Abstract

A grounded theory investigation of the subjective responses from partners in couples where infidelity has occurred.

by

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This qualitative study investigates the subjective responses elicited by partners in long-term committed couples where infidelity has taken place. Each of these couples attended a couple therapy session in the aftermath of their experience of an affair, and the transcriptions of these therapy sessions served as the data set for this investigation. In their seeking of help, most couples articulated a broad, comparable trajectory of the issues; their post-affair understanding of their pre-affair relationship including the state of their pre-affair sex, the origins of the unfaithful partner’s ability to stray from the primary relationship, the impact of the affair on the couple, and the couple’s efforts to move beyond the affair. However, while some couples demonstrated an ability to arrive at new hope for the future of their relationship, others were unable to move past the challenges of the impact of the affair on the couple. Within the couples that were more focused on the impact of the affair, betrayed partners were more likely to remain in a state of anger and mistrust, while unfaithful partners maintained an effort to rationalize their actions. Within the couples that demonstrated an effort to move past their affair, partners experienced a greater degree of post-affair clarity, yielding a collaboration of strategies towards transcending the rupture caused by the affair. The study also explores implications for the clinical practice of couples who present to therapy due to infidelity, as well as suggestions for future research with this population.