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The role of managing information about infidelity and differentiation of self in the adaptation of spouses after infidelity

Rola zarządzania informacją o zdradzie
i dyferencjacja „ja” w adaptacji małżonków po zdradzie

Abstract

Infidelity in marriage leaves a lasting mark not only on the relationship between two people but also affects the functioning of the entire family system. In psychological analyses, research on infidelity is dominated by approaches focusing on its negative consequences. These include, among others, the dissolution of the relationship, increased symptoms of depression, lowered self-esteem, and the emergence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Practical aspects are characteristic of studies where authors emphasize behaviours aimed at preventing infidelity in relationships. Relatively few publications are dedicated to identifying and discussing the psychological variables that may support adaptation after experiencing infidelity in a romantic relationship. The main goal of this article is to propose a new model of adaptation for couples after infidelity in marriage, based on the assumptions of systemic family theory. The specific aim is to present the results of research from the last decade that relate to the variables proposed in the model, such as self-differentiation and managing information about infidelity.

Keywords: adaptation, information about infidelity, marriage, self-differentiation, systemic family theory.

Abstrakt

Zdrada w związku małżeńskim pozostawia trwały ślad nie tylko w relacji dwojga ludzi, ale wpływa również na funkcjonowanie całego systemu rodzinnego. W analizach psychologicznych dominują kierunki badań nad zdradą, w których zauważa się skoncentrowanie na jej negatywnych skutkach. Należą do nich m.in. rozpad związku, nasilenie objawów depresji i spadek samooceny, pojawienie się objawów Zespołu Stresu Pourazowego (PTSD). Praktycznym aspektem charakteryzują się te badania, w których autorzy zwracają uwagę na zachowania, których celem jest zapobieganie wystąpieniu zdrady w związku. Stosunkowo niewiele publikacji poświęconych jest zidentyfikowaniu i omówieniu tych zmiennych psychologicznych, które mogą wspierać adaptację po doświadczeniu zdrady w związku małżeńskim. Główny cel artykułu odnosi się do zaprezentowania zmodyfikowanego modelu adaptacji par po zdradzie w małżeństwie. Model ten został oparty na założeniach teorii systemowej rodzin. W pracy przedstawiono także wyniki badań z ostatniej dekady, obejmujące zmienne psychologiczne zaproponowane w omawianym modelu adaptacji par po zdradzie w małżeństwie, takie jak dyferencjacja „ja” i zarządzanie informacją o zdradzie.

Słowa kluczowe: adaptacja, dyferencjacja ja, informacja o zdradzie, małżeństwo, systemowa teoria rodzin.

Introduction

Research results indicate that any instance of infidelity by one partner can contribute to the termination of a romantic relationship (Whisman, 2015, pp. 713–723; Bendixen, Kennair, and Grøntvedt, 2018, pp. 322–335). Stavrova, Pronk, and Denissen (2023, pp. 143–169) demonstrated that although recovery and stabilization of personal well-being are possible after infidelity, relationship satisfaction does not return to its previous level. Analysis of 160 cultures shows that infidelity in marriage is the most frequently cited reason for relationship breakdown (Grøntvedt, Kennair, and Bendixen, 2020, pp. 1–9). Infidelity not only undermines the foundations of a romantic relationship, potentially leading to its end or divorce, but also significantly impacts the partners' psychological state, increasing symptoms of depression and lowering self-esteem (Bozoyan and Schmiedeberg, 2022, pp. 1090–1099). Infidelity destabilizes core beliefs about close relationships, potentially leading to depression, confusion, guilt, and shame (Platt and Freyd, 2015, pp. 398–404; Whisman, 2015, pp. 713–723). L.G. Roos *et al.* (2019, pp. 468–479) empirically demonstrated that infidelity among unmarried adults can result in symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Researchers confirm that infidelity also has consequences for the offspring of married couples. Young adults raised in families affected by infidelity not only experience emotional problems and decreased well-being but also struggle to establish close romantic relationships (de Castro-Bofill, 2016, pp. 228–235). Other authors have shown that individuals aware of their parents' infidelity are more likely to cheat on their romantic partners compared to those who did not experience such behaviours in their family of origin (Weiser *et al.*, 2015, pp. 2083–2101).

Considering the numerous consequences of infidelity, it is essential to identify the psychological processes that enable couples to cope with this challenging situation. The primary aim of this study is to present a modified model of post-infidelity adaptation in marriage, based on the principles of family systems theory. The results of recent research on the psychological variables proposed in the model, namely “self-differentiation” and the management of infidelity information, are also presented. The findings of this analysis can support interventions used by psychologists, psychotherapists, and the couples themselves who have experienced infidelity in their relationship.

The review includes both qualitative and quantitative studies on sexual and emotional infidelity in marital and informal relationships, with a particular emphasis on works grounded in family systems theory. It should be emphasized that definitions of infidelity and attitudes toward it vary across cultural contexts. What is considered infidelity in one culture may not be perceived as such in another (Pazhoohi, 2022, pp. 349–372). For this reason, the review includes publications from Western cultural contexts. The study began with a review of recent issues from highly-rated journals in the fields of marital and family therapy, sexual therapy, and couples counselling from the last decade (2014–2024). Among these journals were: *Psychotherapy*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Journal of Relationships Research*, *Universal Journal of Psychology*. The study also examined several major social science databases, including EBSCO, JSTOR, ProQuest, Science Direct, Scopus Springer Link, Web of Science, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar, using the following terms: “emotional infidelity” “sexual infidelity”, “infidelity in relationships”, “post-infidelity adaptation”, “post-infidelity communication”, “infidelity information management”, “infidelity in systems theory”, and “self-differentiation”. Relevant references from these publications were also considered, selecting those that fit the established criteria.

In describing, explaining, and predicting human behaviours analysed in the context of infidelity, the assumptions of systems theory were adopted (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974), according to which an infidelity-induced marital crisis constitutes a non-normative crisis that impacts the entire family system (de Barbaro, 2016). In family systems theory, infidelity is understood as a symp-

tom of relational problems. It is not merely the result of individual motivation and decisions but rather the outcome of the interaction between individual factors and relational processes involving both partners. Each spouse participates in the emergence of difficulties in the relationship and is responsible for the quality of the marital bond (Fife, Weeks, and Gambescia, 2007, pp. 71–97). The symptom serves a function within the system, for example, stabilizing the marital relationship. Participation in couples therapy can help in alleviating this symptom (Salih and Chaudry, 2023, pp. 407–430). According to Bowen (1978), an increase in tension within the family system triggers adaptive mechanisms aimed at reducing it. These mechanisms include emotional distancing, marital conflicts, spousal dysfunction, and focus on the child. Adaptive mechanisms can effectively reduce acute anxiety in the marriage. However, if they become the dominant pattern of emotional functioning and the sole means of maintaining balance in the system, leading spouses to extreme forms of behavior, they can become a family problem. Emotional distancing, intended to reduce relational tension, can result in partners seeking to fulfill their needs outside of the marital dyad through engagement in compensatory extramarital intimate relationships (Józefczyk and Świętochowski, 2023, pp. 27–39).

The first part of the article describes the model of post-infidelity adaptation proposed by the authors. The second part discusses one of the psychological variables in this model, referred to as “self-differentiation.” The third part focuses on explaining the second psychological variable, which is the management of infidelity information. The final section presents conclusions.

1. Couple adaptation model after marital infidelity

One of the models used to describe how marriages cope with stressful events, such as infidelity, is the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) Model by B. R. Karney and T. N. Bradbury (1995, pp. 3–34). In the VSA model, adaptation is understood as a couple’s ability to effectively cope with stress, leading to high relationship quality and stability. It is a dynamic process dependent on the interaction between partners’ vulnerabilities, external stressors, and adaptive processes. Vulnerabilities refer to individual differences that partners bring to the relationship, such as demographic factors, family history, past experiences in romantic relationships, personality traits, and attachment style. These vulnerabilities influence how individuals interpret various stressors, i.e., key developmental changes for the individual and couple, as well as various situations or events that may be chronic or sudden and that the partners encounter in

the relationship. According to the VSA model, both internal vulnerabilities and external stressors affect the adaptive processes displayed. These include methods enabling partners to cope with individual differences, relationship issues, or life changes. Adaptive processes include problem-solving and conflict resolution strategies, communication quality, and mutual support.

A positive outcome of a properly functioning adaptation process in romantic relationships is achieving both high relationship quality and stability. Drawing on the VSA model and based on a literature review, the authors of this article propose a modified model of couple adaptation after infidelity in marriage, grounded in the principles of family systems theory. In this model, the stressor is marital infidelity, while the vulnerability is the psychological variable of “self-differentiation”, understood as a central concept in M. Bowen’s family systems theory (1978). The adaptive process in the proposed model is the variable of managing information about infidelity in the romantic relationship.

Existing intervention models emphasize the role of active involvement by both partners and therapeutic support in achieving adaptation after infidelity in marriage. Communication plays an essential role in these models, serving as a critical component in providing effective psychological support to the couple. It not only enables the expression and processing of difficult emotions but also fosters mutual understanding and empathy, which are necessary for rebuilding trust and intimacy in the relationship (Butler, Gossner, and Fife, 2022, pp. 233–257; Perluso, 2019; Gottman and Gottman, 2017). These models focus on the communication between partners after the betrayed partner receives information about the infidelity. The authors of the modified couple adaptation model after infidelity in marriage highlight the role of another communication component in the relationship, which is managing the information about infidelity. This variable is conceptualized as a process involving both the decision of the unfaithful partner about whether to disclose the information and the degree of detail in the conveyed information. The betrayed partner also participates in this process, receiving the information and deciding what to do with that knowledge. The couple may decide, for example, whether and how such information will be communicated to family and children. The model does not only focus on communication within the marriage but, based on the principles of systems theory, takes into account the role of other family system members.

In systems theory, the most crucial aspect of communication is the pragmatism of the message, i.e., how the message is understood and received by the recipient. It is assumed that both verbal and nonverbal communication are equally important. Communication patterns are linked to the degree of open-

ness or closure of the family system and affect the behaviour and functioning of family members. Communication serves as a feedback loop that helps maintain homeostasis within the system. Proper communication supports development and stability, while improper communication (e.g., double binds) acts as a corrective mechanism, restoring the previous state of equilibrium (Sperry and Peluso, 2018). According to B. Dobek-Ostrowska (2007), information is an integral part of communication. The key difference between these concepts is that communication has a psychological dimension, while information pertains to the physical realm and is expressed through signs and perceived through the senses. Information can be seen or heard, but not every exchange of information leads to good communication that achieves mutual understanding. It can also result in a lack of it.

It is essential for the unfaithful partner to reflect on their reasons for wanting to disclose or withhold such information. Therapists and researchers in the field of infidelity do not provide a clear answer to the question of whether it is worth admitting to infidelity and what the consequences might be for individuals and the relationship. An important contribution to this discourse is E. Perel's opinion (2018), which emphasizes that the betrayed partner may not always be able to cope with such information, and the guilt felt by the unfaithful person should not be the sole reason for disclosing the infidelity. However, it is worth noting the findings of W. A. Afifi, W. L. Falato, and J. L. Weiner (2001, pp. 291–308), which indicate that among various methods of discovering infidelity in romantic relationships in a group of respondents (N=115), confessing to infidelity had the least negative consequences for the relationship. In such cases, 56% of couples decided to continue the relationship. In contrast, active pursuit of the truth by the suspecting partner and catching the partner in the act of infidelity were found to be the most destructive for the relationship. Only 14% of couples survived in cases where the betrayed partner sought the truth, and 17% of relationships continued when one partner was caught in the act. Receiving information about infidelity from a third party also led to a high number of breakups – 32% of these relationships survived. The findings suggest that the best strategy for maintaining the romantic relationship might be to admit to infidelity before the betrayed partner discovers it. However, it is emphasized that it cannot be definitively stated that disclosure is a protective strategy for every relationship. Some individuals choose to conceal the infidelity, hoping that their partner will not discover it. The study did not verify whether the benefits of this approach outweigh the risks of relationship disintegration if the infidelity is inadvertently discovered. The authors of this article stress the importance of further empirical research to address this dilemma. Psychological support can be helpful in

making decisions about whether and how to disclose infidelity to the partner. After disclosing information about infidelity, couples therapy can be an effective tool in helping the couple cope with emotions and decide on the future of the relationship. Psychological research findings confirm the positive impact of psychological support and couples therapy on the reconstruction and consolidation of the close relationship after infidelity (Teymori, Mojtabaei, and Rezazadeh, 2021, pp. 130–142).

Each partner may decide whether to share information about infidelity with their friends and family. On one hand, many studies point to the important, positive role of social support after infidelity in a relationship (Fife *et al.*, 2023, pp. 3882–3905). On the other hand, an essential voice in this discourse is E. Perel's observation (2028), which highlights that in modern times, women often face significant social pressure to end a relationship if they have been cheated on by their male partner. The therapist notes that many women encounter criticism when they decide to stay in the relationship. Some of them conceal information about infidelity from friends and family out of fear of social judgment. In the context of these observations, the findings cited in the article highlight the role of friends and family in making decisions about the future of the relationship after infidelity (Shrout and Weigel, 2017, pp. 1–21).

The second psychological variable included in the modified couple adaptation model after infidelity is “self-differentiation,” which refers to the sense of individual separateness that affects how an individual regulates closeness and distance in relationships, as well as their ability to manage their emotions. At the interpersonal level, a high degree of self-differentiation means the ability to find a balance between the need for autonomy and the need to maintain close bonds. At the intrapsychic level, it pertains to the ability to distinguish one's emotions from intellectual processes.

M. Bowen (1978) highlighted the potential to modify self-differentiation levels through psychotherapy. The findings of studies cited in the article indicate that therapeutic support for partners in raising their level of self-differentiation, i.e., their ability to self-regulate and maintain a balance between closeness and autonomy, can lead to increased relationship quality and stability. The literature emphasizes that psychotherapeutic techniques promoting higher self-differentiation levels help reduce anxious attachment and support couples in limiting hyperactivating behaviors, i.e., those aimed at demanding greater support and attention from the partner during conflicts in the relationship. As emphasized by S. Regas (2019), therapeutic work with couples on increasing self-differentiation can facilitate adaptation, understood as a high level of relationship quality and stability.

2. Self-differentiation as vulnerability in the couple's adaptation process after marital infidelity

In the modified theoretical model of adaptation of the betrayed partner proposed by the authors of this article, the vulnerability is the psychological variable known as “self-differentiation.” Previous research has highlighted the importance of this variable in post-infidelity adaptation. Heintzelman *et al.* (2014) conducted a study involving 587 respondents who had experienced infidelity in a romantic relationship. The vast majority of participants (93.5%) were married at the time of the infidelity, while the remaining respondents were in informal relationships. During the study, 95.1% of respondents were married. The study aimed to identify psychological variables associated with post-infidelity recovery, which was defined as post-traumatic growth. Relationships between self-differentiation, trauma, forgiveness, and post-traumatic growth were examined. Self-differentiation was positively associated with the level of forgiveness and acted as a moderator in the relationship between trauma and forgiveness. However, forgiveness was the only significant predictor of post-traumatic growth. A requirement for participants was to remain in the relationship where the infidelity occurred, and at least six months had to have passed since the infidelity. These conditions involved retrospective data collection, meaning that other processes occurring during this time could have influenced the final outcome and were not accounted for in the study.

Rodríguez-González *et al.* (2023) examined the relationship between self-differentiation and variables that, in the authors' proposed model, are outcomes of adaptation, namely relationship quality and stability. The study involved 958 individuals, including 137 couples from Spain and 342 couples from the United States. The researchers demonstrated that a high level of self-differentiation is associated with high levels of relationship quality and stability. This relationship remains significant in the context of stressful life events, such as the death of a child, caring for a disabled relative or friend, moving, serious illness or injury in the family, the birth of a child, the death of a partner, the death of a close friend, the death of a parent, job loss, or being a crime victim. One limitation of the study was the use of different versions of the self-differentiation measurement tool in the Spanish and American groups, comprising 26 and 23 items, respectively, preventing comparative analysis. Empirical studies have confirmed Bowen's hypothesis that individuals with higher self-differentiation exhibit better interpersonal relationship quality, as they can experience emotional closeness while maintaining a sense of autonomy.

Regas (2019) proposed a model of therapeutic work with couples who have experienced infidelity – the Mindful Differentiation Model in Couple Therapy. It consists of six areas of work with the couple: (1) self-differentiation in the relationship, (2) presence without fear, (3) non-reactivity, (4) relational triangles, (5) messages about returning to the previous state, and (6) tolerance of discomfort for the sake of growth.

Regas emphasizes the role of working on self-differentiation after infidelity, noting that low self-differentiation hinders adaptation after infidelity. Mindful differentiation allows partners to be more authentic in the relationship. The couple defines their values and functioning principles and then clarifies who they are to each other. During therapy conducted within this model, the therapist works with the couple to find a balance between individualism and community. Self-regulation work and self-definition are crucial aspects.

The goal of working on presence without fear is to reduce one's anxiety through relationships with others and to learn to manage one's anxiety independently. Presence without fear is the ability to regulate one's emotions and feelings, reducing tension in the relationship and protecting the couple from conflicts (Regas, 2019).

One of the goals of therapy based on the mindful differentiation model is to support partners in developing non-reactivity, which is one of the characteristics of individuals with high self-differentiation. Reactive partners tend to take messages personally and communicate from a "you" rather than an "I" position, leading to blame and conflict. When infidelity occurs in a relationship, reactive partners may persistently revisit the topic. Alternatively, a reactive partner may refuse to communicate with the unfaithful partner. The therapist, working with the couple, employs techniques to reduce reactivity by accepting difficult emotions (Regas, 2019).

In Regas's therapy model, relational triangles are a key area of focus. When a couple experiences an intra- or interpersonal conflict that cannot be resolved, anxiety and tension increase, and the stability of the relationship is threatened. One way to cope with this situation is triangulation, wherein a third person is introduced into the system to avoid addressing problems in the relationship. Anxiety is diffused through the relational triangle, which may involve an extra-marital affair, for example. The lower the level of self-differentiation, the stronger the triangulation. The therapist's crucial task is to avoid creating another opportunity for triangulation during therapy. A high level of the therapist's self-differentiation enables them to introduce a third perspective. The therapist's role is to build a collaborative relationship with each partner and with the couple, without becoming part of their family system.

During the therapeutic process, the partners' levels of self-differentiation increase. They gain greater clarity about their values, needs, and beliefs, and their communication style changes. They learn to set healthy boundaries. However, their surroundings may resist this change. Partners may receive messages aimed at restoring the previous order, which can also come from their partner. These messages often involve threats that if the person undergoing therapy does not return to their former way of functioning, consequences will ensue. The process of self-differentiation can be considered complete when the individual has clarity about their values and how they want to behave while being in a close relationship with their partner.

For individuals who have experienced infidelity in their relationship, difficult thoughts, tension, anxiety, and complex emotions arise. Partners expect each other to help reduce anxiety, and during therapy, they also seek quick solutions and immediate answers to their pressing questions. However, in this therapeutic model, the therapist does not provide quick answers. Instead, therapists accept the presence of anxiety within the relational system and encourage the couple to do the same. They focus on managing interpersonal tension in a way that allows each partner to confront themselves and take full responsibility for resolving their issues, ultimately leading to self-differentiation.

3. Managing information about infidelity in family communication

Infidelity is associated with dilemmas regarding the disclosure and communication of the act. One of these dilemmas concerns whether it is beneficial to discuss infidelity before it occurs. Some marriages choose this route, which allows them to better understand their spouse's values and attitudes toward infidelity. J.P. Felder and L.V. Machia (2024, pp. 148–166) took a scientific approach to examining the relationship between direct and proactive communication and the decision to stay in a romantic relationship or end it after infidelity. The researchers conducted two studies. The first involved imagining a hypothetical infidelity scenario and their reaction to it. The study sample consisted of 135 students aged 18 to 21. The second study was conducted through an online survey. The analysis included responses from 157 individuals who had been betrayed by a partner during dating or marriage. The study encompassed both individuals who remained in the relationship and those who chose to break up. Respondents in the first study anticipated that open communication would influence their decision to stay or leave the romantic relationship. However, the second study showed that when participants referred to their own experienc-

es, rather than hypothetical situations, open communication before infidelity did not significantly influence decisions about the future of the relationship. It turned out that respondents who employed direct and proactive communication strategies and decided to stay with their partner despite infidelity experienced greater internal conflict than others. It is important to emphasize the limitations of these studies. The first study was conducted on a non-representative group of students, preventing generalization. The second study did not assess attitudes toward infidelity or analyse conversations about infidelity prior to its occurrence. These factors could influence decisions to continue or end the relationship. It is also worth noting that the second study was not limited to marriages, and the researchers did not compare those who were dating with those who were married. The studies did not show significant correlations between discussing infidelity beforehand and participants' final decisions, but the identified limitations suggest further exploration of this topic. This is important, especially since many therapists, including Esther Perel (2018), encourage couples to have such conversations at the start of their relationship. Researcher J. Petriglieri (2019) also highlights the benefits of discussing values, boundaries, and concerns early in the relationship, recommending couples establish a psychological contract, which may include addressing the issue of infidelity. Such a contract aims to help couples effectively manage crises and pivotal moments in the relationship.

Another dilemma is whether open communication in a relationship affected by infidelity is always desirable. Esther Perel, in her book *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity* (2018), shares reflections based on her practice. She draws attention to what motivates the desire to reveal the truth about infidelity. E. Perel emphasizes that the truth can be destructive, aggressive, or even delivered with sadistic pleasure. The psychologist argues that silence can sometimes be a sign of care and suggests that, before sharing details of an affair, one should question whose well-being is being prioritized. E. Perel also encourages reflection on whether revealing the truth is a way to alleviate guilt and whether such information will be helpful to the partner.

Sometimes, the person who has cheated may not have the option of whether their partner learns about it. Even if they wish to protect their partner from the consequences of knowing or prevent the relationship from breaking down by concealing the truth, they must consider the likelihood of third parties sharing the information, who may not always choose to keep it to themselves. The actions of third parties may depend on their attitude toward infidelity. J.M. Salerno and L.M. Slepian (2022, pp. 606–633) conducted a study related to the public disclosure of the names of users of the Ashley

Madison¹ website by hackers. This incident sparked a debate about whether revealing the identities of users was morally wrong or an appropriate punishment for marital infidelity. The study involved 157 Americans via the MTurk platform. They read a news article about the event and then answered questions about their evaluation of the situation. The study showed that participants' level of disapproval of infidelity was positively correlated with their moral outrage, which in turn was positively associated with approving the disclosure of secrets as a form of punishment for those who committed infidelity. It is worth noting, however, that the study focused on an event that participants learned about through a news article, not an event that affected their own lives or those of people they knew personally. Therefore, participants' declarations may differ from their actual reactions if the infidelity involved people from their private lives.

An intriguing research topic is what motivates third parties to share information about infidelity with the betrayed person. In a study by D.J. Kruger, M.L. Fisher, and C.J. Fitzgerald (2015, pp. 1697–1704), it was found that third parties are more likely to disclose infidelity when they have a significant reason, such as a close bond with the betrayed person (friendship or kinship). Study participants stated that they were more likely to reveal infidelity if their child was the one betrayed rather than when their child was the one being unfaithful. Similar responses were given when the questions pertained to close relatives. Respondents were more likely to disclose infidelity if the betrayed person was a friend than if the friend was the one cheating. However, the results differed if the friend's partner was also known to them; in such cases, they were more likely to inform the betrayed person. It is important to note that the study was conducted on a group of 487 American students, young people who answered questions about their child's infidelity without having the experience of being parents to an adult. Despite this limitation, the results draw attention to the role of kinship and close bonds in decisions to disclose information about infidelity. This is especially relevant to the findings of R.M. Shrout and D.J. Weigel (2017, pp. 1–21), who examined the role of family and friends in decisions to continue a relationship after infidelity. Based on research on the importance of social acceptance for romantic relationships, the researchers hypothesized that a betrayed partner might consider the opinions of their social network when deciding how to respond to infidelity. They hypothesized that if close ones suggest ending the relationship with the unfaithful partner, the betrayed partner may

¹ Ashley Madison is a dating and social networking site targeted at individuals who are married and seeking an affair.

be more inclined to do so, while if the social network recommends working on the relationship, the person is more likely to stay in it.

Two studies were conducted. The first involved 140 American women and 58 American men in informal relationships, who responded to questions about a hypothetical situation in which they were betrayed by their partner and their close ones advised them to end the relationship. The second study involved 64 American women and 51 American men who had experienced emotional, physical, or both types of infidelity within three months prior to the study. The results of both studies confirmed Shrout and Weigel's hypothesis. It was shown that family and friends' opinions influenced how the betrayed partner attributed blame and responsibility to the unfaithful partner, which in turn affected their ability to forgive the partner. It was also found that betrayed individuals whose close ones advised them to end the romantic relationship were more likely to focus on information incriminating the unfaithful partner. A limitation of the study, especially in the context of the considerations in this article, is that it did not include married couples. The authors themselves emphasize the need for similar studies among married couples. It would also be valuable to examine whether and how the results differ between individualistic and collectivist cultures. It is also noteworthy that family and friends' roles were significant in a study on strategies for obtaining forgiveness after infidelity. M. Apostolou and N. Pediaditakis (2023, pp. 381–392) identified six key persuasive strategies, including asking friends and relatives for help in gaining forgiveness from the betrayed partner.

Betrayed partners do not always learn about infidelity (interpersonal transgression) from their spouse or third parties. However, when they suspect that their partner is not being honest, they may attempt to obtain information to clarify their doubts. Interesting research results were obtained by M. Apostolou and M. Ioannidou (2021, pp. 380–389). The survey was conducted online with a sample of 942 Greek-speaking individuals. Those not currently in a relationship made up 35.1% of participants, 34.3% were in informal romantic relationships, 25.4% were married, and 5.2% were divorced. The researchers identified 47 behaviours aimed at detecting infidelity by a romantic partner. These behaviors were categorized into six strategies for uncovering infidelity, such as observing changes in their behaviour, asking questions and watching their reactions, checking their whereabouts, searching their belongings, using friends, and gathering evidence. The most common strategy chosen by participants was observing changes in their partner's behaviour, with 78% indicating they would likely use this approach. Those trying to keep their infidelity secret are not always equally effective across all areas of the romantic relationship. For example, they may be adept at misleading their

partners through convincing lies, making the strategy of asking questions and observing reactions less effective. At the same time, their negligence in removing physical traces of infidelity may make it easier for the betrayed partner to detect the transgression through thorough searches of their belongings. This phenomenon underscores the importance of using multiple strategies simultaneously to increase the likelihood of detecting infidelity. This may explain why more than half of the study participants (around 58%) expressed willingness to use three or more strategies to detect infidelity more effectively. It is worth noting, however, that participants were not required to have prior experience with infidelity. Some respondents had to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they suspected their partner of infidelity, and their anticipated behaviours may differ from their actual actions. It is also important to emphasize that the sample was not representative, and the study was conducted in a Greek cultural context, making it difficult to generalize these results to a broader population. However, the results provide insights into behaviours that can be expected from individuals who suspect infidelity in a relationship and serve as a basis for further exploration of this topic in other cultural contexts.

In a study by S.M. Hughes and M.A. Harrison (2017, pp. 1–12), the ability of participants to assess the fidelity of individuals in romantic relationships based solely on voice samples was examined. The study involved 88 American female and 64 male students. The experiment consisted of independent reviewers listening to voice recordings of individuals who declared themselves either faithful or unfaithful to their partners. To eliminate the influence of external factors on the socio-affective perception of speakers, voice samples were standardized for attractiveness, age, pitch, and other acoustic parameters. The analysis revealed that participants were significantly able to identify individuals with a history of infidelity based solely on the sound of their voice. It was found that male voices were more frequently associated with a higher risk of infidelity, and women were more likely than men to identify potential infidelity based on voice characteristics. Manipulating the pitch of the voice showed that lower voices were consistently rated as more prone to infidelity (interpersonal transgression). Despite these pitch changes, reviewers were able to accurately assess the true history of infidelity, except when it came to men assessing lower-pitched female voices, which affected their accuracy. The study results suggest that the human perceptual system may have the capacity to make accurate judgments about interpersonal behaviours based on limited information from voice samples. The findings highlight the potential value of voice as a tool for detecting infidelity and suggest that even subtle aspects of vocal expression can provide important information about speakers' behavioural tendencies. A limitation of the study

is that it was conducted on a young population without verifying their history of infidelity. This could mean that older individuals who have been betrayed by a partner or who have been unfaithful themselves might show different or more nuanced accuracy in detecting infidelity.

In discussing information about infidelity within the family system, it is essential to also consider children who may become aware of such knowledge. The phenomenon of triangulation should be noted. In the context of family systems theory, it consists of engaging third parties in reducing tension within the marital dyad. Rigid functioning within a relational triangle consisting of parents and a child can perpetuate marital problems outside the family's awareness and lower the child's functioning (Józefczyk and Świętochowski, 2023, pp. 27–39). In a study by A. Thorson (2020), the relationships between parents and children in the context of a parent's marital infidelity were analysed, with particular attention to the actions of the betrayed parent aiming to involve adult children in the marital conflict and its impact on the satisfaction with the relationship with the unfaithful parent. The study included both intact and divorced families, with data collected from 196 American adult children whose mother or father had committed infidelity. Moderated regression analysis showed that the relationship between feelings of entanglement and satisfaction with the unfaithful parent depended on the parents' marital status after the infidelity was revealed. Moderated mediation analysis revealed that ruminations about the parent's infidelity had a significant indirect effect on the relationship between the betrayed parent's attempts to involve adult children in the conflict and their satisfaction with the relationship with the unfaithful parent. These findings expand the perspective on the role of marital infidelity in the parent-child relationship and suggest that future research should focus on family communication patterns that may promote ruminations about infidelity. Although the study advances psychological knowledge about triangulation within the family system, it is important to note its limitations. One limitation is that over 80% of the individuals who committed infidelity were fathers, and 70% of the study participants were women. Therefore, the results mainly pertain to a relational triangle in which the betrayed mother involved her daughter in the relational triangle. The authors also highlight the value of conducting a longitudinal study on this topic, which could reveal how feelings of entanglement in the relational triangle, ruminations about a parent's infidelity, and satisfaction with the relationship with that parent change over time.

4. Conclusions

Infidelity in marriage is understood as a non-normative crisis that affects the entire family, including children, who also suffer its consequences. The authors of this article proposed a modified model of marital adaptation after infidelity, based on the principles of family systems theory. The adaptation of spouses contributes to the adaptation of the entire family system. The way in which parents undergo this process influences the functioning of their offspring. Caregivers should pay special attention to avoiding triangulation. The authors emphasize the importance of psychological support and therapy for children who have learned about their parents' infidelity.

The model includes a psychological variable known as the management of infidelity information. Previous models of post-infidelity adaptation emphasized the role of communication between partners but did not address the component of the communication process that involves the management of infidelity information. The authors point out that this variable concerns not only the flow of information between the betrayed and unfaithful partners but also between the couple and other family system members and the close environment, such as friends.

Both the decision to disclose or withhold information about infidelity and the reaction of the betrayed person to such information can be related to the psychological variable of self-differentiation. Its level affects the regulation of closeness and distance in relationships and the management of one's emotions. As shown by the study cited in the article (cf. Heintzelman *et al.*, 2014, pp. 13–29), self-differentiation was positively associated with the tendency to forgive infidelity. Further empirical work is recommended to verify the model of couple adaptation after marital infidelity proposed by the authors. The results may help answer unresolved psychological questions regarding whether, when, and how to inform a partner about infidelity and whether, when, and how to involve other family members. The findings may support the efforts of family scientists and other researchers of this issue.

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