9.0
Biracial or multiracial	13	3.2
Other	1	0.2
Education		
High school/GED	13	3.2
Some college	81	19.7
Two-year college degree (associate's)	44	10.7
Four-year college degree (bachelor's)	150	36.5
Master's degree	99	24.1
Doctoral degree	18	4.4
Professional degree (M.D., J.D.)	6	1.5
Relationship status		
Dating, not committed	25	6.1
Dating, committed	132	32.1
Engaged	9	2.2
Living together	53	12.9
Married	192	46.7
Sexual orientation		
Lesbian	8	1.9
Gay male	3	0.7
Bisexual female	12	2.9
Bisexual male	2	0.5
Heterosexual female	344	85.8
Heterosexual male	32	8.0

Note. *N* = 411.

agree). Six items were reverse-coded, and higher scores indicated higher levels of relational ethics (i.e., more trust and fairness, more loyalty, and less destructive entitlement). An example of a question measuring trust and justice is “This person listens to me and values my thoughts,” an example of a question measuring loyalty is “I try to meet the emotional needs of this person,” and an example of a question measuring entitlement is “When I feel angry, I tend to take it out on this person.” The reported overall reliability for the full RES is .96, and reliabilities for the horizontal subscales range from .93 to .96 (Hargrave et al., 1991). Reliability coefficients and mean scores for this sample can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for relational ethics scale.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	α
Horizontal trust and justice	24.69	4.98	6–30	.88
Horizontal loyalty	13.01	1.84	3–15	.58
Horizontal entitlement	11.23	2.47	3–15	.65
Total horizontal relational ethics	49.02	7.46	22–60	.86

Note. *N* = 411.

Table 3. Frequencies for infidelity of mothers, fathers, and participants.

Variable	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)	Participants (%)
Presence of infidelity			
Yes	10.9	28.5	15.3
No	89.1	71.5	84.7
Status of affair(s) ^a			
One-time event	18.6	13.7	44.7
Was/is ongoing with one person	60.5	34.2	38.8
Multiple affairs	20.9	52.1	16.5
Type of affair(s) ^a			
Emotional	16.3	5.1	25.9
Sexual	4.7	27.4	22.4
Emotional and sexual	65.1	46.2	51.7
I'm not sure	14.0	21.4	0.0
Number of affair partners ^a			
One	55.8	33.3	73.2
Two	23.3	16.2	17.9
Three or more	20.9	50.5	7.1
How I learned about affair ^a			
On my own	16.3	17.2	
Told by parent having affair	18.6	9.5	
Told by other parent	23.3	43.1	
Told by a sibling	18.6	7.8	
Told by a friend	2.3	2.6	
Witnessed affair event	16.3	6.9	
Other	4.6	13.9	
Partner aware of affair(s) ^a			
Yes	79.1	95.7	50.0
No	7.0	2.6	41.4
I'm unsure	14.0	1.7	8.6

Note. $N = 411$. Includes information regarding both affairs that are currently active and affairs that have occurred in the past.

^aPercentages for specific details of affairs apply to those who answered "Yes" when questioned about their parents' or their own infidelity.

Results

Reports of Infidelity

Eleven percent of participants ($n = 45$) reported that their biological mothers had engaged in an affair during their parents' relationship. According to participants, the mean number of affair partners for mothers was 1.82 ($SD = 1.20$). Of those who reported knowledge of their mother's infidelity, 81% reported their mother's affairs ended 5 or more years ago ($M = 14.59$ years ago, $SD = 10.41$). The average age when participants learned about the affair(s) was 15.60 years ($SD = 7.05$). For more information, see Table 3.

Twenty-nine percent ($n = 117$) indicated that their biological fathers had been unfaithful during their parents' relationships. The mean number of affair partners for fathers was 3.38 ($SD = 4.05$). Of those participants who reported knowledge of their father's infidelity, 85% reported that their father's affairs ended 5 or more years ago ($M = 16.53$ years ago, $SD = 11.52$). Participants reported an average age of 15.39 years ($SD = 7.51$) when they found out about their father's affair(s).

In addition, 15% ($n = 63$) of participants reported that they themselves had previously engaged or were currently engaging in infidelity during their current romantic relationship. The mean number of affair partners for participants was 1.38

($SD = 0.87$). Eighteen percent of the total sample ($n = 74$) reported having engaged in their first sexual affair during the first year of the relationship, and 6% ($n = 22$) reported having engaged in their first emotional affair during the first year of the relationship. Twenty-three percent of participants also reported having been unfaithful in a past relationship.

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were used to determine whether there were relationships between horizontal relational ethics and various aspects of demographic data collected. One-way ANOVAs revealed a significant difference in participants' ratings of total horizontal relational ethics based on relationship status [$F(406,410) = 4.16, p < .01$] and religious preference [$F(401,410) = 2.36, p < .05$]. Pearson correlations also demonstrated a significant, inverse relationship between length of the current relationship and total horizontal RES score [$r(313) = -.195, p < .01$], as well as an inverse relationship between age at the beginning of the relationship and total horizontal RES score [$r(380) = -.110, p < .05$]. Several demographic items—including participants' sex, level of educational attainment, and race—did not significantly impact horizontal RES scores.

Regression Analyses

Next, a series of multiple hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the influence of parents' and adult children's engagement in infidelity on each of the horizontal subscales of the RES. Based on the results of previous studies of relational ethics and preliminary analyses conducted by the authors, participants' age, religious preference, relationship status, age at the beginning of the relationship, and length of the relationship were included as control variables. Predictor variables included mothers' infidelity, fathers' infidelity, and adult children's infidelity. Detailed results can be found in [Table 4](#).

The overall model for the influence of parental and adult children's infidelity on horizontal trust and justice was significant, $F(10,379) = 3.74, p < .001, R^2 = .09$. The sections pertaining to trust and justice in the first and second hypotheses were partially supported. In the final model, the occurrence of fathers' infidelity ($\beta = -.168, p < .001$) was associated with a lower sense of trust and justice between adult children and their partners when controlling for demographic variables. However, there was no significant relationship between horizontal trust and justice and the infidelity of participants themselves or their mothers.

The overall model for the influence of parental and adult children's infidelity on horizontal loyalty was significant, $F(10,379) = 2.44, p = .01, R^2 = .06$. Sections pertaining to loyalty in the first and second hypotheses were partially supported. In the final model, there were no significant relationships between any demographic or infidelity-related predictors. The occurrence of fathers' infidelity ($\beta = -.106, p = .04$) was initially associated with lower reports of horizontal loyalty, but this

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis for predicting the influence of mothers' and fathers' infidelity on horizontal relational ethics.

Predictor	Trust and justice			Loyalty			Entitlement			Total		
	ΔR^2	B	SE	β	ΔR^2	B	SE	β	ΔR^2	B	SE	β
Step 1	.06				.05				.03			
Age		-.05	.79	-.11		-.06	.04	-.36		-.04	.06	-.21
Christian		.78	.73	.07		.05	.28	-.03***		.52	.38	.10
Age at beginning of relationship		-.07	.11	-.10		.00	.04	.01		.08	.06	.22
Length of relationship		-.01	.12	-.01		.03	.04	.14		.04	.06	.16
Cohabiting		-1.28	.81	-.09		-.39	.30	-.07*		-.73	.41	-.10
Engaged/married		-.06	.68	-.01		.48	.25	.13		-.47	.35	-.10
Step 2	.03				.01				.02			
Mother's affair (0, 1)		-.25	.79	-.02		-.33	.30	-.06		-.23	.41	-.03
Father's affair (0, 1)		-1.94	.55	-.17***		-.43	.21	-.11*		-.80	.28	-.14**
Step 3	.00				.00				.00			
Adult child's affair (0, 1)		-1.15	.72	-.08		-.16	.27	-.03		-.34	.38	-.05
Total R^2			.09***				.06***				.05*	.08**

Note. N = 411. For all variables coded as (0, 1), 0 = yes and 1 = no.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

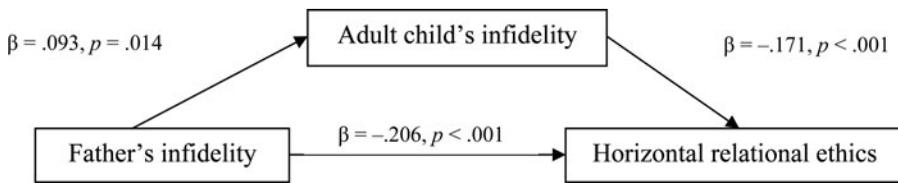


Figure 1. Individual significant paths.

relationship became insignificant when adult children's infidelity was added into the model ($\beta = -.101, p = .06$). There was no significant relationship between horizontal loyalty and the infidelity of participants themselves or their mothers.

The overall model for the influence of parental and adult children's infidelity on horizontal entitlement was also significant, $F(10,379) = 2.08, p = .03, R^2 = .05$. The sections pertaining to entitlement in the first and second hypotheses were partially supported. In the final model, the occurrence of fathers' infidelity ($\beta = -.139, p = .01$) was associated with lower reports of entitlement between adult children and their partners, even when accounting for the infidelity of the adult children. There was not a significant relationship between horizontal entitlement and the infidelity of participants themselves or their mothers at any stage of the model.

Finally, the overall model for the influence of parental and adult children's infidelity on total horizontal relational ethics was significant, $F(10,379) = 3.05, p < .001, R^2 = .08$. The sections pertaining to total horizontal relational ethics in the first and second hypotheses were partially supported. Similar to the results for horizontal trust and justice and entitlement, the occurrence of fathers' infidelity ($\beta = -.181, p < .001$) was associated with lower reports of total relational ethics between adult children and their partners. There was not a significant relationship between total horizontal relational ethics and the infidelity of participants themselves or their mothers at any stage of the model.

Mediation Analysis

The Sobel test (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2014) was run in order to determine if adult children's own reports of participation in infidelity mediated the relationship between parental infidelity and adult children's reports of total horizontal relational ethics in their relationships with their romantic partners. Separate analyses were used for mothers' affairs and fathers' affairs. The results of the Sobel test for the relationship between mothers' infidelity and total horizontal relational ethics were not significant ($z = -0.053, p = .95$), and the results of the Sobel test for the relationship between fathers' infidelity and total horizontal ethics were significant at the trend level ($z = -1.934, p = .053$). Following Hayes' (2009) approach, figures demonstrating the partial mediating influence of adult children's own participation in infidelity on the relationship between fathers' infidelity and adult children's reports of relational ethics in their relationships with their partners can be found in Figures 1 and 2. Although there is still a significant relationship between fathers' infidelity and

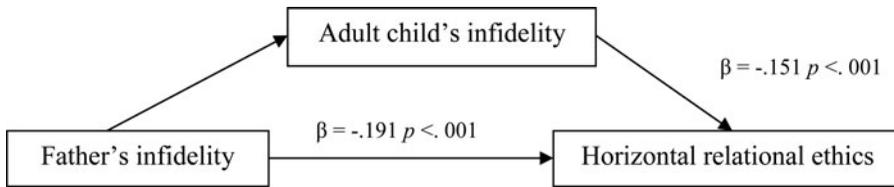


Figure 2. Mediation model demonstrating the role of adult children's own infidelity in mediating the influence of fathers' infidelity on horizontal relational ethics.

adult children's reports of horizontal relational ethics, this relationship is slightly weakened when taking into account the influence of adult children's own participation in infidelity.

Discussion

This study provided evidence demonstrating a relationship between the occurrence of parental infidelity and perceptions of relational ethics between adult children and their current partners. The first hypothesis was partially supported since there were no significant relationships between mothers' infidelity and any of the horizontal RES subscales when controlling for participants' age, religious preference, relationship status, age at the beginning of the relationship, and length of the relationship. However, there was a consistent relationship between fathers' infidelity and participants' reports of horizontal relational ethics, with the occurrence of fathers' infidelity being related to adult children reporting less trust and justice, less loyalty, and an increased attitude of destructive entitlement in their romantic relationships. According to Hargrave, Jennings, and Anderson (1991), loyalty and entitlement may be behavioral indicators of the general sense of trust and fairness within the family.

Since this sample was comprised of almost exclusively heterosexual females, it is possible that the significance of fathers' infidelity over mothers' infidelity demonstrated the tendency of women's experiences with their male partners to be influenced by their experiences with their fathers. This finding supports previous research demonstrating that women's relationships with their fathers influence their self-esteem, experiences of intimacy in romantic relationships, and overall life satisfaction (Allgood, Beckert, & Peterson, 2012; Scheffler & Naus, 1999). Combining contextual therapy with a feminist framework, it is also essential to consider the influence of gender in the power associated with who defines relational ethics within families and how the construct is defined (Dankoski & Deacon, 2011), calling to mind Carol Gilligan's (1983) findings that women are more likely to define justice relationally. Gangamma et al. (2009) reported that vertical relational ethics was associated with lower marital satisfaction for female partners, but this association was not significant for males. Viewed through a contextual lens, adult children's romantic relationships are inevitably influenced by their perceptions of trust, loyalty, and fairness in their families of origin. In interpreting this result, however, one must

consider that the cross-sectional design of the study precludes assuming that fathers' infidelity caused the decrease in horizontal relational ethics.

Contrary to the second hypothesis, there was no relationship between participants' own infidelity and reports of relational ethics in their relationships with their partners when controlling for demographic variables. This could be explained in several different ways. It is possible that the horizontal subscale of the RES did not adequately assess the ways in which relationships are impacted by individuals' participation in infidelity. Another possibility is related to the argument put forth by Parker, Berger, and Campbell (2010) that a perpetuated dysfunctional view of infidelity exists both in the lay media and research literature; these authors argued for a more strengths-based view of couples who are able to overcome relational problems related to their unique experiences of infidelity. Thus, it is possible that even though participants in this study may have participated in infidelity, they may have already worked to restore the balance of relational ethics within their relationship with their partner. This could account for the lack of statistical evidence supporting the expected relationship between participants' infidelity and reports of horizontal relational ethics.

Finally, the third hypothesis was partially supported. The mediation analysis revealed that accounting for the occurrence of participants' own infidelity slightly weakened the relationship between fathers' participation in infidelity and lower levels of total horizontal relational ethics when demographic factors were not added into the equation. While this finding is certainly compelling, it is important to remember that this relationship was significant at the trend level, which suggests that there may be multiple other mediators that would help to explain the relationship between parental infidelity, adult children's infidelity, and relational ethics in adult children's romantic relationships. Potential mediators may include the length of time since the parents' affair(s) had ended, the level of conflict present in the parents' relationship, or whether the adult child's partner had engaged in infidelity. Moreover, it is unclear whether (a) the decrease in horizontal relational ethics was due to the participants' engagement in infidelity or (b) the perception of imbalance in the partner relationship contributed to the desire and motivation for an extradyadic relationship. According to Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendations, a mediation model may not be as effective if the dependent variable causes the mediator. Applied to this study, these results may be less accurate if the imbalance in relational ethics caused the adult children to seek emotional and/or sexual connection with someone other than their partners. Considered from a systemic, contextual point of view, it is likely that a breakdown in relational ethics serves as both a precursor and a consequence of engagement in infidelity.

Implications for Couple Therapists

Contextual therapy is frequently misunderstood as a past-focused, insight-oriented approach (Ducommun-Nagy, 2002). Rather, gaining insight is seen as an avenue to making behavioral changes in contextual therapy (Adams & Maynard, 2010).

Contextual therapists call attention to the ways in which individuals are responsible for taking action to help restore the balance of relational ethics within the family or couple subsystem. Through the use of multidirected partiality, therapists can gently but assertively guide clients to assess the ways in which their participation in infidelity or their response to a partner's infidelity has influenced themselves, their partners, and their children (if applicable). In a systemic, multigenerational model such as contextual therapy, it is also important to challenge clients to consider the impact that their relational patterns will have on future generations, as well.

Contextual therapy begins with a thorough assessment of various historical, psychological, and relational factors that directly or indirectly shape individuals, couples, and families. Based on this study, couple therapists should ensure that this assessment includes a description of family of origin experiences such as parental infidelity that may impact couples' present relationships. If parental infidelity is reported, a genogram would be useful in delineating what relationships within the family of origin looked like before and after the infidelity was exposed. Infidelity can be a powerful way of revealing power imbalances and levels of loyalty within relationships, so clinicians should ask adult clients about how they experienced learning about their parents' infidelity, what changed (or did not change) within the family, and what meaning they ascribe to their parents' infidelity in terms of influencing expectations about trustworthiness, fairness, and having physical and socioemotional needs met within romantic relationships. In addition, clinicians should account for the age at which adult children found out about the affair since normative brain development influences how children cognitively and emotionally process life events that target abstract concepts like loyalty, trust, and fairness.

It is likely that some individuals will identify strongly with the experience of parental infidelity and will be aware of its impact on their relationships, while others may deny that it was important or that it has influenced their expectations within romantic relationships. From the contextual point of view, however, even when individuals are not aware of the influence, there is still a multigenerational legacy of trust, fairness, and loyalty silently influencing relationships. Since every individual's experience of parental infidelity will be different, it is important for therapists to work at the client's pace in exploring how they view this experience as impacting their expectations for trust and fairness within their current relationship with their partner. How has awareness of their parents' infidelity influenced their views on trusting their partner? Based on what occurred in their parents' relationship, what does it mean to be loyal to their partner now? What do they view as acceptable alternatives if their partners are not fulfilling their sexual and emotional needs? How does this fit with expectations their partners may have about acceptable sources for alternative support? What situations alert them to times when the relationship feels unbalanced or unstable?

Multidirected partiality is the primary intervention used by contextual therapists. This technique consists of being actively empathetic with one family member after another (Böszörményi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). While the therapist empathetically recognizes how each person has experienced past injustices and painful

experiences, contextual therapists must be directive at times, bringing to light examples of destructive entitlement that destroy the balance of relational ethics within close family relationships. Based on the results of this study demonstrating the relationship between parental infidelity and adult children's lower reports of horizontal relational ethics, it is essential for therapists to validate that the experience of infidelity may have had long-lasting implications on individuals' perceptions of trust and loyalty that extend into their romantic relationships. However, therapists must also acknowledge the harmful nature of acting out of a sense of destructive entitlement, helping clients to balance the relational ledger in a way that does not prevent others from being treated with respect and honor. An individual who chooses to be unfaithful in her romantic relationship may feel entitled to do so if she has adopted an attitude of destructive entitlement, believing that her needs for love, trustworthiness, and loyalty were not being met in a balanced way. Contextual therapists have the task of balancing empathic understanding of situations facilitating the development of destructive entitlement and refraining from condoning actions perpetuating injustice (Sibley, Schmidt, & Kimmes, 2014).

While accountability for the consequences of one's actions is a fundamental concept in contextual therapy, Goldenthal (1996) recognized that it can be one of the most challenging concepts to successfully address with clients. Although the concept may be difficult to apply, therapists who have the courage and skill to help clients acknowledge responsibility are able to promote lasting growth for individuals, couples, and families attending therapy. As Hargrave and Pfitzer (2003) explained:

Multidirected partiality does not only mean empathizing with and acknowledgement of the pains and violations caused by others. It moves past acknowledging a patient's contributions. It also includes holding the patient, as well as other relational parties, responsible for the actions and intended behaviors that have caused damage. (p. 101)

It is important to note if a therapist is not careful, he could potentially side with the family member who has been a victim of infidelity. This may be especially likely if the therapist has been influenced in a victimizing way by infidelity in his family of origin or romantic relationships of his own. However, this kind of unintentional siding based on silent bias would be defeating to one of the central purposes of contextual therapy: fully and courageously exploring multiple perspectives and restoring the balance of justice within relationships.

The concept of commitment is inherent in therapeutic discussions about infidelity. A potentially beneficial way to discuss with clients about infidelity is exploring whether they are sliding or deciding how they behave in their relationships (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Stanley, Rhoades, and Whitton (2010) explained, "People slide into having sex. People slide into having children. People slide into dangerous relationships. In contrast to sliding, there are strong conceptual reasons to suggest that clear decisions generally build the most resilient intentions" (p. 253). This concept of sliding versus deciding can be applied to clinicians working with individuals affected by parental infidelity. Even if there has been a clear pattern of relational injustices related to infidelity in their family of origin, clients can decide to

set a different legacy in motion rather than sliding into a legacy of injustice. If infidelity has already occurred in an individual's romantic relationships, she can decide to be committed to her partner in the future, making it a priority to restore the balance of relational ethics. Stanley and Rhoades (2009) further highlighted the role of decision making in romantic relationships: "At the root, commitment means making a decision to choose one alternative over others, and that in choosing, one is deciding to give up the other alternatives. Deciding is fundamental to commitment" (p. 35).

Using a contextual therapy framework, commitment is defined by making a conscious, active decision to remedy relational injustices by diligently working to restore the balance of trust and fairness. Forgiveness of past injustices (also known as exoneration in contextual therapy) is an essential element of commitment within relationships, and vice versa. The burden for action to restore the balance of trust, fairness, and commitment rests on *both* partners. As Helmeke, Prouty, and Bischof (2014) cautioned, it is both extraordinarily difficult and potentially unwise for the betrayed partner to forgive the betraying partner if the betraying partner has not made a sincere effort to take responsibility for the break of trust and to repair the hurt that has been inflicted on the betrayed partner. According to Hargrave (2001), the process of exoneration for those who have been hurt in relationships includes four nonlinear stations: gaining insight into how interactions have caused hurt and taking steps to protect one's self from further damage, understanding why the damage happened and assessing the level of responsibility for individuals involved, giving opportunities for compensation and rebuilding of trust, and overtly forgiving the perpetrator and giving life to a new relationship.

To explore the relationship between forgiveness and commitment to restoring trust and justice within the relationship, therapists could consider asking both partners questions such as "How are you currently acting on your decision to be committed to this relationship and to your partner?" Another helpful question for the betrayed partner may be, "How do you see your current willingness to forgive as impacting your openness to being committed in this relationship?" Therapists may also consider asking the betraying partner how they view their participation in infidelity as affecting their partner's commitment to the relationship and how this has influenced their understanding of what it means to work toward reestablishing trust within the relationship. This helps open space for therapists to assess how each partner defines forgiveness and commitment within the relationship and how partners perceive they are putting their commitments into action.

Limitations

Based on the study design and sample characteristics, there are some limitations to generalizing the results of this study. This study included a sample of primarily white, female, Christian participants. Thus, researchers and clinicians should use caution when applying the results of this study to those who do not identify as part of these groups. Another limitation of this study includes the fact that participants may not have been aware of what their parents considered to be infidelity, resulting in

either overreporting or underreporting of parental infidelity. In addition, this study did not account for the influence of infidelity that may have occurred on the part of participants' partners, so it is unknown whether this may have had an influence on participants' reports of relational ethics.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides introductory information about how parental infidelity influences adult children's experiences of trust and fairness in their romantic relationships, it is important to remember that these results can be best generalized to adult women based on this sample. Researchers should continue exploring adult women's experiences to determine whether there is a relationship between the infidelity of women's partners and levels of horizontal relational ethics. It could also be useful to use dyadic data analysis to build on previous studies concerning attachment and infidelity to determine whether there is a relationship between perceptions of relational ethics and attachment in couple relationships and how this is related to participation in infidelity. In addition, researchers should attempt to recruit a sample with more male and nonwhite participants, based on the limitations of the sample in this study.

Likewise, researchers could conduct a follow-up qualitative study to explore how adult women who have knowledge of parental infidelity perceive this as influencing relational ethics within their families of origin. An additional area of interest for interviews would be the systemic implications of parental infidelity concerning their relationships with their romantic partners. In these qualitative interviews, it could be particularly beneficial to examine how adult women perceive the balance of trust and fairness in the family before the infidelity occurred, shortly after the infidelity became exposed, and after a period of time in which the family seeks healing.

Conclusion

This study aimed to address the relationship between parental infidelity and adult children's relationships with their partners. As illustrated by this study, a sample of primarily adult women who acknowledged their fathers' involvement in infidelity reported less trust and justice, less loyalty, and an increased propensity for destructive entitlement in their relationship with their current partner. These results provided support for the clinical application of a contextual therapy framework addressing the balance of relational ethics within couple and family systems. In addition, this research opens additional avenues for further studies with a goal of developing more effective clinical interventions to help individuals, couples, and families find healing after trust has been broken and loyalty questioned through involvement in infidelity.

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