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Internet Infidelity: A Critical Review of the Literature

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People are using the Internet more frequently to form friendships and romances and to initiate affairs. In the present article, the authors provide a critical review of the literature on Internet infidelity. The authors examine articles that focus on the definition of Internet infidelity, attitudes toward it, factors contributing to it, treatment, and/or any information about the impact of Internet infidelity on couples and families. The authors discuss the evolving use of the computer in sexual interactions and briefly summarize and critique the existing treatment methods. Recommendations for future directions in theory, research, and practice are presented.

Keywords: *Internet infidelity; Internet sexuality; sexual addiction; cybersex*

I don't know what's wrong with me but I just can't help fooling around with other women. During our 10 years together, [my wife] has never found anything that might imply me having [a relationship with] another woman . . . Nowadays, with the Internet and well advanced phones, it's even easier.

—Anonymous (2005)

The above quote is just one piece of evidence demonstrating that we must acknowledge the well-established prevalence of infidelity in our society and the role technology plays in sustaining these relationships. As the Internet has become a part of everyday life to most people, communicating online has made it easy for people to begin and develop interpersonal relationships (Hatala, Milewski, & Baack, 1999; Underwood & Findlay, 2004). Certain problems, however, appear to result directly from relationships online (Cooper, Mansson,

Daneback, Tikkanen, & Ross, 2003). For example, increased computer usage may diminish shared time between couples, which can be particularly problematic because a primary factor in infidelity is the amount of shared time between one spouse and another individual outside of marriage. Cooper, McLoughlin, and Campbell (2000) report Internet infidelity is becoming more common. Some 42% of compulsive Internet users report they engaged in an affair while online (Greenfield, 1999). Cooper et al. (2000) suggest that relationships that develop online to the exclusion of one's primary partner may affect a number of areas in the couple relationship, from conflict resolution to emotional support to intimacy. Other problems that individuals may experience in connection with Internet infidelity include shame, guilt, rejection, anger, and other negative feelings.

Though there is a wealth of publications on the topic of Internet sexuality, there are few empirical studies and treatment articles that are strictly devoted to Internet infidelity and even fewer that examine behavior rather than attitudes or sexual addiction. The purpose of this article is to synthesize the literature on this newly emerging topic. In so doing, we hope to provide a coherent and organized view of the published material that will inform both clinicians and researchers in the field. We hope this presentation can be used as a foundation to build a stronger base on which to develop further questions, empirical investigations, and treatment protocols. In this summary, we will provide a review and critique of the existing research. We also explore the characteristics of Internet infidelity and provide a critique of existing treatment models. Based on this information, we present recommendations for future theory, research, and practice.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

To establish the list of publications to be reviewed, we used the following keywords to search the literature: *Internet infidelity, cybersex, Internet sex, cyber infidelity, online infidelity, extramarital, betrayal, online attraction,*

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and *Internet affairs*. To include the disciplines of marriage and family therapy, family studies, psychology, counseling, social work, and education, we used the following databases: PsycInfo, Sociofile, and ERIC. We limited our findings to articles, books, and/or book chapters that provided information about one or more of the following:

1. The definition of Internet infidelity
2. Factors contributing to Internet infidelity
3. Treatment of Internet infidelity
4. Information about the impact of Internet infidelity on couples and families

DEFINITIONS OF INTERNET INFIDELITY

Therapists struggle with the definition of Internet infidelity and cannot agree on its treatment (Nelson, Piercy, & Sprenkle, 2005). One aspect that remains stable across these definitions is secrecy. In cases of Internet infidelity, the involved partner can carry on the relationship in secrecy by rapidly closing chat windows being used, deleting transcripts, and purging e-mail boxes (Schneider, 2000a). In addition, what might appear as someone typically working in his or her cubical or on a home PC may actually be an individual secretly engaging in cybersex. Most researchers also mention sexual chemistry in their definition of Internet infidelity. That is, most participants feel sexual in a medium that makes it relatively easy to flirt or share sexual fantasies online. Internet affairs are often discovered because the trace of e-mails and chat room conversations are found by suspicious partners (Glass, 2003). This level of secrecy charged with sexual excitement can also affect the ability to build trust between the individuals in a relationship.

Nelson et al. (2005) conducted a multiwave Delphi study to determine marriage and family therapists' impressions of Internet infidelity cases and the extent of agreement in their conceptualization and treatment.¹ Twenty experts in the area of extramarital affairs were asked to identify basic assumptions and treatment for Internet infidelity vignettes. Results indicated panel experts were divided on how to handle secrets, the extent to which a clinician should focus on individual or relational treatment, and how feminist family therapy has influenced their work. Their lack of consensus may relate to a relative lack of definitional consensus in the field. Alternatively, as with all Delphi studies, there is a risk of the differences of panel members (their creative or multiple viewpoints) being lost in the quest to develop a consensus. That is, because consensus is the goal of the method, alternative definitions and treatment options do not always reach sufficient consensus to be included in the final profile.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF DEFINITIONS

Current research indicates that definitions of Internet infidelity vary from person to person. As a result, two couples

who experience the same events in their online behavior may have different ideas about whether such actions would be considered infidelity within the context of their relationship. We encourage researchers to investigate couples who report to have experienced Internet infidelity in their relationships and identify what behaviors constituted Internet infidelity in their relationships.

ATTITUDES TOWARD INTERNET INFIDELITY

Henline and Lamke (2003) performed a study examining how respondents experienced sexual and emotional infidelity. Using a sample of 237 college students, they asked participants to complete a questionnaire about the nature and consequences of Internet infidelity. Specifically, they were asked to identify online behaviors that they would consider unfaithful if the individual was in a committed relationship. The researchers also asked participants to rate the probability that someone communicating online with someone other than their partner would lead to a face-to-face meeting. Results indicated that online infidelity was not only characterized by sexual components but also by emotional components. Respondents reported that they would be more concerned about an emotional relationship leading to a face-to-face meeting, more so than an online sexual relationship leading to a face-to-face meeting. This research uses a relatively small sample of college students. This type of research can be problematic as younger individuals are less likely to be married and less likely to be in cohabitating relationships (Whitty, 2003).

Whitty (2003) performed a similar study to Henline and Lamke (2003) in exploring men and women's attitudes on online infidelity. Whitty asked 1,117 respondents to rate behaviors on a 5-point, Likert-type scale assessing whether an activity could be considered unfaithful to one's partner. Respondents viewed certain behaviors online as acts of betrayal, thus supporting the more recent ideas that betrayal in a relationship is not restricted to physical or sexual contact with another person. In relation to gender, women viewed a wider range of behavior as infidelity as compared to men. For example, in a study examining the differences in flirting online and offline, talk of sexual behavior and appearance was found to play a prominent role in flirting over the Internet. It was particularly important to communicate one's emotions over the Internet (e.g., laughing, emoticons; Whitty, 2004).² Whitty (2003) also reported that there were three separate components of infidelity: sexual, emotional, and pornography. In considering age as a variable in one's assessment of infidelity, results of this study indicated that younger individuals rated more acts as fitting the criteria of betrayal than did older adults, but women in the older age group (45 to 70) considered flirting to be more related to betrayal than did younger women (23 to 44).

Whitty (2005) also performed a study exploring Internet infidelity and jealousy in the couple relationship. In a sample

of 234 junior-level students in an introductory psychology class, Whitty tested perceptions of how Internet infidelity affects offline relationships and whether there are gender differences in the perceptions of Internet infidelity. Using two versions of a projective story test, Whitty discovered that the involved partner experienced guilt about the affair, less time spent with their offline (the uninvolved) partner, shame, and loss of self-esteem for the offline partner. Trust was broken as a consequence of the online relationship. Furthermore, respondents reported that Internet infidelity was, in their opinion, a “real” form of cheating and that its effects can have significant consequences for a couple or family offline. More importantly, participants had a tendency to weigh emotional and sexual betrayal equally, implying that Internet infidelity may result in different consequences than those from traditional affairs.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERNET INFIDELITY

Underwood and Findlay (2004) suggest that Internet infidelity relationships are based strongly on emotional intimacy. Furthermore, Underwood and Findlay report that people engaging in Internet infidelity are gaining something not received in their primary relationship from the online relationship. Experiencing a strong emotional connection with one’s Internet partner and not having that connection in one’s primary relationship might contribute to limited discussions about problems in the primary relationship and “coming clean” about the Internet infidelity (Cooper et al., 2000).

Cooper’s (2002) “triple A” engine identifies three aspects of Internet infidelity that distinguish it, to some degree, from traditional infidelity. These three factors are accessibility, affordability, and anonymity. Accessibility refers to the access an individual has to the Internet. For example, the individual with only minimal access to the Internet will be less likely to engage in infidelity compared to someone with greater access to the Internet. Affordability refers to the cost of engaging in Internet infidelity. For a very small price, a computer user can visit many sites and meet multiple potential sexual needs. In addition, people who might feel uncomfortable purchasing sexually charged material in stores could quickly download similar information in the privacy of their own home.

Finally, anonymity comes with the ease with which one can establish an identity on the Internet (Cooper, 2002). In person, carrying on an affair means the other person gets to know who you are, can see you, and can potentially judge you. On the Internet, users can backspace, erase, and change what they say to promote a specific identity. For example, Cooper, Scherer, Boies, and Gordon (1999) reported that more than half of the respondents in their survey (61%) admitted to pretend to be a different age either occasionally or often. As Maheu and Subotnik (2001) describe it,

The Internet allows you to control your message, and, at the same time, prevent the intrusion of reality. Bad breath, dirty fingernails, or an irritating tendency to interrupt are irrelevant in e-mail and chat rooms. Lovers are not distracted by physical attributes, allowing them to listen with their inner selves—their souls. (p. 27)

Other researchers have suggested that a fourth A be added—the aspect of approximation (Ross & Kauth, 2003; Ross, Mansson, Daneback, & Tikkanen, 2005). Approximation means that the Internet provides a possibility of experimentation. This means that people are able to engage in (or fantasize about) sexual behaviors online that they might not normally do and that it is a close enough approximation to the real world to allow them to gain satisfaction from such behavior. Leiblum and Döring (2002) proposed a “triple C engine” that focuses on the interactive component of the Internet including communication, collaboration, and communities.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF CHARACTERISTICS

Like the development of traditional infidelity typologies (Hertlein & Weeks, in press), authors (either clinicians or researchers) have developed the characteristics of Internet infidelity in isolation of one another and without a research basis. We suggest the next steps be ones which seek to empirically validate the 4 As. Examples might include designing empirical investigations where the likelihood of engaging in Internet infidelity is assessed, including an estimate of one’s vulnerabilities to these four areas, identifying the amount to which they contribute to the likelihood of Internet infidelity. In terms of theory, other researchers could attempt to determine whether certain theoretical orientations lend themselves better to these characteristics than others, thus pointing toward a better fitting treatment based on one’s vulnerabilities in these areas.

IMPACT OF INTERNET INFIDELITY ON COUPLES AND FAMILIES

Though most who participate in online sexual activities report that their activities do not have a negative impact on their lives, there are still cases in which these sexual pursuits can affect families and relationships (i.e., Carnes, 2003; Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002; Schneider, 2000b). Barak and Fisher (2002), in citing the increasing trends in online infidelity, believe that cybersex relations “will become a major factor in deteriorating marital relations and, therefore, a cause of relationship distress and divorce” (p. 270).

Schneider (2000a) interviewed 91 women and 3 men who had experienced cybersex in their couple relationships and inquired as to how cybersex affected their marriages and families. Schneider explored the effects of a spouse’s online

sexual behaviors on the emotions, codependent behaviors, and sexual relationship with their spouse. Results indicated that 22% of the respondents had separated or divorced as a result of the compulsive cybersex. In addition, two thirds of the couples reported that they lost interest in sex with their spouse.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF IMPACT INVESTIGATIONS

Schneider's (2000a) investigation can be critiqued in regard to the sample and conclusions drawn from it. In a sample of 91 women and 3 men, the findings should really only be generalized to women and their experiences or perceptions of the impact of Internet infidelity on their primary relationship rather than both men and women. Furthermore, the study was primarily about the impact of compulsive cybersex use on families, of which Internet infidelity is certainly included, but it was not the only focus. Future research might choose to focus strictly on the impact of Internet infidelity on couples and families, a different phenomenon with potentially different consequences.

TREATMENT FRAMEWORKS

The literature on traditional infidelity treatment may provide a basis from which clinicians can draw to treat Internet infidelity (Henline & Lamke, 2003; Schnarch & Morehouse, 2002). Internet infidelity, because of its complex factors related to it, can be treated through a variety of approaches and models. Delmonico, Griffin, and Carnes (2002) noted,

Mental health professionals serve their clients best when they acknowledge that there are varieties of approaches in the treatment of cybersex behavior. In fact, treatment is most effective when clinicians consider utilizing a multifaceted approach that includes various modalities (e.g., individual, group, family, support groups, medication, etc.), and various theoretical orientations (e.g., cognitive-behavioral, reality therapy, psychodynamic, etc.). (p. 151)

Delmonico et al. (2002) present treatment for Internet infidelity cases as proceeding through phases of both first- and second-order change. First-order change strategies refer to those employed as crisis intervention (Delmonico et al., 2002), including reducing Internet access and reducing awareness. Reducing Internet access involves the physical moving of the computer or Internet access to different location less accessible to the client. Another way to create first-order change is to restrict the problematic sites or Web pages for an individual. Raising awareness is when the clinicians work to raise awareness of cybersex as a problem in the computer user's life (Delmonico et al., 2002).

The components of second-order change include interrupting the ritual (called "attacking the appeal"). This includes mobilizing psychiatric evaluations and family support,

addressing the client's social isolation and collateral issues such as grief and stress, promoting sexual health, and supporting the client's exploration of spirituality (Delmonico et al., 2002). Though we relate the multifaceted approach described here to cybersex treatment, the intervention components also can be applied to Internet infidelity cases that do not result in sexual intercourse. Each model described below contains integrative treatment strategies employing one or more of the components we mention above.

One Internet infidelity treatment model is based on reducing vulnerability factors (Shaw, 1997). Examples of vulnerability factors include a lack of connection with a partner or a lack of ability to discuss problems with one's partner, resulting in searching for intimacy elsewhere. Another example of a vulnerability factor is one's readiness to be in an emotional relationship and the fear of being oneself. Shaw (1997) proposes that therapists examine secrets between the partners in a relationship and build trust that supports greater intimacy.

Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, and Buchanan (2000) describe similar steps to Internet infidelity treatment. In examining the factors leading to cybersex addiction (i.e., anonymity, convenience, and escape), they provide a context for understanding the phenomenon and a rationale for interventions. The treatment model includes improving communication between the spouses, rebuilding trust, and addressing underlying issues within the marriage.

Maheu and Subotnik (2001) also provided strategies for treating Internet infidelity. The interventions include both common couple therapy techniques, such as communication training, followed by interventions that focus on transgenerational theory. Coping with emotions is the beginning of the process, followed by searching for understanding and moving toward reconstructing the relationship. Therapists then guide the couple to examine family of origin issues. Expressing empathy to one's partner, accepting responsibility, and rebuilding trust between partners are also part of the recovery process. The next steps to recovery involve reducing codependency and reestablishing a courtship, followed by finding closure and apologizing. In the last steps, treatment revolves around finding meaning, tolerating setbacks, and recognizing loss, specifically in regard to experiencing setbacks.

Atwood and Schwartz (2002) also provide readers some logical and flexible guidelines on how to treat Internet infidelity. Factors associated with an individual engaging in Internet infidelity include projection, differentiation of self, anonymity, intimacy issues, communication difficulties, midlife crisis, and Internet addiction. They are based on dealing with underlying processes, and emphasized communication. The steps begin with evaluation, that is, assessing the Internet user's accessibility to the Internet and the activities in which the user is engaged when online. They also suggest exploring social networks and building a safe environment. Once the environment is safe, the therapist can

help the couple address underlying issues. The therapist then facilitates better communication and begins to help the couple rebuild marital trust. Finally, the therapist helps the couple develop new stories about the relationship and a ritual to symbolize a new start.

Gonyea (2004) proposes Internet infidelity treatment be consistent with Schnarch's (1997) work in regard to differentiation. She indicates that a goal of sex therapy is to create intimacy, and one way in which to accomplish this is to work with the couple to increase their level of differentiation. Steps in this treatment include setting boundaries, maintaining a safe space within the therapy room for the couple, and examining relationship secrets and the functions the secrets serve in the relationship. Partners then accept responsibility for their behavior and change.

Hertlein and Piercy (2005) propose a theoretical framework for the treatment of Internet infidelity cases. During the assessment phase, the therapist identifies the couple's idiosyncratic rules for the relationship. The treatment phase is informed by Bowen's (1978) framework. The therapist examines the behavior around Internet infidelity, specifically focusing on anxiety, differentiation, and triangulation. The therapist is advised to intervene in a manner which supports detriangulation (e.g., getting the couple and/or third person out of the emotional system) and individuation (e.g., supporting both closeness and distance through direct, clear communication, facilitated through *I* statements around wants, needs, and the conditions that support healthy intimacy).

CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE TREATMENT FRAMEWORKS

The gap with these treatments in their application to Internet infidelity is the lack of empirical evidence supporting the utility in clinical work. Most published evidence of the validation of these frameworks is reflected in the case examples following the framework's description rather than through process or outcome research. Though case studies and vignettes are helpful in describing how an intervention or model might be applied to a family, there may be many other families for whom these treatment models might be ineffective. As a result, it is critical that clinician-researchers conduct more research on their interventions to determine their effectiveness.

At present, Hertlein's (2004) investigation is the only study seeking to identify what theories therapists use when treating infidelity cases. She asked therapists working with this problem to delineate their treatment strategies. None of the 504 therapists in this study identified any of the specific frameworks listed above, though they incorporated several aspects of many of these frameworks in their treatment approaches. Hertlein found that differences in how therapists would treat Internet infidelity cases were dependent to some degree on the social background characteristics of the

therapist and their clients. The treatment frameworks most cited by therapists included solution-focused, transgenerational, and emotionally focused therapy. Furthermore, most therapists indicated that they operate from what Hertlein termed a "deficit model." That is, they identify a missing element from a couple's relationship and find ways to incorporate that in the current relationship.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although the field of Internet infidelity research is still in its infancy, we believe that there are several issues that should be resolved as this body of knowledge continues to grow. Our suggestions relate primarily to the research questions and methodologies. Research should continue to ask questions about the attitudes of people regarding Internet infidelity but sample from populations that have experienced this issue. Overreliance on samples of convenience, such as college students, severely limits generalizability of findings, particularly in a cohort that essentially was raised with computers. Rather, these investigations might be more generalizable if researchers sample from clinical populations who identify Internet infidelity as a presenting problem. In addition, analogue studies can be problematic because they do not measure the criteria under investigation but rather one's reactions to a scenario. One must wonder whether a participant's reaction to the hypothetical situation accurately reflects what he or she would do in real life. Thus, researchers should continue to develop studies that limit reliance on analogue investigations.

Treatment models could also be improved in two main ways. First, Internet infidelity treatment models, like so many of the models used for traditional infidelity treatment, are not empirically validated. Even if only using small samples, researchers should begin to consistently implement a framework in treatment and evaluate its effectiveness. This will enhance outcomes in two major ways. It will encourage therapists to adhere to a specific framework and result in more consistent therapy rather than practicing technical eclecticism. It will also help therapists to identify what aspects of a model are more effective than other aspects, influencing framework developers to develop more effective treatment methods.

Second, the development of a common factors approach in marriage and family therapy identifies several factors in therapy (e.g., optimism, the therapeutic relationship, and commitment to change) that prove to be effective across treatment models and frameworks (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 2004). Internet infidelity treatment models should be developed that incorporate and/or address some of the common factors to improve the effectiveness of therapy.

Clients experiencing the effects of Internet infidelity have a difficult road as they navigate their recovery. We encourage therapists and researchers to work collaboratively toward empirical validation of treatment frameworks and resolution of the inconsistencies that plague this body of

knowledge. We look forward to a time when online entries, such as the one presented at the beginning of this article, will be focused on how one recovers from infidelity rather than the ease in sustaining it.

NOTES

1. This study had six phases: contacting potential participants, examining respondent replies to items to determine themes of Internet infidelity, and creating three representative vignettes. Then the vignettes were sent to participants, who rated them and provided a rationale for their decisions.

2. Emoticon refers to a brief composition of typed letters and/or symbols to represent an expression.

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