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‘The relationship past can’t be the future’: Couple counsellors’ experiences of working with infidelity. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 29, 424-435.

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Abstract

Infidelity is both common and difficult to work with therapeutically, but little research to date has examined the experiences of those who work with this presenting problem. This study explores couple counsellors' experiences of working with couples affected by infidelity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven experienced couple counsellors working for a nation-wide relationship counselling organization in the United Kingdom. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a shared pattern of experiences and challenges, providing greater insight into the specific constellations and difficulties practitioners face when working with issues around infidelity. Practical implications for working with this presenting problem are discussed as well as the potential impact of counsellors' own implicit theories on their practice with infidelity.

Keywords: Infidelity, extramarital affair, couple counselling, couple therapy, experiences

Infidelity is reportedly one of the most common problems in couple counselling and therapy, with a significant percentage of couples seeking help to address the effects of an extramarital affair or other forms of infidelity (Doss, Simpson & Christensen, 2004). Based on nationally representative, random samples Blow and Hartnett (2005b) suggest an estimate of lifetime prevalence of up to 25% for married partners engaging in extradyadic sexual intercourse in the United States. For the UK, the last major study of sexual behaviour (National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, Natsal) found 15% of men and 9% of women reported overlapping sexual relationships in the previous year (Johnson et al., 2001). It can be estimated that about half of all couples seeking therapy have encountered infidelity either in the past or present (Weeks, Gambescia & Jenkins, 2003) and many of these clients report infidelity as the presenting problem when seeing marital or family therapists (Atwood & Seifer, 1997).

While infidelity is a common presenting issue for couples, it is also one of the most difficult and challenging problems to work with in practice (e.g. Reibstein, 2013; Kessel, Moon & Atkins, 2007). In a survey with practicing couple therapists in the US (Whisman, Dixon & Johnson, 1997), extramarital affairs were seen as the third most difficult therapeutic problem to work with, and as the second most damaging problem to clients' relationships (with physical abuse rated as having the most damaging impact).

In light of the frequency of infidelity as a presenting issue in clinical practice it might come as a surprise that many couple counsellors don't feel adequately prepared to work with couples presenting with this issue (Pelusa & Spina, 2008). A recent national survey of clinical members of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT) revealed that 74% of respondents did not find their professional training program adequately prepared them for the specific challenges of infidelity disclosure in therapy (Softas-Nall, Beadle, Newell

& Helm, 2008). Blow and Hartnett (2005a) see therapeutic work with couples affected by infidelity as a 'pervasive challenge' which is very different from the work associated with other presented issues, and hence should follow specific treatment guidelines (Blow & Hartnett, 2005b).

These specific demands and challenges are related to the often devastating and long-lasting impact of infidelity on both partners and their relationship (Pelusa & Spina, 2008). Counsellors and psychotherapists are confronted with raw and intense emotions and emotional crises, especially if infidelity is disclosed immediately before or during the counselling process. They often have to work with partners with different levels of motivation, and establish clear boundaries regarding secrets and ongoing affairs (Peluso, 2007b; Dupree, White, Olson & Lafleur, 2007). An additional challenge is the dynamic and volatile process that working through infidelity involves. A qualitative study on experiences and emotional processes of people who discovered their partner's infidelity (Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler & Miller, 2002) found a three-stage process following the disclosure of an affair. Highly emotionally charged responses including feelings of shock, anger, rage, sorrow, shame and guilt dominate the initial stage. Only in later stages ('moratorium' and 'trust building') does it become possible for partners to make meaning of infidelity, take responsibility for what happened in their relationship, and focus on forgiveness and reassurance of commitment. But many couples break up before they reach these later stages, as extramarital sex is rated as the most reliable predictor of subsequent divorce, with its impact on divorce being more than twice as impactful as any other relationship problem (Amato & Rogers, 1997).

In response to these challenges, clinicians and therapists have written and published an abundance of books and articles on the treatment of infidelity (e.g. Brown, 2001; Peluso, 2007a;

Piercy, Hertlein & Wetchler, 2005; Weeks et al., 2003). In recent years there are also increasing efforts to develop treatment programmes and clinical guidelines for therapy with couples where one partner has had an affair, suggesting specific treatment strategies and therapy stages for working with infidelity (e.g. Snyder, Baucom & Gordon, 2008; Baucom et al., 2006). However, most of these clinical guidelines are not grounded in empirical research but based on clinical experience (Olson et al., 2002), and only two recent small-sample studies have looked into the efficacy of couple therapy treatment programmes for infidelity, providing first indicators that these programmes can be effective (Atkins, Eldridge, Baucom & Christensen, 2005; Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004).

Despite the wealth of clinical literature on the treatment of infidelity, very little research has been done to investigate couple counsellors' work with couples presenting with infidelity (Kessel et al., 2007). The question of how counsellors and therapists experience their work with infidelity couples, and what difficulties and challenges they face in doing so, has received even less empirical attention. So far only one study conducted in the US (Olmstead, Blick & Mills, 2009) explored with qualitative interviews (10 participating therapists) how therapists treat infidelity with couples presenting with extramarital involvement. The focus of this study was on the therapists' work with the couple towards forgiveness and reconciliation, an aspect that has been given increased attention especially in the US literature in recent years (e.g. Fife, Weeks & Stellberg-Flibert, 2013; Hall & Fincham, 2006; Spring, 2004). Reflecting on their experience of working with infidelity, therapists in Olmstead et al.'s study identified different treatment components (e.g. working with the relationship history and family of origin) and aspects of working towards forgiveness (understanding clients' views of forgiveness and their wants and needs, psycho-education on forgiveness processes, timing of working towards forgiveness).

In light of the detrimental impact of infidelity and how difficult therapists find working with infidelity, additional research that explores how therapists treat extramarital relationships is of great importance (Olmstead et al., 2009). There is especially a need for more in-depth qualitative research that investigates the experiences and perceptions of counsellors in working with infidelity. Research from the ground, from the perspective of practitioners actually doing the work, can provide critical information to improve the overall impact of couple therapy and to develop research informed guidelines for working with couples where infidelity is an issue (Kessel et al., 2007).

The aim with this study was therefore to explore how British couple counsellors experience the counselling process with couples where one partner has been unfaithful, as well as what aspects of clients' experiences with infidelity they perceive to pose challenges and difficulties when working therapeutically with this issue. For the purpose of this paper, the term 'infidelity' is used in accordance with Dupree et al. (2007) as 'any breach of the primary couple relationship (sexual or emotional) that couples are seeking treatment to deal with' (p. 331).

Method

Research design

For this exploratory study a qualitative research approach was adopted. With the aim of eliciting in-depth, detailed and reflective material from each participant, the number of counsellors interviewed was kept comparatively small, and sampling was ended when data saturation was reached (at the point at which no new insights were obtained; Bowen, 2008). The analytical method used was Thematic Analysis (TA), described by Braun and Clark (2012, 2006) as a

theoretically-flexible and accessible approach to analyzing qualitative data that is compatible with a range of theoretical and epistemological paradigms. With its flexibility in finding rich meaning and identifying patterns in the material, TA was a method well suited to investigate counsellors' experiences of working with infidelity.

A data-driven approach (Boyatzis, 1998) was adopted for interpretation of the data as this was an exploratory study with no intent to fit with any specific theories, and no a-priori assumptions about how counsellors might experience their work with infidelity. The analysis was mainly focused on the semantic or explicit content of the data (semantic version of TA; Braun & Clarke, 2012), reflecting the aim of the research to identify patterns in what participants said about their experiences of working with infidelity and to stay close to how they made sense of their experiences (without theorizing underlying assumptions or 'ideologies' that might have informed the semantic content of the data). The analytic focus is in accordance with the study's epistemological position of 'critical realism' (Willig, 2003), assuming a simple, largely unidirectional relationship between experience and language (language reflects and enables us to articulate experience). This approach takes into account that the 'truth' as expressed in the counsellors' experiences is not stable but likely to shift across time and situation and following new experiences.

Throughout the study a high level of researcher reflexivity was maintained, based on the assumption that data collection and analysis is inevitably shaped and informed by the researcher's subjectivity. For transparency, the first author is a German man and the second is a British woman (both in their mid-forties). Both are involved in long-term heterosexual and bi-cultural relationships, and both have both personal and professional (in terms of client work) experience of infidelity and how it impacts partners in a romantic relationship.

Participants

Interviews from seven couple counsellors, five women and two men, were included in the study. The participants were all White and British, with an age range from 27 to 56. They were recruited, with the help of the centre manager, from a Relate counselling centre with several outposts in the South West of Britain. Relate is the oldest and most well-established nation-wide relationship counselling organisation in Britain (74 centres nationally), traditionally training its own counsellors (2 year training based on systemic/psychodynamic concepts). Only experienced counsellors were included in the study; the seven participants had been practicing for between 4 and a half and 18 years, most of them describing their counselling orientation as 'integrative' or 'eclectic'.

Procedure

After ethical approval had been obtained from both researchers' universities as well as from the Relate Federation, participants were contacted by phone or email to arrange an interview date with one of the researchers at the Relate centre or outpost. After obtaining informed consent, data was collected through semi-structured one-to-one interviews. In accordance with the aim of the study, the interview utilized an interview guide with four open and explorative questions around the experience of working with infidelity (definitions of infidelity, reasons for engaging with infidelity, responses to the disclosure of infidelity and the process of working with infidelity). The interview guide was piloted in an interview with an experienced couple counsellor working in private practice. Evaluation of this interview led to minor changes and amendments to the interview guide; the pilot interview data was not incorporated in the analysis.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. Orthographic transcripts including all verbal and relevant non-verbal utterances (e.g., sighs, coughs, laughter) were produced in an effort to represent the original interviews as clearly as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcription and checking procedures were at the same time utilized by the researchers as a first step of the process of immersion in the data (Morrow, 2005).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2012) and comprised different stages. After the initial data immersion, the interview material was explored and analysed to identify major themes and categories using open coding. Each of the interview transcripts was coded independently by one of the researchers. The resulting analysis was then reviewed and amended by the second researcher and discussed between both researchers in order to develop a shared understanding of the data. This iterative analysis process helped to maximize the reliability of the analysis and to ensure that the analysis was comprehensively grounded in the data corpus with full attention to disconfirmatory evidence (Morrow, 2005). At the end of the process and in consideration of the emerging themes in relation to the research question, the researcher team decided to conduct two separate thematic analyses, one focused on definitions of infidelity and one on working with infidelity; the latter is presented in this paper. In keeping with the guidelines for TA (Braun & Clarke, 2012; see also Morrow 2005), the quality and rigor of the analysis was considered and enforced throughout the whole data analysis process.

Results

A shared pattern of experiences and challenges in working with infidelity emerged in the analysis and are summarised below in three interrelated themes. Each participant is identified by number from 1 to 7, and transcript line numbers for the quotes are also provided in the following write up. To avoid implicit moral judgments, the authors decided to use the terms ‘involved partner’ (for the partner who had an affair) and ‘receiving partner’ (for the disclosed-to partner) in the results section, although the language employed by counsellors in some of the presented quotes is not consistent with this position.

1. Balancing disynchronous needs

When talking about their perceptions of the specific experiences and needs of their clients, the interviewees saw both partners as affected in very different ways by infidelity, dependent on when and how infidelity was discovered or disclosed. Counsellors felt that this led to different needs they had to attend to in the counselling process:

Well they’re often so out of kilter with each other, especially if you’ve got an unfaithful partner who’s felt dreadful all the time doing it, they are actually also at a stage of, OK, that period of deceit and secrecy is over, “thank the lord, um, now I know, it’s all suddenly become clear. I want this relationship so what can we do to make this relationship OK?” Whereas the disclosed-to partner is way back down the process, they want to know what were you doing 5 weeks ago on Saturday afternoon when you said you were at the football? (7, 599-605)

Most counsellors commented on the very negative impact the disclosure had on the receiving partner, immediately after the revelation. Dependent on the time of disclosure (before or during the counselling process; in or outside the session), the receiving partner was perceived as displaying a range of highly charged emotional reactions ranging from shock, disbelief, denial, bewilderment and anger to strong feelings of being hurt and betrayed. Some counsellors related these highly emotional responses to psychological reaction patterns in the context of traumatic events or experiences (e.g. a post-traumatic stress reaction), especially in cases where infidelity was suddenly and abruptly revealed:

What quite often happens, which is that the partner will suddenly sit down and say, "I've got something to tell you", and, up until that moment there was no understanding, no real suspicion that there was anything wrong and so to have that suddenly abruptly revealed, can be, I think, truly traumatic. (3, 490-494)

Other counsellors used language related to death, loss and bereavement to describe the emotional experience of receiving partners following the disclosure of infidelity: "Yeah they go into grief really. Hurt, shock, anger, renewal, you know that's part of the grief cycle isn't it?"(2, 491-504). Grief processes were seen as triggered by the sudden and painful 'death' of fundamental beliefs about the partner and the relationship held before the disclosure, as well as the imagined future of the couple.

The reactions of the involved partner were experienced as less uniform and predictable and seen as dependent on relationship context and self-perception. Involved partners were

often perceived as feeling guilty about their behaviour and its impact on their relationship, with some being shocked by their own infidelity and “disgusted with themselves” (7, 444). However, counsellors also described attempts by involved partners to ‘normalise’ the situation, or to make the partner responsible for their unfaithfulness. Participants mentioned how in certain contexts involved partners might utilise the disclosure of their affair to end the primary relationship: “ ‘It’s happened, get over it and I am not sure if I love you anyway’ ” (2, 544-446). Involved partners were also seen as the ones who wanted to move on and try to restore the relationship without looking back at the details of what happened. They were seen as feeling relief due to having admitted the affair and acknowledging fault, but also finding it difficult and humiliating to bear “constantly being asked again and again very similar if not identical questions” (3, 394-395) by their partner about the affair.

In contrast, receiving partners, who might have just found out about the infidelity and might possibly be still shocked by the revelation, were described as having an “almost obsessive...wish to be told what happened”, leading to repetitive questioning for details of the affair that could be “highly destructive if they can’t escape from it” (3, 395-398). Another counsellor stated the belief that the “hurt part, they can’t move on until it’s been told in front of somebody else” (5, 667-668]. These observations indicate the need of the receiving partner to reconstruct and verify what actually has happened, which can be understood as a precondition for them to be able to accept the infidelity as a reality.

In bridging the often contrasting needs of both partners and in eliciting the relevant information from the couple for their work, counsellors experienced a “balancing act to try and

make them both feel that you're there for them" (5, 684-685). On one hand, counsellors felt they need to be careful not to be too confrontational with their exploration of the infidelity to minimise the risk of being perceived as one-sided by the involved partner: "You are aware of not wanting to again push them in a corner, catch them out, because then they're not going to come back next time, you've gotta build your trust with them and their belief in you" (5, 682-685). On the other hand, they felt it was important to meet the needs of the receiving partner and provide them with a safe space to express their intense feelings as well as enough information about the affair to rebuild trust between the partners: "For a period of time she needs to know a bit more and he's going to have to bear doing that really" (7, 464-468).

Counsellors' efforts to contain high emotions and prepare the ground for a putatively more constructive period of work with the couple were described as potentially hampered if one or both partners became stuck in their intensely emotionally charged responses and in cycles of blame and self-blame: "You're trying to on one hand to move forward to reconcile, but you're being held back by the anger on one side but often by the guilt on the other" (1, 940-941). Some counsellors seemed to regard a successful transition to a more rational and "calmer discourse... where it can be more adult-to-adult" (1, 120-121) – as opposed to the more irrational, emotional and 'childlike' exchanges ('hurt child' reactions) described as typical for the initial stage – as a precondition for effective work with the couple.

Counsellors also acknowledged the potential impact their own experiences and perceptions of infidelity can have on their therapeutic work with couples: "It might push your own buttons which you go off to supervision for" (6, 623). Unresolved issues and grievances

related to their own experiences were described as potentially making it difficult for them to fully empathise with both partners and maintain the accepting and non-judgmental counselling approach seen as essential for this work.

2. Making sense of infidelity

Helping the couple to develop an idea about what has happened, and why it happened in their relationship, was considered a pivotal part of the work with infidelity: “The majority of the work inevitably is around understanding why” (4, 1099). Based on their implicit understanding that infidelity doesn’t just happen but is related to deeper contextual factors, most of those interviewed stressed the importance of looking at underlying psychological motives and relationship issues in order to make sense of infidelity:

It gives an opportunity for him to say “Well that was why, you know, I had the affair, because I couldn’t talk to you about things”, or “I couldn’t do this and communication wasn’t there”, and often that gives a sense of relief to a certain extent because it gives them a context to it as to why. (1, 92-104)

Counsellors identified various contextual factors that might play a role in infidelity (“It depends on what the issues were, all sorts of things, there’s so many factors” [5, 446-447]), including a neglected or unstable relationship, birth of a first child or difficult experiences in the families of origin. The counsellors also described different ways they help clients to develop a deeper insight into and understanding of underlying factors (such as providing clients with an

explanatory framework from literature, or chair techniques to help clients to switch roles and take different perspectives).

In addition to unique contextual factors for each couple, the ways in which counsellors help their clients to make sense of infidelity are inevitably influenced by their own beliefs and implicit theories about the dynamics and factors leading to an affair. As stated above, one strong implicit belief was that infidelity was more a symptom than a cause of relationship difficulties, and not primarily caused by psychological deficiencies of the involved individuals. Some of the counsellors also revealed a systemic understanding, explaining infidelity not so much as a product of individual motivations and decisions but rather as result of relationship processes in which both partners are involved: “Because the last thing somebody wants to hear is that they could be partly responsible for the affair having happened. That’s tough to hear, but in some way they have been part of it” (6, 169-178).

Such a view has important implications for the work with the couple, shifting the focus “Away from baddy, goody, you know victim, perpetrator, you know, because that is not necessarily terribly helpful to them as a couple” (7, 510-514), and asking both partners to take some responsibility for what has happened in and with their relationship. While this might initially be difficult to accept, particularly for the receiving partner (as indicated in the quote above), several counsellors discussed how such a systemic conceptualization of infidelity can be beneficial for clients. One counsellor described how a systemic view can help to buffer high emotions (“It takes it away from the individual, makes it less direct and hurtful” [1, 122-123]) and open the door for constructive work on underlying relationship issues: “So you’re then

beginning to have a dialogue then with the relationship, of what used to happen in the relationship to make it different” (1, 127-130). Another counsellor illustrated how a shared responsibility for what has happened can empower the receiving partner and level the power balance in the relationship so that both partners can regain a sense of agency:

The next thing is trying to gently get them to a place where they can acknowledge that it’s about the two of them. So they can begin to see that they’ve got power in this relationship. Otherwise it can feel like, for the one who has not had the affair, they’ve got no power in it. You can just go off and do it. Whereas if they can begin to see actually this is about us, we’ve got equal opportunity in this, and equal power in this to make sure that it doesn’t happen again. (6, 588-594)

Some of those interviewed considered it essential for successful work with infidelity that both partners accept a shared understanding of infidelity as a relationship issue. Moving beyond the initial feelings of pain, guilt and betrayal and acknowledging their part in what happened was seen as providing a basis for clients “for saying, so now there is something we can do about that” (3, 403-414).

3. Rebuilding trust and moving forward

Counsellors shared their experience that working towards the re-establishment of trust can be complex and challenging. A first step in this process, as identified in the interviews, was the acknowledgment by the partner who had breached the trust that they had done so, and an

awareness that their partner needs the reassurance that this will not happen again. Counsellors felt that this stage might also require several cycles of apologies and expressions of forgiveness:

A couple of clients I remember, for the one who didn't have the affair, needed to hear the other one say sorry. And the other one needed to hear the forgiveness.

And we had to work and sit with that for a couple of weeks. (6, 475-477)

Another helpful aspect suggested by participants was the creation of a sense of safety and reassurance by mutual openness and practical safety arrangements in the initial stages after the disclosure of infidelity: "To open up, 'you can have a look at my emails, I'll look at your phone you look at my phone', and often that's fairly short term but it's giving the permission that it's OK" (1, 757-759). The couple might also draw reassurance from a general renegotiation of boundaries for the relationship future that are better adjusted to the needs of each partner. While changes to relationship boundaries and structure were seen as necessary in the recovery process, one counsellor acknowledged the difficulties clients may have in adjusting their relationship in the aftermath of infidelity:

The thing I often have to work with is getting both partners to see that if there is a future together it is a different future – it is not a restoration of a past. And that can be extremely difficult to come to terms with for both. (3, 476-477)

How the interviewees evaluated the outcome of their work with infidelity was linked to their implicit understanding of what constitutes successful work in these cases. Although this was

rarely made explicit, it seems that counsellors drew most satisfaction from the work with those couples where counselling was experienced as a chance for the couple to “save this relationship rather than they go and split up” (1, 928). However, presumably due to the emotional damage and the complex interplay of underlying issues, infidelity was generally seen as less likely to result in such a successful outcome than other couple issues: “It’s an area where I suppose I would acknowledge your sense of chances of success are somewhat lower than many other contexts” (3, 666-667)..

However, for those couples who do ‘recover’ from infidelity, several counsellors felt that the counselling process can help to improve the relationship quality compared to the time before the affair: “On a number of occasions, um, they will get a better relationship after the affair than for years before - because the affair’s brought certain things to a head that they’ve not, you know, that they’ve been avoiding” (5, 570-571). Working on the issues brought up by infidelity was seen as an opportunity for these couples to develop a different and deeper relationship with greater openness and awareness of each other’s feelings: “Some couples will say ‘We’ve never talked about this. We’ve never talked this deep before’” (6, 491-492).

Discussion

The intent with this study was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of couple counsellors in working therapeutically with infidelity. The findings have the potential to provide insight into couple counsellors’ work with couples affected by infidelity. The specific constellations and challenges reported by the practitioners in this study reflect in many ways the

research findings on the different stages couples go through when infidelity is disclosed, and the different emotional spaces they occupy in this process (e.g. Olson et al., 2002). Especially at the beginning of the counselling process and immediately after the revelation, counsellors see the need to keep a balance between providing a safe space for and containing the often intensely emotionally charged responses to the disclosure, and at the same time preparing the ground for a constructive counselling process in which both partners acknowledge their responsibilities for what happened in their relationship. Based on their qualitative study on the relationship processes around the disclosure of marital infidelity, Olson et al. (2002) describe this initial stage after the disclosure as a volatile ‘roller coaster of emotions that can cycle unprofitably’, with those couples who manage to move on from this stage ‘eventually shifting from a focus on emotion to a focus on cognition’ (p. 431). This corresponds with the suggestions of counsellors in this study that for an effective counselling process the couple needs to move from irrational and highly emotional exchanges (‘hurt child’) to a more rational adult-to-adult discourse. In later counselling stages, the focus appears to shift towards the work on underlying relationship issues – based on the understanding of the practitioners in this study that infidelity is a symptom and not just a cause of relationship problems. This involves working with the couple on a shared understanding of the relationship context in which infidelity occurred, encouraging them to take responsibility for their own contribution, and re-establishing trust between the partners through safety arrangements and reassurance processes. Olmstead et al. (2009) also identified the role of mutual acceptance of responsibility as a key step in working through infidelity in their study with US professionals.

However, in contrast to Olmstead et al.'s study, and contrary to Hall and Fincham's (2006) view that forgiveness (and not necessarily reconciliation) is central for favourable outcomes for couples experiencing infidelity, the need to apologise and engage in forgiveness processes did not take a central stage in the accounts of British counsellors in the present study. Participants in this study were rather focused on the steps and processes that are necessary preconditions for forgiveness work. Their implicit theories about origins and contexts of infidelity, often informed by systemic thinking, seem to shape the way they help their clients to develop explanations for infidelity, without blaming or finger-pointing at each other. By introducing the idea of infidelity as a result of relationship processes in which both partners are involved, it is possible to avoid blame and pave the way for forgiveness and reconciliation. From a systemic perspective, individuals are seen as relational beings, and their behaviour can only be understood in the context of the social and interactional systems, such as relationships and families, and the society they live in (e.g. expectations and pressure on modern partnerships, Reibstein, 2013). Systemic thinking can help counsellors in this context to maintain an impartial and empathic stance towards both partners.

However, such a stance is endangered if practitioners become vulnerable to the impact of their own unresolved issues regarding infidelity, for example due to counter transference processes (Silverstein, 1998) or a lack of self awareness (e.g. over-identifying with one of the partners, Pelusa & Spina, 2008). Also, and on a more subtle level, counsellors need to reflect on the strong cultural and societal norms and myths around infidelity that might influence their practice and interfere with their ability to connect empathically with both partners. They might find it difficult to 'counter the rigidity and sense of emotional flooding that often accompany

infidelity' (Warren, Morgan, Williams & Mansfield, 2008, p. 352) and resist the pitfall of moralizing and thereby implicitly supporting a blame approach between the partners.

Unfortunately, some of the language in the literature on infidelity and its treatment is tinged with blame and condemnation (e.g. Peluso, 2007a; Pittman, 1990) 'which might make treatment, and particularly reaching forgiveness, hard' (Reibstein, 2013, p. 369). Dramatic metaphors used in this literature (e.g. medical metaphors such as: 'heart attack', 'virus'; allusions of toxicity such as 'poisoned tree'; natural disaster references such as 'earthquake'; e.g. Warren et al., 2008) illustrate a moralised and value-laden therapeutic discourse that is at odds with an impartial and compassionate stance towards both partners (Linguist & Negy, 2005). The implicitly moralising terms used by some of the participants for the involved and receiving partner in the interviews (as indicated in some of the quotes in the result section) might also be indicative of the impact of this latent cultural discourse.

Limitations of the research and implications for future research

One of the study's limitations is the lack of generalizability, due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of the research (in-depth interviews) and the small sample of counsellors interviewed. Moreover, the emerging themes are inevitably shaped by the authors' subjectivities, despite all efforts to maintain a high level of researcher reflexivity throughout the study (e.g. by reflecting on preconceptions and potential biases in the iterative analysis process between the researchers). Participants in this study also gave retrospective accounts of their experiences. Future research could include larger and more diverse samples and focus on the therapeutic work with infidelity as experienced by couple counsellors and clients across sessions. Additionally, given the less prominent role of issues around forgiveness in this study compared to research

conducted in the US, it would be useful to further explore the role of forgiveness processes in different national settings as well as within diverse cultural groups within Britain. Further research could also specifically focus on 'successful' counselling cases and investigate the ways in which these couples benefit from counselling, learn to accept and forgive each other and develop a new perspective for their relationship.

Conclusion

Maintaining a curious and empathic therapeutic position and avoiding blame clearly seems to be an important precondition to help a couple to understand and work through wider issues raised by infidelity. In cases where these conditions are met and the couple is committed to work on their relationship, the study results indicate the potential of a relationship future with re-negotiated relationship boundaries, more openness and tolerance, and a deeper understanding of each other. In such cases, infidelity can be reframed as opportunity for individual and relationship transformation and post-traumatic growth, rather than a relationship-ending experience.

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