

USING COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY TO INVESTIGATE THE THOUGHTS AND
BEHAVIORS OF INDIVIDUALS WHO COMMIT ROMANTIC INFIDELITY

by

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(Under the direction of W. Keith Campbell)

Abstract

Romantic infidelity is a behavior that conflicts with how most individuals view the self and therefore may promote cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, individuals who commit infidelity may use strategies such as trivialization and behavior change to diminish negative consequences associated with cognitive dissonance. Consistent with my predictions, I found that prior instances of romantic infidelity promoted discrepancy involving the self-concept and psychological discomfort, particularly in women. Additionally, prior infidelity promoted negative shifts in general affect, suggesting that infidelity causes a combination of cognitive dissonance and negative general affect. Also consistent with my predictions, prior infidelity promoted the use of trivialization and behavior change; the latter from perpetrators who desired consistency amongst their beliefs and behaviors. Perpetrators of infidelity who did trivialize their behaviors experienced significant improvement in terms of self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, but not general affect, suggesting that trivialization directly targets the dissonance associated with infidelity. Finally, participants were more likely to trivialize prior infidelities when they were highly aware of their personal beliefs regarding infidelity, suggesting that a salient discrepancy between beliefs and behavior may lead perpetrators of infidelity to

trivialize their behaviors. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed, and future avenues of research are suggested.

INDEX WORDS: Infidelity, Cognitive Dissonance, Discomfort, Discrepancy, Behavior

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my fiancée Hope, my parents Jeannie and David, and my brothers Jason, Chris, and Mathew. (note: I have nothing against sisters; I simply do not have any). You mean the world to me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Virtually all Americans agree that infidelity is morally unacceptable (e.g., Gallup Poll, April 30, 1999). This is true under almost any circumstance. For example, individuals report that sexual betrayal is “somewhat unacceptable” to “totally unacceptable” even after strong justification is provided for the betrayal (Feldman, Cauffman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000). Logically speaking then, infidelity should be rare or absent. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that infidelity is far from rare, and may even be the norm (e.g., Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 2003; Hansen, 1987; Lawson & Samson, 1988; Tavris & Sadd, 1975; Thompson, 1983; Townsend & Levy, 1990). This is a clear example of behaviors not logically adhering to beliefs, and suggests that there are perhaps millions of Americans coping with a potentially serious intrapsychic dilemma—most people think of themselves as loyal, but when they commit infidelity their behavior suggests otherwise. This internal dilemma may manifest itself in a variety of psychological experiences such as feelings of discrepancy involving the self-concept as well as tension and discomfort. Additionally, infidelity may promote a number of cognitive and behavioral responses, including those that may undermine the relationship further such as minimizing the importance of the infidelity, but also those that may contribute to enhanced relationship functioning such as behaving more loyally in the future. Key to the present research, these types of experiences and responses may reflect underlying motives to maintain behavior-belief consistency and the repercussions that stem from failure to maintain consistency. This conceptualization of the consequences and responses associated with romantic infidelity is most consistent with Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance (see Harmon-Jones & Brehm,

1999 for an excellent review of the contributions and controversies surrounding Cognitive Dissonance Theory).

Examining romantic infidelity using a cognitive dissonance framework may promote better understanding of the motivational underpinnings of the thoughts, feelings, and actions often encountered by couples and therapists facing the aftermath of infidelity. For example, it may be frustrating, and to some extent inconceivable, that perpetrators of infidelity often fail to acknowledge the significance of their transgressions. When viewed through the lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory, however, this type of response actually makes a good deal of sense. Furthermore, prior research suggests that perpetrator accounts of interpersonal transgressions can influence the functioning of relationships (Schonbach, 1980). For example, romantic partners who minimize the importance of their own infidelities may undermine forgiveness and reconciliation. An understanding of the potential role that cognitive dissonance plays in responses to infidelity may therefore be important to clinicians and romantic partners in determining the probability that relationships survive infidelity. Finally, it is important to investigate cognitive dissonance as it occurs in the “real world.” As Festinger stated in his last public remarks on dissonance theory (as documented in Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999), this type of research is needed to explore the extent to which dissonance impacts the behaviors and attitudes of people on an everyday basis. This type of research will ultimately determine the global implications of one of social psychology’s most well established and documented theories.

I begin with a brief overview of Cognitive Dissonance Theory and how I propose that it relates to romantic infidelity. This is followed by examples from the social transgression and infidelity literatures supporting my argument that cognitive dissonance plays a role in the

thoughts and actions of those who commit infidelity. Finally, I present a series of five studies that empirically test my contention of the link between romantic infidelity and cognitive dissonance.

Overview of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory is one of the most influential psychological theories ever proposed (Jones, 1985). A keyword search of “cognitive dissonance” in PsycInfo® results in nearly 1800 citations. Combine this with the numerous other names under which cognitive dissonance is researched (e.g., choice-supportive memory; Mather, Shafir, & Johnson, 2003) and one begins to appreciate the enormous impact that this theory has had on psychological research. Originally developed by Festinger (1957), Cognitive Dissonance Theory suggests that the human desire for consistency (e.g., Heider, 1958) extends to cognition and behavior. In the words of Festinger, “There exists a tendency to make one’s cognition and one’s behavior consonant” (Festinger, 1954/1999, p. 358). When two related cognitions (either or both of which may regard behavior) are opposite one another they are said to be dissonant, and this is both psychologically and even physically uncomfortable (e.g., Cooper, Zanna, & Taves, 1978; Elliot & Devine, 1994). Because cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable, individuals experiencing it are motivated to reduce the discomfort through a variety of cognitive and behavioral strategies.

Cognitive dissonance theory has been frequently challenged, most notably by self-perception theory (Bem, 1967), impression-management theory (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971), self-affirmation theory (Steele & Liu, 1983; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993), and Cooper and Fazio’s (1984) “new look” theory of cognitive dissonance. It has also been revised and altered, yet has remained at its core one of the most applicable social psychological theories, perhaps because of its general and flexible approach to explaining the dynamic

relationship between cognitions and behavior (Harmon-Jones, 1999). There are perhaps hundreds of detail-oriented debates that need to be settled empirically. My goal in the present research, however, is not to “test” Cognitive Dissonance Theory against competing theories, or to determine what is required for the general dissonance process to be activated (although my research certainly contributes to the general understanding of Cognitive Dissonance Theory). Rather, my goal is somewhat more practical in nature—to use Cognitive Dissonance Theory as a framework for understanding and predicting individual experiences and reactions to romantic infidelity.

Cognitive Dissonance and Infidelity

People who see themselves as loyal and faithful, but who also commit infidelity, are likely to experience a discrepancy between what their behavior suggests about them and how they see themselves. It is discrepancy involving the self-concept that is often the basis for cognitive dissonance (Aronson, 1999). In other words, individuals experience cognitive dissonance because their cognitions surrounding their behavior conflict with their cognitions surrounding the self. Importantly, cognitive dissonance is often experienced as a state of psychological discomfort (Elliot & Devine, 1994). Therefore, individuals who commit infidelity are likely to feel relatively uncomfortable, especially when the conflict between their self-beliefs and behavior is particularly prominent.

Fortunately (from the perspective of individuals who commit infidelity), there are numerous strategies that can be employed to reduce psychological discomfort associated with cognitive dissonance. For example, persons who commit infidelity may report that their infidelity was relatively meaningless and therefore only represents a minor infraction. In the present research, I focus on this strategy, which is termed *trivialization*. Past research suggests that

trivialization is an effective strategy to reduce cognitive dissonance. For example, Simon, Greenberg, and Brehm (1995) demonstrated that individuals who commit counterattitudinal behaviors, such as writing essays supporting a counterattitudinal position, are less likely to change their position on the topic if they are first given the opportunity to minimize the subjective importance of their behavior. In the case of infidelity, perpetrators may be inclined to minimize the subjective importance of their transgressions, and doing so may alleviate the dissonance that emerges from their acts of infidelity. If true, then trivialization may be an effective coping mechanism for perpetrators of infidelity.

Cognitive dissonance might also promote behavioral coping strategies; exposing people to their own hypocrisies can have significant effects on future behavior (Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Dickerson, Stone, Aronson, Crain, et al., 1994; Thibodeau, Aronson, & Miller, 1992). These studies suggest that when people are made aware of previous behavior that fails to match how they view themselves, the inconsistency creates cognitive dissonance. To alleviate the resulting dissonance people often behave in ways that are more consistent with how they view themselves rather than what their previous behavior suggests. For example, individuals made aware of both their beliefs regarding the importance of water conservation and past incidents when they did not conserve water tend to be more inclined to conserve water in the future (Dickerson et al., 1994). In terms of infidelity, this suggests an intriguing possibility that previous infidelity, under the right circumstances, may actually lead to a future reduction in infidelity. That is, individuals who are highly motivated to maintain belief-behavior consistency may be less inclined to commit infidelity to the extent that their prior acts of infidelity conflicted with their self-views.

In summary, I propose that cognitive dissonance plays a role in the thoughts and actions of those who commit infidelity. More specifically, prior acts of infidelity are likely to promote inconsistencies involving elements of the self-concept relevant to fidelity. Most individuals consider themselves faithful, and acts of infidelity are inconsistent with these self-views. I suggest that these inconsistencies may manifest as psychological discomfort and may promote the use of dissonance reduction tactics such as trivialization and behavior change. Before I get to my specific predictions and empirical test, however, I first present evidence from the literature supporting the general link between infidelity and cognitive dissonance.

Evidence of Infidelity-Dissonance Link from the Social Transgression Literature

Baumeister and colleagues (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Votman, 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997) conducted some of the most influential research on differences between victim and perpetrator accounts of social transgressions. Their research, using a narrative approach, suggests that perpetrators and victims often describe transgressions quite differently. Although this research did not focus specifically on infidelity, it does provide insight into the motivations that may guide perpetrator reactions to infidelity. For example, they found that perpetrators were more likely to describe their behaviors as justifiable, out of their control, and non-deliberate. Perpetrators also tended to ascribe some level of blame to the victim. Of course, victims tended to describe these incidents in decidedly different terms. Other researchers, also using narrative approaches, have reported similar findings (Cameron, Ross, & Holmes, 2002; Kowalski et al., 2003). In a particularly relevant twist to this line of research, Mikula et al. (1998) asked spouses to describe an identical conflict. They found that, consistent with more general victim/perpetrator research, spouses who were more responsible for the conflicts tended to describe them as less serious and more justifiable. A final study recently collected narrative

accounts from individuals who described an instance when they were unfaithful to a romantic partner and another instance when a romantic partner was unfaithful to them. Evidence was uncovered suggesting that when participants wrote from the perspective of the perpetrator of the infidelity they tended to, for example, describe the transgressions as less consequential than when they wrote from the perspective of the victim (Shrira & Foster, 2005). This suggests that perpetrators of infidelity tend to respond in the same way as perpetrators of any other type of transgression.

In summary, there is solid evidence suggesting that victims and perpetrators recall transgressions in very different ways. In general, there is a pattern whereby perpetrators reduce the significance of their transgressions and lessen their culpability via a variety of strategies that usually involve distortion of the facts. Though there are of course other explanations for these results, it is likely that desire for intrapersonal consistency influences the recollections of perpetrators. Individuals tend to possess positive self-views and employ a variety of strategies to maintain them (e.g., Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). For many people, even perpetrators of social transgressions, a positive self includes being nice to others, or at least not hurting others, and at the very least not hurting people who do not deserve to be hurt. Of course, there are individual differences in the extent that people value being nice when assessing how they feel about themselves. For example, Campbell, Rudich, and Sedikides (2002) found that narcissists tend to focus less on communal traits when evaluating themselves. However, for most people, harming others for no good reason is inconsistent with how they conceptualize themselves. Thus, deflecting blame and distorting history may serve to promote intrapersonal harmony between perpetrators' self-concepts and their previous behaviors.

Victim-perpetrator research has clear implications for any study involving infidelity. A desire for intrapersonal consistency may result in recollections of previous infidelity that are highly biased. For example, a romantic partner who has committed infidelity may report that their behavior is insignificant. Essentially, philanderers will recollect in a manner that is consistent with how they view themselves. Because most people share in common a highly positive view of the self, recollections of previous infidelity are likely to be biased in a manner that puts the perpetrator in the most positive light. I now turn to research that has focused on the reasons people give for infidelity, which suggests just such a pattern.

Evidence of Infidelity-Dissonance Link from the Infidelity Literature

It is important to note that when a researcher (or clinician or partner) asks a participant (or patient or partner) why he or she has committed infidelity, the response is necessarily post-hoc in nature. This has been a point of criticism by some researchers (e.g., Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilla, 1999) because post-hoc rationales for infidelity are probably influenced by motivational factors. Classic social psychological research demonstrates that people often have little insight into their own behaviors and instead rely upon socially acceptable heuristics to explain them (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). The justifications that people give are likely influenced by many factors including the desire to maintain consistency between how they view themselves and what their behavior suggests.

Buunk (1987) discussed the “pushes” and “pulls” of infidelity. Pushes describe the motivation to exit a primary relationship, whereas pulls describe the motivation to enter an extra-pair relationship. For example, a commonly cited push is low relationship satisfaction; a commonly cited pull is physical attraction. Participants tend to describe these types motivations when providing explanations for why they enter and maintain extra-pair romantic relationships

(Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a). These motivations may alleviate some of the inconsistency surrounding the perpetrator's personal beliefs and behavior, or at least provide justification for the inconsistency. A person who cheats and who feels as though their behavior suggests something negative about themselves might look to justify their philandering by reporting that the relationship they betrayed was bad. This may serve the goals of removing personal responsibility for the infidelity and reassigning blame to the betrayed partner, both of which may reduce/justify the behavior-belief inconsistency. Consistent with this, infidelity that is committed because the primary relationship is poor is considered more acceptable by others (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b). The literature suggests that people who either commit infidelity or who report that they are more likely to commit infidelity tend to report that their relationships are of poor quality (e.g., Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Glass & Wright, 1977). Indeed, Feldman and Cauffman (1999) found that the majority of participants reported that poor relationship quality was a primary motive for having committed infidelity. Although it is certain that some people cheat because their relationships truly are bad, no research has investigated the flip-side to this coin: that people may report that their relationships are poor because they have cheated. Given the human nature to reconstruct the past to suit personal beliefs, it seems likely that this sort of bias occurs fairly regularly.

Similarly, infidelity tends to be seen as more acceptable when it is committed following an act of betrayal by a romantic partner (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b). For example, a person who cheats on their partner because their partner recently cheated on them tends to be evaluated more favorably. Importantly, this sort of motivation to cheat is likely more consistent with the self-concepts of perpetrators. The "contract" has already been broken by the partner and the perpetrator of the infidelity is no longer obligated to remain faithful. Therefore, it is not

surprising that individuals often cite partner betrayal as a cause for their own previous or planned infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Greene, Lee, & Lustig, 1974; Mongeau, Hale, & Alles, 1994). It is well known that romantic partners are not always correct in their perceptions of partner betrayal. Thus, it is possible that cheating partners may bias their perceptions that their partners are cheating on them when they, in fact, are the ones doing the betraying. This has not been empirically tested (an empirical test of this would admittedly be difficult to conduct), but seems likely given human nature. If true, it could then be suggested that inflated estimates of partner infidelity by perpetrators of infidelity stem, in part, from the motivation to maintain consistency between one's self-directed beliefs and behavior.

One of the most important and studied elements of Cognitive Dissonance Theory is the idea of free-choice. Individuals must freely choose their behavior for dissonance to arise. Indeed, nearly every experimental manipulation of cognitive dissonance involves a condition where participants are told, not asked to do something that is counterattitudinal. In these conditions free-choice is reduced and consequently so is cognitive dissonance. If cognitive dissonance plays a role in the reactions of perpetrators of infidelity, then the reasons that they give for infidelity should oftentimes focus on the removal of free-choice. Mongeau, Hale, and Alles (1994) found that when participants did not commit infidelity out of revenge for their partner's prior infidelity, they were likely to cite excuses such as being intoxicated or not being able to stop the infidelity from occurring for reasons out of their control. Similarly, Feldman and Cauffman (1999a) found that alcohol/drugs were reported to have played a role in many of the infidelities reported by participants in their study. In both of these instances, participants reported reduced free-choice in regard to their infidelities. That is, they reported being less in control of their behavior at the time that the infidelities occurred. Of course, it is probable that in many instances, forces were at work

that did reduce participants' ability to resist committing infidelity. However, it is also likely that these reasons for infidelity stem at least partially from a desire to reduce the perception of free-choice, which consequently reduces discomfort associated with dissonance.

To summarize, it is certain that situational factors play a role in causing individuals to commit infidelity. It is also likely, however, that situational factors tend to be exaggerated by perpetrators of infidelity, and this serves to diminish negative psychological consequences associated with infidelity, such as cognitive dissonance. Although these types of situational explanations are not directly studied in the present research, they reflect the primary argument driving this research: that perpetrators of infidelity experience decreased behavior-belief harmony following acts of infidelity, which are uncomfortable, but which can be alleviated via strategies designed to either minimize the significance of the inconsistencies, or remove the inconsistencies altogether. I now turn my discussion to the present research, laying out the primary predictions, and then present several empirical tests of my hypotheses.

Overview of the Present Research

The goal of the present research was to investigate romantic infidelity from a cognitive dissonance perspective. There were two primary hypotheses that guided this research. First, it was predicted that individuals who committed more frequent prior acts of infidelity would experience symptoms of cognitive dissonance, including discrepancy involving the self-concept and psychological discomfort. Second, individuals who committed more frequent prior acts of infidelity were predicted to think and behave in ways that diminish symptoms of cognitive dissonance. The primary focus of the present research was on the use of trivialization as a cognitive dissonance reduction strategy, although behavior change was also investigated. These

hypotheses were investigated in five studies that combined experimental and correlational methodology.

CHAPTER 2

PILOT STUDY: IS THE INFIDELITY MANIPULATION EFFECTIVE?

In the first three studies I employed an experimental manipulation that was designed to make participants feel that they had either been faithful or unfaithful in a prior romantic relationship. I did this to simulate the experience of committing infidelity without, of course, forcing participants to actually commit infidelity. In these studies I randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions. Participants in the “unfaithful condition” were led to believe that they had been relatively unfaithful in their previous relationships, whereas participants in the “faithful condition” were led to believe that they had been relatively faithful in the previous relationship. In each of these studies, after completing the manipulation, participants were asked questions designed to assess their reactions to the manipulation. It is possible that these questions may have biased their recollection of how they interpreted the feedback they received during the manipulation. It was nevertheless important to assess whether participants in the unfaithful condition actually felt as though they had been less faithful than participants in the faithful condition. To determine this, I conducted a pilot study of the manipulation in which I randomly assigned a sample of participants to either the unfaithful or faithful conditions and then asked them how faithful they felt immediately after the manipulation.

Method

Participants

Seventy-two University of Georgia undergraduates (54 women; 18 men; M age = 19.5, sd = 1.2) participated in this study in exchange for partial fulfillment of their research participation requirement. To participate in this study, all participants had to have had at least one prior

romantic relationship that lasted at least three months. These relationships were required to have been “at least somewhat serious.”

Materials and Procedure

Infidelity manipulation. I attempted to alter the extent to which participants thought that they had committed infidelity in their past relationships. Participants were asked to think about their most recent previous romantic relationship (which lasted at least three months and was at least somewhat serious), and more specifically about the “person or persons whom [they] were most attracted to other than [their] primary romantic partner.” They were then asked to report (a) the amount of time they spent thinking about these individuals, (b) the amount of flirting that occurred between them, and (c) how often they did “couple” things together, such as talking on the phone (1 = none; 7 = a great deal). These items were taken from a more extensive scale developed by Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia (1999), and were used because they represented forms of infidelity relatively common amongst college-aged people (other items included, for example, frequency of physical intimacy with other partners). Additionally, these items were most appropriate for the manipulation because they were relatively ambiguous in terms of the severity of the behaviors.

Participants were next asked to sum their scores from these three items and to write their scores at the top of the next page of the questionnaire (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics of scores for this scale). Then participants read a bogus description of the scale. The scale was purportedly designed by a distinguished professor of psychology at a prestigious northern California university. Furthermore, participants were informed that the scale had been administered to over 50,000 students from across the United States and had been shown to be a valid assessment of common types of infidelity. Then, depending upon random assignment,

about half of the participants (unfaithful condition, $n = 34$) were told that 83% of past participants reported scores that were *less than six* (higher scores indicated more prior infidelity). The remaining participants (faithful condition, $n = 38$) were told that 83% of past participants reported scores or *more than 18*. Pilot testing with this scale suggested that most participants would report scores between six and 18. Therefore, participants who were told that the majority of past participants reported scores of more than 18 should have perceived their own levels of prior infidelity as relatively low. Conversely, participants who were told that the majority of past participants reported scores of less than six should have perceived their own levels of prior infidelity as relatively high.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of measures used in study ($n = 72$).

Variable Name	Mean	Standard Deviation	Low	High	Alpha
Infidelity assessment	10.97	4.40	3.00	21.00	.84
Perceived faithfulness	5.71	2.28	1.00	9.00	^a

^aCronbach's alpha could not be computed because it was a single-item measure.

To potentially strengthen the effect of this manipulation on perceived level of infidelity, participants were next informed that a computer would be scanning their responses to the questionnaire. They were told that the experimenter wanted to create groups comprised of participants who committed either more or less infidelity relative to past participants who completed this scale. To supposedly assist with this, participants were asked to print in large letters the words “unfaithful” or “faithful” depending on whether their scores were above or

below what the majority of past participants ostensibly reported. It was expected that most participants who were told that 83% of past participants reported scores of less than six would write the word “unfaithful” in the box, whereas most participants in the other condition would write the word “faithful” in the box. Indeed, only nine participants were excluded from the original sample ($n = 81$) because they reported scores of less than six in the unfaithful condition or more than 18 in the faithful condition.

Perceived level of faithfulness. Following the infidelity manipulation, participants next completed a series of questionnaires that were used in another study. Following these questionnaires, participants completed a single-item assessment of how faithful they felt after they completed the infidelity manipulation (participants were still under the impression that the feedback they received was legitimate). Specifically, they were asked to recall how they felt immediately after learning what their scores meant on the measure of infidelity. They responded on a nine-point Likert-type scale (1 = extremely unfaithful; 9 = extremely faithful). Descriptive statistics for this item can be found in Table 1.

Suspicion check. After participants completed all of the measures, I assessed whether they were able to figure out the purpose of the study. None of the participants were able to do so.

Results and Discussion

Random assignment check. I first determined whether participants in the two conditions differed in terms of age, gender, and their scores on the infidelity assessment. As is shown in Table 2, no significant differences existed between the two experimental conditions. However, participants in the unfaithful condition did report marginally higher scores on the infidelity measure than did participants in the faithful condition. This was because more participants were excluded from the unfaithful condition because they reported scores on the infidelity measure

lower than six ($n = 7$) than were participants excluded from the faithful condition because they reported scores higher than 18 ($n = 2$). This was unlikely to influence the effect of the manipulation because items on the infidelity measure were highly ambiguous in terms of whether they actually constituted increased romantic infidelity. However, to control for this I included level of prior infidelity as a covariate in all analyses. This has not effect on any of the results and if thus discussed no further.

Table 2. Preexisting differences between unfaithful and faithful conditions.

Variable Name	Faithful ($n = 38$)	Unfaithful ($n = 34$)	t
Gender (% female)	76.5%	73.7%	.8
Age	19.6	19.5	-.2
Infidelity assessment	10.2	11.9	1.7 [†]

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Validity of the infidelity manipulation. I next compared how participants in the two experimental conditions responded to the question about how faithful they felt after completing the infidelity manipulation. The result of this analysis was unambiguous. Participants in the faithful condition reported average responses of 7.32 ($sd = 1.53$) whereas participants in the unfaithful condition reported average responses of 3.91 ($sd = 1.51$), $t(71) = -9.51$, $p < .001$ (higher scores indicated higher perceived faithfulness). Participants who were led to believe that their scores on the infidelity measure suggested that they had been unfaithful reported feeling significantly less faithful than did their counterparts in the faithful condition. Indeed, the difference between the two groups was large, more than two standard deviations in size. I

calculated the effect size of this manipulation and found, $\eta^2 = .56$, suggesting that the manipulation accounted for the majority of the variation in perceived faithfulness. Another indication of the power of the manipulation was that participants in the unfaithful condition reported average scores on perceived faithfulness lower than the midpoint of the scales (i.e., 5), whereas participants in the faithful condition reported average scores greater than the midpoint of the scale. This suggests that participants who received the feedback that they had been unfaithful felt unfaithful in both a relative and absolute sense.

Gender interactions. It was possible that male and female participants might have interpreted the experimental feedback differently, or that the effect of the feedback on perceived faithfulness might have varied depending on which gender received it. An analysis of gender interaction, however, suggested that the experimental feedback had an identical effect on males and females, $F < .11$, unfaithful males = 4.00, faithful males = 7.20; unfaithful females = 3.89, faithful females = 7.36.

Summary. The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the validity of the infidelity manipulation. The manipulation did indeed make participants feel either more or less faithful depending on which type of experimental feedback they received. In the next three studies I used this experimental manipulation to test whether perceptions of fidelity cause experiences and responses reflective of cognitive dissonance.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY 1: DOES PAST INFIDELITY AFFECT MARKERS OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND AFFECT?

The purpose of the present study was to demonstrate whether prior acts of infidelity promote subjective experiences consistent with what Cognitive Dissonance Theory would predict. There are a number of ways to detect cognitive dissonance in the laboratory. The most common way to do this historically has been to look for attitude/belief change in the direction of the attitude/belief discrepant behavior. However, there is evidence that this sort of change does not occur when attitude or beliefs are particularly strong or central to the self-concept (e.g., Sherman & Gorkin, 1980). Beliefs about infidelity are likely to be resistant to change for similar reasons; therefore, I sought alternative methods by which to detect cognitive dissonance.

Fortunately, there are a number of markers of cognitive dissonance that do not involve attitude/belief change. One of the more common methods is to examine what Elliot and Devine (1994) refer to as psychological discomfort. According to Cognitive Dissonance Theory, individuals who experience dissonance are motivated to change their attitudes or beliefs in the direction of the discrepant behavior because doing so reduces the discomfort they experience. Elliot and Devine created a measure to assess the psychological component of this discomfort. In the present study I utilized their measure to determine whether participants who were made to feel less faithful would report increased levels of psychological discomfort.

Furthermore, Aronson (1999) suggests that cognitive dissonance is the result of an internal dilemma involving cognitions surrounding the behavior (e.g., infidelity) and cognitions surrounding related elements of the self-concept. According to Aronson, the reason we feel

uncomfortable after committing a behavior that is counter to our beliefs is not simply that the behavior is opposite of what one would predict knowing our beliefs, but rather because of what this behavior suggests about who we are. If this behavior suggests something about who we are that is discrepant with how we view ourselves, we feel uncomfortable and are motivated to reduce the discomfort. There is no known measure of this type of self-concept discrepancy, however, I developed a suitable measure for this study. I expected that participants who were made to feel less faithful would report increased levels of self-concept discrepancy.

I made one final prediction for this study. If Aronson (1999) is correct that the psychological experience of discomfort stems from discrepancies involving the self concept, then participants in this study who were made to feel less faithful should have experienced greater discomfort because of the discrepancy involving the self-concept. Thus, I predicted that self-concept discrepancy would mediate the effect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort.

I tested these predictions by manipulating perceptions of past infidelity in a sample of undergraduate participants similar to the sample used in the Pilot Study. Following this manipulation, I assessed self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort.

Method

Participants

Ninety-three University of Georgia undergraduates (67 women; 26 men; M age = 19.0, sd = 1.0) participated in this study in exchange for partial fulfillment of their research participation requirement. To participate in this study, all participants had to have had at least one prior romantic relationship that lasted at least three months. These relationships were required to have been “at least somewhat serious.”

Materials and Procedure

Self-concept saliency task. Cognitive dissonance stems from an awareness of a discrepancy between cognitions surrounding behavior and cognitions surrounding the self-concept (Aronson, 1999). Therefore, it was possible to strengthen the dissonance-arousing properties of the infidelity manipulation by first reminding participants about how they viewed themselves with regard to fidelity. Additionally, it was probably unlikely that “unfaithful” participants would alter their self-concepts since this aspect of the self-concept is resistant to change. However, past research suggests that reminding participants about their beliefs regarding a focal topic can ensure that they are less likely to alter them in response to a dissonance manipulation (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). Hence, I started the study by reminding participants how they viewed themselves with regard to fidelity by asking them to rate the extent to which eight different words described them (1 = not at all; 5 = completely). The words were *faithful, loyal, truthful, honest, genuine, sincere, trustworthy, and dependable*. I chose these words because they are synonyms of or closely related to the word *faithful*. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for this scale. Participants on average scored very high, suggesting that they considered themselves to be very loyal.

Infidelity manipulation. I used the same experimental manipulation of infidelity as used in the pilot study. Forty-seven participants were randomly assigned to the unfaithful condition and 46 participants were assigned to the faithful condition. Only eight participants were excluded from the original sample ($n = 101$) because their scores on the infidelity survey were either too high or too low for the manipulation to successfully categorize them as “faithful” or “unfaithful.” The descriptive statistics for this scale can be found in Table 3. On average the scores were equivalent to how participants scored in the pilot study.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of measures used in study (n = 93)

Variable Name	Mean	Standard Deviation	Low	High	Alpha
Self-concept saliency	4.30	.44	2.75	5.00	.82
Infidelity assessment	10.87	4.03	3.00	18.00	.81
Self-concept discrepancy	3.31	1.63	1.00	7.00	^a
Psychological discomfort	2.44	1.39	1.00	6.00	.81
Positive affect	4.65	1.42	1.25	7.00	.90
Negative affect	2.62	1.38	1.00	6.00	.62

^aCronbach's alpha could not be computed because it was a single-item measure.

Self-concept discrepancy. Following the infidelity measure, participants completed an assessment of self-concept discrepancy created by the author. This scale was modeled after pictorial assessments that use overlapping circles to depict similarity or closeness (e.g., Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale; Aron, Aron, & Smollen, 1992). Specifically, I asked participants to consider how they felt about themselves typically versus at the moment (they completed this scale after reporting about prior infidelities). They were presented with seven sets of overlapping ovals positioned down the paper. Each set consisted of two ovals labeled either “typical” or “right now.” The ovals at the top of the scale did not overlap at all (scored as a 7), whereas the ovals at the bottom of the paper completely overlapped (scored as a 1). The sets of ovals in between represented varying degrees of overlap. Participants placed a mark next to the set of ovals that best described how they felt at the moment. Larger differences between “current” and

“typical” self were operationally defined to indicate greater discrepancy involving the self-concept. See Table 3 for descriptive statistics for this scale.

Psychological discomfort. Lastly, participants completed Elliot and Devine’s (1994) measure of psychological discomfort, which asks participants to rate the extent to which they are currently feeling *uncomfortable*, *uneasy*, and *bothered* (1 = does not apply at all; 7 = applies very much). These words represent Festinger’s (1957) description of cognitive dissonance being a state of psychological discomfort (Elliot & Devine, 1994). Furthermore, consistent with past research on cognitive dissonance and psychological discomfort, I also assessed positive and negative mood using additional words from Elliot and Devine’s (1994) measure. Positive mood was assessed using the words *good*, *happy*, *optimistic*, and *friendly*. Negative mood was assessed using the words *disappointed*, *guilty*, and *annoyed*. Descriptive statistics for all three of these scales can be found in Table 3.

Suspicion check. After participants completed all of the measures, I assessed whether they were able to figure out the purpose of the study. None of the participants were able to do so.

Results and Discussion

Random assignment check. Participants assigned to the faithful and unfaithful conditions did not differ significantly in terms of age, gender, the degree to which they considered themselves to be loyal (i.e., self-concept saliency measure), or level or prior infidelity (see Table 4). Two of these comparisons, however, approached significance. Participants in the faithful condition reported that they viewed themselves as slightly more loyal and faithful than did participants in the unfaithful condition. It is possible that this may have undermined my prediction that participants in the unfaithful condition would experience greater cognitive dissonance. If they considered themselves to be slightly less loyal and faithful coming into the

experiment, feedback suggesting that they had been unfaithful in the past may have been less discrepant with their self-concepts, resulting in lower cognitive dissonance. To be certain that preexisting differences in self-concept did not affect the results of the present study, I included it as a covariate in all further analyses. This did not affect any of the results and is thus not discussed further.

Participants in the faithful condition also reported slightly lower infidelity scores than did participants in the unfaithful condition (similar to what was found in Study 1). Again, this difference stemmed from the need to exclude participants who were not appropriately classified by the manipulation. Removing high scoring participants from the faithful condition ($n = 6$) and low scoring participants from the unfaithful condition ($n = 2$) produced the slight mean difference between the two conditions. To make certain that this difference did not influence the results, I conducted each of the following analyses controlling for infidelity scores. This did not affect any of the results and is thus not discussed further.

Table 4. Preexisting differences between unfaithful and faithful conditions.

Variable Name	Faithful ($n = 46$)	Unfaithful ($n = 47$)	<i>t</i>
Gender (% female)	70.2%	73.9%	-.4
Age	19.1	19.0	-.4
Self-concept saliency	4.4	4.2	-1.9 [†]
Infidelity assessment	10.2	11.6	1.7 [†]

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Infidelity and self-concept discrepancy. First, I examined whether experimental condition (faithful versus unfaithful) affected reports of self-concept discrepancy. As predicted, participants who were told that they had been more unfaithful in their previous relationship reported less overlap between how they felt at the time of the experiment relative to how they normally felt about themselves (see Table 5). This result suggests the presence of cognitive dissonance, in that cognitive dissonance is thought to involve a discrepancy involving the self-concept (Aronson, 1999). To the extent that these sorts of discrepancies involving the self-concept led to feelings associated with cognitive dissonance, I further expected to find increased feelings of discomfort in participants in the unfaithful condition.

Infidelity and psychological discomfort. I next tested whether the infidelity manipulation affected feelings of psychological discomfort. Supporting my predictions, participants in the unfaithful condition reported significantly higher levels of psychological discomfort compared to participants in the faithful condition (see Table 5). I also examined the individual components of the psychological discomfort scale and found that participants in the unfaithful condition reported being significantly more uncomfortable and uneasy, and marginally more bothered than participants in the faithful condition. In sum, these results were consistent with what I had predicted. Participants who were told that they had been unfaithful in the past reported feeling somewhat different about themselves (i.e., self-concept discrepancy) in addition to feeling less comfortable. Both of these results suggest that participants who were led to believe that they had been less faithful experienced cognitive dissonance.

Infidelity and positive and negative affect. Past research on cognitive dissonance has attempted to distinguish between feelings of discomfort, which is most strongly associated with the classical definition of cognitive dissonance, and feelings of positive and negative affect.

Table 5. Effect of experimental manipulation of infidelity on self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort, and positive and negative affect.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 46)	Unfaithful (n = 47)	<i>t</i>
Self-concept discrepancy	2.85	3.77	2.82**
Psychological discomfort	2.05	2.83	2.80**
<i>Uncomfortable</i>	1.78	2.79	3.10**
<i>Uneasy</i>	1.96	2.64	2.20*
<i>Bothered</i>	2.41	3.06	1.84 [†]
Negative affect	2.22	3.01	2.90**
<i>Disappointed</i>	2.57	3.43	2.13*
<i>Guilty</i>	2.09	2.87	2.22*
<i>Annoyed</i>	2.00	2.74	2.10*
Positive affect	5.04	4.26	-2.78**
<i>Good</i>	5.37	4.19	-3.97***
<i>Happy</i>	5.09	4.00	-3.37**
<i>Optimistic</i>	4.59	4.21	-1.16
<i>Friendly</i>	5.13	4.62	-1.46

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

What is sometimes found is that manipulations designed to elicit cognitive dissonance affect feelings of psychological discomfort, but do not affect positive or negative affect (see Elliot & Devine, 1994). However, as is seen in Table 5, this was not found in the present study.

Participants in the unfaithful condition, in addition to being more psychologically uncomfortable, also reported decreased positive/increased negative affect.

More than likely, this finding has much to do with the topic of the manipulation.

Romantic infidelity produces an entire range of cognitive and emotional experiences. This is quite different from what participants may experience in more traditional cognitive dissonance studies, where they are asked to adopt counterattitudinal positions. College students who write essays, for example, in favor of tuition increases may feel uncomfortable because the position they take conflicts with their personal beliefs. However, these sorts of beliefs stem from practical rather than emotional bases; for example, a tuition hike has potentially serious practical, but relatively few emotional implications. Beliefs about infidelity, however, are heavily rooted in emotion. Therefore, it makes sense that participants in this study who were made to feel less faithful not only felt uncomfortable, but also experienced shifts in general affect. Furthermore, all of these feelings may have stemmed from the discrepancy they felt between how they viewed themselves with regard to infidelity and what their behavior suggested about them, which is what I next examined.

Mediational role of self-concept discrepancy on the links between infidelity and psychological discomfort and positive/negative affect. It is possible that when participants in this study thought that they had been unfaithful in the past, this conflicted with how they viewed themselves, which made them feel psychologically uncomfortable and affectively poor. I tested this by determining whether self-concept discrepancy mediated the effect of the infidelity

manipulation on psychological discomfort and positive/negative affect. Baron and Kenny (1986) recommend that four analyses be conducted prior to concluding the presence of statistical mediation; (1) the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable, (2) the relationship between the independent variable and the mediator, (3) the relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable, and (4) the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable while simultaneously controlling for the mediator. If the first three relationships are statistically significant, and the mediator remains significantly related to the dependent variable, but the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable falls to non-significance in the fourth analysis then there is evidence of statistical mediation. Furthermore, the Sobel (1982) test can be used to determine whether the strength of the mediation is statistically significant.

Table 6 shows the results of these analyses. The results suggest that self-concept discrepancy mediated the effect of the infidelity manipulation on all three dependent variables. It is important to note that the mediations were all partial except for the complete mediation involving negative affect. In other words, self-concept discrepancy appeared to play a significant (as indicated by the Sobel test) although partial role in explaining the effect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort and positive affect, but a significant and complete role in explaining the effect of the manipulation on negative affect.

Gender interactions. It is conceivable that male and female participants may have possessed different standards of fidelity. In the present study, males reported that they saw themselves as being significantly less faithful than did females (i.e., self-concept saliency measure) [M males = 4.05, M females = 4.40, $t(91) = -3.68$, $p < .001$]. Given this difference, one might expect that telling males participants that they were less faithful in the past would have

Table 6. Tests to determine whether self-concept discrepancy mediates the effect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort, positive affect, and negative affect. Values are associated with the underlined variables. Analyses 4a and 4b are identical; only difference is the variable of focus. Infidelity manipulation coded so that 0 = unfaithful condition, 1 = faithful condition. All associations involving infidelity manipulation are point-biserial.

Analysis	<i>b</i>	Std. error	<i>t</i>
Infidelity > Discrepancy > Discomfort			
(1) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discomfort	-.779	.278	-2.80**
(2) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discrepancy	-.918	.326	-2.82**
(3) <u>Discrepancy</u> > Discomfort	.354	.081	4.35***
(4a) Infidelity & <u>Discrepancy</u> > Discomfort	.311	.084	3.71***
(4b) <u>Infidelity</u> & Discrepancy > Discomfort	-.493	.272	1.82 ^{†a}
Infidelity > Discrepancy > Positive Affect (PA)			
(1) <u>Infidelity</u> > PA	.788	.284	2.78**
(2) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discrepancy	-.918	.326	-2.82**
(3) <u>Discrepancy</u> > PA	-.407	.081	-5.05***
(4a) Infidelity & <u>Discrepancy</u> > PA	-.367	.083	-4.41***
(4b) <u>Infidelity</u> & Discrepancy > PA	.451	.271	1.67 ^{†b}
Infidelity > Discrepancy > Negative Affect (NA)			
(1) <u>Infidelity</u> > NA	-.797	.275	-2.90**
(2) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discrepancy	-.918	.326	-2.82**
(3) <u>Discrepancy</u> > NA	.493	.072	6.84***
(4a) Infidelity & <u>Discrepancy</u> > NA	.461	.075	6.18***
(4b) <u>Infidelity</u> & Discrepancy > NA	-.374	.241	1.55 ^c

^aSobel test: $z = 2.23$, $p < .05$

^bSobel test: $z = 2.35$, $p < .05$

^cSobel test: $z = 2.63$, $p < .01$

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

been less discrepant with how they saw themselves, thus resulting in lower levels of self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort, negative affect, and higher levels of positive affect. I tested this by conducting 2 (faithful versus unfaithful condition) X 2 (male versus female) ANOVAs and examining the interaction terms.

As is shown in Table 7, the interaction term was marginally significant for self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, significant for negative affect, and non-significant for positive affect. When the interaction term was significant or approached significance, the interaction suggested that the infidelity manipulation had more of an effect on females than males. Indeed, male participants reported very little difference in terms of self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort, or negative affect, whereas female participants reported relatively strong variability depending upon which infidelity condition they were assigned. Interestingly, males and females appeared to be similarly affected by the manipulation in terms of positive affect.

Why would the infidelity manipulation have a stronger effect on females than males? One could argue that there is a societal double standard when it comes to romantic infidelity; there are higher expectations of female fidelity. If the women in this study internalized these expectations it is possible that their personal standards of behavior might have been such that feedback suggesting prior infidelity would have been more discrepant with how they viewed themselves. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that females considered themselves to be more faithful prior to the manipulation. It is interesting that no gender interaction emerged for positive affect. This may suggest that positive feelings are more malleable than negative feelings.

Table 7. Interactions involving gender and infidelity manipulation.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 46)	Unfaithful (n = 47)	Interaction Term (<i>F</i>)
Self-concept discrepancy			3.26 [†]
Males (n = 26)	2.92 (n = 12)	2.93 (n = 14)	
Females (n = 67)	2.82 (n = 34)	4.12 (n = 33)	
Psychological discomfort			3.59 [†]
Males	2.39	2.33	
Females	1.93	3.04	
Negative affect			9.21**
Males	3.00	2.50	
Females	1.94	3.23	
Positive affect			.68
Males	4.69	4.29	
Females	5.17	4.25	

notes:

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

It is also important to understand that the gender differences uncovered do not undermine the theorized nature of the psychology effect of infidelity. Acts of infidelity were more inconsistent with how female participants viewed themselves in this study, and they thus experienced greater cognitive and emotional consequences. This is perfectly consistent with what dissonance theory would have predicted.

Summary. The results of the present study were consistent with the hypothesis that infidelity promotes symptoms of cognitive dissonance. Participants who were led to believe that they had committed more infidelity in the past reported greater self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, two markers of cognitive dissonance. Additionally, self-concept discrepancy effectively mediated the effect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort. It should be noted, however, that the infidelity manipulation not only affected the markers of dissonance, but also affect positive and negative affect. Thus, perceptions of past infidelity not only tend to be discrepant with our self-concepts and uncomfortable, but they also tend to make perpetrators affectively less positive and more negative. Interestingly, both the discomfort effect and the affect effects may stem from feelings of self-concept discrepancy. In other words, when people commit infidelity, this tends to produce feelings of discrepancy between how they normally see themselves and how they currently see themselves, and these cognitions make perpetrators of infidelity feel uncomfortable, less positive, and more negative.

CHAPTER 4

STUDY 2: DOES PAST INFIDELITY AFFECT TRIVIALIZATION?

In Study 1 I demonstrated that prior infidelity increases feelings of self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, in addition to making participants feel less positive and more negative. These results suggest that perpetrators of infidelity experience a variety of cognitions and emotions, at least some of which are consistent with experiences of cognitive dissonance. In Study 2, I examined a strategy that perpetrators of infidelity may use to reduce feelings of cognitive dissonance. Past research suggests that individuals can effectively diminish cognitive dissonance by reducing the subjective importance of the conflicting behavior (i.e., trivialization; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). For example, Simon et al. found that participants tended to minimize the importance of their behavior after experiencing cognitive dissonance from writing counterattitudinal essays. If romantic infidelity also promotes feelings associated with cognitive dissonance then it is likely that perpetrators of infidelity trivialize the importance of their infidelities. Thus, I expected to find that participants assigned to the unfaithful condition would report that their behaviors (i.e., infidelities) were significantly less important compared to participants assigned to the faithful condition.

Method

Participants

Fifty-seven University of Georgia undergraduates (47 women; 10 men; M age = 19.0, sd = 1.0) participated in this study in exchange for partial fulfillment of their research participation requirement. As with Study 1, to participate in this study all participants had to have had at least

one prior romantic relationship that lasted at least three months. These relationships were required to have been “at least somewhat serious.”

Materials and Procedure

Self-concept saliency and infidelity manipulation. The procedure used in the present study was identical to that used in Study 1 except that a measure of trivialization was substituted for the cognitive and emotional measures used in Study 1. Participants began the study by completing the self-concept saliency measure. Consistent with what was found in Study 1, on average participants in the present study reported that they considered themselves to be very faithful and loyal (see Table 8). Participants then completed the measure of infidelity committed in a previous relationship (see Table 8 for descriptive statistics). At random, about half of these participants (unfaithful condition) was informed that their scores suggested that they had been unfaithful in their past relationship, whereas the other half was informed that their scores suggested that they had been relatively faithful in their past relationship.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of measures used in study (n = 57)

Variable Name	Mean	Standard Deviation	Low	High	Alpha
Self-concept saliency	4.40	.43	3.13	5.00	.82
Infidelity assessment	11.11	4.73	3.00	20.00	.90
Importance ^a	4.27	1.80	1.00	7.00	.94

notes:

^aHigher scores indicate more importance and less trivialization.

Trivialization assessment. I assessed trivialization using a measure that I adapted from Simon, Greenberg, and Brehm's (1995) measure of trivialization. I changed their measure to reflect what participants did in the present study (in Simon et al.'s study, participants wrote counterattitudinal essays). Participants were asked four questions regarding the importance of the behaviors (i.e., infidelities) that they reported on the infidelity measure (which they completed prior to the administration of this scale). Specifically, participants were asked to rate (1) "how important [was] the extent to which [they] committed these behavior in terms of describing [them]," (2) "how meaningful [was] the extent to which [they] committed these behavior in terms of describing [them]," (3) how much [could] one infer about [them] from the extent to which [they] committed these behaviors," and (4) "how much [did] the extent to which [they] committed these behaviors suggest about [them]." Participants responded on Likert scales (1 = not at all; 7 = a whole lot). Scores for each item were averaged so that participants received scores representing the mean level of importance that they placed on their prior infidelities (see Table 8 for descriptive statistics).

Suspicion check. After participants completed all of the measures, I assessed whether they were able to figure out the purpose of the study. None of the participants were able to do so.

Results and Discussion

Random assignment check. As with Study 1, participants in the two experimental conditions did not differ with regard to age, gender, or reported level of prior infidelity (see Table 9). However, participants in the faithful condition did report that they considered themselves to be significantly more faithful (i.e., they reported higher scores on the self-concept saliency task). To control for this difference, I ran each analysis with scores from the self-

concept saliency measure included as a covariate. This did not have any effect on the results and thus I do not discuss it further.

Table 9. Preexisting differences between unfaithful and faithful conditions.

Variable Name	Faithful (n = 31)	Unfaithful (n = 26)	<i>t</i>
Gender (% female)	80.7%	84.6%	.4
Age	19.0	18.9	-.3
Self-concept saliency	4.5	4.3	-2.1*
Infidelity assessment	11.6	10.5	-.9

notes:

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Infidelity and trivialization. I had predicted that participants in the unfaithful condition would report that their behaviors were significantly less important (i.e., higher trivialization) compared to participants in the faithful condition. Supporting my prediction, perceptions concerning the importance of prior infidelities were influenced by the condition participants were assigned. As shown in Table 10, participants assigned to the unfaithful condition reported that their behaviors were significantly less important than did participants assigned to the faithful condition. This was true regarding the trivialization scale as a whole and the individual items of the scale. In sum, when participants were informed that they had been unfaithful in their previous relationships, they responded by downplaying the importance of their behavior. This result is consistent with prior research on cognitive dissonance suggesting that individuals trivialize their behaviors when they are inconsistent with their personally held beliefs (Simon et al., 1995) and

further suggests that infidelity promotes belief-discrepancy in the minds of those who perpetrate infidelity.

Table 10. Effect of experimental manipulation on trivialization.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 31)	Unfaithful (n = 26)	<i>t</i>
Importance ^a	5.42	2.90	-7.33***
<i>Importance of behavior?</i>	5.81	3.19	-6.47***
<i>Meaningfulness of behavior?</i>	5.74	3.35	-5.96***
<i>Infer from behavior?</i>	5.10	2.50	-6.58***
<i>How much does behavior suggest?</i>	5.03	2.58	-5.93***

notes:

^aHigher scores indicate more importance and less trivialization.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Gender interactions. In Study 1 I found that the infidelity manipulation had a stronger effect on female participants. I therefore tested whether females in the present study were more likely to downplay the importance of their behaviors in the unfaithful condition. I found no evidence of this (see Table 11). Males and females responded identically to the infidelity manipulation—reporting that their behaviors were less important when told that they had been unfaithful in the past. It is important to note that there were very few males in the present study ($n = 10$); there were 26 male participants in Study 1. Therefore, it was possible that the sample of males in the present study was less representative of males in general than the sample attained in Study 1. In the next study I sampled more males to give a firmer impression of how males think and respond to past infidelities.

Summary. Participants who were told that they had been unfaithful tended to report that their behaviors were less important than did participants who were told that they had been faithful. This suggests a link between past infidelity and trivialization, and consequently a link between infidelity and cognitive dissonance. Although the results of the present study are informative of the cognitive reactions that perpetrators have to their own infidelities, it is not known whether this specific reaction has any bearing on the cognitive and emotional consequences of infidelity. Study 1 demonstrated that past infidelity produces several cognitive and emotional consequences that together may be described as possessing a negative valence. If trivialization serves a dissonance reduction purpose, then I should find that “unfaithful” participants who are given the opportunity to trivialize their behaviors will experience diminished symptoms of cognitive dissonance. I test this in Study 3.

Table 11. Interactions involving gender and infidelity manipulation.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 31)	Unfaithful (n = 26)	Interaction Term (<i>F</i>)
Importance ^a			.34
Males (n = 10)	5.25 (n = 6)	3.19 (n = 4)	
Females (n = 47)	5.46 (n = 25)	2.85 (n = 22)	

notes:

^aHigher scores indicate more importance and less trivialization.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

CHAPTER 5

STUDY 3: DOES TRIVIALIZATION AFFECT

MARKERS OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND AFFECT?

Thus far, I have presented evidence that infidelity promotes subjective experiences of self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, in addition to higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect. Additionally, I found that perpetrators of infidelity tend to minimize the importance of their prior behaviors. It is possible that by minimizing the effects of infidelity, perpetrators of infidelity may lessen the negative psychological consequences of their behavior. Although it has never been explicitly shown in past research that trivialization attenuates any of the psychological consequences of cognitive dissonance, there is reason to believe that it does. Simon, Greenberg, and Brehm (1995) showed that participants who trivialized their counterattitudinal behaviors were less likely to change their attitudes in favor of the counterattitudinal position. This suggests that trivialization diminishes cognitive dissonance. Because cognitive dissonance promotes feelings of discomfort (Elliot & Devine, 1994), it is plausible that participants in Simon et al.'s study who were allowed to trivialize their behaviors lessened the discomfort associated with cognitive dissonance. Following this logic, it is possible that participants in Study 2 who were led to believe that they had been less faithful and who trivialized their behavior, reduced the cognitive dissonance produced by the discrepancy surrounding how they viewed themselves and what their behavior supposedly suggested about them.

I attempted to demonstrate this in the present study by giving some participants in the unfaithful condition the opportunity to trivialize their behavior prior to reporting self-concept

discrepancy, psychological discomfort, and positive and negative affect. I predicted that these participants would report more moderate levels of these consequences than would participants not given the opportunity to trivialize their behaviors. I also included in this study a faithful condition where participants trivialized their behavior *after* the dependent variables were assessed. This provided the opportunity to attempt to replicate the findings of Studies 1 and 2 with experimental conditions nearly identical to those used in these prior studies.

Method

Participants

One-hundred twenty-one University of Georgia undergraduates (66 women; 55 men; M age = 19.4, $sd = 1.5$) participated in this study in exchange for partial fulfillment of their research participation requirement. The key difference between the present sample and those used in Studies 1 and 2 was the number of male participants. More than twice as many males were recruited for this study compared to Study 1 and more than four times the number of males were recruited for this study compared to Study 2. This was done so that more powerful tests of gender interactions could be performed. As with Studies 1 and 2, to participate in this study all participants had to have had at least one prior romantic relationship that lasted at least three months. These relationships must have been “at least somewhat serious.”

Materials and Procedure

In general the procedure of this study was nearly identical to what was done in Studies 1 and 2. Departures in procedural design were done, however, so that I could attempt to replicate all of the results from Studies 1 and 2 in addition to testing the hypotheses that guided the present study. All participants began the study by completing the self-concept saliency measure. As is shown in Table 12, most participants again indicated that they were very faithful and loyal. All

of the participants next completed the infidelity scale (see Table 12 for descriptive statistics). Participants were next randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions (faithful, unfaithful-no trivialization, or unfaithful-trivialization). In each of these conditions, participants received bogus feedback regarding their scores on the infidelity measure and then completed measures of self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort, positive and negative affect, and trivialization (see Table 12 for descriptive statistics for all of these measures). The order in which they completed these measures, however, differed depending on the experimental condition to which they were assigned.

Table 12. Descriptive statistics of measures used in study (n = 121)

Variable Name	Mean	Standard Deviation	Low	High	Alpha
Self-concept saliency	4.26	.47	2.88	5.00	.82
Infidelity assessment	12.20	4.39	4.00	20.00	.85
Self-concept discrepancy	3.29	1.72	1.00	7.00	^b
Psychological discomfort	2.75	1.54	1.00	6.67	.83
Positive affect	4.45	1.48	1.00	7.00	.89
Negative affect	2.84	1.53	1.00	6.67	.67
Importance ^a	3.42	1.42	1.00	7.00	.87

notes:

^aHigher scores indicate more importance and less trivialization.

^bCronbach's alpha could not be computed for self-concept discrepancy because it was a single-item measure.

Faithful condition. Thirty-nine of the participants received feedback, based on their infidelity scores, that they had been relatively faithful in their past relationship. These

participants then completed, in the following order, the measure of self-concept discrepancy, the measure of psychological discomfort and positive and negative affect, and finally the measure of trivialization. The measure of trivialization was administered last because, although trivialization may have affected cognitive and affective reactions to infidelity, I presumed that the reverse of this causal orientation would be far less likely. In other words, I was doubtful that participant reports about cognitive and affective reactions to infidelity would have affected the extent to which they trivialized their behaviors.

Unfaithful - no trivialization condition. Forty of the participants received feedback, based on their infidelity scores, that they had been relatively unfaithful in their past relationship. These participants then completed all of the dependent variables in the same order as did participants in the faithful condition. What is most important to consider regarding this specific condition is that these participants were given the opportunity to trivialize their behavior *after* they had already reported about cognitive and affective reactions to their prior infidelities. Of course, the purpose behind this procedural move was to prevent the act of trivialization from affecting the cognitive and behavioral reactions. In other words, participants in this condition were not given the opportunity to use trivialization to reduce cognitive dissonance and/or improve affect.

Unfaithful - trivialization condition. The remaining 42 participants also received feedback suggesting that they had been unfaithful in their previous relationship. These participants also completed all of the dependent variables. Importantly, however, these participants completed the trivialization measure *before* they completed any of the measures of cognitive and affective reactions. The purpose behind this procedure was to allow participants in this condition the opportunity to trivialize their behavior before they reported how they felt in terms of self-concept discrepancy, discomfort, and affect. The idea was that if trivialization

affected cognitive and affective reactions to infidelity, then participants in their condition should have reported, relative to participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition, less self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort. Additionally, it was possible that participants in this condition may have also reported lower negative affect and higher positive affect relative to participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition.

Suspicion check. After participants completed all of the measures, I assessed whether they were able to figure out the purpose of the study. None of the participants were able to do so.

Results and Discussion

Random assignment check. As shown in Table 13, none of the three conditions significantly differed with regard to gender, age, how faithful and loyal participants thought they were (i.e., self-concept saliency measure), or the extent of previous infidelities. To further make certain that no two groups differed (e.g., faithful versus unfaithful-trivialization, faithful versus unfaithful-no trivialization) I also conducted independent t-tests for each pair of conditions and again found no significant differences for any of these variables. In summary, participants in the three experimental conditions were very similar with regard to gender, age, how faithful and loyal they considered themselves to be, and the extent of their prior infidelities.

Replication of Study 1. I first attempted to replicate the results of Study 1, that participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition would report greater self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort relative to participants in the faithful condition. (Note that participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition in the present study were exposed to the same procedure as were Study 1 participants in the unfaithful condition.) I also looked for differences in terms of positive and negative affect since they emerged in Study 1. As is seen in Table 14, the results of the present study were almost identical to what was found in Study 1.

Participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition reported more self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort, negative affect, and less positive affect than did participants in the faithful condition.

Table 13. Preexisting differences between experimental conditions.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 39)	Unfaithful/No Trivialization (n = 40)	Unfaithful/ Trivialization (n = 42)	<i>Omnibus F</i>
Gender (% female)	51.3%	57.5%	54.8%	.2
Age	19.2	19.6	19.3	.6
Self-concept saliency	4.2	4.3	4.3	.4
Infidelity assessment	11.6	13.0	12.0	1.1

notes:

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

I next attempted to replicate the finding from Study 1 that self-concept discrepancy mediated the affect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort. Because I uncovered similar mediation effects for positive and negative affect in Study 1, I also attempted to replicate these findings with the present dataset. As seen in Table 15, all of the mediations found in Study 1 were replicated in the present study. Indeed, the mediation effects were stronger in the present study than they were in Study 1. In the present study, self-concept discrepancy completely and significantly mediated the affect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort, and positive and negative affect. In other words, participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition reported greater self-concept discrepancy and this explained why they further reported greater psychological discomfort, greater negative, and less positive affect.

Table 14. Effect of experimental manipulation of infidelity on self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort, and positive and negative affect.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 39)	Unfaithful/No Trivialization (n = 40)	<i>t</i>
Self-concept discrepancy	2.33	4.20	5.47***
Psychological discomfort	2.22	3.37	3.42**
<i>Uncomfortable</i>	2.28	3.38	2.98**
<i>Uneasy</i>	2.23	3.43	2.97**
<i>Bothered</i>	2.15	3.30	2.89**
Negative affect	2.07	3.37	4.10***
<i>Disappointed</i>	2.08	3.93	4.37***
<i>Guilty</i>	1.77	3.40	4.40***
<i>Annoyed</i>	2.36	2.78	0.96
Positive affect	5.09	4.24	-2.87**
<i>Good</i>	5.54	4.30	-3.97***
<i>Happy</i>	5.00	3.98	-3.11**
<i>Optimistic</i>	4.67	4.13	-1.37
<i>Friendly</i>	5.15	4.55	-1.67 [†]

notes:

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 15. Tests to determine whether self-concept discrepancy mediates the effect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort, positive affect, and negative affect.

Analysis	<i>b</i>	Std. error	<i>t</i>
Infidelity > Discrepancy > Discomfort			
(1) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discomfort	-1.144	.334	-3.42***
(2) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discrepancy	-1.867	.341	-5.47***
(3) <u>Discrepancy</u> > Discomfort	.487	.069	7.07***
(4a) Infidelity & <u>Discrepancy</u> > Discomfort	.453	.100	4.54***
(4b) <u>Infidelity</u> & Discrepancy > Discomfort	-.299	.352	-.85 ^a
Infidelity > Discrepancy > Positive Affect (PA)			
(1) <u>Infidelity</u> > PA	.852	.297	2.87**
(2) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discrepancy	-1.867	.341	-5.47***
(3) <u>Discrepancy</u> > PA	-.531	.062	-8.54***
(4a) Infidelity & <u>Discrepancy</u> > PA	-.552	.077	-7.18***
(4b) <u>Infidelity</u> & Discrepancy > PA	-.179	.271	-.66 ^b
Infidelity > Discrepancy > Negative Affect (NA)			
(1) <u>Infidelity</u> > NA	-1.298	.317	-4.10***
(2) <u>Infidelity</u> > Discrepancy	-1.867	.341	-5.47***
(3) <u>Discrepancy</u> > NA	.536	.065	8.25***
(4a) Infidelity & <u>Discrepancy</u> > NA	.458	.093	4.95***
(4b) <u>Infidelity</u> & Discrepancy > NA	-.443	.327	-1.35 ^c

notes: Values are associated with the underlined variables. Analyses 4a and 4b are identical; only difference is the variable of focus. Infidelity manipulation coded so that 0 = unfaithful-no trivialization condition, 1 = faithful condition. All associations involving infidelity manipulation are point-biserial.

^aSobel test: $z = 3.49$, $p < .001$

^bSobel test: $z = 4.35$, $p < .001$

^cSobel test: $z = 3.67$, $p < .001$

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Replication of Study 2. In Study 2 I found that participants in the unfaithful condition reported that their prior infidelities were less important than did participants in the faithful condition. I attempted to replicate this in the present study by comparing participants in the faithful condition to participants in either unfaithful condition. (Participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition were also included in the analysis because although they trivialized after reporting about self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort, and positive and negative affect, this was theoretically unlikely to have affected level of trivialization). As can be seen in Table 16, the results replicated what was found in Study 2. That is, participants in the faithful condition reported that their behaviors were significantly more important than did participants in either of the two unfaithful conditions. Additionally, as would be expected based on theory, participants in either of the two unfaithful conditions did not differ with regard to level of trivialization.

Table 16. Effect of experimental manipulation of infidelity on trivialization.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 39)	Unfaithful/No Trivialization (n = 40)	Unfaithful/ Trivialization (n = 42)	<i>Omnibus</i> <i>F</i>
Importance ^c	4.17 ^a	3.01 ^b	3.11 ^b	9.37***

notes:

Within row means with different subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$) using LSD comparison procedure.

^cHigher scores indicate more importance and less trivialization.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Does trivialization reduce self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort? The primary purpose of the present study was to examine whether trivialization reduced self-concept

discrepancy and psychological discomfort; two consequences of perceived prior infidelity. To test this, I contrasted self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort scores among participants in each of the three experimental conditions. I predicted that participants who were informed that they had been unfaithful, but were not given the chance to trivialize their behaviors (unfaithful-no trivialization condition) would report higher levels of both self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort relative to participants in the faithful condition. I further predicted that participants who were told that they had been unfaithful, but were given the opportunity to trivialize their behaviors (unfaithful-trivialization condition) would report significantly lower discrepancy and discomfort compared to participants in the unfaithful-no trivialization condition. This would suggest that trivialization reduces both self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort. Table 17 shows the results of these comparisons. As is seen, both of my predictions were supported by the data. Indeed, participants in the unfaithful condition who were given the opportunity to trivialize their behavior reported levels of psychological discomfort equivalent to participants in the faithful condition.

Trivialization and positive and negative affect. I next tested whether trivialization would also affect reports of positive and negative affect. I did not make any specific predictions regarding either of the two affect dependent variables. If my predictions were based on a strict reading of Cognitive Dissonance Theory then I would predict that trivialization, a dissonance reduction strategy, would have little to no effect on affect. In other words, Cognitive Dissonance Theory would seem to predict that trivialization would lessen discrepancy and discomfort, both markers of dissonance, but not affect, a theoretically distinct experience from dissonance. However, this prediction seems based upon an overly strict interpretation of cognitive dissonance, especially as it relates to romantic infidelity. I have already found in Study 1 and in

the present study that romantic infidelity produced both cognitions associated with cognitive dissonance and shifts in general positive and negative affect. Therefore, it was possible that trivialization following romantic infidelity may have reduced cognitive dissonance as well as improved affect.

Table 17. Effect of experimental manipulation of infidelity on self-concept discrepancy, psychological discomfort and positive and negative affect.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 39)	Unfaithful/No Trivialization (n = 40)	Unfaithful/ Trivialization (n = 42)	<i>Omnibus</i> <i>F</i>
Self-concept discrepancy	2.33 ^a	4.20 ^b	3.21 ^c	14.20***
Psychological discomfort	2.22 ^a	3.37 ^b	2.64 ^a	6.07**
Negative affect	2.07 ^a	3.37 ^b	3.05 ^b	8.72***
Positive affect	5.09 ^a	4.24 ^b	4.05 ^b	6.08**

notes:

Within row means with different subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$) using LSD comparison procedure.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 17 shows the result of the comparisons. Interestingly, both unfaithful conditions, regardless of whether participants were given the opportunity to trivialize their behaviors reported less positive and more negative than did participants in the faithful condition. Furthermore, there were no statistically significant differences in affect between either of the two unfaithful conditions. These results combined with the results concerning self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort suggest that trivialization may have served more of a dissonance reduction rather than affect adjustment role.

Gender interactions. One of the goals of the present study was to examine whether any of the gender interactions uncovered in the previous studies replicated. Additionally, because there were more males in the present study compared with Study 2, I was better able to assess whether gender played a role in the use of trivialization. In Study 1, marginally significant interactions were found for self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort; a statistically significant interaction was found for negative affect. All of the interactions suggested that the infidelity manipulation had a more pronounced effect on females than males. In general, the results of the present study were consistent with what was found in Study 1 (see Table 18). Although the gender interaction for self-concept discrepancy was non-significant, the trend in the data was similar to what was found in Study 1; the infidelity manipulation had a somewhat larger effect on females than males. Gender interactions for psychological discrepancy, negative affect, and positive affect were all either statistically significant or marginally significant, and were also highly consistent with what was found in Study 1 (except that in Study 1 no gender interaction was uncovered for positive affect). Again, the infidelity manipulation appeared to have a somewhat more pronounced effect on females compared to males: Female participants experienced more dissonance and poorer affect compared to males when they were led to believe that they had been unfaithful in the past relationship.

Next I attempted to replicate the finding of Study 2, which suggested that male and female participants trivialized their past behavior equivalently. Because more male participants were included in the present study, firmer conclusion could be drawn from this test of gender moderation. As seen in Table 18, the gender interaction term was again non-significant, suggesting that male and female participants trivialized this behavior similarly when they were

Table 18. Interactions involving gender and infidelity manipulation.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 39)	Unfaithful/No Trivialization (n = 40)	Interaction Term (<i>F</i>)
Self-concept discrepancy			2.34
Males (n = 55)	2.32 (n = 19)	3.59 (n = 17)	
Females (n = 66)	2.35 (n = 20)	4.65 (n = 23)	
Psychological discomfort			5.77*
Males	2.49	2.77	
Females	1.97	3.81	
Negative affect			4.01*
Males	2.18	2.77	
Females	1.97	3.81	
Positive affect			3.31 [†]
Males	5.00	4.75	
Females	5.18	3.86	
Importance ^b			.03
Males	3.88	2.74	
Females	4.45	3.21	

notes:

^bHigher scores indicate more importance and less trivialization.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

led to believe that they had been less faithful in the past, although in general females reported that their prior behaviors were more important than males.

Lastly, I examined whether gender moderated any of the primary findings of the present study; that is, whether gender moderated the extent to which trivialization attenuated any of the psychological consequences of past infidelity (see Table 19). Trivialization appeared to attenuate self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort similarly for male and female participants. However, a marginal gender interaction was found for psychological discomfort, suggesting that female participants experienced more dramatic declines in discomfort following trivialization. Although, this interaction was primarily driven by the fact that male participants in general felt less uncomfortable than female participants after being told that they were less faithful in their past relationships.

Although I found that trivialization did not significantly change affect, I nevertheless tested whether gender might have played a role in this. I found no evidence that gender moderated the effect of trivialization on either positive or negative discomfort. I did find a significant gender interaction involving positive affect. However, as is seen in Table 19, this interaction merely suggested that female participants in either of the unfaithful conditions reported lower positive affect than did their male counterparts.

Summary. In summary, the results of Study 3 replicated and extended the results of studies 1 and 2. Consistent with the results of Study 1, manipulating perceptions of prior acts of infidelity caused shifts in self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, both markers of cognitive dissonance, as well as changes in positive and negative affect. Self-concept discrepancy also once again appeared to mediate the effect of infidelity on psychological discomfort as well as affect. Additionally, prior infidelity again caused participants to trivialize

Table 19. Interaction effects involving gender and experimental manipulation.

Dependent Variable	Faithful (n = 39)	Unfaithful/No Trivialization (n = 40)	Unfaithful/ Trivialization (n = 42)	Interaction term (<i>F</i>)
Self-concept discrepancy				1.10
Males (n = 55)	2.32 (n = 19)	3.59 (n = 17)	3.00 (n = 19)	
Females (n = 66)	2.35 (n = 20)	4.65 (n = 23)	3.57 (n = 23)	
Psychological discomfort				2.84 [†]
Males	2.49	2.77	2.54	
Females	1.97	3.81	2.73	
Negative affect				1.93
Males	2.18	2.77	2.88	
Females	1.97	3.81	3.19	
Positive affect				3.34*
Males	5.00	4.75	4.79	
Females	5.18	3.86	3.44	

notes:

Within row means with different subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$) using LSD comparison procedure.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

their prior behaviors, consistent with what was found in Study 2. In terms of gender interactions, the results of the present study were also largely consistent with what was found in Studies 1 and 2. The infidelity manipulation had a somewhat larger effect on females in terms of psychological consequences, although both males and females trivialized their behaviors in similar fashions.

Extending these results, however, the present study demonstrated that trivialization significantly reduced both self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, but had a non-significant effect on affect. In other words, participants who thought that they had been unfaithful, but had the opportunity to trivialize their behaviors were able to significantly diminish feelings of inconsistency and discomfort, but still felt affectively bad. This finding may suggest that trivialization specifically targets the inconsistency or dissonance effects of infidelity rather than general affect. In general, however, these results suggest that trivialization, as it relates to infidelity, is an effective strategy for reducing cognitive dissonance.

CHAPTER 6

STUDY 4: DOES SELF-CONCEPT SALIENCY AFFECT TRIVIALIZATION?

In Studies 2 and 3, I found evidence that participants given feedback suggesting that they had been unfaithful in the past tended to minimize the importance of their behavior. Because these studies employed an experimental manipulation of infidelity perception, they allowed me to establish a causal link between infidelity and trivialization. However, neither of these studies assessed the actual extent of prior infidelity committed by participants, and this may limit the external validity of the results. In Study 4, I abandoned the experimental manipulation of past infidelity and instead used a more comprehensive continuous measure of prior infidelity; the goal of which was to examine whether perpetrators of infidelity trivialize their past behaviors to the extent that they committed more extensive prior infidelity.

Furthermore, in each of the previous studies, I began by reminding participants how faithful they considered themselves. I have not tested what the effect would be if I removed this feature. It is possible that by not reminding participants of their personal views of infidelity I might be able to reduce the tendency to trivialize their behaviors because the saliency of the discrepancy would presumably be lower in participants not first reminded about their self-views. This is potentially important because past research suggests that perpetrators of more general social transgressions can influence the functioning of their relationships depending on how they respond to their own transgressions (Schonbach, 1980). Minimizing the importance of past infidelity may undermine relationship future relationship functioning because it sends the message that the perpetrator is unaware or unwilling to accept responsibility for his or her actions. Therefore, interventions designed to reduce this tendency may benefit relationships that

experience infidelity. I tested the general proposition that trivialization would be moderated by self-concept saliency in the present study by reminding some participants, but not reminding others about how faithful they considered themselves.

Method

Participants

One-hundred thirty University of Georgia undergraduates (89 women; 41 men; M age = 19.3, $sd = 1.2$) participated in this study in exchange for partial fulfillment of their research participation requirement. As with the first three studies, participants in this study all had at least one prior romantic relationship that lasted at least three months. These relationships were required to have been “at least somewhat serious.”

Materials and Procedure

Self-concept saliency manipulation. Approximately one-half of the randomly assigned participants (salient condition; $n = 66$) completed the same self-concept saliency task that was used in the first three studies (except that in this study a 7-point rather than a 5-point Likert-type scale was used; 1 = not at all; 7 = completely). The remainder of the participants (not-salient condition; $n = 64$) completed a survey about how much they enjoyed eight types of activities (e.g., movies, sports). The tasks were designed to be similar in length, but different in focus. Specifically, the salient condition task was designed to make salient how participants viewed themselves with regard to being loyal and faithful, whereas the not-salient task was designed not to make these aspects of the self-concept as salient (see Table 20 for descriptive statistics for each of these measures). Consistent with the previous three studies, participants in the salient condition again reported that they considered themselves to be very loyal and faithful. Of course, as might be expected more moderate scores were reported by participants in the not salient

condition who reported about how much they liked various activities. Additionally, the internal consistency of the control scale was very low, which is also to be expected considering that it asked about attitudes toward a variety of different activities.

Table 20. Descriptive statistics of measures used in study (n = 130)

Variable Name	Mean	Standard Deviation	Low	High	Alpha
Self-concept saliency ^a	6.12	.99	1.00	7.00	.95
Likes and dislikes scale ^b	4.98	.60	3.63	6.75	.27
Infidelity assessment	3.81	1.52	1.00	7.00	.93
Importance ^c	4.32	1.49	1.25	7.00	.91

notes:

^aRepresents scores for the 64 participants randomly assigned to the salient condition.

^bRepresents scores for the 66 participants randomly assigned to the not-salient condition.

^cHigher scores indicate more importance and less trivialization.

Infidelity assessment. The participants next completed the same assessment of prior acts of infidelity as used in the first three studies. However, in the present study the complete version of the measure (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999) was used (nine items) rather than just the three items used in the previous studies. The complete version of the scale contained additional questions about (1) how attractive participants found these other people whom they were most attracted to other than their romantic partner, (2) the level of arousal that was felt in the presence of these other people, (3) how tempted they were to be emotionally intimate with these other people, (4) how emotionally intimate they actually were with these other people, (5) how tempted they were to be physically intimate with these other people, and (6) how physically

intimate they actually were with these other people. Participants answered each other these items on 7-point Likert scales (1 = not at all; 7 = extremely). Items were averaged together into a single score for each participant (see Table 20 for descriptive statistics).

Trivialization assessment. Finally, all participants completed the same measure of trivialization that was used in Studies 2 and 3 (see Table 20 for descriptive statistics).

Suspicion check. After participants completed all of the measures, I assessed whether they were able to figure out the purpose of the study. None of the participants were able to do so.

Results and Discussion

Random assignment check. Neither of the two experimental groups (i.e., salient versus not-salient) differed from one another in terms of gender, age, or how much prior infidelity they reported (see Table 21). This last comparison was important because it was possible that making elements of the self relevant to infidelity salient might have made participants less likely to report prior incident of infidelity; however this did not appear to be the case in the present study. Indeed, the two groups were nearly identical in terms of the level of prior infidelity reported, suggesting that impression management did not play a role in participant responses. As an aside, I did not conduct a comparison for the self-concept saliency task because the two groups differed in terms of which scale they completed.

Self-concept saliency and trivialization. I predicted that participants whose self-concepts regarding fidelity were made salient would trivialize their prior infidelities to the extent that they committed more of them. I predicted a smaller relationship between prior infidelity and trivialization for participants in the not-salient condition. Each of these predictions was supported by the data. First, I submitted saliency condition (salient versus not-salient), level of prior infidelity, and the interaction between the two as predictors into a regression model

predicting level of infidelity (i.e., how important participants reported their prior behaviors to have been). All predictors were mean centered prior to analysis consistent with recommendations by Aiken and West (1991). Table 22 shows the result of this analysis. As is seen, in general participants reported that their prior behaviors were less important to the extent that they reported more frequent prior infidelities. This is consistent with what was found in Studies 2 and 3; participants who actually committed more prior infidelity in the current study responded similarly to how participants who were led to believe that they had committed more prior infidelity responded in Studies 2 and 3.

Table 21. Preexisting differences between experimental conditions.

Dependent Variable	Salient (n = 64)	Not-Salient (n = 66)	<i>t</i>
Gender (% female)	66.7%	70.3%	.4
Age	19.3	19.2	-.6
Infidelity assessment	3.7	3.9	.6

notes:

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

This main effect, however, was qualified by a significant two-way interaction. I decomposed this interaction, conducting simple slopes tests (Aiken & West, 1991). Table 23 shows the results of this decomposition. What is shown clearly is that participants in the salient condition were primarily responsible for the main effect. That is, participants who were first reminded of how they viewed themselves with regard to loyalty and faithfulness showed a tendency to downplay the significance of their prior infidelities to the extent that they committed

more of them. To be more precise, these participants tended to report that their previous behavior was important when they committed fewer acts of infidelity, but that their previous behavior was unimportant when they committed more frequent acts of infidelity. Somewhat surprisingly, participants who were not reminded about how they viewed themselves with regard to loyalty and faithfulness showed no tendency to downplay the significance of their behaviors to the extent that they reported more prior infidelity.

Table 22. Regressing level of trivialization onto self-concept saliency condition, level of prior infidelity, and the interaction between the two.

Predictors	B	Std. error	<i>t</i>
Constant	4.301	.127	33.97***
Saliency condition ^a	.122	.253	.48
Level of prior infidelity	-.183	.084	-2.19*
Interaction	-.443	.168	-2.64**

Model $R^2 = .086$, $F(3,126) = 3.96$, $p < .01$

notes:

^aCoded: salient condition = 1; not-salient condition = 0

Gender interactions. I next tested whether males and females responded similarly to one another. Based on the results of the previous studies that assessed trivialization, I did not anticipate any sort of gender interactions. To test this I examined whether gender moderated the two-way interaction that was uncovered in the present study. Of course, in doing so I also tested whether gender interacted with either self-concept saliency condition or level of prior infidelity individually. The results of this regression analysis appear in Table 24. Consistent with what I

found in Studies 2 and 3, gender showed no moderating influence on level of trivialization. As it relates to the present study, males and females trivialized their behaviors equivalently.

Table 23. Predicted values of self-concept saliency condition X level of prior infidelity interaction.

Dependent Variable	Low level of prior infidelity ^a	High level of prior infidelity ^b	<i>t</i>
Salient condition (n = 64)	4.98	3.75	-3.38**
Not-salient condition (n = 66)	4.18	4.30	.33

notes:

^aRepresents hypothetical participant who reported infidelity score 1 standard deviation *below* the mean.

^bRepresents hypothetical participant who reported infidelity score 1 standard deviation *above* the mean.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Summary. The results of the present study suggest that focusing attention on relevant self-concept domains caused participants to minimize the importance of their behaviors to the extent that they committed more frequent infidelity in the past. Conversely, participants who were not first reminded about how faithful they considered themselves did not trivialize their behaviors more or less depending on their level of prior infidelity. The latter result was somewhat surprising; I predicted less of a trend to trivialize, but not the absence altogether of a relationship between infidelity and trivialization. Some caution, however, should be used when interpreting this result primarily because of (1) the environment in which the study was conducted, and (2) the fact that level of infidelity was assessed in prior, not current relationships. It is possible that the laboratory task designed to induce feelings of past infidelity is not as powerful a motivator to

trivialize as what would occur if participants were to naturally think of instances of past infidelity. If this is the case, a secondary device, namely the self-concept saliency task, might be needed to increase the motivational power of the infidelity assessment. Additionally, participants reported about infidelity that occurred in previous relationships. It is possible that doing this is not as strong a motivator to trivialize as would occur if participants, for example, reported about infidelity in their current relationships. However, asking participants about their current relationships created a risk that later participant cognitions might have been driven by the perception of threat to their current relationships rather than directly from the prior acts of infidelity. Nevertheless, the results of the present study were generally consistent with what was predicted. Self-concept saliency did modify trivialization and for those participants whose self-concepts were made salient, they tended to minimize the significance of their prior infidelities to the extent that they committed more of them.

Table 24. Testing whether gender moderated the two-way interaction

Predictors	b	Std. error	<i>t</i>
Constant	4.270	.129	33.13***
(A) Saliency condition ^a	.168	.258	.65
(B) Level of prior infidelity	-.186	.085	-2.18*
(C) Gender ^b	-.313	.282	-1.11
A x B	-.434	.170	-2.55*
A x C	-.393	.565	-.70
B x C	-.197	.185	-1.07
A x B x C	.297	.371	.80

Model $R^2 = .114$, $F(7,122) = 2.25$, $p < .05$

notes:

^aCoded: salient condition = 1; not-salient condition = 0

^bCoded: males = 1; females = 2

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

CHAPTER 7

STUDY 5: DOES PAST INFIDELITY AFFECT BEHAVIOR CHANGE?

The results of the first four studies suggest that prior infidelity causes a range of cognitive and emotional reactions, including those associated with cognitive dissonance. Additionally, infidelity promotes the use of trivialization by those who commit infidelity, which appears to lessen feelings associated with cognitive dissonance, but does not significantly alter positive/negative affect. Finally, the motivation to trivialize behavior appears to be particularly strong when individuals are reminded about how faithful they see themselves as being.

In general, the findings suggest that committing infidelity can create uncomfortable discrepancies involving the self-concept. These discrepancies can be alleviated using such cognitive strategies as trivialization. However, trivialization is potentially detrimental to relationship functioning. As discussed previously, Schonbach (1980) suggests that perpetrators play a large role in determining the functioning of their social and/or romantic relationships following transgressions. When perpetrators show concern and acknowledgment of their wrongdoing, relationships are likely to function better. Trivialization is probably one of the responses most detrimental to relationship functioning. In fact, it is probably very difficult for a victim of infidelity to forgive a perpetrator when the perpetrator fails to acknowledge the extent of his or her offense. Trivialization may make it impossible for perpetrators to recognize the severity of their own transgressions, much less communicate this type of understanding to their romantic partners. For this reason it is important to examine other types of perpetrators responses to infidelity, particularly those that may both alleviate cognitive dissonance and enhance the functioning of relationships touched by infidelity.

Aronson and colleagues (see Aronson, 1999 for review of these studies) have conducted several studies showing how cognitive dissonance can be reduced by altering future behavior so that it is brought back in line with personal beliefs. In the context of infidelity, it is possible that perpetrators of infidelity may be inclined to behave more loyally in the future when they are confronted with their own previous indiscretions. If true, then this may mark an instance when past infidelity actually predicts future fidelity. In the present study I tested this idea by first reminding participants (all of whom were currently in romantic relationships) about how loyal and faithful they considered themselves to be, then reminding them about previous romantic infidelities, and finally assessing future fidelity. I predicted that participants who reported more frequent past infidelity would be inclined to be relatively faithful in the future.

I also included in the present study, a measure of individual differences in preference for maintaining consistency between beliefs and behavior. Cialdini et al. (1995) have shown that individuals with high preference for consistency tend to be more highly motivated to reduce discrepancies between beliefs and behavior. Because behavior change is a strategy that theoretically reduces perceived belief-behavior discrepancy, participants in the present study with high preference for consistency were predicted to report greater future fidelity to the extent that they also reported more frequent prior infidelity. Just the opposite pattern was predicted for participants with low preference for consistency. Because these participants would be theoretically less motivated to maintain consistency between their beliefs and actions regarding infidelity, it was predicted that they would report higher levels of future infidelity to the extent that they also reported higher levels of past infidelity. However, I still anticipated that, on average, participants would report greater future fidelity to the extent that they reported more frequent past infidelity. This was because I anticipated that the association between past and

future infidelity would be stronger for participants with high preference for consistency than those with low preference for consistency, thus resulting in an overall negative relation between past and future infidelity.

Method

Participants

One-hundred forty-nine University of Georgia undergraduates (76 women; 73 men; M age = 19.4, $sd = 1.2$) participated in this study in exchange for partial fulfillment of their research participation requirement. As with the first three studies, participants in this study all had at least one prior romantic relationship that lasted at least three months. These relationships were required to have been “at least somewhat serious.” Additionally, all participants reported being currently involved in romantic relationships that were at least three months old. All of these relationships were also “at least somewhat serious.”

Materials and Procedure

Preference for consistency assessment. All participants first completed Cialdini et al.’s (1995) Preference for Consistency scale (along with other demographic measures). This nine-item scale assesses participants’ preferences for maintaining consistency among their thoughts and their behaviors. Example items include, “I make an effort to appear consistent to others” and “It doesn’t bother me much if my actions are inconsistent” (reverse scored). Participants responded to each item on a nine-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 9 = strongly agree). I averaged the scores for all items so that each participant received one score indicating his or her average response to the nine items on the scale. Higher scores indicated greater preference for consistency. The descriptive statistics for this scale are shown in Table 25.

Self-concept saliency task and infidelity assessment. Participants then completed the same self-concept saliency scale used in the previous four studies. However, this scale used five-point rather than seven-point response anchors, so it differs in this respect from what was used in Study 4, but is identical to what was used in the initial three studies. Participants next completed the same infidelity assessment used in Study 4. That is, it was the full nine-item version of the scale rather than the three-item version used in the first three studies. Descriptive statistics for both of these measures can be found in Table 25.

Future fidelity assessment. Finally, future fidelity was assessed with two single item measures that I developed: (1) “If later today an attractive man/woman asks me out on a date, how much would I want to say yes.” This item was responded to on a nine-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all; 9 = very much). High scores indicated greater desire to accept the hypothetical date. (2) “If later today an attractive man/woman asks me out on a date, it is likely that I will say yes.” This item was responded to on a nine-point Likert-type scale (1 = very unlikely; 9 = very likely). High scores indicated greater probability of actually accepting the hypothetical dating invitation. Descriptive statistics for these scales are shown in Table 25. Note that participants reported, on average, moderate desire to accept the hypothetical date, but relatively low probability of actually accepting the hypothetical date. This was expected given that participants were all involved in romantic relationships at the time of the study. They may have been tempted, but they were still unlikely to act on the temptation, at least hypothetically.

Suspicion check. After participants completed all of the measures, I assessed whether they were able to figure out the purpose of the study. None of the participants were able to do so.

Table 25. Descriptive statistics of measures used in study (n = 149)

Variable Name	Mean	Standard Deviation	Low	High	Alpha
Preference for Consistency	5.33	1.42	2.00	8.22	.90
Self-concept saliency	4.56	.50	1.63	5.00	.89
Infidelity assessment	4.66	1.14	1.78	7.00	.86
Desire to accept date	4.47	2.96	1.00	9.00	^a
Would accept date	2.93	2.72	1.00	9.00	^a

notes:

^aCronbach's alpha could not be computed for either desire to accept dating invitation or probability of accepting dating invitation because they were both single-item measures.

Results and Discussion

Infidelity and future fidelity. I first tested whether level of prior infidelity was associated with reports of greater future fidelity. I correlated scores on the infidelity assessment with scores on both the fidelity measures (i.e., desire to and probability of accepting hypothetical dating invite). Contrary to what I predicted, reports of past infidelity were unrelated to report of future fidelity, $r(149) = .069$ and $.063$ for desire to accept dating invite and actual probability of accepting dating invite respectively. I next tested whether PFC moderated this relationship; whether participants with higher PFC reported greater future fidelity to the extent that they reported greater past infidelity and whether participants with lower PFC reported greater future *infidelity* to the extent that they reported greater past infidelity.

Infidelity, PFC, and future fidelity. I tested whether PFC moderated the relationship between past infidelity and future fidelity by regressing each future fidelity measure onto level of prior infidelity, PFC, and the interaction between the two. The results of these analyses are

Table 26. Regressing future fidelity measures onto level of prior infidelity, PFC, and the interaction between level of prior infidelity and PFC.

Outcome: *Desire to accept hypothetical dating invitation*

Predictors	B	Std. error	<i>t</i>
Constant	4.413	.237	18.63***
Level of prior infidelity	.219	.208	1.05
Preference for Consistency	.061	.167	.37
Interaction	-.471	.140	-3.36**

Model $R^2 = .078$, $F(3,144) = 4.04$, $p < .01$

Outcome: *Probability of accepting hypothetical dating invitation*

Predictors	b	Std. error	<i>t</i>
Constant	2.863	.215	13.29***
Level of prior infidelity	.190	.189	1.00
Preference for Consistency	.055	.152	.36
Interaction	-.490	.128	-3.84***

Model $R^2 = .097$, $F(3,144) = 5.17$, $p < .01$

notes:

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

shown in Table 26. PFC did significantly moderate the association between past infidelity and future fidelity for both future fidelity measures (i.e., desire to accept hypothetical dating invitation and actual probability of accepting hypothetical dating invitation). I next conducted simple slopes tests (Aiken & West, 1991) to determine the nature of these interactions. Table 27 shows the results of these analyses. The pattern was essentially the same regardless of which measure of future fidelity was examined. Participants who preferred greater consistency between the beliefs and behaviors (i.e., high PFC participants) reported less desire to commit infidelity and lower probability of committing infidelity to the extent that they reported *more* extensive infidelity in the past. The exact opposite pattern was found for participants who reported less preference for consistency (i.e., low PFC participants).

Table 27. Predicted values of level of prior infidelity X gender interaction.

<i>Outcome: Desire to accept hypothetical dating invitation</i>			
Dependent Variable	Low level of prior infidelity ^a	High level of prior infidelity ^b	<i>t</i>
Low PFC ^a	3.31	5.34	3.01**
High PFC ^b	5.01	3.99	-1.60
<i>Outcome: Probability of accepting hypothetical dating invitation</i>			
Dependent Variable	Low level of prior infidelity ^a	High level of prior infidelity ^b	<i>t</i>
Low PFC ^a	1.77	3.80	3.31**
High PFC ^b	3.52	2.36	-1.98*

notes:

^aRepresents hypothetical participant who reported infidelity score 1 standard deviation *below* the mean.

^bRepresents hypothetical participant who reported infidelity score 1 standard deviation *above* the mean.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Taken as a whole, these results are consistent with what Aronson (1999) and colleagues have found in numerous studies on behavior change as a dissonance reduction strategy. They suggest that high PFC participants committed themselves to behaving more loyally in the future when they were confronted with evidence that they had been less faithful in the past. Two caveats to these results are worth mentioning. First, past infidelity significantly predicted future infidelity for low PFC participants. This was true regardless of which measure of future infidelity was used. Of course, this finding was not surprising given that an excellent way to predict one's future behavior is to examine one's past behavior. More important to the present study was that the opposite pattern was found for high PFC participants (i.e., past infidelity predicted future fidelity). However, this trend was only significant when actual probability of future infidelity was assessed. When desire to commit infidelity was assessed, high PFC participants reported somewhat less desire to the extent that they reported more extensive past infidelity, but the trend was non-significant. This may suggest that past infidelity affects the motivation of high PFC individuals to resist temptation, but not necessarily the level of temptation itself.

It is also prudent to note that cross-over interactions were found, meaning that level of prior infidelity and PFC interacted in such a way that, for example, high PFC participants who reported low levels of prior infidelity actually reported higher anticipated future infidelity than did their low PFC counterparts. This was unanticipated, although it may suggest that different mechanisms influenced low versus high PFC estimates of future behavior. If true, then what constituted subjectively low, moderate, and high levels of anticipated future infidelity may have been different for low versus high PFC participants, making direct comparisons between low versus high PFC participants less meaningful. In this case, the general trends in responses are more important than the absolute values of responses.

Gender interactions. Finally, I examined whether gender moderated the interaction between level of prior infidelity and PFC. To do this, I included gender as part of a three-way interaction term, with level of prior infidelity and PFC as the other two components of the interaction term (all predictors were mean-centered). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 28. For neither of the outcome variables did the three-way interaction approach significance, suggesting that gender did not moderate the interaction between level of prior infidelity and PFC. However, it is interesting that several two-way interactions involving gender did emerge when predicting the probability of accepting the hypothetical dating invitation. Although I did not explicitly predict any gender interactions, I explicated them nevertheless. Table 29 shows the results of these explications.

Probably of more interest is the interaction involving gender and level of prior infidelity. Females reported that they would be less likely to accept the hypothetical dating invitation when they reported more rather than less prior infidelity. Males, on the other hand, reported just the opposite pattern of responses. Based on the results of Studies 1 and 2, it is reasonable to assume that females in the present study were more affected by reports of more frequent past infidelity. It is possible, then that this might have motivated females in this study, particularly females who reported higher levels of prior infidelity, to commit themselves to behaving more loyally in the future. Because males may have been less affected by reports of prior infidelity, for them it might have been more a matter of past infidelity predicting future infidelity. Of course, this explanation is inconsistent with the lack of gender interactions found for trivialization in Studies 2, 3, and 4. Then again, it is possible that gender may interact more with behavioral strategies to reduce the negative effects of infidelity, such as behavior change, than cognitive strategies, such as trivialization.

Table 28. Testing whether gender moderated the two-way interaction

Outcome: Desire to accept hypothetical dating invitation

Predictors	b	Std. error	t
Constant	4.298	.250	17.19***
(A) Level of prior infidelity	.235	.228	1.03
(B) Preference for Consistency	.105	.176	.60
(C) Gender ^a	-.363	.500	-.73
A x B	-.410	.155	-2.64**
A x C	-.444	.455	-.98
B x C	.548	.352	1.56
A x B x C	-.244	.310	-.79

Model $R^2 = .109$, $F(7,140) = 2.45$, $p < .05$

Outcome: Probability of accepting hypothetical dating invitation

Predictors	b	Std. error	t
Constant	2.654	.217	12.23***
(A) Level of prior infidelity	.219	.198	1.11
(B) Preference for Consistency	.093	.153	.61
(C) Gender ^a	-.212	.434	-.49
A x B	-.379	.135	-2.81**
A x C	-.889	.395	-2.25*
B x C	.952	.306	3.12**
A x B x C	-.376	.269	-1.40

Model $R^2 = .205$, $F(7,140) = 5.16$, $p < .001$

notes:

^aCoded: males = 1; females = 2

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 29. Predicted values of level of prior infidelity and PFC X gender interactions.

<i>Outcome: Probability of accepting hypothetical dating invitation</i>			
Dependent Variable	Low level of prior infidelity ^a	High level of prior infidelity ^b	<i>t</i>
Males (n = 73)	2.01	3.93	3.08**
Females (n = 76)	3.35	2.09	-2.05*

<i>Outcome: Probability of accepting hypothetical dating invitation</i>			
Dependent Variable	Low PFC ^a	High PFC ^b	<i>t</i>
Males (n = 73)	3.54	2.15	-2.14*
Females (n = 76)	1.66	3.40	2.72**

notes:

^aRepresents hypothetical participant who reported infidelity score 1 standard deviation *below* the mean.

^bRepresents hypothetical participant who reported infidelity score 1 standard deviation *above* the mean.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Of perhaps less interest, I also found a significant interaction involving gender and PFC. Males with higher PFC reported less probability of accepting the hypothetical dating invitation, whereas females with higher PFC reported greater probability of accepting the hypothetical dating invitation. It is difficult to speculate what this interaction might suggest about differences between male and female perpetrators of infidelity. However, this does introduce the possibility that the interaction of primary importance to the present study, that between level of prior infidelity and PFC, might have been confounded by the pattern of responses by males and females of differing levels of PFC. Thus, I ran an additional analysis in which I regressed both of the future fidelity outcomes onto level of prior infidelity, PFC, and the interaction between the

two while controlling for gender. I found virtually no change in the size or direction of any of the original predictors regardless of whether gender was controlled or not. Therefore, I conclude that gender did not play a role in the interaction between level of prior infidelity and PFC when predicting either desire to accept the hypothetical dating invitation or probability of accepting the dating invitation.

Summary. In the present study, I tested whether level of prior infidelity predicted future fidelity. I predicted that participants would report greater anticipated future loyalty to the extent that they reported more frequent prior infidelity. I predicted this because behavior change is strategy employed by individuals facing behavior that is discrepant with their self-views (e.g., Aronson, 1999). Participants in the present study who reported more frequent past infidelity were presumably faced with this sort of discrepancy behavior. I found, however, that level of prior infidelity did not directly predict level of anticipated future loyalty. However, this null result was qualified by a significant interaction involving participants' preference for consistency. Participants who desired high levels of consistency among their behaviors and beliefs reported that they would be more faithful in the future to the extent that they were less faithful in the past. I suggest that these high PFC individuals were more motivated to maintain consistency and were therefore more likely to employ the behavior change strategy. I found just the opposite pattern of results for participants with relatively low preference for consistency. For these participants I found what one might normally expect; that their past behavior significantly predicted their anticipated future behavior. More specifically, when these individuals were less faithful in the past they anticipated being less faithful in the future, and vice-versa.

CHAPTER 8

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The primary purpose of this investigation was to determine whether cognitive dissonance is experienced following acts of romantic infidelity. Additionally, I sought to determine whether traditional methods of dissonance reduction are effective at reducing dissonance effects experienced by perpetrators of infidelity. To this end, I conducted a series of five studies, each testing specific aspects of these general contentions. In summary, I predicted that perpetrators of infidelity would experience feelings of self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, both markers of cognitive dissonance. Both of these predictions were strongly supported by the data. In Studies 1 and 3, participants who were given feedback suggesting that they had been unfaithful in prior relationships reported increased discrepancy involving the self-concept as well as psychological discomfort. Additionally, however, these participants also reported changes in general affect. This suggests that past infidelity promotes both symptoms of dissonance as well as generally poor affect. I also found that, consistent with what Cognitive Dissonance Theory would predict, discrepancy involving the self-concept mediated the effect of prior infidelity on feelings of psychological discomfort. Furthermore, however, self-concept discrepancy also mediated the effect of the infidelity manipulation on affect. Therefore, participants who were made to feel less faithful reported shifts in discomfort as well as affect, both of which stemmed from feeling discrepancy between how they normally viewed themselves and what their past behavior suggested about them. Both dissonance and changes in affect may stem from perceptions of behavior-belief discrepancy as it relates to romantic infidelity.

Studies 2 and 3 examined trivialization by perpetrators of infidelity as a potential way to reduce the psychological consequences of infidelity. In both studies, participants who were made to feel less faithful minimized the importance of their past behavior. Furthermore, Study 3 demonstrated that by trivializing past behavior, perpetrators of infidelity significantly reduced self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, but did not reduce negative affect or increase positive affect. This finding suggests that trivialization, as it relates to romantic infidelity, serves more of a dissonance reduction rather than general affect adjustment purpose. Study 4 examined the role that self-concept saliency played in the use of trivialization. Whereas participants who were first reminded about how they viewed themselves with regard to infidelity trivialized their past behaviors to the extent that they committed more frequent infidelity, participants not reminded about how they viewed themselves did not report increased trivialization as their past reports of infidelity increased. This finding suggests that trivialization may stem from an awareness of belief-behavior discrepancy on the part of perpetrators of infidelity.

Finally, Study 5 examined behavior change as an additional response by perpetrators to their own acts of infidelity. This study included Preference for Consistency (PFC) as a potential moderator of behavior change in response to past infidelity. Consistent with predictions, romantically attached participants with high PFC reported less future infidelity to the extent that they committed *more* frequent acts of infidelity in a previous relationship. Just the opposite pattern of results was found for participants with low PFC. For low PFC participants, their past behavior significantly and positively predicted their anticipated future behavior. These results suggest that some perpetrators of infidelity respond to their infidelities by committing themselves to behaving more faithfully in the future. Individuals who desire consistency amongst their

beliefs and behaviors are particularly likely to respond to their infidelities in this manner, whereas individuals with low preference for consistency are not.

Implications and Future Research Directions

I present the implications of this research into two sections: those that relate to the literature on infidelity and those that relate to the literature on cognitive dissonance.

Additionally, I present avenues of future research that may extend the findings of the present research. Finally, I present some of the limitations of the present research and how future research may address them

Implications for the literature on romantic infidelity. Although there is ample evidence of the effects of romantic infidelity on the victims of such behavior, there is a relative lack of empirical research that investigates the consequences of infidelity on those who commit it. The present research demonstrates that perpetrators of infidelity experience a variety of cognitive and emotional consequences of their behavior. These include dissonance-like cognitions, such as self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, as well as generally poor affect. Clearly, the negative effects of infidelity are by no means limited to the victims of infidelity. The cognitive and emotional consequences of infidelity are, however, potentially unique depending on whether victims or perpetrators are surveyed. For example, participants in the present research who were made to feel less faithful reported feelings discrepancy involving the self-concept. It is unlikely that victims of infidelity would report similar feelings since their behavior is not in conflict with beliefs concerning the self. It is possible that victims and perpetrators of infidelity also experience a variety of similar psychological effects stemming from infidelity, including poor affect. However, these reactions are likely driven by different mechanisms; perpetrator affect was found to be linked to the self in the present research, although victim

affect is more likely linked to cognitions targeting the perpetrator. Future research addressing the uniqueness and similarity of victim/perpetrator consequences of infidelity may provide a more thorough understanding of the cognitive and emotional consequences of romantic infidelity and how these consequences may drive the thoughts and actions of couples that experience romantic infidelity.

A number of studies have examined the aftereffects of romantic infidelity, including responses by individuals to their own acts of infidelity (e.g., Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a; 1999b; Greene, Lee, & Lustig, 1974; Mongeau, Hale, & Alles, 1994). In general, these studies suggest that perpetrators of infidelity often cite reasons for their behavior that reflect less negatively on themselves. Although it has not been tested empirically, it is likely that cognitive dissonance plays a role in the motivations individuals cite for their own infidelities. Results from the present set of studies are generally supportive of this contention. Participants who were made to feel less faithful tended to downplay the significance of their prior infidelities, and this alleviated the dissonance associated with their actions. This suggests that individuals who commit infidelity are motivated to think about their behaviors in ways that reflect less negatively upon the self. More specifically, the results of the present studies suggest that individuals who commit infidelity are particularly likely to think about their behaviors in ways that diminish cognitive inconsistencies involving what their behavior suggests about the self and how they view the self. Therefore, it is important to practice caution when interpreting the accounts that individuals give for their own acts of infidelity, and to more thoroughly research the motivations that may underlie perpetrator accounts of infidelity.

As I discussed earlier, although trivialization may serve a useful purpose so far as it makes perpetrators feel more comfortable, it is likely that it does little to improve the quality of

relationships that experience infidelity. In fact, minimizing the importance of prior acts of infidelity may cause further harm to relationships, particularly if victims of infidelity infer this to mean that their partners fail to acknowledge the severity of their transgressions (Schonbach, 1980). Therefore, it is important to examine ways to potentially reduce the usage of trivialization. In present research, I demonstrated that the usage of trivialization effectively disappeared when participants were not reminded about their self-views regarding infidelity. I cautioned readers that in the real-world individuals may still trivialize to some extent even in the absence of direct reminders about how they view themselves. However, I suggest that trivialization may be increased when individuals are given reminders of how they view themselves. This may have practical applications for therapists and couples facing infidelity. For example, statements to perpetrators by victims, such as “What kind of person are you?” may exacerbate the tendency to minimize the importance of the infidelity. This is because these statements, even if rhetorical in nature, may serve as reminders of how perpetrators see themselves. If this occurs, then my findings suggest that trivialization is more likely.

Although trivialization is perhaps a common method by which to reduce cognitive dissonance stemming from romantic infidelity, there are certainly others. Dissonance theorists (e.g., Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Dickerson, Stone, Aronson, Crain, et al., 1994; Thibodeau, Aronson, & Miller, 1992) have repeatedly shown that individuals who commit behaviors that conflict with their beliefs oftentimes alter their future behavior to make it congruent with their beliefs. I predicted that perpetrators of infidelity would react similarly if given the opportunity to alter their future behavior. Although in general I found that no relationship existed between prior frequency of infidelity and reports of anticipated future infidelity, I did find that participants with elevated PFC reported that they would be more faithful to their current romantic partners in the

future to the extent that they reported more frequent acts of infidelity in their prior relationships. This result suggests that perpetrators of infidelity may alter their future behavior to bring it in-line with their self-views, especially when they are inclined to maintain consistency between their belief systems and their behavior. Future research may address possible mechanisms that determine whether perpetrators of infidelity trivialize their infidelities or alter their behavior (or choose additional dissonance-reduction strategies). Findings from this research may have tremendous value to therapists working with couples facing romantic infidelity.

Implications for the literature on cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance has been described as an intrapsychic discrepancy involving what an item of behavior suggests about the self, and the self-concept itself (e.g., Aronson, 1999). In the present research, participants whose behaviors suggested that they had acted less faithfully in the past appeared to experience this discrepancy associated with cognitive dissonance. Participants who were experimentally made to feel less faithful reported elevated levels of self-concept discrepancy, providing empirical support of Aronson's theoretical conceptualization of cognitive dissonance. I also uncovered evidence that participants who received feedback suggesting that they had been less faithful in the past reported feeling less comfortable than participants who received feedback suggesting that they had been faithful in the past. This is also consistent with the theoretical conceptualization of cognitive dissonance being a state of psychological (and physiological) discomfort, in addition to being consistent with past research suggesting that cognitive dissonance promotes experiences of psychological discomfort (Elliot & Devine, 1994). Prior research on cognitive dissonance and psychological discomfort has employed traditional dissonance manipulations that involved tricking participants into committing counterattitudinal behaviors, such as writing counterattitudinal essays. The present research represents a unique

demonstration of this phenomenon using infidelity as the belief-discrepancy behavior, and thus contributes to the external validity of Elliot and Devine's pioneering work.

Studies 1 and 3 were set up so that participants first completed the measure of self-concept discrepancy followed by the measure of psychological discomfort. This order was chosen because it most closely matches the theoretical orientation of the cognitive dissonance process. That is, the psychological affects of cognitive dissonance are theorized to stem from the discrepancy involving the self-concept that arises from the discrepant behavior (Aronson, 1999). I examined the validity of this theoretical process by testing whether self-concept discrepancy mediated the effect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort. Evidence of statistical mediation was uncovered, demonstrating that self-concept discrepancy effectively explained the effect of the infidelity manipulation on psychological discomfort. This suggests that psychological discomfort may have resulted from feelings of increased discrepancy involving the self-concept, and is consistent with the theoretical nature of the dissonance process. Therefore the results of the present research provide further evidence that cognitive dissonance operates in the manner that prior theorists have proposed.

It should be stressed that in the present investigation, participants who were made to feel less faithful reported both psychological discomfort as well as changes in affect. As was discussed earlier, infidelity seems to promote a range of experiences in perpetrators, including dissonance-like and emotional experiences. This, of course, differentiates infidelity from other types of behaviors that have been studied from a cognitive dissonance perspective (e.g., writing counterattitudinal essays). Behaviors that promote dissonance without also promoting affect change are certainly more appropriate choices when the goal of the research is to examine a particular element of Cognitive Dissonance Theory. However, the goal of the present studies was

to apply dissonance theory to the study of romantic infidelity. Festinger (1999) suggested that applying Cognitive Dissonance Theory to real-world phenomena would be conceptually and empirically muddier compared to the study of very precise, dissonance-arousing behaviors that have traditionally been used in the dissonance literature. I found this to be the case, and I would argue that it suggests that cognitive dissonance, as it is experienced in the real-world, is a complex phenomenon that is often intertwined with a variety of related experiences.

Prior dissonance research has focused a great deal not only on the consequences of behaviors that differ from self-views, but also on how individuals cope with these discrepancies. In the present set of studies, I examined two strategies that perpetrators of infidelity may use in response to infidelity: trivialization and behavior change. Each of these strategies has been shown in prior research to be common responses by individuals faced with behaviors that are discrepant with personally held beliefs. Simon, Greenberg, and Brehm (1995) showed that individuals tend to trivialize behaviors which conflict with their beliefs. Consistent with this finding, I demonstrated that individuals who either committed more frequent prior infidelity or who were led to believe that they had been less faithful in the past tended to trivialize the importance of their past behavior. Additionally, I showed that trivialization can effectively reduce perceived self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort. Therefore, I demonstrated not only that infidelity promotes trivialization, but that trivialization may serve a useful function: namely the reduction of the cognitive dissonance that stems from infidelity. This finding is potentially important to cognitive dissonance researchers. Prior research has shown that individuals who experience cognitive dissonance tend to trivialize their behaviors (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). Furthermore, research has shown that dissonance reduction strategies, such as attitude-change, have the effect of reducing psychological discomfort (Elliot

& Devine, 1994). However, no research to my knowledge has examined whether trivialization, specifically, attenuates discomfort. The results of the present research suggest that trivialization serves such a function. Additionally, this research lends external validity to prior research on the topics of trivialization and dissonance reduction because it suggests that trivialization serves a dissonance reduction function in a variety of contexts, including infidelity.

It is perhaps important that although trivialization reduced self-concept discrepancy and psychological discomfort, it did not significantly attenuate affect. That is, participants who were led to believe that they had been less faithful in the past, but were allowed the opportunity to trivialize their behaviors, did not feel significantly better in terms of affect. This is important because it suggests that perpetrators of infidelity who trivialize their past behaviors feel less inconsistent and more comfortable, but still feel affectively bad, indicating that trivialization targets cognitive dissonance more directly than general affect.

Finally, the finding that perpetrators of infidelity may alter their future behavior is consistent with past research suggesting that behavior change is a common response to cognitive dissonance, and furthermore represents a response to infidelity that is potentially beneficial to the maintenance of relationships that experience infidelity. Whereas trivialization would seem to harm relationships because it communicates a lack of understanding and culpability to the victim of the infidelity, behavior change is a way that perpetrators may salvage their relationships and promote long-term positive functioning. Of course, not everyone should be expected to commit themselves to being more loyal in the future following acts of infidelity. According to my findings, individuals who are not motivated to maintain consistency between their beliefs and behavior are less likely to alter their behavior. This caveat is consistent with past research by Cialdini and colleagues (1995) suggesting that preference for consistency tends to moderate

cognitive dissonance effects, with individuals with higher preference for consistency more likely to enact such dissonance reduction strategies as attitude-change. The present study extends this to include behavior change as another dissonance reduction strategy that may be modified by preference of consistency.

Limitations

Although this set of studies has many strengths, there are of course a variety of limitations that should be considered. Perhaps the most important limitation of the studies was the inability to differentiate cognitive from emotional consequences of infidelity (Studies 2 and 3). Because of this it was not possible to isolate whether the effects of infidelity were consistency based as Cognitive Dissonance Theory might suggest, mood based, or a combination of the two. As I discussed earlier, it is plausible that infidelity promotes all of these experiences in perpetrators and that they are difficult to distinguish from one another. In general, it appears that perpetrators of infidelity experience a combination of dissonance and less positive/more negative affect. Future research might address this by employing more extensive measures of dissonance and affect. It may be possible that the items used in the present study did not adequately distinguishing dissonance from affect in the context of infidelity, but that larger, more inclusive sets of items might. It is, of course, also possible that participants may still lump together dissonance and affect even if more numerous items assessing dissonance and affect are used. In this case, it would seem apparent that dissonance and affect consequences of infidelity are non-distinguishable to perpetrators.

I did find that trivialization appears to target dissonance more than affect. Therefore, although perpetrators of infidelity experience dissonance and feel affectively bad, trivialization leaves them with reduced dissonance, but still feeling affectively bad. This finding supports my

contention that infidelity promotes dissonance, since trivialization has been shown in the past to be an effective dissonance reduction strategy. This finding also leaves me questioning, however, what types of cognitive or behavioral responses might better address the emotional consequences of infidelity. Although I did not address this topic in the present studies, it is probable that at least a portion the change in affect that occurs following infidelity results from guilt stemming from the perception that the perpetrators hurt their romantic partners. I would speculate then that the emotional effects of infidelity might be better targeted by perpetrator responses that more directly address the victim. For example, it is common for perpetrators of social transgressions to assign blame to the victim of the transgression (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). This type of response may have the effect of enhancing affect because it results in the impression that the victim somehow either deserved to be hurt or encouraged it. This may lessen the culpability of the perpetrator and thus diminish poor affect resulting from infidelity. Future research may address this by giving participants the opportunity to assign blame to their romantic partners for the infidelity that they themselves committed.

A third limitation of the present studies was that the infidelity that was either measured or manipulated occurred in prior relationships. I did this because I wanted to reduce the possibility that perpetrator responses stemmed not from dissonance, but rather from perceived threats to their current relationships. However, by assessing or manipulating infidelity in past relationships I might have weakened the level of dissonance that was experienced by participants if for no other reason than that the discrepant behavior occurred some time ago. Of course, this suggests that my results probably underestimated the effect of infidelity. This may be part of the reason why I failed to find a general relationship between frequency of past infidelity and trivialization

in participants who were not first reminded about how faithful and loyal they considered themselves.

Conclusion

The results of the present studies suggest that perpetrators of infidelity experience a variety of cognitive and emotional consequences stemming from their actions, including cognitive dissonance and negative shifts in affect. Perpetrators of infidelity are motivated to respond to their behaviors in ways that alleviate some of these consequences. Some of these responses may be harmful to relationships that experience infidelity (e.g., trivialization) whereas other may be beneficial (e.g., behavior change). It is hoped that the present studies and future research on this topic will uncover more about the underlying motives for these responses as well as potential interventions that may encourage responses that benefit relationships. Romantic infidelity is a common phenomenon, affecting the lives of millions of individuals; research on this topic has the potential to benefit a large segment of the population, and should be vigorously pursued.

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