

## **RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION FOLLOWING INFIDELITY: THE ROLES OF ATTRIBUTIONS AND FORGIVENESS**

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Although infidelity is a problem faced by many couples, some are able to recover from this trauma while others decide to terminate their relationship. This study investigates how attributions and forgiveness influence the likelihood of relationship dissolution following infidelity. Responses from 87 individuals who had experienced infidelity in a romantic, heterosexual relationship showed that forgiveness fully mediated the association between attributions and relationship termination. In addition, individuals who initiated breakup following a partner's infidelity reported lower levels of forgiveness than those whose partners initiated the breakup. These findings are discussed in terms of interventions designed to help couples recovering from infidelity.

Infidelity, defined as "a secret sexual, romantic, or emotional involvement that violates the commitment to an exclusive relationship" (Glass, 2002, p. 489), occurs in 20 to 25% of all marriages (Greeley, 1994; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Wiederman, 1997), and can have a number of deleterious effects on both the relationship and the individuals involved. Infidelity is the leading cause of divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003; Beitzig, 1989; Kitson, Babri, & Roach, 1985), and often results in anger, disappointment, self-doubt (Buunk, 1995), and depression (Cano & O'Leary, 2000) among partners of unfaithful individuals. The scope of infidelity extends beyond the marital realm, as 65% to 75%

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of college students report engagement in some form of extradyadic involvement while in a serious dating relationship (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Finally, couple therapists indicate that infidelity is the third most difficult problem to treat (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Given the magnitude of this problem, reactions to infidelity represent an important area of research, but one that has been overshadowed by research on predictors of infidelity. Although a common response to infidelity is relationship dissolution, some couples choose to remain together and to work through such a betrayal. Unfortunately, little is known about the process by which individuals reach such a decision; it is therefore critical to consider variables that may influence the likelihood of relationship dissolution following extradyadic involvement.

#### **UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION FOLLOWING INFIDELITY: AN ATTRIBUTION MODEL**

One way to distinguish between couples who separate following infidelity and those who remain together is to consider the victim's attributions for his/her partner's unfaithful behavior. Attribution models posit that reactions to events (i.e., behavior) are guided by the attributions or explanations that people make for them (e.g., Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). Thus, negative experiences may be attributed to another person, to chance, or to the self, and are most likely to lead to aggressive responses when attributed to a personal agent (Heider, 1944). Such attribution models have been applied to marriage and other close relationships, in an effort to understand how partners interpret and respond to one another's behavior. For example, Bradbury and Fincham (1990) developed a framework relating spousal attributions, behavior, and satisfaction within marriage. This framework postulates that a spouse's behavior is processed (i.e., given meaning) by his or her partner, and that the partner's cognitive activity will occur automatically (i.e., outside of conscious awareness) when the spouse's behavior is low in negativity, unexpectedness, and self-relevance. However, when the spouse's behavior does not meet these criteria, as in the case of infidelity, the partner will engage in controlled or conscious cognitive processing by making a mindful attribution for this behavior and will then respond accordingly.

Applying this framework to infidelity, the victim will likely make attributions for his or her partner's unfaithful behavior, and the nature of these attributions will influence his or her behavioral response to the infidelity. Thus, if the victim makes internal, global, and stable attributions for the infidelity (e.g., "My partner cheated because he/she is untrustworthy, no matter the situation, and isn't going to change"), he or

she may be more likely to react negatively (e.g., terminate the relationship). In contrast, external, specific, and unstable attributions (e.g., "My partner only cheated because he/she got put in a bad situation and he/she won't cheat again") might be more likely to lead to reconciliation. In summary, the former, conflict-promoting attributions for infidelity seem more conducive to relationship-destructive behaviors such as breakup, whereas the latter more benign attributions might lead to relationship-constructive behaviors such as reconciliation. Indeed, empirical work with couples has shown that conflict-promoting attributions are related to higher rates of negative behavior and increased tendencies to reciprocate negative partner behavior (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). However, the association between attributions and relationship dissolution has received little attention in the infidelity literature. To our knowledge, only one study has demonstrated that attributions for extradyadic relationships are related to breakup; Buunk (1987) found that, among married and cohabiting couples who had experienced infidelity, individuals whose relationships broke up following infidelity were more likely to report that their own and their partners' infidelity was motivated by aggression (e.g., revenge, anger) and deprivation (e.g., a void in the primary relationship) than were individuals who reconciled following infidelity. However, no study has examined how relationship dissolution is related to the underlying dimensions of attributions (i.e., globality, internality, and stability of attributions) in the aftermath of infidelity. Thus, the current study seeks to fill this gap in the literature, and to expand upon previous research by considering a potential mediator of the association between attributions and relationship dissolution: forgiveness.

### **A MEDIATIONAL MODEL OF RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION FOLLOWING INFIDELITY: THE ROLE OF FORGIVENESS**

Forgiveness is a process that has received increased attention in recent years, and has been considered in relation to both attributions (e.g., Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002) and infidelity (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1999). Forgiveness is a motivational shift by which an individual replaces destructive responses toward an offender, such as avoidance or revenge, with constructive behavior (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). In the context of infidelity, forgiveness does not require an individual to excuse or condone a partner's extradyadic behavior, nor does it mean that a couple must reconcile. Rather, the goal of forgiveness is for the injured spouse to gain a more balanced view of the offender and the infidelity, while decreasing nega-

tive affect toward the offender and increasing empathy (Gordon & Baucom, 1999).

A number of studies have demonstrated that attributions predict forgiveness, as benign attributions are related to greater levels of forgiveness than are nonbenign or conflict-promoting attributions (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fincham et al., 2002; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). In a study of transgressions among married couples, Fincham et al. (2002) found that benign attributions predicted forgiveness both directly and indirectly via affective reactions and emotional empathy. Thus, we expect that conflict-promoting or nonbenign attributions for partner infidelity will be associated with lower levels of forgiveness, whereas benign attributions will be related to higher levels of forgiveness.

Forgiveness, in turn, appears to play a significant role in reactions to partner infidelity. Although the process of forgiving an unfaithful partner may seem impossible, forgiveness is an instrumental component of couple interventions for recovery from extramarital affairs (Gordon & Baucom, 1999). Indeed, couples recognize that forgiveness is a necessary part of the healing process, and is equally important for couples that reconcile as it is for those who separate (Brown, 1991; Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, & Miller, 2002). While forgiveness does not require a couple to stay together, it may make reconciliation more likely. Forgiveness, by definition, increases the probability of pro-relationship behaviors and thus may increase the injured spouse's desire to rebuild the relationship. Forgiveness is also associated with decreases in avoidance and revenge, which may make reconciliation more likely. However, to our knowledge, there is no research documenting an association between lower levels of forgiveness and a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution in the aftermath of infidelity. We sought to explore this association in the current study, hypothesizing that lower levels of forgiveness would predict a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution following infidelity.

Having now considered the interrelationships among attributions, forgiveness, and relationship dissolution, we are in a position to propose a mediational model by which forgiveness accounts for the relationship between attributions and relationship dissolution. In constructing this model, we view infidelity as an interpersonal trauma (e.g., Glass, 2002; Gordon & Baucom, 2003), and draw upon theoretical and clinical models of trauma recovery (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). As previously discussed, there is an ample theoretical and empirical basis for a mediational model by which forgiveness accounts for the association between attributions and relationship dissolution following infidelity. In addition, there may be clinical justification for this se-

quence; a newly developed intervention for facilitating recovery from extramarital affairs appears to implicitly draw upon this mediational model (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004). In Gordon et al.'s (2004) three-stage model, attributions for the infidelity are explored during the second phase of therapy, which focuses on contextualizing and finding meaning for the affair. After constructing realistic attributions, the couple enters the third stage, in which the concept of forgiveness is introduced and they are asked to consider the future of their relationship. Thus, although not explicitly stated by Gordon and colleagues, this sequence parallels our expectation that the victim's attributions for the partner's infidelity facilitate (or hinder) forgiveness, which then influences the decision to separate or reconcile. One purpose of the current study was to test this mediational model among victims of infidelity, in an effort to further our understanding of how individuals react to such a betrayal.

#### THE CURRENT STUDY

The goal of this study was to investigate whether attributions and forgiveness predicted relationship dissolution following infidelity, and to determine whether forgiveness accounted for the association between attributions and breakup. These questions are important in light of a growing need to consider variables that influence reactions to infidelity. This study also improves upon past research by sampling individuals who have experienced infidelity in their actual relationships, as opposed to relying upon hypothetical scenarios in which participants speculate about the conditions under which they would break up with an unfaithful partner. This is important given emerging evidence that responses to imagined infidelity are unrelated to reactions to real infidelity (Harris, 2002). Finally, we focus specifically on infidelity within dating relationships, as the majority of research in this area has been limited to married couples. Our hypotheses were as follows.

*Hypothesis 1.* Conflict-promoting or nonbenign attributions will be associated with a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution.

*Hypothesis 2.* Lower levels of forgiveness will be associated with a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution.

*Hypothesis 3.* Forgiveness will mediate the association between attributions and relationship dissolution.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants ( $N = 87$ ) were 53 male and 34 female university undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course (mean age = 19.8 years). These participants were recruited as part of a larger study about infidelity, and were sub-selected from the overall sample because they indicated that a past romantic partner had cheated on them. Participants were asked, "Have you had any experiences in which someone you were romantically involved with 'cheated on' you?" and were instructed to check "Yes" or "No." Those who answered affirmatively were included in the current sample. Several ethnic groups were represented (60% Caucasian, 15% African American, 11% Latino/a, 8% Asian, 6% other). Participants received one research credit in exchange for their participation.

### PROCEDURE

Participants completed a questionnaire packet containing a series of measures about how they reacted to their partners' infidelity and were then debriefed.

### MEASURES

*Relationship Dissolution.* Participants indicated whether their relationship ended as a result of the infidelity (yes/no), and which partner ended it (self/partner/both).

*Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory—Revised (TRIM-R; McCullough et al., 1998).* The TRIM-R is an 11-item self-report measure that assesses individual reactions to a specific partner transgression, with a particular focus on revenge and avoidance.<sup>1</sup> This measure was selected because of evidence that forgiveness is represented by low levels of both revenge and avoidance (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997, 1998). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each of the items based on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).<sup>2</sup> Items of this measure were reverse scored, such that higher overall scores reflected greater levels of forgiveness.

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1. One item of the original TRIM (i.e., "I cut off the relationship with him/her") was dropped because it overlapped with our measure of relationship dissolution.

2. This 7-point scale (as opposed to the traditional 5-point scale) was used to allow for greater variability in forgiveness scores.

This instrument is a revised version of the original TRIM, which was modified such that it targeted forgiveness of a partner's infidelity (e.g., "After finding out about my partner's unfaithful behavior, I found a way to get even"). Revised versions of the TRIM have been used in other studies focusing on forgiveness within romantic relationships (e.g., Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005), and have demonstrated good internal consistency. The original TRIM has also demonstrated a variety of desirable psychometric properties, including adequate internal consistency, moderate temporal stability, as well as acceptable discriminant and convergent validity (McCullough et al., 1998). In the current study, the TRIM-R had a Cronbach alpha of .84.

*Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992).*

The RAM is a 6-item self-report measure that assesses causal and responsibility attributions about partner behavior. Although participants are typically asked to complete the RAM in response to 4–8 hypothetical stimulus events (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), participants in the current study were asked to complete this measure solely in regard to their partners' unfaithful behavior (e.g., "My partner deserves to be blamed for his/her unfaithful behavior"). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each of the items based on a 6-point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 6 = agree strongly), and several items were reverse scored such that higher scores indicated more benign attributions. The RAM has been established as a reliable and valid measure of attributions, as shown by its high internal consistency and test-retest correlations, as well as correlations with marital satisfaction and observed marital behaviors (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). To raise the internal consistency of the scale in the current study, one item which had a very low item-total correlation ( $r = .15$ ) was deleted (i.e., "The reason my partner was unfaithful is something that affects/affected other areas of our relationship").<sup>3</sup> Using the five remaining items, the RAM had a Cronbach alpha of .70.

*Demographics.* Participants provided basic demographic information, including gender, age, and ethnic group. They also indicated how long ago the infidelity occurred, and whether they considered the unfaithful behavior to be a sexual, emotional, or sexual and emotional betrayal.

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3. This item is somewhat abstract and the low item-total correlation for this item may reflect participant difficulty in understanding exactly its intended referent.



TABLE 1. Means, *SDs*, Ranges, and Zero-Order Correlations among Relationship Dissolution, Forgiveness, and Attributions

Variables	1	2	3	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Range
1. Relationship Dissolution						
2. Forgiveness	-.40*			37.77	11.81	12–62
3. Attributions	-.31*	.35*		12.54	4.67	5–26

Note. Given the dichotomous nature of the relationship dissolution variable, means/*SDs*/ranges are not provided, and all correlations involving this variable are point-biserial. \* $p < .05$ .

## RESULTS

### DESCRIPTIVE AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

Means, standard deviations, ranges, and zero-order correlations for all variables are summarized in Table 1. When asked to classify their partners' unfaithful behavior as sexual, emotional, or sexual and emotional, 42.5% ( $n = 37$ ) categorized it as sexual infidelity, 10.3% ( $n = 9$ ) categorized the betrayal as emotional infidelity, and 44.8% ( $n = 39$ ) considered the infidelity to be both sexual and emotional in nature; 2.3% ( $n = 2$ ) did not categorize their partners' infidelity. The average time since the infidelity had occurred was 19.6 months ( $SD = 16.7$  months). 74.7% ( $n = 65$ ) of the participants indicated that their relationship with their partner had ended because of the infidelity, and the remaining 25.3% ( $n = 22$ ) reported that the relationship had not ended because of the infidelity. Among those who endorsed infidelity-related breakups, 83% ( $n = 54$ ) reported that they (i.e., the victim) had initiated the breakup, 15% ( $n = 10$ ) reported that their partner had initiated it, and 2% ( $n = 1$ ) reported that the breakup was mutual.

Preliminary analyses using point-biserial correlations revealed that forgiveness and attributions were significantly associated with relationship dissolution ( $r = -.40$  and  $-.31$  respectively,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that as forgiveness and benign attributions increased, the likelihood of relationship dissolution decreased. We then turned to test each of our hypotheses using a series of logistic and linear regressions.

Tests of the first two hypotheses were necessary steps for examining

4. Although forgiveness appears to increase as time since a transgression increases (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), we did not find that time since the infidelity predicted forgiveness in the current study,  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $t = -.63$ , ns. Thus, we did not control for time in any of our analyses.

5. The predicted probability of relationship dissolution across various levels of forgiveness was calculated using the log-likelihood values obtained in the logistic regression analyses.



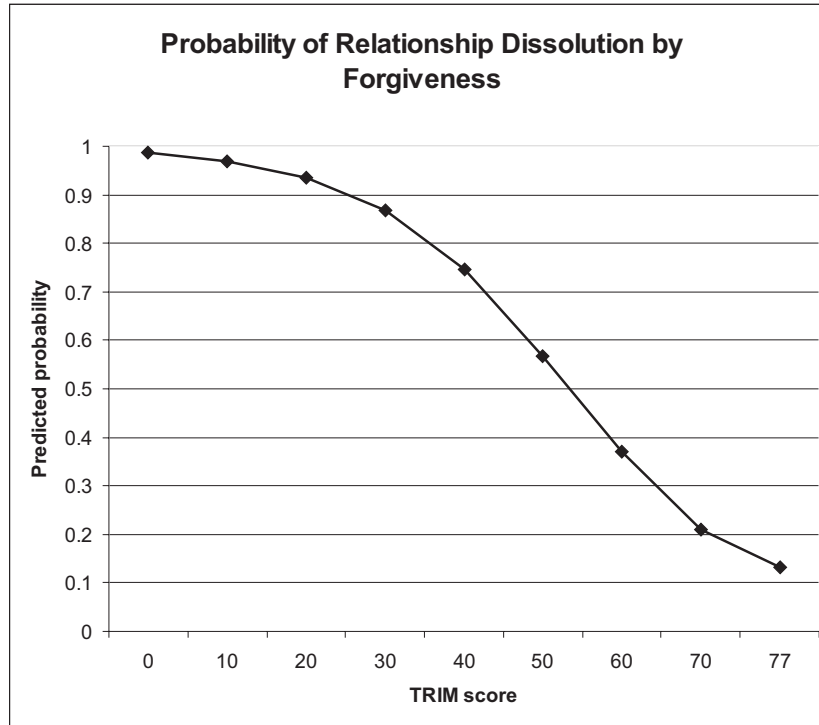


FIGURE 1. Predicted Probability of Relationship Dissolution by Forgiveness.

the third mediational hypothesis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Hypothesis one was supported in that more nonbenign attributions were positively associated with relationship dissolution,  $z = 7.4, p < .01$ . Similarly, the second hypothesis was supported in that lower levels of forgiveness also predicted relationship dissolution,  $z = 11.73, p = .001$ .<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the probability of relationship dissolution based on an individual's forgiveness level. At low levels of forgiveness the predicted probability of relationship dissolution was nearly 100%, while there was a much smaller chance of relationship dissolution at maximum levels of forgiveness.<sup>5</sup>

To examine the third hypothesis, whether forgiveness mediated the relationship between attributions and relationship dissolution, we followed the remaining steps outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test for mediation. Specifically, we showed that attributions predicted the mediating variable, forgiveness,  $\beta = .36, t(84) = 3.55, p = .001$ . Finally, we examined whether attributions predicted relationship dissolution when

TABLE 2. Characteristics of the Breakup and Stay Together Groups

	Group	
	Breakup	Stay together
N	65	22
Male	38	15
Female	27	7
Caucasian	40	12
Non-Caucasian	25	10
Infidelity type		
Sexual	25	12
Emotional	5	4
Sexual and emotional	34	5
Mean time since the infidelity occurred (in months)	20.93	15.20
Forgiveness mean	34.64	46.86
Attributions mean	11.71	15.00

controlling for forgiveness. In this model, forgiveness significantly predicted relationship dissolution,  $z = 8.61, p < .005$ , but attributions did not,  $z = 3.06, ns$ . Thus, forgiveness fully mediated the association between attributions and relationship dissolution.

In examining the characteristics of the “breakup” and “stay together” groups, shown in Table 2, it is evident that individuals whose relationships ended following infidelity tended to report lower levels of forgiveness and more nonbenign attributions. It also appears that sexual and combined infidelity (i.e., sexual and emotional) were more strongly associated with relationship dissolution than emotional infidelity. However, the limited sample size did not allow us to statistically test the associations between infidelity type and relationship dissolution. In considering those participants whose relationships ended following infidelity, it is critical to note that not all of the breakups within this group were initiated by the victim; thus, it was important to rule out any within-group differences based on which partner initiated the relationship dissolution. A MANOVA was performed with perpetrator-initiated breakup and victim-initiated breakup as the two levels of the independent variable and forgiveness and attributions as the dependent variables. The overall MANOVA was significant,  $F(3, 58) = 4.11, p = .01$ . Univariate analyses of variance using a Bonferroni adjustment were then conducted for each of the dependent variables. Only the ANOVA in which forgiveness was the dependent variable was significant,  $F(1, 62) = 15.78, p < .001$ , indicating that victims who initiated the breakup were less forgiving than victims whose partners initiated the breakup.

TABLE 3. Characteristics of the Victim-initiated and Perpetrator-initiated Breakup Groups

	Group	
	Victim-initiated	Perpetrator-initiated
<i>N</i>	54	10
Male	30	7
Female	24	3
Caucasian	35	5
Non-Caucasian	19	5
Infidelity type		
Sexual	22	3
Emotional	4	1
Sexual and emotional	27	6
Time since the infidelity occurred (in months)	22.86	12.53
Forgiveness mean	33.06	46.4
Attributions mean	11.35	13.00

Characteristics of the victim-initiated and perpetrator-initiated breakup groups are summarized in Table 3.

## DISCUSSION

This study makes several contributions to our understanding of how individuals in dating relationships react to a partner's infidelity, and what factors may influence their decision to stay together or separate following such a betrayal. First, it replicates Buunk's (1987) finding that break-ups following infidelity were more likely when the infidelity was seen to be motivated by what we have termed conflict promoting attributions. Second, our findings suggest that attributions regarding a partner's infidelity predict relationship dissolution indirectly via forgiveness. Consistent with prior research on forgiveness in relationships (for a review see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005), we showed that conflict-promoting attributions may inhibit forgiveness processes. This, in turn, is likely to make couples more susceptible to negative behaviors (i.e., avoidance and revenge) thereby increasing the likelihood of relationship dissolution. Given that forgiveness fully mediated the association between attributions and relationship dissolution, attempts to increase forgiveness of infidelity may be more effective to the extent that attributions for the behavior are first modified. This process has been implemented to some degree in interventions designed to promote recov-

ery from extramarital affairs (Gordon et al., 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest that attributions should be addressed in therapy before attempting to facilitate forgiveness and/or reconciliation. Indeed, the current study lends empirical support to a sequence by which forgiveness mediates the association between attributions and relationship dissolution and therefore supports this implicit element of Gordon et al.'s (2004) intervention.

It must be made explicit that forgiveness, not reconciliation, is viewed as the optimal outcome for couples affected by infidelity. Whether a couple decides to break up or remain together, forgiveness can have significant emotional and physical health benefits (McCullough et al., 1997; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). Though forgiveness is considered to be a crucial stage in the recovery process, researchers are quick to point out that forgiveness does not require reconciliation and can also provide emotional closure for couples who choose to separate (Brown, 1991; Gordon & Baucom, 1999). Whereas Figure 1 reveals that fairly high levels of forgiveness are required in order to reach low-risk levels of relationship dissolution, the current findings do suggest that by increasing forgiveness, the likelihood of reconciliation may also increase. Thus, when couples enter treatment with the goal of reconciliation, forgiveness is an important process that may facilitate this outcome.

An unexpected finding in the current study emerged from post-hoc analyses that revealed differences in forgiveness based on which partner initiated relationship dissolution. Though not predicted, this result makes theoretical sense in light of our other findings. Individuals who were more forgiving of their partner's infidelity may have been less inclined to terminate the relationship, but may have been forced to if their partner initiated the breakup. However, given the cross-sectional nature of our data, it is unclear whether this difference in forgiveness levels between the victim and partner-initiated breakup groups existed before the breakup, or emerged post-breakup.

In addition to the small sample size and cross-sectional design of the current study, several other limitations qualify these results. First, our sample consisted of unmarried college undergraduates and thus the findings may not generalize to older, cohabiting, or married couples. Second, responses to actual infidelity situations were measured retrospectively, which may have biased participants' responses. In addition, while research suggests that men and women react differently to sexual and emotional infidelity (e.g., Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002), we were unable to explore potential interactions between gender and type of infidelity because of insufficient power. It is also important to note that the cross-sectional nature of our data prevents us from drawing

conclusions regarding the causal pathways among predictors (i.e., attributions → forgiveness) and between predictors and relationship dissolution. Longitudinal data will be necessary to further explore these associations. Finally, it may be important to control for participants' previous experiences with infidelity in future research, as this may influence the attributions they make for subsequent betrayals.

Nevertheless, the present study provides useful information about how individuals in dating relationships react to a partner's infidelity, and what variables predict relationship dissolution following such a betrayal. Given the frequency of infidelity in dating relationships and marital relationships and the potential severity of its impact, it is essential to understand the factors that account for the association between infidelity and relationship dissolution. Attributions and forgiveness represent two such variables that may account for this association, and also two promising targets for infidelity interventions. It will be important for future research to continue to identify factors that affect responses to infidelity, in an effort to inform interventions that will help couples that experience this serious and frequent problem.

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