The Gray Area: Exploring Attitudes Toward Infidelity and the Development of the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale

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ABSTRACT. Prior research has distinguished between emotional versus sexual infidelity. Two studies examined the development of the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale (PDIS) to assess attitudes toward specific behaviors that constitute these types of infidelity in romantic relationships. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses indicated three factors to the scale: Ambiguous, Deceptive, and Explicit behaviors. In both studies, there were gender differences on ratings of the behaviors. The construct validity of the scale was assessed with measures of sociosexual orientation, guilt, and coping with unwanted sexual situations. It was found that the Ambiguous behaviors were positively correlated with avoidance of unwanted sexual situations, while the Deceptive and Explicit scales were positively correlated with guilt and avoidance and negatively associated with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation and acting on attractions toward friends.

Keywords: infidelity, romantic relationships, attitudes, scale development

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THE OCCURRENCE OF INFIDELITY in romantic relationships can have devastating consequences for the individuals in the relationship as well as for third parties (e.g., children). It is one of the most frequently cited reasons for divorce (Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). It is also one of the most-often cited reasons for seeking out marital therapy, one of the most difficult problems to treat in therapy, and one of the most damaging in terms of impact on the relationship (Glass & Wright, 1988; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Knowing that one’s partner has engaged in infidelity can cause severe emotional distress (Buunk, 1995) as well as physical violence against one’s partner (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

The terms used to describe infidelity in the literature are varied and include (but are not limited to) cheating (e.g., Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007), unfaithfulness (e.g., Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988; Yarab, Sensibaugh, & Allgeier, 1998), sexual betrayal (e.g., Feldman & Cauffman, 1999) and extradyadic involvement (e.g., Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Similarly, the definitions of what constitutes infidelity in a romantic relationship vary. The aim of this paper is to determine how people define infidelity in a committed relationship, specifically dating relationships. In previous studies, examples of infidelity include physical and emotional infidelity, with behaviors ranging from sexual intercourse to dating to flirting (Roscoe et al., 1988; Weiss & Felton, 1987). The current studies were designed to help (1) clarify the definition of infidelity, (2) develop a measurement tool to identify specific cheating behaviors and the severity of these behaviors, and (3) explore possible correlates of peoples’ definition of infidelity.

Research on infidelity has focused primarily on the prevalence, predictors, reactions to, and consequences of infidelity, but not the behaviors that are perceived to constitute infidelity. Prevalence estimates range from 30–60% of males and 20–50% of females in America engaging in at least one extramarital encounter, such as sexual intercourse (Sponaugle, 1989; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). In terms of dating relationships, Weiderman and Hurd (1999) found that of their participants who had ever been involved in a serious dating relationship, approximately 75% of men and 68% of women had engaged in at least one type of extradyadic behavior such as dating, romantic kissing, or sexual activity.

Predictors of why people engage in infidelity include relationship dissatisfaction, lack of commitment, attraction to another person, revenge, and feelings of inequity in the relationship (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001; Drigotas, Saffstrom, & Gentilia, 1999; Glass & Wright, 1985; Roscoe et al., 1988; Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannet, 1994). A recent study by Barta and Kiene (2005) investigated multidimensional motivations for infidelity, distinguishing between emotional and sexual motivations. Emotional motivations included dissatisfaction, neglect, and anger. Sexual motivations included wanting a greater variety of sex partners, wanting more frequent sex, and having a partner with different
sexual interests. Gender differences were found such that females were more likely to engage in emotional forms of infidelity than males, while males’ motivations tended to be more sexual in nature. Furthermore, males’ sexual motivations covaried with dissatisfaction and neglect such that for men, emotional satisfaction was contingent upon sexual satisfaction. Individual difference variables have also been examined as predictors of infidelity. In their study, and consistent with other studies (e.g., Seal et al., 1994), Barta and Kiene found that attitudes toward uncommitted sexual relationships also predicted sexual infidelity such that more favorable attitudes predicted a greater likelihood of sexual infidelity. Higher neuroticism, lower agreeableness, and lower conscientiousness are also associated with a greater likelihood of infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

Emotional vs. Physical Infidelity

Traditionally, infidelity has been referred to as sexual behavior with someone other than one’s partner. The current literature on infidelity, though, distinguishes between emotional versus sexual infidelity. Emotional infidelity involves developing an emotional connection with an individual other than one’s current partner. Just like sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity can result in strong feelings of betrayal and jealousy. This emotional connection may occur with or without sexual behavior. Clear gender differences exist in committing and responding to emotional versus sexual infidelity. Men are more likely to engage in extramarital sex than women (Seal et al., 1994). Additionally, men find it more difficult to deal with sexual infidelity and are more likely to end a relationship due to sexual infidelity, whereas women find emotional infidelity more difficult to deal with and are more likely to terminate a relationship due to emotional infidelity (Goldenberg et al., 2003; Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002). Relevant to the current research, multiple theories may explain possible differences in beliefs between men and women regarding the behaviors that constitute infidelity.

Evolutionary theory provides an explanation for these sex differences in response to infidelity (e.g., Buss, 1995). Evolutionary theorists posit that males have a harder time forgiving sexual infidelity because a partner’s sexual infidelity jeopardizes paternal certainty. In such a case, the male may risk investing in another male’s offspring. Doing so will fail to propagate one’s own genes and instead increase the likelihood of having the other male’s genes pass on through the generations. When paternity is uncertain, males risk investing their resources on another male’s child. For females, the sexual infidelity of a male partner is not as harmful as emotional infidelity, because with strictly sexual infidelity, there may not be the risk of losing the long-term commitment of the male. However, if a male becomes emotionally involved with another female, then there is the risk
of losing the long-term commitment and resources of the male, in turn decreasing the likelihood of successful child-rearing and of her genes surviving throughout the generations.

Evolutionary explanations of jealousy responses have received wide support in the literature (e.g., Buss Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Edlund, Heider, Scherer, Fare, & Sagarin, 2006; Landolfi, Geher, & Andrews, 2007). An early study by Buss and colleagues (1992) demonstrated clear gender differences in responses to sexual versus emotional infidelity. In a forced-choice response format, males indicated significantly more distress towards a partner’s sexual infidelity, while females indicated significantly more distress to a partner’s emotional infidelity. Thus, evolutionary theory may explain differences between men and women in the behaviors that constitute infidelity. For example, women may be more likely to find nonsexual (emotional) types of behaviors as being indicative of infidelity than do males. However, it is important to keep in mind that in the current study it was not of specific concern how distressing the behaviors were but rather whether these extradyadic behaviors were indicative of infidelity.

While evolutionary theory provides one explanation for differing attitudes toward infidelity, alternate theories provide insight as well. Sociocultural theories of jealousy posit that sex differences in responses to infidelity are a result of social norms that define appropriate responses for men and women (Pines & Friedman, 1998). The differences between men and women are seen as reflecting the differing knowledge that men and women have about the concepts of sex and love and the distinctions that men and women make between sex and love (Cramer, Abraham, Johnson, & Manning-Ryan, 2001–2002). Harris and Christenfeld (1996) argue that women believe that men can have sex without being in love, while men believe that women are less likely to have sex without being in love. Additionally, it is believed that men assume that if a woman is in love with another man, sexual infidelity is also happening. As a result, men are more concerned about a partner’s sexual infidelity because it also implies emotional infidelity. However women are more concerned about a partner’s emotional infidelity because it implies that sexual infidelity is also happening. DeSteno and Salovey (1996) refer to this as the double-shot hypothesis. For many individuals, emotional and sexual infidelity are not independent; if one is happening, the other is as well. Thus, when asked which type of infidelity is more distressing, individuals select as more distressing the type of behavior they believe implies the occurrence of the other, reflecting a “double-shot” of infidelity (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996).

Gender differences in attitudes toward infidelity may also reflect gender differences in attitudes toward sex in general. Research has demonstrated that, in general, males have more permissive attitudes about sex than do females (Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, & Foote, 1985) and are more willing to engage in extradyadic sex than are females (Seal et al., 1994). As such, it is
possible that males would be less likely than females to view certain sexual behaviors as indicative of cheating. Regardless of which theoretical orientation is stronger in explaining differences between men and women and their responses to different types of infidelity, it is clear that different forms of infidelity exist. Individuals perceive infidelity to be occurring even in the absence of sexual behavior. Based on the distinction between emotional and physical infidelity, we set out to delineate specific behaviors, both sexual and emotional, that may be seen as indicative of infidelity.

Defining Infidelity

Little is known about what behaviors people believe are indicative of infidelity in romantic relationships. Few studies have examined attitudes toward infidelity, particularly in terms of non-sexual behaviors. Some research has focused on developing taxonomies of cheating behaviors (e.g., Yarab, Sensibaugh, & Allgeier, 1998), whereas others have focused on perceptions of the acceptability of particular behaviors. For example, Weiss and Felton (1987) surveyed undergraduate women in an introductory course in marriage and family relations, and found high consensus that extramarital sex is considered cheating. However, there was disagreement upon what other extramarital behaviors are also considered cheating, such as going to a movie, having dinner, or dancing with someone other than one’s partner. Because participants responded to these items in the context of a married relationship, it is unclear whether this pattern of results would be found for dating relationships. Additionally, all of the participants reported being single and thus, their attitudes may be different than that of a person in a long-term relationship. In another such study, Feldman and Cauffman (1999) examined attitudes toward and incidence of betrayal behaviors in college students. Overall, participants rated sexual betrayal (i.e., sexual intercourse or petting) as unacceptable in a variety of circumstances. The circumstances included having a bad relationship with one’s partner, being sure that one’s partner would not find out, being unsure of one’s relationship with their partner, feeling carried away with attraction toward the other person, and feeling vindictive toward their partner. Those who reported that they had cheated on a partner engaged in the following behaviors: dating, emotional involvement, kissing, petting, and sexual intercourse. Overall, participants rated engaging in behaviors such as being friends, having coffee, studying, and talking on the phone as being acceptable with someone other than their partner when in a monogamous relationship. Other behaviors, such as flirting, thinking about the person a lot, and dreaming or fantasizing about someone else were seen as less acceptable.

Other studies have found gender differences in attitudes toward infidelity. Roscoe and colleagues (1988) surveyed a group of undergraduate males and females regarding what behaviors would constitute infidelity in a dating
relationship. They found evidence that men and women differ in their conceptualizations of infidelity. For instance, females saw keeping secrets from a partner as more indicative of cheating than did males, while males saw engaging in sexual interactions as being more indicative of cheating than did females. This finding is supportive of the evolutionary explanations of jealousy such that men have a harder time forgiving sexual infidelity in a relationship than do women (e.g., Shackelford et al., 2002).

Expanding upon the taxonomy of cheating behaviors developed by Yarab and colleagues (1998), Yarab, Allgeier, and Sensibaugh (1999) had participants rate the degree to which various behaviors were seen as unfaithful and jealousy-provoking within the context of relationships differing in level of commitment. There were no gender differences in ratings of unfaithfulness and jealousy for extradyadic sexual behaviors. Females rated extradyadic romantic attachments and flirting as more unfaithful and jealousy-provoking than did males. Females also rated sexual fantasy as more jealousy-provoking than did males. Both males and females expected sexual behaviors to be more jealousy-provoking and unfaithful than romantic attachments. Unfaithfulness ratings of sexual behavior differed based upon relationship type such that as the commitment level of the relationship increased, unfaithfulness ratings increased.

Further, examining different types of behaviors that constitute infidelity is important in understanding relationship quality. Conflict could arise if partners have differing views on what are acceptable behaviors. The purpose of the current research was to examine the extent to which certain behaviors were indicative of cheating and to identify predictors of attitudes toward infidelity. Additionally, we were interested in developing a scale with items assessing various types of infidelity. Previous studies have developed measures to assess attitudes regarding infidelity, however, none to date have specifically set out to develop a psychometrically sound measurement tool to assess attitudes.

Items reflective of both physical and emotional infidelity from Yarab et al. (1998, 1999) and Feldman and Cauffman (1999) were used, as well as items that were more ambiguous in terms of whether they are considered cheating. Additionally, we condensed items from previous studies to make a more parsimonious list. The literature on infidelity has used a variety of terms to refer to infidelity, such as cheating (e.g., Brand et al., 2007), unfaithfulness (e.g., Yarab et al., 1999), and extradyadic relationships (e.g., Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). Our scale utilizes the term cheating to facilitate participants’ understanding. Furthermore, because the multiple theoretical perspectives would suggest contradictory hypotheses, the current studies were largely exploratory. As such, few specific predictions were made.

The first study examined the factor structure of the scale using factor analysis. We attempted to confirm the results of previous studies (e.g., Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Yarab et al. 1998) as well as to develop a scale assessing attitudes toward infidelity. Based on previous findings, differences in gender and
relationship commitment status were examined regarding the behaviors. The second study further examined the psychometric properties of the scale and individual difference variables that may be associated with attitudes toward the behaviors. Because we were specifically interested in examining attitudes toward dating infidelity, we used a college sample.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 336 undergraduate psychology students from Saint Louis University. The majority of participants were female (65.7%) and Caucasian (78.7% Caucasian, 11.4% African American, 4.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.8% Latino/a, 1.5% Bi-racial, 1.8% Other). Participants’ mean age was 20.4 (SD = 4.7; Mdn = 19). Approximately two-thirds of the sample reported being in some type of romantic relationship [15.5% dating casually, 5.7% dating regularly, 38.1% dating exclusively (no one else), 3.3% engaged, 5.75% married]. When asked if they were currently in a committed relationship, 49.9% responded “yes”. Of those in a relationship, the mean relationship duration was 27.8 months (SD = 35.1; Mdn = 18).

Materials and Procedure

Fifteen behaviors were generated by previous research and by the experimenters and are listed in Table 1. Participants were asked to rate the level of cheating associated with each behavior if one were to engage in the behavior with someone other than his or her romantic partner. Participants completed the measure in groups during a mass testing session. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = extremely low level of cheating to 5 = extremely high level of cheating), with only the end points labeled. Participants also completed demographic items (e.g., age, race, gender) and items assessing relationship history (e.g., status, length).

Results

A factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation was conducted on the data to examine the factor structure of the items. Oblimin rotation was used because the resulting factors were not assumed to be orthogonal. Many of the items were either positively or negatively skewed; therefore, the data were transformed to help normalize the data. Positively skewed items were transformed with the square-root function (Kline, 2005). Negatively skewed data were transformed by
## TABLE 1. Factor Loadings for PDIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Ambiguous</th>
<th></th>
<th>Explicit</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Deceptive</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat/drink</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugging</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go somewhere</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy/receive gifts</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking on phone/internet</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual intercourse</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral sex</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy petting/fondling</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kissing</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withhold info</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasizing</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flirting</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>1.84 (.71)</td>
<td>1.54 (1.06)</td>
<td>4.42 (.73)</td>
<td>5.52 (.97)</td>
<td>2.91 (.85)</td>
<td>3.21 (1.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* In Study 1 items were rated from 1 (*extremely low level of cheating*) to 5 (*extremely high level of cheating*) and in Study 2 from 0 (*never cheating*) to 6 (*always cheating*). Study 1 *N* = 336, Study 1 *N* = 244.
applying the square-root function to the original scores subtracted from the highest scores plus one (Kline, 2005). Three factors emerged from the factor analysis accounting for 50.4% of the variance (see Table 1 for factor loadings). The items on each factor make up three scales that we collectively termed the Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale (PDIS). The first factor was composed of items such as eating or drinking, dancing, and going somewhere with someone other than one’s partner. These behaviors were termed Ambiguous because it is unclear whether there is actual cheating or intentions to cheat associated with these behaviors, but the possibility exists that cheating could be occurring. The second factor consisted of items such as sexual intercourse, oral sex, and dating. These were items that one might typically associate with infidelity (e.g., sexually related behaviors), and thus the scale was labeled Explicit behaviors. The third factor consisted of items such as lying to one’s partner and fantasizing about someone else. These behaviors were termed Deceptive because they could be done without one’s partner being aware and seemed aimed at actively deceiving one’s partner. Table 1 also shows the means and standard deviations for each scale. Cronbach’s alpha was good for each scale (Explicit = .83; Ambiguous = .81; Deceptive = .72). Pearson correlations indicated moderate positive relationships among the Ambiguous and Deceptive scales ($r = .46, p < .01$) and the Deceptive and Explicit scales ($r = .39, p < .01$) and a small, but significant, positive correlation between the Ambiguous and Explicit scales ($r = .21, p < .01$).

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed significant mean differences in the ratings on each scale, $F(2,638) = 1402.66, p < .01$. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s HSD revealed significant differences between each of the behaviors (see Table 1). Participants rated the Ambiguous behaviors as less indicative of cheating than both the Deceptive and Explicit behaviors. Additionally, participants rated the Explicit behaviors as more indicative of cheating than the Deceptive behaviors.

A two-way ANOVA was calculated to examine gender and commitment status on the cheating scales. There were no significant effects of gender, commitment, or their interaction on the Ambiguous behaviors. There was a significant main effect of gender on the Deceptive items, $F(1,322) = 8.54, p < .01$, such that women rated these behaviors as more indicative of cheating than did men [$M_{females} = 3.01 (SD = .85), M_{males} = 2.72 (SD = .81)$]. There was a significant effect of gender on the Explicit scale, $F(1,323) = 4.23, p < .05$, such that females rated these behaviors as more indicative of cheating than did males [$M_{females} = 4.48 (SD = .64), M_{males} = 4.30 (SD = .85)$]. There were no other significant main effects or interactions.

**Discussion**

The goal of the current analyses was to explore the factor structure of the PDIS. The factor analyses revealed three factors. The items from the factors
make up three scales labeled Ambiguous, Deceptive, and Explicit. The scales represent varying degrees of infidelity, such that the Explicit items were rated as most severe, followed by the Deceptive and Ambiguous behaviors. Gender differences were found such that females rated the Deceptive and Explicit items as more indicative of cheating than did males. This may seem contradictory to findings based in evolutionary theory; however it should be pointed out that studies supportive of evolutionary theory have examined which types of infidelity are more upsetting to males versus females, whereas the current study had participants simply rate the extent to which a behavior would be considered cheating. It is possible that behaviors that are considered cheating are not equally upsetting (e.g., an individual may not view a partner’s emotional attachment to another person as indicative of cheating but may still experience substantial distress). These results do support previous findings that males have more permissive attitudes toward extradyadic behaviors than do females (Seal et al., 1994). No statistically significant differences were found based upon commitment status.

Despite the clear factor structure of the scales, several of the items suffer from floor and ceiling effects. The Ambiguous items seem to suffer from floor effects, as few people rated these items above a 1 or 2. Depending upon the item, between 57.4% and 85.8% of participants rated these items as a 1 or 2. The Explicit items, on the other hand, suffer from ceiling effects, as few people rated these items below a 4 or 5. Depending upon the item, between 58.6% and 95.8% of participants rated these items as a 4 or 5. These items were transformed before data analysis to help normalize the scores. Employing a 7-point scale may help increase the variability in responses; however, given the nature of some of the items, there still may be problems with variability in responding.

STUDY 2

Study 2 was conducted to examine correlates of the PDIS for the purposes of establishing the construct validity of the scale. The scale was also administered with a 7-point response scale instead of a 5-point scale in order to try to increase the variability of responses. Individual difference variables of sociosexual orientation, coping with unwanted sexual situations, and guilt were examined in relation to responses on the PDIS.

Sociosexual orientation (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) refers to one’s willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations. Individuals with a restricted sociosexual orientation desire commitment and closeness in a relationship before engaging in sexual intercourse with a partner. Alternately, individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation are comfortable engaging in sex without commitment or closeness. Persons with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation are more likely to engage in sex earlier in relationships and have sex with more than one partner at a time than are individuals with a restricted sociosexual orientation.
Sociosexual orientation is associated with willingness to engage in extradyadic relationships using both self-report and behavioral measures (Seal et al., 1994). For the self-report measures, men and individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation reported greater willingness to engage in extradyadic behaviors than did women and individuals with a restricted sociosexual orientation. Similarly, when given the opportunity to enter into a drawing for a free computer date, unrestricted individuals were more likely to enter into the drawing than were restricted individuals. Unrestricted individuals also reported that they would be more willing to engage in more physically intimate extradyadic behavior if they were to go on the free computer date. Given that individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation are more likely to engage in infidelity, they may also have more permissive views regarding the behaviors that constitute infidelity. It is expected that individuals with a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation will be less likely to view the behaviors on the PDIS as indicative of cheating.

The manner in which an individual copes with attractions to persons other than their romantic partner may also be related to perceptions of infidelity. Worthington, Heizenroth, Berry, and Berry (2001) developed a scale to assess coping strategies associated with unwanted sexual situations. They identified three coping strategies for dealing with unwanted sexual attraction: acting on one’s impulses, avoiding tempting situations and thoughts, and psychologically distancing oneself from temptation. Significant gender differences were found such that males were more likely than females to report acting on their impulses. Additionally, married individuals were less likely to act on their attractions and more likely to distance themselves than never-married participants. A follow-up study surveyed undergraduate students regarding their coping with unwanted sexual attractions in relation to several relationship variables (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, status) (Clark et al., 2001). Acting on attractions was predicted by relationship status, high frequency of attraction toward someone other than one’s partner, and low commitment. Distancing was predicted by relationship status, frequency of attraction, and commitment. In the current study, coping with unwanted sexual situations was included as a possible correlate of ratings on the PDIS. Individuals who are more likely to act on their sexual attractions may be less likely to view the behaviors on the PDIS as indicative of cheating. Alternatively, individuals who are more likely to distance and avoid temptation may be more likely to rate the behaviors as indicative of cheating.

There is limited research on guilt and infidelity. In a study examining perceptions of aversive interpersonal behaviors, Kowalski, Walker, Wilkinson, Queen, and Sharpe (2003) found that perpetrators of betrayal in romantic relationships reported feelings of guilt. Mongeau, Hale, and Alles (1994) found that as intentions to cheat and cheating for revenge increased, feelings of guilt regarding cheating decreased. Feelings of guilt regarding cheating and feelings of guilt over engaging in the PDIS behaviors were examined to investigate whether feelings of
guilt would be associated with viewing the PDIS behaviors as cheating. Thus, it was hypothesized that feelings of guilt regarding infidelity would be related to ratings of the PDIS behaviors, such that higher feelings of guilt regarding cheating would be related to more conservative views of the PDIS behaviors.

The goals of the current study were to analyze the PDIS with a seven-point scale as well as to determine correlates of the factors on the PDIS. Based on previous research, individuals with unrestricted sociosexual orientations were predicted to assign lower ratings to the cheating behaviors than individuals with a restricted sociosexual orientation. Individuals who are more likely to act on their attractions to individuals other than their partner were also expected to assign lower ratings to the cheating behaviors. However individuals who are more likely to avoid or distance themselves from a potential extradyadic partner were predicted to assign higher ratings to the cheating behaviors. It was also expected that the extent to which individuals felt guilty about engaging in the behaviors would be positively related to ratings of cheating. The extent to which individuals felt guilty about cheating on their partner in general was also expected to be related positively to ratings of the behaviors. Additionally, only participants currently in a romantic relationship were allowed to participate because rating the behaviors may be more relevant for individuals in a relationship than for single individuals. Single individuals may be less concerned with the behaviors that constitute cheating because it does not immediately impact their lives.

Method

Participants

Two hundred forty-four heterosexual undergraduate psychology students participated for partial course credit. The mean age was 19.2 (SD = 1.5, Mdn = 19). The majority of the sample was female (66.4%) and Caucasian (75.8%, 6.1% African American, 9.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.7% Latino/a, 2.5% Biracial, 2.5% Other). All participants were involved in a romantic relationship for at least 1 month. The mean relationship duration was 17.4 months (SD = 12.9; Mdn = 14). The majority of participants defined themselves as “dating exclusively” (83.6%; 2.9% dating casually, 9.8% dating regularly, 1.6% engaged or married). Five individuals (2%) defined themselves as “single.” These individuals are excluded from the analyses.

Measures

Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale (PDIS). The PDIS was used to assess participants’ views on various behaviors that may be indicative of cheating. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the behaviors were considered to be cheating. The items were rated on a scale from 0 (never cheating) to
6 (always cheating). The response options were changed to allow for the fact that participants may not view some of the behaviors as indicative of cheating. The previous version assumed that the items were reflective of cheating to some degree. The scale consists of three subscales: Ambiguous Behaviors (e.g., eating/drinking, dancing with someone other than one’s partner, etc.; alpha = .72); Deceptive Behaviors (e.g., flirting, withholding information from your partner, etc.; alpha = .85); and Explicit Behaviors (e.g., dating, sexual intercourse, etc.; alpha = .73).

**Guilt regarding cheating.** Participants completed items assessing how guilty they would feel if they engaged in each of the behaviors as well as a global item assessing how guilty they would feel if they cheated on their partner. The guilt items were rated on a 7-point scale from 0 (not at all guilty) to 6 (very guilty), with the middle point labeled “neither guilty or not guilty.” Participants responded to separate items measuring how guilty they would feel if they performed each PDIS behavior. The items were combined into three guilt scales corresponding to the PDIS scales (i.e., Ambiguous, Deceptive, and Explicit). The guilt scales were combined on a priori grounds and factor analysis supported the structure of the scales.

**Coping with Unwanted Sexual Situations Scale** (CUSS-52; Worthington et al., 2001). This is a 52-item scale assessing the frequency that people use particular behaviors to cope with sexual attraction to an opposite-sex friend. The scale consists of three subscales: Acting on One’s Impulses (Act), Avoiding Tempting Situations and Thoughts (Avoid), and Psychologically Distancing Oneself from Temptation (Distance). Items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never to 5 = nearly all the time). Sample items for the scales include the following: “I flirt with my friend in hope that she or he will find me sexually attractive” (Act); “I avoid situations where I am alone with that friend” (Avoid); and “I do my best to make it clear to my friend that I would like to keep our relationship at a friendly level and not to get sexual with her or him” (Distance). Worthington et al. found that the scales demonstrated good internal consistency and 3- and 6-week test-retest reliability (Act = .90 and .85, respectively; Avoid = .80 and .79, respectively; Distance = .74 and .78, respectively). The data for the current sample also demonstrated good internal consistency with alphas of .80 (Act), .90 (Avoid), and .77 (Distance).

**Sociosexual Orientation Scale** (SOS; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). This scale measures individual differences in willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations. Individuals who score high on the scale are said to have an unrestricted sociosexual orientation and tend to feel comfortable engaging in sex without commitment or closeness. Individuals low in sociosexual orientation are said to have
a restricted sociosexual orientation and need commitment and closeness in a relationship before engaging in sex. The 7-item scale consists of one factor with items such as “Sex without love is ok” (rated from 1 = I strongly disagree to 9 = I strongly agree) and estimates of the number of partners participants have had and foresee themselves having. Simpson and Gangestad report a Cronbach’s alpha of .73 for the scale, while the current sample’s alpha was .77.

Procedure

Participants completed a packet of questionnaires containing the PDIS, SOS, and CUSS-52 along with several demographic items (i.e., age, race, gender, relationship status). These measures were collected as part of a larger study examining individual difference and situational factors related to perceptions of infidelity. Participants were tested individually and received partial course credit for their participation.

Results

A factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation was conducted on the data to examine the factor structure of the PDIS with a 7-point response scale. The same data transformations were performed on the positively and negatively skewed items as in Study 1. Three factors emerged accounting for 55.01% of the variance. The factor structure was nearly identical to that found in Study 1 with the 5-point scale (see Table 1). Both fantasizing and flirting had low loadings on the Deceptive scale (.34 and .32, respectively). The other scale loadings were acceptable and loaded on the same scales as in Study 1. Pearson correlations among the scales indicated a strong positive relationship between the Ambiguous and Deceptive scales, a moderate positive relationship between the Deceptive and Explicit scales, but no relationship between the Explicit and Ambiguous scales (see Table 2).

A measurement model using LISREL 8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) was conducted to confirm the factor structure of the PDIS with the 7-point response scale. All models were run using Maximum Likelihood estimation with the Satorra-Bentler correction for non-normality (Satorra & Bentler, 1994). Three cases were missing data and were deleted listwise. The resulting sample size was reduced to 241. The specified measurement model consisted of the three factors identified in the factor analyses, with the items specified for each factor based upon the highest-loading items from the factor analysis. Due to the poor loadings from the factor analysis, fantasizing and flirting were not included in the measurement model.

The measurement model had the following fit statistics: \( \chi^2 (62) = 185.33, p < .001; \) RMSEA = .09; NFI = .91; NNFI = .92; CFI = .94. The RMSEA is above the acceptable range (see Browne & Cudeck, 1993); however, the other fit
indices indicate good model fit. The standardized factor loadings were acceptable (see Kline, 2005) with the exception of the kissing item. Consistent with the Pearson correlations, the model indicated a moderate relationship between the Ambiguous and Deceptive scales and a small to moderate relationship between the Deceptive and Explicit scales. There was no significant relationship between the Ambiguous and the Explicit scales. Because kissing loaded poorly, the model was run a second time without that item. The model statistics improved, $\chi^2 (51) = 134.53, p < .001$; RMSEA = .08; NFI = .93; NNFI = .94; CFI = .95 (see Figure 1 for the final model). The normed chi-square—that is, the ratio of the chi-square statistic to the degrees of freedom—was 2.64, which is within appropriate limits (Kline, 2005).

Pearson correlations were run to assess the relationships of the scales of the PDIS with the SOS, CUSS-52, ratings of guilt associated with engaging in each behavior, guilt regarding cheating, and relationship length (see Table 2). The correlations were run on the sample as a whole as well as by gender.

### Ambiguous behaviors. Ratings on the Ambiguous behaviors were not significantly correlated with the SOS, the Act or Distance scales of the CUSS-52, or overall guilt regarding cheating. Ratings on the Ambiguous scale were significantly correlated with ratings of guilt for the Ambiguous behaviors. Higher ratings of guilt on the Ambiguous behaviors were associated with rating the Ambiguous behaviors as indicative of cheating. In addition, the Ambiguous behaviors were significantly related to feelings of guilt over engaging in the Deceptive behaviors, such that higher ratings of guilt over engaging in the Deceptive behaviors were related to higher cheating ratings on the Ambiguous behaviors. This correlation

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*Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.**
became non-significant, though, when controlling for ratings on the Deceptive behaviors ($r = -.03, p > .05$). Additionally, there was a small, significant correlation between the Ambiguous items and the Avoid subscale of the CUSS, such that higher ratings on the Ambiguous items were related to more avoidance.

**Deceptive behaviors.** Ratings on the Deceptive behaviors were negatively correlated with the SOS and the CUSS-Act scale. Higher scores on sociosexual
orientation (indicating unrestricted sociosexual orientation) were associated with lower ratings on the Deceptive behaviors. Ratings on the Deceptive items were also positively correlated with the CUSS-Avoid and -Distance scales, ratings of guilt for each set of behaviors, and overall guilt regarding cheating. The more likely participants were to psychologically avoid and distance themselves from sexual situations with someone other than their partner, the more they indicated that the Deceptive behaviors were indicative of cheating. The correlation between ratings on the Deceptive behaviors and ratings of guilt on the Ambiguous behaviors became nonsignificant when controlling for ratings on the Ambiguous behaviors. Controlling for ratings on the Explicit behaviors, the correlation between the Deceptive behaviors and ratings of guilt for the Explicit behaviors was reduced but remained statistically significant ($r = .17, p < .01$).

**Explicit behaviors.** Ratings of the Explicit items were negatively correlated with sociosexual orientation and CUSS-Act. Individuals having an unrestricted sociosexual orientation and indicating that they would act on attractions to their friends rated the behaviors as less indicative of cheating. Additionally, ratings of the Explicit behaviors were also positively correlated with CUSS-Avoid and -Distance, overall guilt, and guilt regarding engaging in the Ambiguous, Deceptive and Explicit behaviors. The more likely an individual was to avoid and distance themselves from sexual situations with their friends and the guiltier they felt if they cheated and engaged in the cheating behaviors, the more they saw the behaviors as indicative of cheating. The correlation between ratings on the Explicit behaviors and ratings of guilt on the Ambiguous behaviors was reduced but remained significant when controlling for ratings on the Ambiguous behaviors ($r = .17, p < .05$). Controlling for ratings on the Deceptive behaviors, the correlation between the Explicit behaviors and ratings of guilt for the Deceptive behaviors was reduced but remained statistically significant ($r = .21, p < .01$).

**Gender differences.** With few exceptions, the same pattern of correlations was found when the sample was split by gender as with the entire sample. For males, the Ambiguous behaviors were not correlated with the CUSS-Avoid scale. Additionally, the Deceptive behaviors were not correlated with the CUSS-Act for males. Lastly, for females, sociosexual orientation was not correlated with ratings of the Explicit items. Independent samples $t$-tests were run to examine mean gender differences. Females rated the Ambiguous behaviors as more indicative of cheating than did males, $t(239) = −2.05, p < .05$ ($M_{\text{females}} = 1.64$ ($SD = 1.11$), $M_{\text{males}} = 1.34$ ($SD = .95$). There were no significant gender differences in ratings of the Deceptive behaviors. Females rated the Explicit behaviors as more indicative of cheating, $t(237) = −2.60, p < .05$ ($M_{\text{females}} = 5.64$ ($SD = .82$), $M_{\text{males}} = 5.30$ ($SD = 1.19$).
The goals of Study 2 were twofold. First, the factor structure of the PDIS was re-examined using a 7-point scale, in contrast to the 5-point scale employed in Study 1. Second, sociosexual orientation and the manner in which individuals respond to unwanted sexual attraction to a non-intimate other were examined as possible correlates of the PDIS.

Replicating findings from Study 1, an exploratory factor analysis on the 7-point PDIS yielded three distinct factors: Ambiguous, Deceptive, and Explicit. Furthermore, a confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the three factor model adequately fits the data. However, three items from the original factor analysis were deleted due to poor loadings: flirting, fantasizing, and kissing. More variance is accounted for with the 7-point scale (55.01% for the 7-point PDIS vs. 50.41% for the 5-point scale) than the 5-point scale; however, in the factor analysis for the 7-point scale, both flirting and fantasizing had poor factor loadings.

Interestingly, the three types of infidelity appear to be qualitatively distinct as opposed to being the same construct but varying in severity. Ambiguous behaviors are those in which the individual’s motivations seem unclear but may be benign. Deceptive behaviors are those in which the individual’s behaviors are mainly internal or hidden and are aimed at actively deceiving one’s partner. Explicit behaviors are those in which the individual clearly breaks the agreement of monogamy by engaging in sexual behaviors with someone other than a romantic partner. Whereas Explicit behaviors appear directly related to sexual infidelity, a combination of the Ambiguous and Deceptive behaviors appears related to emotional infidelity (cf. Shackelford et al., 2002).

Additionally, Study 2 found multiple correlates of the PDIS. Individuals’ attitudes of the degree to which the Deceptive and Explicit behaviors are indicative of cheating were associated with guilt for those behaviors. That is, the more that participants perceived the Deceptive or Explicit behaviors as indicative of cheating, the more guilt they would feel if they engaged in those behaviors. Additionally, an unrestricted sociosexual orientation and a tendency to act on a sexual attraction to an opposite-sex friend were associated with a decreased tendency to rate the Deceptive and Explicit behaviors as indicative of cheating. Furthermore, a tendency to avoid and distance oneself from tempting situations involving an opposite-sex friend were associated with an increased tendency to rate the Deceptive and Explicit behaviors as indicative of cheating. Similar to Study 1, females rated the Explicit behaviors as more indicative of cheating than did males. Additionally, females rated the Ambiguous behaviors as more indicative of cheating than did males.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Infidelity is quite prevalent and has a devastating impact on romantic relationships (Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). However, little consensus exists as
to which behaviors constitute infidelity and which behaviors are acceptable in everyday interaction. That men and women differ in their reactions to sexual and emotional infidelity suggests that cheating is comprised of more than just breaking the written or unwritten rules of sexual monogamy. Research has shown that inconsistencies exist in individuals’ perceptions of what non-sexual behaviors are indicative of cheating (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Roscoe et al., 1988; Weiss & Felton, 1987; Yarab et al., 1999). Therefore, the main purpose of the current study was to more fully examine the extent to which several behaviors constitute infidelity, develop a scale assessing various types of infidelity, and examine the correlates of perceptions of infidelity.

Two studies were conducted to determine the degree to which a variety of behaviors were considered infidelity and if these behaviors could be classified as general factors. The results from both studies provide preliminary evidence that infidelity can be classified as being composed of Ambiguous, Deceptive, and Explicit behaviors which vary both qualitatively and quantitatively (i.e., severity). Individuals perceive extradyadic Ambiguous behaviors such as eating or drinking, hugging, and dancing as the least indicative of cheating; Deceptive behaviors such as flirting, fantasizing, and lying to or withholding information from a partner as moderately indicative of cheating; and Explicit behaviors such as sexual intercourse and oral sex as most indicative of cheating. The three factor model that was derived from exploratory factor analytic techniques in Study 1 was replicated and confirmed in Study 2, providing further support for the varying levels of infidelity.

The current data supports the distinction between emotional and sexual infidelity; however, the explicitly sexual behaviors in this study were rated as the most indicative of cheating. The traditional sex differences found in research examining perceptions of emotional versus sexual infidelity were not supported by the current research. The current data indicated that females viewed the explicitly sexual behaviors as more indicative of cheating than did males. There was a key difference between the current data and previous studies examining gender differences regarding emotional versus sexual infidelity. The current studies focused on whether the behaviors were indicative of cheating, whereas previous studies have asked participants to rate their distress level to sexual versus emotional infidelity. Thus, it appears that an interesting distinction exists between perceptions of whether behaviors are considered cheating and the level of distress that such behaviors may inflict on an individual.

Utility of the PDIS

The PDIS was developed in an attempt to assess various perceptions of infidelity, and the scale demonstrated convergent validity. The current studies found that perceiving the PDIS behaviors as indicative of cheating were associated with greater anticipated guilt after engaging in the behaviors. Additionally,
individuals with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation, a tendency to act on extra-dyadic sexual attraction, and a decreased tendency to distance oneself from tempting extra-dyadic situations were less likely to view the PDIS behaviors as cheating. Importantly, the PDIS may demonstrate predictive validity in several domains.

First and foremost, ratings on the PDIS should be highly correlated with a propensity to engage in particular behaviors. For example, individuals who report that the Deceptive behaviors are very indicative of cheating should be less likely to engage in those behaviors. Conversely, individuals who find the PDIS behaviors as not indicative of cheating may be more likely to engage in those behaviors because they do not perceive their actions as unacceptable in the context of a romantic relationship. Future research should investigate how the scale may predict future cheating behaviors.

Additionally, relationship satisfaction may be influenced by the extent to which partners match on their perceptions of infidelity. Similarity research has shown that relational outcomes are more positive when individuals have similar attributes (e.g., Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, & DeBord, 1996). Perceptions of which behaviors constitute infidelity are an important domain in which partners may desire to be similar because dissimilarity may have dire consequences. If Partner A engages in behaviors that he/she feels are acceptable but Partner B believes constitute cheating, relational conflict is likely to ensue, in turn lowering the individuals’ satisfaction with the relationship and potentially even leading to termination of the relationship.

Ratings on the PDIS may be useful in mediation and/or moderation models. It is possible that perceptions of infidelity may mediate the association between individual difference variables (e.g., Big Five personality traits, narcissism) and likelihood of engaging in infidelity-related behaviors. Additionally, an association between romantic commitment and likelihood of engaging in infidelity may be moderated by perceptions of infidelity in that committed individuals are less likely to engage in certain infidelity-related behaviors only to the extent that they perceive the behaviors as indicative of cheating. That is, committed individuals who do not perceive the PDIS behaviors as indicative of cheating may or may not engage in the PDIS behaviors; however, committed individuals who do perceive the PDIS behaviors as indicative of cheating would be extremely unlikely to engage in the behaviors.

Limitations and Future Directions

The PDIS may be useful in predicting individuals’ likelihood of engaging in infidelity; however, the current study did not assess this relationship. Ratings on the PDIS are likely to be negatively associated with tendencies to engage in infidelity. This should be the case in that individuals generally have a high need for consistency (e.g., Swann, 1983). If an individual believes that certain
behaviors are indicative of cheating, and the individual believes that cheating is wrong and immoral, then a desire to have consistent attitudes and behaviors should lead the individual to refrain from engaging in the questionable behaviors. Unfortunately, because individuals clearly have differing perceptions of which behaviors constitute infidelity, self-report measures of actual behavior may be unreliable in assessing actual infidelity.

A second limitation of the present research is that the PDIS behaviors were intentionally left decontextualized. The purpose of this procedure was to broadly investigate which behaviors are considered cheating. However, ratings of the PDIS behaviors may be context-dependent. Are certain behaviors viewed as acceptable if engaged in with a friend as compared to an acquaintance? A co-worker as compared to an ex-boyfriend? Is having lunch at a busy sandwich shop more acceptable than having dinner at a quiet, dimly lit restaurant? Is engaging in certain behaviors less acceptable if the other person is physically attractive (e.g., high quality of alternatives)? Are the Ambiguous and Deceptive behaviors still considered cheating if the individual does not harbor any harmful intentions, or are the behaviors only unacceptable if the individual intends to proceed further with his/her actions (e.g., Explicit behaviors)? Future research should certainly examine the contextual factors associated with individuals’ perceptions of infidelity.

Third, although the current studies provided support for the three-factor PDIS, the results should be interpreted with caution, as both studies were conducted with college students. It is possible that perceptions of infidelity are more liberal with a young sample. Additionally, very few participants were married—a stage in which the effects of infidelity likely have their most profound impact. As such, future research should attempt to replicate the findings with a non-college sample that is older, has larger numbers of married individuals, and is more ethnically diverse.

Finally, the results of the current studies are correlational, thus, causal associations cannot be determined. Therefore, an experimental design would be able to distinguish how individuals’ perceptions of infidelity are influenced. For example, by manipulating the attractiveness of a target individual or priming romantic commitment, the situational factors that influence ratings of infidelity might be better examined.

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