COPING AND RELATIONAL INFIDELITY ACROSS THE LIFESPAN:
THE ROLE OF COMMITMENT DURING RELATIONAL DISTRESS

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ABSTRACT

Studies in areas such as counseling psychology, social psychology, and sociology have extensively covered infidelity, including gender differences for initiating the behavior, predictors for relational satisfaction, and the trust issues associated with infidelity (see Treas & Giesen, 2000). Although communication studies have begun to examine infidelity from a perspective that differs from other areas of social science, we are still left wondering what the role of communication may be for coping with a transgression and its effects. In order to understand the role of communication in romantic relationships following infidelity, adults ranging in age from 18-84 (N = 288) who were presently involved in romantic relationships were surveyed regarding attitudes towards exclusivity in their relationships, commitment to the relationship, and possible strategies for coping with the transgression. A research question regarding variance in coping strategies across the lifespan yielded significant results, indicating that coping strategies do vary according to age. Another research question that examined coping strategies according to attitudes of exclusivity yielded no significant results. In addition, open-ended data revealed differences in specific responses to infidelity, including relational dissolution and forgiveness.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A report on cohabitation, marriage, and divorce released in 2002 by the Center for Disease Control stated that “[t]he probability of a first marriage ending in separation or divorce within five years is 20 percent, but the probability of a premarital cohabitation breaking up is 49 percent” (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). Although the report does not go on to explore the direct causes for these breakups and separations, we do know that a vast amount of research has described causes such as relational dissatisfaction, verbal and physical aggression, and the lack of intimacy between partners as possible factors in the breakup of intimate relationships (Allen et al., 2005; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Smutzler, & Vivian, 1994; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). Despite the increased amount of research concerning distress in romantic relationships and the effects that emerge, there are occurrences such as infidelity and relational abuse that have been more difficult to understand and explore.

Relational infidelity is one distressing behavior that has been highlighted for the negative impact it has on various types of romantic relationships (Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, & Miller, 2002). Christopher and Kisler (2004) and Willetts, Sprecher, & Beck (2004) noted that research has begun to differentiate the effects that infidelity has on dating, marital, and cohabiting relationships in an attempt to explain the distinguishing features of these relationships. One possible weakness of these studies is the failure to incorporate communication to aid in further understanding the infidelity process. Research has neglected to adequately investigate how couples communicate with one another during and following the disclosure of the transgression, which possible
communicative coping techniques they use to maintain the relationship, or which communicative strategies they use to dissolve the relationship. As Harrison and Marsden (2004) noted, “… there has been less empirical research on the changing patterns of commitment… and indeed little on sexual affairs at the level of actual practices and processes” (p. xii). The primary purpose of this dissertation is to engage in research that focuses on communication as a significant aspect of coping with the experience of infidelity in romantic relationships. This dissertation investigates the diverse definitions that individuals have regarding commitment across the lifespan. Additionally, this dissertation attempts to detail various coping strategies for infidelity as well as determining the type of communication that can function as a salient coping strategy for this problematic event.

Studies in areas such as counseling psychology, social psychology, and sociology have extensively covered infidelity, including gender differences for initiating the behavior, predictors for relational satisfaction, and the trust issues associated with infidelity (see Treas & Giesen, 2000). Many disciplines within the social sciences provide substantial contributions to the literature, concentrating on attributions of why infidelity occurs and on the specific contexts of infidelity, while mostly ignoring the possible communicative implications of infidelity (see Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000). This being stated, several communication studies have investigated infidelity (Afifi, Felato, & Weiner, 2001; Mongeau, Hale, & Alles, 1994; and Spitzberg & Tafoya, 2004). Although each of these studies used infidelity as the relational context for its research, the foci of the studies varied greatly. Within these investigations, topics such as communicative infidelity (or infidelity in the presence of specific messages), accounts and attributions
communicated following an instance of sexual infidelity, and how identity and facework were communicated following infidelity were examined. In fact, many of these studies go so far as to call for the further examination of maintenance strategies used after disclosure of the event in order to understand the communicative patterns in the relationship (Afifi et al., 2001). Clearly, one of the possible patterns that could emerge following an instance of infidelity is communicative coping. However, there is some uncertainty about whether or not communication would be used to gather more information about the transgression, to gain an understanding of why it occurred, or to repair the relationship (if this outcome was desired).

An underlying assumption of this dissertation is that focusing on communication could benefit our understanding of the process of coping with infidelity. Social scientists are still attempting to understand coping as a phenomenon; how people cope with stressful or taxing events, how coping strategies differ between the genders, and whether or not these behaviors differ over the lifespan (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987; Moos, Brennan, Schutte, & Moos, 2006). There are also indications that coping strategies could differ as a function of relational status or satisfaction (Bowman, 1990; Ptacek & Dodge, 1995). Studies focused on a lifespan approach to communication are beginning to encompass more phenomena than earlier studies that were limited to college-aged participants and their behaviors (see Folkman et al., 1987). Specifically, this dissertation investigates how communication is used as a coping mechanism within the context of infidelity, how commitment coincides with attitudes toward exclusivity, and how coping strategies for dealing with infidelity vary across the lifespan.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Infidelity

An Introduction to Infidelity

Infidelity is primarily defined as an extra-dyadic (although typically extramarital) sexual relationship between two people (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004). According to Blow and Hartnett (2005), definitions for infidelity vary in a number of ways and encompass behaviors including but not limited to extramarital relationships, kissing, fondling, and having an affair. As prevalent as this type of infidelity may be, much of the research has been primarily limited in scope to sexual transgressions and has ignored the potential emotional nature of the behavior (Shackelford & Buss, 1997; Taylor, 1997; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Infidelity can occur without the presence of a sexual relationship between the participants. Furthermore, sexual satisfaction may not be the primary cause for initiating an extra-dyadic or extramarital relationship. In a substantive review, Blow and Hartnett (2005) acknowledge that there are different “general” types of infidelity, but that most evidence indicates “…that there are emotional-only, sexual-only, and combined sexual and emotional types of infidelity” (p. 220). They acknowledge that these three categories most likely encompass the primary definitions of infidelity, but that as society and time progresses there may be significant changes in behaviors associated with infidelity and the degree to which researchers are able to classify these behaviors under only three categories. Therefore, there may be problems when trying to limit a definition of infidelity to either sexual or emotional or a combination of the two, and there is a need to examine types of infidelity closely to determine the prevalence of specific types within the general population (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).
Why Infidelity Occurs

Sexual infidelity. Extra-dyadic or extramarital relationships that are primarily sexual in nature can be seen as intentional or unintentional (Mongeau, Hale, & Alles, 1994). The need for fidelity and commitment is strong in most romantic relationships, but the opportunity for infidelity to invade a relationship presents itself in a number of ways (Christensen & Jacobsen, 2000). Allan (2004) mentioned that individuals who are unfaithful can be motivated by the illicit or forbidden nature of the relationship; this is more often the case for men than for women. Additionally, accounts concerning the amount of sexual pleasure obtained from the initiation of such a relationship were another factor that people identified when attempting to explicate arguments for participating in such relationships (Allan, 2004).

Sexual pleasure is often a salient factor for initiation, and Treas and Giesen (2000) argued that within most sexual extra-dyadic or extramarital relationships there was an attitude that monogamy was not a valued relational trait. More often, an orientation to open sexual experiences outside the committed relationship was preferred. Opportunities for extra-dyadic affairs became more obvious and acceptable with individuals who held these attitudes and values. Perhaps the most salient factor in delineating how sexual extra-dyadic affairs are classified and initiated is the recognition of the opportunity for these relationships. Buunk and Dijkstra (2004b) note that because sex-only relationships often require little to no investment in actually creating an intimate interpersonal relationship between the participants, these relationships may be seen as more appealing in comparison to the current romantic relationship that the person may have.
Emotional infidelity. Another distinction that frequently presents itself within the literature is a distinction between uncommitted sexual relationships and emotionally intimate extra-dyadic or extramarital relationships. Emotion-only relationships may have some sexual aspect to them, but commitment and intimacy are the noteworthy characteristics. The emphasis for emotionally-unfaithful relationships is not the possible physical aspect of the affair. Although many studies examine the types and prevalence of infidelity in interpersonal relationships, few have arrived at a clearly distinct definition for what emotional infidelity entails (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). Vangelisti and Gerstenberger (2004) suggested that emotional processes in infidelity become salient when relational satisfaction or a deficit model is considered. Essentially, those who are experiencing deficits in their relationship, particularly emotional deficits, are likely to go elsewhere in search of relational satisfaction.

Allan and Harrison (2002) used marital relationships to emphasize the difference between sexual extra-dyadic relationships and emotional ones. They explained that although the rules for marriage might clearly suggest standards for the more physical and labor-oriented aspects, there is merely a general assumption that the more emotional aspects connecting the spouses to one another would seem to occur naturally within the relationship (Allan & Harrison, 2002). In instances where a lack of shared emotional commitment exists, the partner desiring this relational element may be motivated to seek connection elsewhere. Rather than having an extramarital relationship motivated by physical or sexual needs, emotional ties are the mitigating factor. Boekhout, Hendrick, and Hendrick (2003) suggest that emotional infidelity may also serve as a vehicle for personal enrichment. In their opinion, infidelity can be a behavior that allows people to...
expand their range of activities and companions, thereby achieving a sense of personal growth. The personal growth model implies that people may not initially seek out the opportunity to carry on relationships that seem extra-dyadic or extramarital in nature. As relational deficits come to the forefront of the interactions they have with others, opportunities for emotionally fulfilling secondary relationships may present themselves more often.

Emotional infidelity differs in origin from sexual infidelity and is also differentiated in terms of the relational harm it can cause to the primary romantic relationship (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Cann, Mangum, & Wells, 2001; Cann & Baucom, 2004; Nannini & Myers, 2000). Abraham, Cramer, Fernandez, and Mahler (2002) noted that both types of infidelity are seen as threatening to a relationship, and emotional infidelity not only signals a threat or decrease in commitment to the relationship, but may later affect access to other relational resources. If emotions like caring and consideration are important to the health of a satisfying relationship, then emotional infidelity would prevent those resources from being allocated to the current committed relationship in favor of the extra-dyadic relationship. Furthermore, fidelity and trust in a relationship are seen as primary features of committed relationships. Extra-dyadic relationships violate norms associated with these characteristics. People who admitted to committing adultery indicated that there were violations of trust and frequent instances of deception in order to carry on the extramarital relationship (Allen & Harrison, 2002).

Emotional infidelity not only distinguishes itself by the emotions developed within the relationship between partners, but also through the emotions that emerge
because this event has occurred. An individual who violates the bond between spouses or relational partners, and engages in frequent occurrences of deceit, can often cause feelings of guilt in the person committing the transgression, and feelings of jealousy and hurt in the other partner in the relationship (Becker, Sagarin, Guadagno, Millevoi, & Nicastle, 2004). Johnson’s (1970) early research on the experience of guilt in extramarital relationships emphasized that often males reported experiencing less guilt following infidelity, and were more likely to justify the behavior than women were. Spanier and Margolis (1983) also found gender differences for experiences of guilt after infidelity and noted that women were more likely to experience guilt than men, regardless of whether their partner was or became aware of the transgression or not. A more recent study by Fisher, Voracek, Rekkas, and Cox (2008) tied feelings of guilt to the type of infidelity (emotional, sexual, or emotional and sexual). They determined that men were more likely to only experience guilt in the case of sexual infidelity, whereas women were more likely to experience guilt in the case of emotional infidelity. Within these intense emotional attachments, women experience more guilt about the infidelity. This guilt stems from the greater investment in the extramarital relationship compared to their marriage. Mongeau, Hale, and Alles (1994) determined that the guilt that women felt in response to their extramarital affairs was related to the intentionality and responsibility that they had for the extramarital relationship because they realized their role in the potential for negative outcomes that result from their actions, and because they tended to experience the negative state in emotional ways. Not everyone who engages in infidelity will feel guilt. Purely sexual infidelity (rather than sexual and emotional) implies the person(s) involved will feel no emotions or guilt associated with their actions. Research has also indicated
that some transgressors admittedly feel no guilt if they perceive their current romantic relationships seem to have encouraged their actions. For example, if there were no boundaries within the relationship to prevent infidelity from occurring in the first place, this might indicate such behavior is permissible in the relationship (Blow & Hartnett, 2005).

Emotional infidelity may not only take its toll on those directly involved in such a relationship, but can also affect individuals who are outside parties to the relationship (such as their primary romantic partners) who may have emotional reactions to this type of infidelity as well. According to Sabini and Green (2004), infidelity demonstrates a clear devaluation of the primary romantic relationship, and emotional infidelity is more profound in that the possibility of relational dissolution is increased. This potential outcome can create feelings of jealousy for the victim(s) of infidelity because of the emotional and relational resources being allocated to an outside relationship, rather than the primary one. Becker et al. (2004) also find that jealousy may not be the only emotion elicited by this specific type of infidelity. Previous research has revealed emotions such as anger, hurt, and disgust, as well as others; emotional infidelity was more likely to elicit stronger emotional reactions than sexual infidelity.

Additional causes. Despite the many negative repercussions, infidelity still occurs within a relationship for a number of reasons. After surveying individuals who engaged in infidelity, Spanier and Margolis (1983) reported that individuals have often attributed initiating these relationships to a need for sexual variation, retaliation, and emotional satisfaction, as well as opportunity factors that encouraged the creation of an extramarital relationship. Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, and Miller (2002) also discovered that
marital dissatisfaction was another reason why people sought relationships outside their marriage. This finding correlates with research that demonstrated that marital satisfaction typically declines during the first 10 years of marriage, where large amounts of distress are often present (Halford et al., 2003). If spouses perceive inequality within their relationship in terms of emotional, physical, or other resources, they may be motivated to seek out a relationship that compensates for their existing marriage.

Infidelity may also occur based on an individual’s socialization. Essentially, specific events within an individual’s history, including past romantic relationships, may influence his or her behavior (Cann, Mangum, & Wells, 2001). Based on previous experiences, an individual might not place a high priority on fidelity if his or her previous romantic relationships had different expectations of commitment. An example of a relationship that might unknowingly influence these expectations is the cohabiting relationship. Halford, Markman, Kline, and Stanley (2003) found that premarital cohabitation often created situations between partners where there was only limited relational commitment present instead of complete commitment to one another. Even though the cohabiting relationship might eventually transition into marriage, the amount of commitment for this relationship might not transition into the amount necessary for a marriage. In addition to having an effect on commitment, Forest and Tanfer (1996) found that women who were initially in cohabiting relationships were more likely to engage in infidelity once married, citing higher rates of wife versus husband infidelity. Despite the popularity of this type of relationship, more and more evidence is coming to light that conveys the negative effects of these relationships on commitment and relational
satisfaction, which could lead to occurrences of infidelity (Hsueh, Morrison, & Doss, 2009; Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006).

As demonstrated through connections to relational history and experience, opportunity is an area within the study of extramarital relationships that has garnered much attention from researchers (see Atkins et al., 2001; Liu, 2000; Wiggins & Lederer, 1984). Opportunity or access to a potential relationship was not only identified as a construct where there were people available for infidelity to occur, but also whether or not there was access to an extramarital relationship (Atkins et al., 2001). If the environment promoted socializing or interactions between potential partners, then there was an effect on whether or not infidelity occurred. Wiggins and Lederer (1984) first detailed the influence the workplace environment had on infidelity. Later research performed by Treas and Giesen (2000) found that it was still an environment where these relationships were likely to be initiated; they also found that opportunities for infidelity could also be attributed to environments that fostered more casual attitudes towards monogamy and fidelity, such as larger cities and metroplexes. Whether this could solely be attributed to the characteristics of a large city (large numbers of people, many social networks) or the people who chose to live there was sometimes hard to distinguish.

Gender differences. Differences between the sexes in terms of initiation, likelihood to participate in an extramarital relationship, and number of potential partners are often evident when examined closely. Initial studies into gender effects for infidelity found that men were more likely to have more sexual partners outside of their primary relationship and were less likely to see sex outside of the primary relationship as negative or harmful (Spanier & Margolis, 1983; Wiggins & Lederer, 1983). Although specific
statistics regarding the number of men who willingly admit to this characteristic are hard to determine, Jones, Moore, Schratter, and Negel (2001) found that society has typically endorsed the idea that men were more prone to adultery than women. Individual differences between men and women not only were significant in the likelihood that each would engage in infidelity and the desire for such relationships, but also in how the opportunities for such relationships were perceived (Prins, Buunk, & VanYerpin, 1993; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). Men are more likely than women to be more open to the opportunity for extra-dyadic or extramarital sex than women, and this behavior might also encourage them to have more short-term versus long-term affairs in order to guarantee that sexual variety is achieved (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004b).

Although men are likely to engage in infidelity for reasons such as sexual variety, women are more likely to assess relational satisfaction before initiating an extramarital relationship. Buunk and Dijkstra (2004) argued that marital dissatisfaction was found to be associated with supportive attitudes towards extramarital sex more often in women than in men. Current infidelity literature has also determined that women have a preference for the kind of infidelity that includes more emotionally charged extra-dyadic or extramarital relationships (Abraham et al., 2002; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). Based on the emotional connection that women might develop with their partner in the extra-dyadic relationship, they are more likely to fall in love with the extra-dyadic partner, whereas males are more likely to only maintain loose friendships in these situations.
Infidelity in Various Relational Contexts

Dating and cohabiting relationships

Research is now examining differences between sexual and emotional infidelity within various relationships (see Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Roscoe, Cavanaugh, and Kennedy (1988) found that despite tendencies in many studies to emphasize connections between marital relationships and infidelity, some studies were beginning to consider couples who cohabitate. In order to distinguish cohabiting from married couples, Thompson (1984) labeled infidelity within cohabiting relationships as extra-dyadic. By basing infidelity on the amount of commitment in the relationship (which here meant that higher commitment most likely implied a married relationship versus cohabiting), researchers could differentiate one type of relationship from the other.

Christopher and Sprecher (2000) investigated the context of infidelity by examining the patterns of sexual behaviors that occurred within dating relationships. Their findings supported previous research that identified commitment as predictive of infidelity. How a dating couple perceives commitment within their relationship affects their experiences in the relationship. Although we would expect perceptions of committed romantic relationships to go across the various relationship types, this does not always happen. Christopher and Sprecher (2000) not only found that commitment influences dating and cohabiting relationships, but also found that individuals in cohabiting relationships reported that they were less monogamous than married couples. Treas and Giesen (2000) noted that this could be based not only on findings that cohabitators differed in the amount of investment compared to married couples, but that
cohabiting relationships may not lose access to relational resources if they do have an affair.

*Marital relationships*

According to Vangelisti and Gerstenberger (2004), recent statistics indicate that 20-25 percent of marriages will have one partner who has an affair over the course of the relationship, or one out of every four or five marriages. Although 85% of Americans disapproved of extramarital sex, occurrences of infidelity still occur in many marriages (Boekhout, Hendrick & Hendrick, 2003). Infidelity has been understood within most research as adultery. Vandervoort and Duck (2004) defined adultery as a transgression of marriage, which is socially and legally recognized as a relationship that should be sexually exclusive or monogamous. When commitment is examined in dating relationships, researchers find there is an inherent assumption that a married relationship would have similar commitment attitudes, if not stronger attitudes than the dating relationship. Jamieson (2004) argued that sexuality within marital relationships is equated with sexual fidelity, which is symbolic of trust between the partners. Therefore, when sexual infidelity occurs in a marriage, there seems to be a blatant disregard for the trust established through commitment to one’s partner.

Infidelity may produce numerous detrimental effects for marriages, which may seem very different from the effects that cohabiting and dating couples experience. Research within the psychology and counseling fields frequently highlights the detrimental effects of extramarital affairs (Cano, Christian-Herman, O’Leary, & Avery-Leaf, 2002; Mongeau, Hale, & Allen, 1994; Sweeney & Horowitz, 2001). Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson (2001) noted that therapists have found anywhere from 50-65% of
couples in treatment are there because of infidelity in their relationships. The disclosure of marital infidelity often leads to relationship dissatisfaction, divorce, and possible emotional or mental distress. Gordon and Baucom (1999) noticed that injured partners often seek out ways to avoid their partner after the discovery of the affair. Avoidance implies that the partner actively avoids all contact with the partner by any means possible, including terminating the relationship.

Although overwhelming evidence supports the association of infidelity with separation and even divorce, some studies have found that a couple may survive the crisis that typically ensues from infidelity. For instance, Halford et al. (2003) found that communication between spouses could aid in conflict management, particularly over distressful issues that the couple encountered. Actively communicating with one another about the transgression could allow partners to understand why it occurred and could provide a reappraisal of the relationship between the spouses. Roscoe, Cavanaugh, and Kennedy (1988) determined that couples who successfully maintained their relationships with one another following infidelity often used communication to reach an understanding about the infidelity and their relationship with one another. The idea that communication can be perceived as a type of coping mechanism within this phenomenon provides some evidence for possible associations between infidelity and certain types of communicative coping strategies.

Understanding Commitment

It is important to understand how relational partners define commitment, since it may determine whether or not infidelity occurs, as well as what type. Additionally, perceptions of commitment may also affect who participates in such relationships and
why this behavior is initiated. Commitment is an underlying characteristic of many studies covering infidelity; researchers examine it as a key variable to understanding why infidelity occurs and whether the extra-dyadic relationship will continue (see Cann & Baucom, 2004; Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999). To understand commitment, though, it is necessary to understand the role of interdependence and investment within a romantic relationship, and to consider other emerging factors as well.

Interdependence

Commitment has frequently been acknowledged by various fields within the social sciences as one of the key components necessary in romantic relationships (see Etcheverry & Le, 2005; Rydell, McConnell, & Bringle, 2004; Stanley, Whitman, & Markman, 2004; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Commitment was initially approached as a “…long-term orientation toward a relationship partner, including feelings of psychological attachment and intentions to persist through both good and bad times” (Gaines & Agnew, 2003, p. 232). Studies on commitment have found that there are two predominant ways commitment is examined: interdependence and investment. The first definition offered by Gaines and Agnew (2003) is aligned with research examining commitment through interdependence theory. Interdependence theory proposes four properties with which to analyze commitment in relationships: degree of dependence, mutuality of dependence, basis of dependence, and correspondence of outcomes. Interdependence theory argues that relational partners must attempt to coordinate their interests and efforts for the relationship to be successful, despite their own personal goals and motivations for behaviors (Gaines & Agnew, 2003; Reis & Rusbult, 2004).
Furthermore, interdependence theory recognizes two types of relationships, one of which is the communal relationship. Communal relationships are defined as relationships in which benefits and resources are determined based on the nature of the relationship between individuals (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Relationships differ in terms of expected responsiveness to one’s partner’s needs, based on the amount of communal closeness that exists between partners. Whereas people might not expect casual friends to be overly responsive to certain requests or needs, they would expect relational partners have more communal strength based on the closeness that exists between them. Reis et al. (2004) argue that interdependence ties in when we look at how partners relate to their significant others and to their sense of self, which includes goals, needs, and dispositions.

The second type of relationship within interdependence theory is the exchange relationship. In exchange relationships, as opposed to communal relationships, there is a lack of perceived responsibility for others’ needs. In communal relationships, partners observe different standards than exchange relationships. Whereas individuals in communal relationships feel a responsibility towards their partner’s welfare and needs, exchange relationships only address this based on equity norms (Reis et al., 2004).

Scholars have also viewed interdependence as an indicator of intimacy in a relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Coolsen, & Kirchner, 2004). Guerrero and Anderson (2000) defined intimacy as a strong feeling of openness and familiarity between relational partners. The openness and familiarity not only motivate relational partners to share positive emotions, but also give them freedom to express negative emotion without suffering repercussions. Intimacy may also encompass more than just openness and familiarity. According to Knobloch and Solomon (2004),
Intimacy is considered to encompass characteristics such as closeness and emotional tone, which are typically demonstrated through expressions of concern for one another throughout the relationship. Knobloch and Solomon (2004) further elaborated that specific displays of intimacy can be seen within certain behaviors, such as the use of idioms, personalized communication, and nonverbal signs of togetherness. These behaviors are not unique to one stage of a relationship or to a particular moment; rather they can be seen across the development of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). As important as the displays are, partners are also expected to respond appropriately to intimacy behaviors. Furthermore, Gable and Reis (2001) observed that the process of intimacy depends on responses expressed by the relational partners. Responses that demonstrate understanding, validation, and care from a partner are most likely to foster intimacy within a relationship.

Interdependence is not limited to appropriate displays and responses to specific behaviors or communicative events. Instead, it is likely that when a high amount of intimacy exists between relational partners, they will work to negotiate with one another to achieve tasks and goals that are important. Knobloch and Solomon (2004) noted that it is during the negotiation process that we see the presence of emotional investment, demonstrating the interdependence within the relationship. Ickes and Simpson (2004) defined emotional investment, or involvement, as the influence the relationship has on producing strong emotions, either positive or negative. Initially, because the partners are not completely enmeshed in one another’s lives, interdependence may be limited, but over time, relational partners should develop the ability to influence the activities in which they are involved as individuals and as a couple (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004).
Within relational development, the partners must learn to coordinate their behavior and reach a compromise over the amount of influence they have over one another and over their activities. Berscheid (1983) argues that relationships should transition out of negotiating interference of goals to negotiating facilitation of goals as intimacy increases in a relationship.

**Investment**

Commitment has additionally been described or defined by some studies as the degree to which powers that attract people to their partners are stronger than those that would repel them (Etcheverry & Le, 2005). Depending on how commitment is examined, interdependence between relational partners may not be obvious, so interdependence theory can be extended by measuring investment. The investment model was proposed as a way of understanding the development and dissolution of romantic relationships where other theories and concepts could not explain the possible connections between relationship satisfaction, commitment, and dissolution (Rusbult, 1983). Rusbult (1983) acknowledged that the investment model differed from interdependence by distinguishing relational satisfaction and commitment; in this case, relational satisfaction would refer to the attractiveness of the relationship, while commitment would be demonstrated through the partners’ efforts to maintain the relationship. Commitment, in the investment model, is defined as the sustainment of a relationship towards the long term, and indicates behavioral intent for actions concerning the relationship (Reis & Rusbult, 2004).

Commitment is further defined as an individual’s experience of using their relationships to fulfill needs that are interpersonal and intrapersonal in nature (Rydell, McConnell, & Bringle, 2004). Reinforcing the belief that commitment is a central force
in relationships, three primary factors are related to its measurement: increases in satisfaction, declines in the desirability of available alternatives, and increases in the investment of resources in a relationship (Reis & Rusbult, 2004; Rusbult, 1983).

According to Drigotas et al. (1999), satisfaction in the relationship is typically related to relational outcomes for the individuals. Rusbult (1983) stated that those individuals who are more satisfied with relationship in which they continually receive high rewards and low costs should be inclined to continue their current relationship in favor of any alternatives they may encounter. In most cases, the comparison level or expectations for individuals and their current relationships should outweigh the costs or benefits associated with leaving the relationship, or initiating an alternative relationship. When comparisons such as these occur within a relationship, alternative quality becomes salient to a relationship. Alternative quality is the assessment of benefits and costs anticipated in potential alternative relationships (Drigotas et al., 1999). However, Rusbult (1983) argued that another key concept in understanding commitment came through investment level. The investment model accounts for perceptions of commitment when an individual believes that any alternative to their current relationship is poor or inferior (Rusbult, 1983). Therefore, it seems likely that a person will be motivated to invest in a relationship in which satisfaction is high and alternatives are not beneficial in some way.

Although the investment model seems to clearly outline the specific components of investment, understanding specific maintenance behaviors is also useful in understanding the motivation behind sustaining a particular romantic relationship (Dindia, 2000; Drigotas et al., 1999; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). These maintenance acts include disparagement of alternatives, willingness to sacrifice,
accommodative behavior, and perceived superiority of the relationship. Wieselquist et al. (1999) remarked that most evidence indicates these maintenance acts are directly indicative of the couple’s well-being. As noted in Rydell et al. (2004), the perceptions of the relationship, or a “we” versus “I” perspective, are important to the function of the relationship. Overall, the maintenance strategies used in a relationship can significantly affect the behaviors and interactions that occur between relational partners.

Additionally, the health of a relationship is dependent on the ability to maintain perceptions of the current relational partner as superior to potential others (Reis & Rusbult, 2004). However, there is the possibility that disenchantment may occur in light of an overwhelming number of negative behaviors or interactions. Cunningham et al. (2005) noted that unless romantic passion in the relationship is sustained over time, it is unlikely that positive attitudes will successfully buffer any negative behaviors that may occur. The most extreme end of this disenchantment follows with a significant decrease in emotional investment, as evidenced by a partner’s lack of effort in devotion to the relationship. This would follow under the strategies that allow partners to avoid seeking relational alternatives or to see their current relationship as superior to other relationships, whether past or present. In studies examining relational conflict, there is significant evidence that the frequency of negative events or emotions within a relationship can affect relational satisfaction (Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee, & Ault, 2005; Gaelick, Bodenhausen, & Wyer, 1985; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002; Yoshimura, 2004). Stanley et al. (2002) noted that when interpersonal commitment decreases, alternative monitoring frequently occurs. The likelihood that an individual would resort to this tactic increases based on that individual’s lack of emotional investment.
Alternative Perspectives

There is little debate about the claim that commitment is grounded in investment and interdependence. However, there may be other factors that influence commitment, and commitment can be characterized by aspects other than investment or interdependence. Johnson (1991, 1999) presented a three-part model of commitment that included personal, moral, and structural aspects. Personal commitment in relationships accounts for an individual’s desire to continue a relationship based on his or her attraction to his or her partner, to the relationship, or both. Additionally, personal commitment also considers how the relationship functions as a part of an individual’s identity. In other words, individuals may choose to continue in their relationships despite dissatisfaction with their partners and the relationships, simply because they directly associate who they are with the relationship. Johnson (1999) explains that moral commitment can be defined as any type of obligation to continue a relationship based on norms or values, the partner in the relationship, or a desire to sustain the relationship for the sake of consistency.

Finally, structural commitment considers four components: alternatives, social pressure, termination procedures, and irretrievable investments. Johnson (1999) argued that alternatives could not be simplified to alternative relationships that could be established compared to the current one; instead, alternatives also encompass a consideration of options such as housing, income, and employment. Social pressure encompasses reactions that others (i.e. family and friends) may have to communication about the relationship terminating. In this case, some people feel the need to remain committed to a relationship merely for the sake of not disappointing others, or to avoid experiencing other negative reactions from others. Termination procedures can often
influence commitment according to how difficult it may be to leave a relationship. This can include ideas concerning divorce for marital relationships, as well as other issues that must be endured as a result of the decision to terminate the relationship. Lastly, irretrievable investments may also play a role in commitment due to the time and resources that an individual has invested in a relationship. This closely echoes sentiments from the investment model; however, these may be weighted differently when all four factors are considered together for relational commitment.

Clearly, Johnson (1991, 1999) offers a view of commitment that encompasses many of the experiences and influences that couples may assess when determining their commitment to a relationship. However, Stanley and Markman (1992) decided to redistribute the three components of commitment into two: personal dedication and constraint commitment. Personal dedication differs from personal commitment in that personal dedication also includes a desire to maintain and improve the relationship on some level. Not only does it include relational improvement, but the motivation for this behavior comes from a desire that both partners benefit. Constraint commitment encompasses both moral and structural commitment. According to Stanley and Markman (1992), there is no need to place value on one relational constraint over another; instead, it is better to understand how they all work to constrain an individual to a relationship.

Regardless of which particular view of commitment is endorsed, that of Johnson or Stanley and Markman, it is important to emphasize the influence of factors in addition to investment or interdependence. These factors could be presumed to differ according to the type of romantic relationship, and some studies have found this to be the case. Stanley, Whitton, and Markman (2004) and Kline et al. (2006) found that commitment
can significantly differ in cohabiting relationships when compared to marriages, and that there are also differences in commitment between genders in these relationships. These findings are noteworthy because there appears to be a trend for many couples either to cohabitate prior to marriage or to cohabitate long-term and never formally marry. Furthermore, studies that employ this perspective on commitment could be useful in understanding the change in commitment as it progresses from a dating relationship to a more committed relationship, like marriage or long-term cohabitation. Rather than offering just one view of commitment in a relationship, Stanley and Markman’s perspective (1992) allows us to understand exactly what influences are at work in a romantic relationship.

Coping

Defining Coping and its Strategies

Coping research provides an opportunity to gather an in-depth understanding of how stress affects an individual, positively and negatively (Skinner, Edge, Altman, and Sherwood, 2003). Various studies have focused on how people deal with the stressful events that they encounter in their lives; however, arguments about how to conceptualize or measure coping are still developing and changing (Skinner et al., 2003). Coping is defined as “an individual’s efforts to manage those demands appraised as either taxing or exceeding available resources” (DeLongis & Preece, 2002, p. 119). Typically, coping is examined in terms of specific strategies or categories that are in some cases classified as either problem-focused or emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping strategies attempt to change the relationship between individuals and the environments or situations they are experiencing (DeLongis & Preece, 2002). Essentially, this type of strategy occurs when a
person manages demands based specifically on the environment or physical place in which those demands occur. Emotion-focused coping strategies are more likely to focus on managing the emotions generated from the situation, rather than on managing the specific environment.

However, research examining coping strategies has also emerged with another type of classification. Ptacek and Dodge (1995) noted that within relationship research, studies sought not only to classify how people deal with specific situations, but also how their perceptions of relationships changed, evolved, or were maintained based on that context. As these perceptions affected the maintenance of the overall relationship, relationship-focused strategies were then emphasized within future coping research studies. Relationship-focused strategies are those which manage, regulate, and preserve a relationship during times of stress (DeLongis & Preece, 2002). Realizing the impact of stressful situations on relationships, researchers then began to focus their attentions on the relationship as an entity that was vulnerable to stressful situations, whereas the research about coping was previously limited to the individual.

Based on the three types of classifications, specific strategies can often achieve specific goals, depending on the person experiencing the stressful or taxing situation. Studies that attempt to understand how coping affects various contexts often phrase the discussion in terms of specific strategies that people use when they encounter particularly stressful situations (Amirikhan, 1998; Frye & Karney, 2002; Guerrero, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995; Samp & Solomon, 2001; Skinner et al., 2003). Some of these strategies look at the ways people directly respond to stress, whether active (e.g. seeking assistance, problem-solving) or passive (e.g. denial) in nature (Skinner et al., 2003). The
active or passive nature of these strategies truly distinguish these strategies from one another, particularly when determining the amount of effort exerted to cope with the stressor, or whether they are involuntarily enacted. Attempting to create a distinction in the specific strategy used implies that some are intentional, controlled, and effortful; which also suggests that people not only choose the strategy but also are aware of possible outcomes that may emerge from this form of coping (Skinner et al, 2003).

Additionally, earlier research from Marco, Neale, Schwartz, Shiffman, and Stone (1999) determined that consistently, people are more likely to use the most basic coping strategies within a stressful situation, and that the efficacy of the strategy depends on the situation. This distinction is fairly new to coping research, and studies are exploring whether or not this classification applies to the larger categorization of coping strategies, and whether or not it is affected by individual characteristics. Additionally, there is some question about time as a salient variable in determining whether a coping strategy is intentional or involuntary and potentially leaves the question of whether time and repetition would promote the use of a certain strategy over another one.

Amirkhan (1998) found that attributions affect choice of coping strategy. The use of attributions would allow a person to identify three characteristics of the situation that would function within their coping experience: locus of the cause, stability of the cause, and controllability of the cause. In determining the locus of the cause for a stressful situation, a person is likely to try to understand whether the situation was based on internal or external factors. In the stability of the cause, a person attempts to determine how permanent the situation is and the likelihood that it will occur again. Finally, by
examining the controllability of a cause, the person attempts to explain how to deal with a similar situation in the future.

Another factor frequently identified within coping research is that of social support. MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, and Budarz (2004) noted social support has frequently proven to buffer stressful situations and the effects of those situations for many individuals. The authors also point to the significant use of advice as an enabler for coping, based on how a support-seeker responds to the advice itself. Depending on the quality of the support messages and whether or not this type of support was sought, a person is likely to cope with a situation more effectively than through the use of purely intrapersonal methods.

Guerrero, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, and Eloy (1995) noted that strategies often differed when the stressful situation involved a relationship, rather than an experience salient to only one person. Within relationships, coping strategies varied based on four categories: actions toward relational change, cognitive reappraisal or reassessment, outreach to social networks, and avoidance or denial. Although these categories overlap with strategies suggested in other lines of coping research, Guerrero et al. (1995) acknowledged the key differences as lying within the perceptions of the relationship. The first category, actions toward relational change, entails the possibility of focusing on the more positive aspects of the relationship, such as the intimacy and trust within it. Cognitive reappraisal as a strategy would involve a person trying to improve his or her self-esteem or decrease the importance of the relationship. Reaching out to social networks might also be seen as a positive coping strategy because others may be able to assist in repair to self-esteem or to perceptions about the relationship. Avoidance or
denial was not considered a useful strategy, as determined by other studies, based on the amount of emotions and cognitions that could be blocked by a person in response to the situation.

Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect

As useful as social support and other coping mechanisms may be, active coping may present itself in a variety of ways. Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Gunn (1982) studied how individuals cope with dissatisfaction in relationships, and romantic ones specifically. Frustrated by a lack of consistency within the factors of coping associated with dissatisfaction, Rusbult et al. (1982) posited that individuals in a deteriorating relationship would consider factors such as investment and commitment, and would also account for the overall deterioration of a relationship. Previous research within the area of relational dissatisfaction appeared limited in three important aspects of dissatisfaction. First, most of the extant literature seemed to assume that the only plausible response to dissatisfaction in a relationship was termination of the relationship. Rusbult (1993) suggested that such an assumption permitted no means for the dyad to find constructive ways to manage tension instigated by dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the literature was limited to examinations of dissatisfaction at static moments in time, rather than over the course of a relationship. Many researchers would only focus on the couple and coping during a specific conflict, rather than considering the pattern of behaviors that might occur over time. Finally, Rusbult (1993) also argued that the extant literature would only consider single modes of response to dissatisfaction, rather than multiple reactions. This limitation appeared to be a disservice to relationships because it would fail to consider a wider range of behaviors and thus, future research would need to consider commitment,
investment, and interdependence in its assessments of reactions to relational dissatisfaction.

Adapting the work of Hirschman (1970) for application to interpersonal relationships, Rusbult et al. (1982) emerged with four methods of coping: exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect. These four responses to dissatisfaction are classified according to whether they are active or passive, and destructive or constructive to the relationship. Exit is any type of action with which a person would attempt to formally or informally separate from a relationship, and can include moving away, getting a divorce, or de-escalating the romantic relationship to friendship status. Voice involves tendencies either to discuss the problems in the relationship or to seek help from others to reach a resolution or compromise.

In contrast to exit and voice, loyalty and neglect function differently as potential coping strategies. Loyalty encompasses behavior including waiting for the problem to subside, hoping that things will improve without any effort from the individual, and giving things time. Neglect is seen in behaviors such as ignoring the partner, refusing to discuss the problem at hand, or criticizing the partner for things unrelated to the problem. These two strategies are classified as passive because rather than coping directly with the problem or the dissatisfaction, these strategies may have little to no effect on the problem itself. Further research using this framework for coping and problem-solving in relationships found that the health of a relationship depends on the particular coping style the relational partners use (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986a, 1986c). When examining the consequences of using constructive or destructive tactics, more relational satisfaction was demonstrated in relationships where individuals did not react with either
the exit or neglect strategy, but did actively employ voice. This could imply that communication between the partners could serve as a more positive and beneficial way to cope with a negative situation in the relationship.

This framework has since been found to be salient to dissatisfaction in multiple contexts, including nonromantic close relationships, activities such as psychotherapy, and employment (Derlega, Winstead, Lewis, & Maddux, 1993; Rusbult, 1993; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988). These contexts have reinforced the overall salience of this framework towards coping with dissatisfaction and have also indicated that differences may exist between the genders in choosing a specific strategy. Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek (1986) noted that women appeared to engage more in voice and loyalty than their male partners. Males, in contrast, appeared to engage in the exit strategy more frequently. However, Rusbult et al. (1986b) and Rusbult (1993) noted that these differences were weak in some studies and inconsistent, as well. In fact, Rusbult (1993) noted that psychological femininity and masculinity yielded bigger differences in behavior, rather than just gender differences. This seems to imply that these strategies may resonate according to specific roles that an individual plays in his or her relationship over time.

*Changes in Coping across the Lifespan*

A person can employ a variety of coping strategies during a particularly stressful situation. While the use of a particular strategy is dependent on the situation, age or lifespan development is also influential in these decisions (Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, & Hobart, 1987). Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, and Novacek (1987) suggested various interpretations of age-related changes in coping do exist. One of these
interpretations, the developmental interpretation, finds that there are inherent changes in coping behaviors as people age (Folkman et al., 1987). Rather than relying solely on the environment or situation to explain the use of a particular strategy, this perspective suggests that as people age, they may regress developmentally and use more egocentric behaviors in their coping strategies, or they may choose to use more mature coping behaviors, depending on their place in the lifespan. For example, Labouvie-Vief et al. (1987) noted that cognitive complexity arrives with age and replaces more youthful views of looking at conflict within various situations. Someone younger in age is more likely to cope with conflict or stressful situations by using strategies such as denial or projection (placing blame on others). In contrast, an older or more mature person is less likely to cope with stressors through hostile or escapist techniques; instead, as Labouvie-Vief et al. (1987) found, they will rely on such coping strategies as humor, suppression, and sublimation (diverting an expression of the reaction to the situation to one that is acceptable). Furthermore, older persons tend to reframe negative events and view them as positive, indicative of a strategy that may accept the stressful nature of the event, but also allow for more evaluation of the strategies available to cope with the event (Labouvie-Vief et al., 1987). Blanchard-Fields (2007) also noted within her research a tendency for older adults to use more emotion-regulation coping strategies for stressful situations. She explained that the tendency to rely on this strategy is based on the fact that older adults are more concerned with social connectedness, or maintaining relationships with others. Given this concern, when older adults are involved in a stressful event that is perceived to be uncontrollable, they are more likely to more successfully differentiate when the situation requires action versus passivity. Evaluating a situation by these two categories
(action and passivity) encourages flexibility when applying problem-solving strategies to various contexts (Blanchard-Fields, 2007).

As much as age itself becomes a major variable in how people cope with stressful situations, combining age and gender could also have an effect. Although some studies have disagreed that gender and age have effects (see Bowman, 1990), early studies suggested that there were differences in coping processes between men and women (Gutmann, 1974; Hamilton & Fagot, 1988; Lowenthal, Thurner, & Chiriboga, 1975). Hamilton and Fagot (1988) noted that theoretically, women are more likely to express their emotions during problematic situations, whereas men will attack the situation in either a constructive or destructive manner. They further noted that when these claims were made by previous studies, there was little to no disagreement with them. However, Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, and Novacek (1987) noted that as they age, women become actively aggressive in their attempts to manage the situation, while men become more passive and mild. This idea appears contrary to the popular response indicated by Hamilton and Fagot (1988). Indeed, differences based on gender are still in question, with some studies noting no difference whatsoever, and others noting some difference (Folkman, Lazarus, 1980; Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, and Novacek, 1987; Hamilton & Fagot, 1988). Evidence of the differences between the genders becomes more obvious within the contextual interpretation, where the specific stressor could elicit different coping strategies for men and women (Moos et al., 2006).

The other interpretation in the changes for coping strategies as people age is the contextual interpretation. Here, this perspective views changes in coping strategies according to the situations people face as they age (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, &
Novacek, 1987). For example, as people age, they are more likely to deal with stresses not only related to their interpersonal relationships, but also areas such as health and well-being. Although there are areas that are more salient to older adults versus younger adults, it is still likely that a particular coping strategy is employed more often as people age, based on their situations and the stress such situations cause (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987). Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, and Novacek (1987) noted that age differences in coping were significant and indicated that younger adults were more likely to employ more active and interpersonal forms of coping, whereas older adults were more likely to employ more passive strategies. The research of Labouvief-Vief et al. (1987) on the developmental and life-span differences in coping suggests that more mature individuals are often likely to reassess negative events and use more inner-focused control and coping, which could suggest or seem like a passive attempt to cope with the stressful situation.

To further understand the specific stressors that affect these differences in age groups, Moos, Brennan, Schutte, and Moos (2006) looked at chronic stressors in older adults to determine how contextual and personal factors influenced coping outcomes. Although problem-solving and approach or active coping responses were typical for most contexts, chronic stressors tended to involve more avoidance strategies. Typically, these chronic stressors were seen as health issues, interpersonal issues, and financial or work events or contexts (Moos et al., 2006). Because these stressors may be more longstanding and less likely to change, older adults tend to adopt strategies that they might not otherwise use for dealing with these interpersonal events, such as dealing with the event indirectly (Moos et al., 2006). Moos et al. (2006) noted that health issues were more
likely to include coping strategies such as emotion-focus or avoidance; interpersonal and work-related stressors were more likely to elicit problem-solving and approach strategies. Furthermore, the more stressful the event a person is experiencing at a given time determines his or her appraisal of the stressor, and the strategy choice as well. The responses from older adults varied greatly from those given by younger and middle aged adults, in that older adults were less likely to engage avoidance strategies, unless the stressor was health-related (Moos et al., 2006).

As influential as context may be on coping, the involvement of another person may influence coping strategy choice, as well. Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser (2006) found that these strategies may not be limited to an individual’s experience of coping, but dyadic coping also emerges within the interpersonal stressors. “During the entire life span, various developmental tasks, critical life events, and, just as important, daily hassles are stressors to be coped with individually as well as by a couple or a family” (Bodenmann et al., 2006, p. 485). During the experience of dyadic coping, it is expected that any reactions from one partner would be a reflection of the stress the other partner is coping with (Bodenmann et al., 2006). In this case, dyadic coping would function to improve or maintain relational satisfaction and could still work to enhance the coping skills of the individual. Examples of this occurrence have also been seen within relationships where there is stress experienced during a health-related stressor (Ruiz, Matthews, Scheier, & Schulz, 2006). In this case, the coping skills of the partner affected the spouse’s recovery from an intense medical procedure, and the total amount of time it took to recover from the procedure itself. Furthermore, if dyadic coping is salient to a relationship, it is likely that the experience of dyadic coping would change over time.
Earlier research performed by Bowman (1990) indicated that this could possibly be
differentiated by age groups, in addition to the length of the relationship.

Rationale, Hypotheses, and Research Questions

Romantic relationships are developed and defined by the amount of
interdependence, investment, or both, that exists within the relationship. Communication
may be an important mechanism in the development or dissolution of a relationship,
where a couple would intensify, sustain, or de-escalate the relationship based on
interactions that occur between the relational partners. The commitment literature has
shown that individuals who are committed, interdependent, and invested in their
relationship are able to fulfill each other’s needs and sustain the relationship over time.
Additionally, there are indications that a couple’s relationship status is likely affected by
the events that a couple experiences, both positive and negative in nature. Clearly, the
presence of infidelity in a relationship can have a range of effects on a relationship, based
on the amount of commitment or interdependence between the partners.

Similarly, attitudes about relational exclusivity could have an effect on how
infidelity in a relationship is explained. Whether or not a couple maintains the same
expectations for exclusivity and communicates these expectations to one another could
influence a predisposition to infidelity or exclusivity. Literature on coping and coping
strategies indicates that there are differences in the strategies that partners use during the
problematic events in their lives, some of which are based on where they are in the
lifespan and on their genders. Once again, communication also plays a role; whereas an
older individual might be more likely to cope with and resolve a situation, someone
younger might see fit to dissolve the relationship without understanding why a specific
incident or behavior occurred. In light of these concepts and perspectives introduced within the review of literature, this study puts forth the following hypotheses and research questions.

First, in order to understand the role that attitudes concerning exclusivity and non-exclusivity play within committed relationships, and especially to see if attitudes of intimacy or interdependence correlate with these measures, the following hypothesis is posed:

\[ H1: \text{Those experiencing higher exclusivity in relationships will report higher scores of commitment than those experiencing lower exclusivity.} \]

Second, as indicated within the literature on the various perspectives of commitment, those who are committed to their current romantic relationships will attempt to maintain the relationship, even through problematic events. It is highly likely that the amount of commitment will determine which coping strategies are employed (passive versus active and destructive versus constructive) when experiencing problematic events; therefore, it is hypothesized:

\[ H2: \text{Those who report higher scores of commitment within their relationships will report using more active and constructive coping strategies in their relationships.} \]

Acknowledging that relationships are important to individuals regardless of their place in the lifespan, Chiriboga (2002) suggested that with age people become more knowledgeable and selective of their interpersonal relationships. This selectivity functions as a method for not only ensuring relational stability from the stressors they encounter in these relationships, but also indicates investment in the relationship (Chiriboga, 2002). Infidelity could be viewed as a relational stressor that is likely to
threaten relational stability and investment, and has been known to affect relationships for both younger and older adults and their marital relationships. Because we are unsure of the exact relationship between commitment, infidelity, and coping, whether differences may occur between younger and older adults, and the role of communication within each of these elements, the following research questions also merit investigation:

*RQ1:* Does the definition of infidelity differ across the lifespan?

*RQ2:* How do coping strategies vary across the lifespan in response to infidelity?

*RQ3:* How do coping strategies used in relationships vary with the degree of exclusivity across the lifespan?

*RQ4:* How does reported relational commitment and coping strategy vary with degree of exclusivity across the lifespan?
CHAPTER TWO
METHODS
Overview of Multiple Methods Design

The goals of this dissertation are: to understand how infidelity is defined by individuals in romantic relationships; to understand conceptualizations of commitment and exclusivity in romantic relationships in order to assess coping strategies used during the presence of infidelity in the relationship; to understand how each of these coping strategies can vary across the lifespan; and to advance studies in communication within these areas. In order to reach these goals, a multiple methods design was used to collect data from individuals across the lifespan at different points in their romantic relationships.

Survey Component

Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited in three different ways. First, students at a large northeastern university who were enrolled in a basic communication course with a research participation requirement were recruited to participate. Students were assigned to this study based on specific screening questions assessed in a survey at the beginning of the semester. One of these questions asked the students to indicate whether or not they were currently in a romantic relationship, another asked if they might have a parent or step-parent willing to complete a mailed questionnaire, and a final question asked if they might have a grandparent willing to complete a mailed questionnaire. All students received credit for participation, regardless of whether or not information for a parent
and/or grandparent was given. A majority of the young adults for this study (those aged 18–25) were recruited through this method.

The individuals whose contact information was provided by the child or grandchild were mailed a packet that included a letter from the researcher and an implied consent form (see Appendices A and B) detailing the nature of the project and the criteria for participation. Also included in this packet were a self-addressed stamped return envelope and a survey for them to complete. To ensure a varied sample from adults aged 26 and older, snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants. In this case, individuals who did and did not participate in the project were asked to refer friends and family members who were interested in participating, if they met the study’s criteria. Adults who indicated interest in the study were mailed a different version of a letter from the researcher (see Appendix C), which was included in a packet also containing an implied consent form, survey, and self-addressed return envelope. Adults who were not students of the university did not receive compensation for completing the survey portion of this project.

**Participants**

Participants for this study consisted of adults who were currently involved in committed dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships. The sample consisted of 288 adults, of whom 181 (63.1%) were females and 106 (39.1%) were males (three participants did not identify their sex). The mean age of the participants was 33.54 years old ($SD = 16.18$, range = 18-84). The average length of their romantic relationships was 12.00 years ($SD = 14.55$ years, range = .08-68.5 years). Of this sample, 281 (97.6%) indicated that this was currently an exclusive relationship and six (2.1%) indicated that it
was not (one person did not respond). The six individuals who indicated that they had additional romantic partners reported having anywhere from one to three partners, in addition to their current one. When asked if the dating partner considered the relationship to be exclusive, 283 (98.3%) indicated that it was, whereas four (1.4%) indicated that it was not (one person did not respond). When asked to indicate the number of additional romantic partners for their significant others, participants reported a range from one to nine additional partners.

Participants were then asked to respond to a question asking whether or not they were currently involved in another romantic relationship of which their primary relational partner was not aware, whether sexual, emotional, or a combination of the two. A majority of the participants, 280 (97.2%) indicated that this was not the case. However, seven (2.4%) individuals did indicate that they were participating in a relationship of which their partners were unaware (one person did not respond). Participants were then asked to indicate whether they had in the past had relationships of which their partner was not aware, and if so, how many times such relationships had occurred. A majority of participants, 253 (87.8%), indicated that this was so, and the frequency for the occurrences ranged anywhere from one to ten times (\(M = 2.28, SD = 2.43\)). They were then asked to report the same statistics for their current partners. In this case, 268 (93.1%) of the participants indicated that they had not discovered their partner engaging in outside relationships that of which the participants were not made aware of. However, 20 (6.9%) participants did reveal that this had occurred in their current relationship, and that the frequency for this behavior ranged from one to twenty times (\(M = 2.20, SD = 4.23\)).

Demographic statistics were also gathered for this sample, as shown in Tables 1 through 3.
Table 1
Number of Participants According to Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant race</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>81.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Asian-American</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>288</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Number of Participants According to Sexual Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>94.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>288</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
Number of Participants According to Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic/Roman Catholic</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None/No Religious Affiliation</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>288</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

The survey packet that was given to each participant included the following measures:

Relational Closeness

Participants for this study completed the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) to assess relational closeness; it is a one-item, visual measure. Participants chose from one of seven diagrams showing overlap of two circles, one representing self, the other representing the relational other. Specifically, the diagrams range from the circles not touching (i.e., low amounts of closeness) to the circles almost completely overlapped (i.e., high amounts of closeness). Because the IOS is one item, reliability cannot be determined; however, Aron et al. (1992) describe the instrument as a way to measure closeness and an instrument determined to not be
susceptible to social desirability. For this sample, the mean for relational closeness via
the IOS was 5.64 (SD = 1.43). Both men (M = 5.70, SD = 1.51) and women (M = 5.61,
SD = 1.39) reported high closeness in their relationships. An independent sample t-test
was then conducted to determine whether there were significant differences across
gender. However, three participants did not indicate their gender on their survey, so this
statistic was calculated using N = 285 and there were no significant differences between
the two groups (t(285) = .612, p > .05).

*Relationship Issues Scale*

The Relationship Issues Scale was developed by Boekhout et al. (2003) in order
to measure attitudes and behaviors regarding exclusivity and non-exclusivity in
relationships and uses a 5-point Likert scale (e.g. strongly disagree to strongly agree) to
assess agreement with each statement for the various dimensions. Although infidelity
research has predominantly focused on the role of the more physical side of this
phenomenon, gauging the areas of exclusivity and non-exclusivity can also indicate the
values and expectations that people have for committed relationships. The 37 items in the
instrument measure the following dimensions and their respective following reliability
scores when used in previous studies: five items measuring sexual non-exclusivity (e.g. having sex with someone other than one’s primary partner is a threat to relationship
intimacy/stability; α = .73), four items measuring general non-exclusivity (e.g. an
exclusive relationship does not mean that a man and a woman must give up all of their
friends; α = .59), five items measuring non-exclusive friendship expectations (e.g. I
expect to have same-sex friendships while in my primary relationship; α = .84), five
items measuring exclusive relationship expectations (e.g. I expect to be the only one to
meet my partner’s sexual needs; $\alpha = .73$), seven items measuring benefits of other relationships (e.g. regarding the fulfillment of my needs, besides my relationship with my partner, I would characterize the other relationships that I currently have as a way to express other aspects of myself; $\alpha = .88$), two items measuring drawbacks of other relationships (e.g. regarding the fulfillment of my needs, besides my relationship with my partner, I would characterize the other relationships that I currently have as detracting from my primary relationship; $\alpha = .55$), six items measuring benefits of exclusive relationships (e.g. in an exclusive relationship, where it is expected that I would do everything with my partner and have all my needs met by my partner, I would feel like I always had someone there for me; $\alpha = .82$), and three items measuring drawbacks of exclusive relationships (e.g. in an exclusive relationship, where it is expected that I would do everything with my partner and have all my needs met by my partner, I would tend to get bored; $\alpha = .71$). For this study, the score for each dimension was computed by adding the scores for each item in the subscale, including items that were reverse coded. Scores ranged from 62 to 106 for the participants in this study. The means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for each of the dimensions are listed in Table 4. Based on their lower Cronbach’s reliability scores, the general non-exclusivity and exclusive relationship expectations following dimensions were dropped from analysis: general non-exclusivity and exclusive relationship expectations.
Table 4
Means, Standard Deviations and Reliability for Relationship Issues Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Non-exclusivity</td>
<td>10.44</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Non-exclusivity</td>
<td>18.41</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive Relationship Expectations</td>
<td>18.22</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>.511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-exclusive Friendship Expectations</td>
<td>16.93</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Other Relationships</td>
<td>23.23</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawbacks of Other Relationships</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>.660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Exclusive Relationships</td>
<td>21.08</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawbacks of Exclusive Relationships</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.701</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Commitment Inventory

Given the plethora of scales available to study commitment and its components, Stanley and Markman (1992) created a scale that attempts to encompass all of the dimensions of commitment and remains relatively parsimonious. By examining dedication to the relationships and the constraints that make a person committed to the relationship, it may be possible to fully understand all the factors working within a relationship. The version of Stanley and Markman’s commitment inventory that was used in this study included 34 items with a 5-point Likert (strongly disagree to strongly agree) scale measuring constraint commitment through the following dimensions: four items measuring social pressure (e.g. my family really wants this relationship to work), four items measuring termination procedure (e.g. the process of ending this relationship would require many difficult steps), six items measuring concern for partner’s welfare (e.g. I would feel guilty for ruining my partner’s life if I ended this relationship), four items measuring structural investments (e.g. I have put a number of tangible valuable resources into this relationship), eight items measuring alternative quality (e.g. I cannot imagine
how my life could be as good without my partner as it is with my partner), and four items measuring availability of partners (e.g. I would have trouble finding a suitable partner if this relationship ended). The short form of the personal dedication subscale was used, which included four items assessing attitudes about the relationship progressing into the long-term (e.g. I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now). Scores for each dimension were calculated by adding the items for each subscale together. The final scores for constraint commitment were then calculated by adding each of the dimensions together and scores ranged from 12 to 95; personal dedication was simply calculated by adding the four items together and scores ranged from 0 to 16. A final commitment score was calculated by adding scores for constraint commitment and personal dedication together, which included a range of 17 to 109; thus, higher scores reflect stronger commitment.

The reliabilities for the subscales that measure constraint commitment were determined to be acceptable and ranged from .70-.89 in the development of the scale (Stanley & Markman, 1992). The reliability for the short form of the personal dedication scale was found to be .71. Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for the scale for this sample are included in Table 5.

*Table 5*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
<th>Standard Deviation (SD)</th>
<th>Reliability (α)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Pressure</td>
<td>10.29</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination Procedure</td>
<td>11.01</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for Partner’s Welfare</td>
<td>13.55</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>.745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Investment</td>
<td>8.83</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Quality</td>
<td>11.58</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of Partners</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Dedication</td>
<td>12.72</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.838</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect Measure**

To answer the question of how individuals respond to dissatisfaction in their romantic relationships, Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983) developed a scale that would sort these responses according to four categories: exit (e.g. ending the relationship), voice (e.g. expressing dissatisfaction), loyalty (e.g. remaining loyal to the relationship), and neglect (e.g. allowing the relationship to become stagnant). Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983) argued that classifying such responses along these dimensions would allow researchers to encompass the full range of any reactions that occur in response to relational dissatisfaction. This scale includes 28 items that employ a 9-point Likert scale (I am very certain I would never do this to – I am very certain I would do this). To frame this measure according to the purposes of this study, participants were asked to read the following scenario, substituting their partner’s initials and appropriate information into the following blanks as appropriate:

You and your partner, ______________, have been dating/married _______ months/years. You have recently discovered that your partner is currently involved in a romantic relationship with another man/woman. Given the situation that you and your partner, ______________ are in, please tell us how YOU would react to the situation by responding to the following items with one of the following eight responses.

In past studies, the dimensions have yielded the following reliabilities in some studies: exit, α = .82; voice, α = .88; loyalty, α = .85; and neglect, α = .72. A follow-up study yielded reliabilities close to the initial study: exit, α = .87; voice, α = .76; loyalty, α = .62; and neglect, α = .82 (Rusbult et al., 1982). The means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for this study are included in Table 6. However, based on its low reliability score, neglect was dropped as a dimension for analysis. Scores for each of the acceptable dimensions were as follows: Exit, 0 to 56; Voice, 0 to 56; and Loyalty, 0 to 48. A final
classification for a preferred coping method was determined by choosing the highest score out of the remaining dimensions, where the highest score was at least five units away from the next highest score.

Table 6
Means, Standard Deviations and Reliability for Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect Measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exit</td>
<td>35.00</td>
<td>13.76</td>
<td>.882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>39.81</td>
<td>9.08</td>
<td>.708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>15.52</td>
<td>11.05</td>
<td>.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>17.98</td>
<td>8.52</td>
<td>.575</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measure for Change in Definition of Infidelity and Coping

As the literature on infidelity indicates, there are many perceptions of specific behaviors included within this concept. Although the biggest differences are linked to whether the act was sexual or emotional, there are still questions about the specific actions that people believe define infidelity. In order to assess whether definitional differences do exist across the lifespan, one open-ended question asked participants to define what they considered to be infidelity in a romantic relationship, including any references to specific behaviors or contexts.

Research has also shown that coping strategies may differ depending on the severity of the stressful event an individual experiences. Although Rusbult’s (1993) Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect measure may capture many of the coping strategies used in response to the presence of infidelity in a relationship, individuals are not necessarily limited to these strategies alone. Therefore, participants were asked to respond to the following question: “The survey on the previous pages attempted to identify possible
reactions to infidelity in your romantic relationship. Are there other strategies/reactions that you would have that were not mentioned? Please describe these in detail.” [sic]

This open-ended question was created to gather what additional strategies adults would use in response to the scenario mentioned in the survey.

Interview Component

Recruitment

In addition to the open-ended questions that were included in the written survey to assess definitions for and reactions to infidelity, participants were also offered the opportunity to participate in an interview portion. Participants were either directly solicited to participate in the interview when completing the survey, or participation was detailed in a letter and advertisement included with the surveys that were mailed to participants. The advertisement (see Appendix K) briefly explained the nature of the study, provided the researcher’s contact information, and offered an incentive of $20 for participation. A total of four participants were recruited through the use of this type of solicitation. Due to the challenges incurred in recruiting participants in this manner, the researcher also solicited participants by means of visits to churches and social organizations. For these organizations, the researcher gave a brief presentation about the nature of the project, about what participation entailed, and about potential compensation for participation. Once again, the advertisement was distributed, as was a handout to collect names and telephone numbers of interested participants. Meeting attendees were encouraged to contact the researcher personally with their questions about the project and to share information about the study with other friends and family members who might be interested in participating. These visits yielded the most participants for the interview
portion, with 20 individuals choosing to participate in the study. Finally, snowball sampling was also used to encourage individuals to assist with the research project. Individuals who agreed to assist in this manner were given copies of the advertisement used previously, and were directed to encourage potential participants to contact the researcher if they were interested in the opportunity. Those individuals who did recruit for this study received no additional compensation for their assistance, whether they participated in the interview portion or not. This method of recruitment successfully brought in six individuals to participate in this part of the study.

**Participants**

A total of 30 participants were recruited; however, due to technological issues where the sound files were corrupted, only 28 participant interviews could be analyzed. Of the remaining interviewees for analysis, 11 were females (39.3%) and 17 were males (60.7%). The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 65 years of age ($M = 37.14, SD = 11.26$). A majority of the participants reported being in some type of committed relationship; 17 participants (60.7%) were married at the time of the interview and seven (25.0%) classified themselves as being in a dating relationship. Only four (14.3%) participants indicated that they were single or had recently ended a relationship at the time of the interview. Overall, participants reported being in relationships with durations that ranged anywhere from five months to 504 months ($M = 114.32, SD = 133.06$).

**Procedure**

After completing the initial demographic questions, participants were asked to share their opinions regarding conflict in their relationships and the strategies they used to cope with it. These questions were asked in an attempt to determine if communication
was a primary strategy used within their romantic relationship to cope with times of conflict and distress, and to prepare the participants for the questions regarding the primary focus of the study. After completing this first half of the interview, participants were asked to define what infidelity meant to them and whether or not they believed this definition would change over time. If they indicated that it would change or had changed, they were then asked a follow-up question about how this change had occurred or might occur in the future. The participants were then asked about their previous experiences regarding infidelity, whether experienced personally or through a friend or family member. The participants were then asked what particular coping strategies had been used to cope with the incident, or if they had not directly experienced the infidelity, what their specific role was in helping the other person to cope if they had not directly experienced the infidelity. If participants reported that they had not experienced infidelity at all, and they were asked what they would do if this were to occur in their own relationships. Furthermore, the interviewees were then asked to consider what behaviors their spouse or partner might use in response to the presence of infidelity in the relationship, and whether or not they would be willing to repair the relationship with their partner. Finally, each participant was then asked what specific situations would prompt dissolution of the relationship. (For the full list of interview questions, please see Appendix L.)

Data Analysis

To determine the relationships in this study’s hypotheses and to answer the posited research questions, several different methods of data analysis were used.
Hypothesis 1

To determine whether those experiencing higher exclusivity do report higher commitment scores than those who experience lower exclusivity, an ANOVA was performed that compares the responses of commitment according to grouping by reported exclusivity. An alpha-level of $p = .05$ was used to evaluate the significance of the results of this test. To segregate the participants into high, average, and low exclusivity groups, the average score for this statistic was calculated using the dimensions that satisfied the acceptable reliability requirement. The mean for the RIS was computed as 85.63 with $SD = 7.50$. The standard deviation was then used to create the upper and lower boundaries for each of the groups. Individuals whose scores fell between 78.0 and 92.0 were considered to be average in exclusivity for their relationships. Those whose scores were 93.0 and above were considered to be high in exclusivity while those whose scores were 77.0 and below were considered to be low in exclusivity for their relationships.

Hypothesis 2

Another ANOVA was performed to answer the second hypothesis, which determines the relationship between the commitment and the specific coping strategy used in the participants’ relationships. Here, coping strategy functions as the grouping variable and the difference in degree of commitment was examined. Similar to the first hypothesis, an alpha-level of $p = .05$ was used utilized to evaluate the significance of the results and to determine whether the hypothesis was accepted or rejected. In order to compute an overall score for commitment, two scores were calculated using items from the Commitment Inventory: constraint and personal dedication. Constraint scores were gathered by summing items from the following dimensions (and those which required
recoding were recoded and then summed into the final score): social pressure, termination procedure, concern for partner’s welfare, structural investment, alternative quality, and availability of partners. The score for personal dedication was calculated by summing the four items measuring this dimension, only two of which required recoding. An overall commitment score was computed by adding the scores from constraint and personal dedication \((M = 67.95, SD = 19.28)\). Using the mean and the standard deviation, the upper and lower bounds for average commitment were calculated, resulting in scores between 49.0 and 87.0 (whole numbers were used based on the type of scores gathered from this instrument). Individuals were considered low in commitment if their scores fell below 48.0, and individuals were considered highly committed to their relationships if their scores were above 88.0.

*Research Question 1*

The first research question used a qualitative response item and frequencies for specific codes were examined after thoroughly reviewing all participants’ responses and their codes. The researcher initially created codes by examining the first 25 surveys where in which participants responded to the question, and noting common categories that emerged within these surveys. Coders were then given an initial set of 50 surveys to code for thought units, or statements, sentences, or meaningful phrases (see Hatfield and Wieder-Hatfield, 1978) indicating specific behaviors, contexts or other elements/behaviors that were considered to be infidelity for the survey participant. The coders and researcher coded five surveys together to be sure that the coders understood the process and could easily identify thought units and codes accordingly. Initially, coders used the 12 categories created by the researcher to classify the responses. After
using the a priori codes, the researcher and coders determined that another code could be created for responses/thought units where the a priori codes were not applicable. A total of 13 codes were used to classify each of the responses. This same process was also used for the interview responses to the same open-ended question. To assess consistency in coding, Kappa was calculated and was determined to be .81 for written responses and .78 for interview responses. Additionally, given the use of clear and objective codes, unitizing reliability was not computed for this open-ended question.

**Research Question 2**

To understand how coping strategies vary across the lifespan, a one-way MANOVA was performed to understand the role of the dependent variables of exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect as they differ across the three age groups. Using a MANOVA showed how these strategies could vary simultaneously; follow-up individual ANOVAs demonstrated the change of each variable across age groups where the interplay between strategies was not examined. In the analysis for this research question, a p-value of .05 was used to evaluate the significance of the results, including univariate effects that have occurred. Additionally, effect size and other descriptive statistics were reported.

**Research Question 3**

To determine how coping strategies vary with the degree of exclusivity present in the relationship, ANOVAs were performed to determine how differences between those individuals grouped by exclusivity (low, average, and high) differ in coping strategy (exit, voice, loyalty, or neglect). An alpha-level of $p = .05$ was used to evaluate the significance of the results of this test, and all means, standard deviations, and effect size were reported, as well.
Research Question 4

Finally, to understand how reported commitment varies simultaneously by preferred coping strategy and degree of exclusivity, two-way ANOVAs were performed. This test allowed the researcher to examine both coping and degree of exclusivity at the same time, as they affect relational commitment reported by participants. This test was used based on the multiple levels for each variable. An alpha-level of $p = .05$ was used to evaluate the significance of the results of this test, and all means, standard deviations, and effect size were reported, as well.
CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

Hypothesis One

In order to determine variations of commitment based on exclusivity scores, an overall RIS score was computed by summing all reliable RIS dimensions (sexual non-exclusivity, benefits of other relationships, drawbacks of other relationships, benefits of exclusive relationships, and drawbacks of exclusive relationships). The average score for this instrument was 85.63 ($SD = 7.50$). From there, the scores were then classified into groups: low-exclusivity ($N = 52$), average exclusivity ($N = 213$), and high exclusivity ($N = 23$) using the mean and standard deviation rounded to the next integer (e.g. scores from 0 – 78 were considered low exclusivity; scores from 79- 94 were considered average exclusivity; and scores 95 and higher were considered high exclusivity). A one-way ANOVA was then conducted, which determined that there were significant differences in commitment across the three levels of exclusivity ($F (2, 285) = 3.10$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for low exclusivity ($M = 73.94$, $SD = 16.22$) was significantly different from average exclusivity ($M = 66.62$, $SD = 19.94$). Scores for high exclusivity ($M = 66.74$, $SD = 17.55$) did not significantly differ from scores for either average or low exclusivity.

Hypothesis Two

The second hypothesis posits that individuals differed in their commitment to their current romantic relationship based on the coping style chosen by the individual. As stated previously, a preferred coping style was based on the highest score (or, more than of three dimensions for each individual: exit ($n = 124$, 43.1%), voice ($n = 156$, 54.2%),
and loyalty \((n = 8, 2.8\%)\). A one-way ANOVA determined that there were significant differences in commitment among the three strategies \(F(2, 285) = 10.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07\). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for individuals who primarily relied on the exit strategy to deal with infidelity \((M = 62.13, SD = 18.83)\) differed significantly from those relying on the voice strategy \((M = 72.28, SD = 18.57)\). Scores for individuals relying on loyalty as their coping strategy \((M = 73.88, SD = 19.08)\) did not significantly differ from scores for either of the exit or voice strategies.

**Research Question One**

The first research question delves into definitions of infidelity commonly used by participants. In an open-ended question on the written survey and through interviews conducted with the researcher, participants were asked to describe what they considered to be infidelity by detailing specific contexts or behaviors. Both research methods were used in order to gather as many responses possible, in case some participants chose not to fully write out or respond to the question on the written survey.

These responses were unitized into thought units through the process of conceptualizing (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The thought units that represented ideas about infidelity were then categorized according to common categories that emerged from the written responses. The researcher created a codebook of the most common of these emergent categories, and with these codes categorized the emerging definitions of infidelity. Thirteen coded categories emerged from the data: betraying the relationship, violating trust, secret keeping, initiating other relationships while in a relationship, being attracted to other potential partners, physical behaviors between individuals other than
sex (e.g. kissing or romantic touching), sex with someone other than the current relational partner, emotional infidelity (e.g. building connections with other potential partners), inappropriate communication with others (e.g. phone sex), excessive investment in potential partner (e.g. spending too much time with another person), gift giving, devaluing the relationship (e.g. ignoring their partner), and other. The interview (verbal) data was also coded according to the codebook used for the written responses.

Of the 288 written surveys submitted, 262 participants responded to the first question, which addressed how individuals defined infidelity in a romantic relationship. Twenty-six individuals chose not to answer the question. Two coders independently coded the available responses, and interrater reliability on the 1262 items/thought units was acceptable as indexed by Cohen’s Kappa (κ = .81). Of the 28 interviews transcribed, where all participants answered the same question, interrater reliability on the 162 items or codes was acceptable by Cohen’s Kappa (κ = .78). Using the codebook generated early in the data analysis phase, coders categorized the definitions according to the thirteen categories mentioned earlier. Table seven gives the frequency percentage for each theme according to the written surveys and demonstrates the frequency percentage for categories based on the interview data. One of the codes or categories not included in the tables was defined as “does not apply/no code,” which was designated for responses where the content did not fall within one of the established categories or indicated that the respondent may not have understood what the question was asking. For the written survey participants, the “does not apply/no code” category was used to classify 53 responses/thought units, or 4.1% of the total responses. For the interview survey
participants, the category was used once, or reflected .66% of the total responses/thought units.

Table 7
Definitions of Infidelity According to Written and Interview Survey Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Written %</th>
<th>Interview %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex with someone who is not the relational partner</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical behaviors other than sex</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating other relationships while in current relationship</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate communication with others</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret keeping</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betraying the relationship</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violating trust</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devaluing the primary relationship</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive investment in other potential partner</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attraction to other potential partners</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift Giving</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: n(thought units) for written survey = 1262; n(thought units) for interviews = 150

The most common definition for infidelity for both survey (n = 246, 19.4%) and interview (n = 21, 14.0%) participants was *sex with someone who is not the current relational partner*. Statements within the written survey reflected behaviors that went beyond slightly intimate behaviors (e.g. kissing, holding hands) and either identified specific sexual behaviors or discussed general sexual encounters. For example:

“[I]nfidelity to me is involving yourself with someone else sexually” (#011).

“I would consider infidelity in a romantic relationship to consist of physical sexual interaction with another individual” (#057)

“It would include being sexually satisfied by someone else” (#076)

“Not so much ‘friendship’ relationship with the opposite sex, but more intimate relationship such as sexual intercourse, meeting at various locations to have sex.” (#156)
Within the interviews, there were statements such as:

“‘I would think it would have to be sexual to me for it to be infidelity’” (I-#006)

“Um, I personally take it in the sexual sense, sexual infidelity rather than emotional infidelity. (I-#010)

“Uh, having a physical…relationship with someone besides your spouse.”

(I-#022)

The second most prominent definition for both survey (n = 182; 14.4%) and interview (n = 18; 12.0%) was where an individual defined infidelity based on behaviors other than sexual intercourse. In this case, sexual intercourse was not the primary behavior identified by these participants; instead, they may have chosen to focus on behaviors such as kissing or making out with someone and romantic touching. Statements that illustrated these definitions can be seen in the following examples from the written surveys:

“If he were to kiss another girl… I would consider that cheating” (#003)

“Infidelity starts with touching another in sensual areas, kissing (on lips) with affection” (#151)

“Any…romantic physical activity such as kissing, holding hands, etc. “ (#162)

“Having friends with the opposite sex is fine, but excessive touching in a seductive way crosses the line” (#217)

“This includes…certain things like cuddling and holding hands as well as kissing and being ‘touchy-feely’ with that person” (#284)

Participants in the interviews conveyed this definition with statements such as:

“And infidelity is engaging in… passionate kissing, you know anything from a peck on with anyone under any circumstances is infidelity to me” (I-#001)
“Uh, infidelity would be like, um physical… cheating against your partner”

(I-#011)

“I think that certainly any sort of physical contact in a romantic way, I think
definitely constitutes infidelity.” (I-#019)

Although both groups endorsed sexual and physically intimate behaviors as the primary ways of defining infidelity, participants defined infidelity in other ways as well. Another category that emerged for participants was emotional infidelity. This definition was seen in 5.4% of the survey responses (n = 69) and 9.7% of the interviewees’ responses (n = 15). Emotional infidelity was defined by behaviors that included building a connection with an individual beyond friendship, a romantic connection between individuals, closeness, or falling in love with someone. This category was reflected in statements such as:

“Infidelity could be… loving someone else.” (#038)

“…[b]ut I also consider establishing another romantic relationship (even [without] sex) to be infidelity.” (#115)

“This can happen by… becoming emotionally involved with someone else. It’s when feelings, desires, emotions, [and] needs are shared with someone other than the one with whom you are in a relationship.” (#391)

Another definition for infidelity included attempts to initiate another romantic relationship while in the current romantic relationship. This could include behaviors such as asking other potential partners on dates, actually dating other individuals, considering dating other people, or getting information (phone numbers, email addresses, IM screen names) about another individual with the intent of soliciting dates or romantic
involvement. This definition classified 5.94% (n = 75) of survey participants’ responses and 5.0% (n = 8) of interviewees’ responses and was exemplified by statements such as:

“I believe have an actual relationship…meaningful talk and dating and leading the person on. “ (#181)

“This could mean…just dating them” (#209)

“…abandonment of one in pursuit of the affections of someone else” (#303)

“I also feel that hanging out with someone one-on-one in a romantic setting, such as going out to dinner or going to the movies, counts as infidelity. “ (#337)

Participants also defined infidelity as inappropriate communication with others and categorized 5.4% (n = 69) of responses from survey participants and 6% (n = 10) of interviewee responses. This was exemplified by behaviors that included flirting or even phone sex with another individual and seen in statements such as:

“Verbal things can also be considered acts of infidelity. Obvious things like phone sex are bad.” (#015)

“Initiating conversations with strangers of the opposite sex is also unacceptable.” (#019)

“Infidelity means… [being] extremely flirty” (#200)

“Um, whether it be a note saying… you know, anything that you share with a person that you are in a current relationship with you share with someone outside of that relationship. Um, that to me is infidelity.” (I-#005)

“Whether that’s talking too close to somebody, talking about inappropriate material…” (I-#013).
Some participants also considered secret keeping a form of infidelity. Secret keeping included behaviors such as doing things that could not be revealed to the primary romantic partner or intentionally keeping information secret from the primary relational partner while telling the information to a potential romantic partner. This category classified 5.3% (n = 67) of survey participant responses and 8.0% (n = 12) of interview responses and was exemplified by statements such as:

“…doing anything sneaky (without partner’s knowledge)...meeting with people and not telling your partner. Anytime/anything the partner hides from my knowledge purposefully.” (#186)

“If he were to secretly be seeing another woman…” (#197)

“Withholding information or situation encountered that are relevant to your relationship or significant other is infidelity” (#259)

“If it’s something you wouldn’t feel comfortable telling your wife about, then it’s probably inappropriate.” (1-#026)

Another emergent category for infidelity corresponded with statements which indicated that when the relational partner betrayed the relationship in some form or fashion (e.g. was not loyal to the relationship, unfaithful, or a partner’s actions were disclosed by someone outside the relationship) that this constituted infidelity. About 5.0% (n = 63) of survey participant responses and 6.0% (n = 13) of interviews fit in this category. This category was exemplified by statements such as:

“Infidelity is not being loyal, cheating or betrayal of your partner.” (#192)

“Infidelity is passing boundaries you know to be harmful to your partner” (#387)

“…unfaithful to the other person.” (#392)
“Infidelity is not obeying the marriage vows that you committed to. In a non-marriage act, infidelity is a disloyal act between you and your partner.” (#400)

Infidelity was also categorized as a violation of trust between romantic partners. This category was primarily identified by responses indicating dishonest behavior or lying, and 4.3% (n = 54) of survey responses and 1.3% (n = 2) of interviewee responses were classified as such.

“Infidelity to me is breaking the trust that is mutual between partners.” (#109)

“Betrayal of trust and making your partner feel like they are not good enough for you that you have to share personal things with others.” (#124)

“Breaking the trust of your mate through a violation that is self-centered…” (#132)

“To me, it’s losing my trust by doing things to hurt me.” (#277)

Infidelity is a behavior that can indicate that the current/primary romantic relationship is no longer valued by the romantic partner(s) and was another category that classified 4.2% (n = 53) of responses from survey participants and 10.7% (n = 16) of responses from interviewees. If a response indicated that a partner was replacing their primary partner, ignoring their partner, acting like they could live without their partner, being rude or inconsiderate, or that the relationship experienced a lack of love or connection, then it was classified into this category.

“Overall, it is putting another person above your partner when you shouldn’t.” (#185)

“Any of these areas [i.e. trust, communication, shared experiences] that involved someone outside of our relationship would be infidelity.” (#225)
“It is done when the person is no longer interested in you anymore.” (#265)

“When feelings, desires, emotions, needs are shared with someone other than the one with whom you are in a relationship.” (#391)

While infidelity can indicate a devaluation of the primary investment, it can signal investment in a new/other potential partner. Responses (survey: 3.6%, n = 45; interview: 2.0, n = 3) which indicated that an individual was excessively communicating with a potential partner or perhaps spending too much time with a potential partner were classified into this category.

“…pay too much attention to someone else physically” (#226)

“…hanging out all the time…” (#332)

“Spending time, etc. with a person of the opposite sex in preference to being with your … partner.” (#343)

“Spending significant alone time with the opposite sex.” (#416)

The final two categories that classified definitions for infidelity given by the survey and interview participants included attraction to potential partners and gift-giving. The category regarding attraction to potential partners was used for responses indicating that an individual excessively talked about another individual/potential partner or admitted to frequent thoughts about another person or other people. This category fit 2.1% (n = 26) of responses from survey participants and 4.7% (n = 7) of responses from the interviewees.

“I think that infidelity occurs when one of the 2 [sic] married people takes steps to indulge romantic feelings towards a third person. (#222)

“…feelings toward another person while in a stable relationship.” (#351)
“…finding someone of the opposite-sex attractive (when that person is attainable).” (#271)

Gift-giving, the final category used to classify participant responses, was more self-explanatory in nature and included behaviors where gifts or tokens were given to other potential partners or romantic rivals. This category was exemplified in only 0.55% of survey responses (n = 7) and none of the interviewees’ responses could be placed in this category.

“Infidelity is behavior… that threatens their primary relationship, such as… gifts” (#033)

“If my partner did things like bought an expensive necklace for someone else, without a reason (i.e. birthday, Christmas), then I would consider this also infidelity.” (#038)

“Buying gifts on Valentine’s Day (like jewelry)…” (#239)

Research Question Two

As the literature indicates, coping strategies may change over time for an adult and research question two sought to find how these strategies varied over the lifespan. In order to answer this question, participants were sorted into three age groups: emerging/young adulthood (18-38; N = 177), middle adulthood (39-56; N = 81), and late adulthood (57 and older; N = 30). Studies in adult developmental research have found that these age groups do yield differences in mental development, and have been consistent over time and in various studies (e.g. Schaie, 1994). After sorting the participants accordingly, a one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed using exit, voice, and loyalty (coping strategies) as the dependent variable. Preliminary testing
was conducted to check for normality, linearity, outliers, homogeneity of variance-
covariance matrices and multicollinearity, with no serious violations noted. There were
statistically significant differences among age groups on coping strategy choice,
\[ F(3, 283) = 11.93, p < .01; \text{ Wilks’ Lambda} = .96; \eta^2 = .12. \] Significant univariate effects
were found for exit \( F(2, 285) = 30.19, p < .01, \eta^2 = .18 \) and loyalty \( F(2, 285) = 9.97, \]
\( p < .01, \eta^2 = .07 \). An inspection of the mean scores indicated that emerging/young adults
more frequently indicated using an exit strategy in response to infidelity (\( M = 39.45, \)
\( SD = 11.63 \)) than individuals in either middle adulthood (\( M = 29.07, SD = 13.28 \)) or late
adulthood (\( M = 24.73, SD = 15.47 \)). Individuals in late adulthood were more likely to use
the loyalty coping strategy as their response to infidelity (\( M = 22.67, SD = 13.18 \)) versus
those in middle adulthood (\( M = 16.91, SD = 11.15 \)) or emerging/young adulthood
(\( M = 13.67, SD = 10.05 \)).

Research Question Three

Research question three was formulated to determine whether or not differences
exist between a chosen coping strategy and ratings of exclusivity in the current romantic
relationship. A one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted and there was no
significant difference between the three exclusivity groups (low, average, and high) and
use of the exit coping strategy \( F(2, 285) = 2.54, p > .05 \), the voice coping strategy
\( F(2, 285) = 1.72, p > .05 \), or the loyalty coping strategy \( F(2, 285) = 2.06, p > .05 \). In
order to ensure that there were no inflated Type-1 errors that occurred as a result of the
analyses performed for research question three, a MANOVA was conducted. Before
proceeding with the actual analysis, the researcher examined the data to ensure that the
assumptions for MANOVA were met and all assumptions were satisfied.
A one-way between groups MANOVA was performed to examine differences in coping strategy according to the degree of exclusivity reported (low, average, high). There was no statistically significant difference between reported exclusivity and coping style, \( F(4, 282) = 1.892, p = .06, \) Wilks’ Lambda = 1.89.

**Research Question Four**

After examining the effects on coping and commitment using exclusivity, this research question attempted to determine whether both exclusivity and preferred coping strategy affected commitment. A two-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted using groups for exclusivity and preferred coping strategy established in previous analyses. The interaction effect between exclusivity and coping strategies was not statistically significant, \( F(4, 279) = .479, p > .05. \) There was a statistically significant main effect for coping strategy (exit, voice, or loyalty), \( F(2, 279) = 5.04, p < .05; \) however, the effect size was small \( (\eta^2 = .04). \) Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for those preferring the exit strategy \( (M = 62.13, SD = 18.83) \) was significantly different from those preferring the voice strategy \( (M = 72.28, SD = 18.58). \) The loyalty group \( (M = 73.88, SD = 17.80) \) did not differ significantly from either of the other groups. The main effect for exclusivity, \( F(2, 279) = .53, p < .05, \) did not reach statistical significance.

Once again, to ensure that no Type-1 errors occurred, a two-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate differences between coping styles (exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect) and degree of exclusivity with respect to reported commitment. While there was not a significant relationship between coping style and degree of exclusivity as commitment varies \( (F(4, 278) = .345, p = .95, \) Wilks’
Lambda = .990), there was a statistically significant difference between coping style on the combined dependent variables, $F(2, 278) = 2.616, p = .03$; Wilks’ Lambda = .963; $\eta^2 = .018$. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the only difference to reach statistical significance, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .017, was constraint, $F(2, 279) = 4.60, p = .01, \eta^2 = .032$. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that there were slightly different means between the coping categories with those endorsing loyalty as their primary strategy reporting more commitment ($M = 63.94$) than those endorsing voice ($M = 59.56$). These two strategies both reported more commitment than those endorsing the exit strategy ($M = 51.32$).

Other Analyses

To determine the relationship between the dimensions of commitment and the overall computed commitment score, a Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated. There was a very strong positive relationship between the constraint dimension and overall commitment ($r = .990, n = 288, p < .05$) and also a strong positive relationship between personal dedication and overall commitment ($r = .728, n = 288, p < .05$).

Analyses were also carried out to determine whether or not each age group experienced the dimensions of commitment differently. The findings revealed that young adults perception of commitment had a small, negative relationship with constraint ($r = -.483, p < .05$) and a small, negative relationship with personal dedication ($r = -.339, p < .05$). Adults within the middle-aged group had a small, positive relationship with constraint ($r = .373, p < .05$) and a small, positive relationship with personal dedication ($r = -.483, p < .05$). Older adults also had a small, positive relationship with constraint ($r = .221, p < .05$) and a small, positive relationship with personal dedication ($r = .216, p < .05$).
CHAPTER FOUR
DISCUSSION

Communication is used to convey a variety of messages in romantic relationships. Where it is frequently used to initiate, build, sustain, and de-escalate intimate relationships, this research project attempted to understand the role communication played within the contexts of relational exclusivity, commitment and coping when experiencing a relational transgression. Using the context of infidelity as a relational stressor, this project attempted to determine whether or not communication was a viable strategy in coping with this event. In order to assess the effectiveness and utility of communication, or voice, as a coping mechanism, it was important to understand conceptualizations of exclusivity and commitment within the relationship. Adults in various stages of the lifespan were asked to assess exclusivity and commitment to their primary romantic relationship to gauge reactions to the presence of infidelity in their relationship.

Studies examining infidelity have acknowledged that there are different ways to define this behavior, but that most definitions primarily rely on either a sexual or emotional orientation (see Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Although these orientations do function as definitions in some part, we may be missing further detailed examples or definitions of infidelity that fall within these categories. We may unknowingly dismiss more specific behaviors that contain aspects of each of these orientations that may also introduce other aspects of infidelity that were not originally conceptualized by social scientists. Regardless of the specific definition with which an individual may choose to use to classify infidelity, what remains most important is the cause and impact of such
behavior within a romantic relationship. There is no one cause for infidelity. This behavior may be driven by the need for an illicit or forbidden relationship (Allen, 2004) or by more of a deficient needs perspective (see Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). Understanding the motivations for infidelity may be nested within the specific type of orientation toward this behavior (i.e. sexual versus emotional), but this may not answer all questions. What we do know is that each orientation or type of infidelity can cause relational harm for a primary romantic relationship (see Cann et al., 2001; Cann & Baucom, 2004). Psychological and counseling studies acknowledge that there are detrimental effects of the presence of infidelity in a romantic relationship and that a significant number of couples in therapy admit to seeking counseling because of infidelity (Atkins et al., 2002). The implication that there are couples who choose to work through the effects of infidelity instead of terminating their relationship implies that management of this stressful event is possible (Halford et al., 2003).

Another factor that could be influential in the coping process, besides the specific type of infidelity that occurred within the relationship, is commitment to the current romantic relationship. Commitment is perceived in multiple ways, primarily as interdependence (Gaines & Agnew, 2003) and investment (Rusbult, 1983), but another perspective may shed light for how couples practically perceive commitment in their relationships. By viewing commitment as a combination of personal, moral, and structural obligations we can get a more in-depth view of the balance between attraction and commitment to one’s partner and to one’s relationship with another (Johnson, 1999). Furthermore, this perspective may allow us to understand commitment as it adapts to differing stages or types of relationships, such as less-serious committed ones (e.g. dating
relationships) versus more serious committed relationships (e.g. marriages). We must acknowledge that romantic relationships as we know them are changing and evolving constantly. Dating, co-habiting, and married relationships are changing based on the partners’ attitudes about commitment, and subsequently, based on exclusivity as partners negotiate what standards exist for these relationships.

As useful as it is to understand how infidelity and commitment can affect one another in a relationship, researchers must also acknowledge communication as an important component within the situation. Communication is not limited to positively-valenced or neutral topics that emerge at the beginning of a relationship. We must also understand how communication evolves between partners as they grow and experience negative events in their relationships. Examining various coping techniques, such as exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect, for responding to stressful events allows us to determine whether communication between partners is a viable strategy that couples can use to cope with infidelity. In many cases, the best way to classify coping behaviors is to use a problem-focused or emotion-focused orientation (see DeLongis & Preece, 2002), but it is also helpful to consider the nature of the relationship when selecting a strategy as well. Communication as a coping strategy can easily fit in the problem or emotion-focused orientations, and yet is also useful to a relationship-focused orientation because it attempts to regulate and preserve the relationship in times of stress (DeLongis & Preece, 2002). While some individuals will adopt a problem-solving orientation to the stressor at hand, research also shows that people will use the simplest strategy they can adopt based on the given stressor (Marco et al., 1999). In some cases, this may mean that an individual is more likely to deal with a stressor by withdrawing from the situation or
neglecting the relational partner altogether, rather than actively resolving the issue. Perceptions of the relationship may also complicate the coping process for the individuals involved, particularly when it comes to choosing a specific strategy (Guerrero et al., 1995).

In order to assess the areas mentioned above, this study posited the following hypotheses and research questions:

H1: Those experiencing higher exclusivity in relationships will report higher scores of commitment than those experiencing lower exclusivity.

H2: Those who report higher scores of commitment within their relationship will report using more active and constructive coping strategies in their relationships.

RQ1: Does the definition of infidelity differ across the lifespan?

RQ2: How do coping strategies vary across the lifespan in response to infidelity?

RQ3: How do coping strategies used in relationships vary with the degree of exclusivity across the lifespan?

RQ4: How does reported relational commitment and coping strategy vary with degree of exclusivity across the lifespan?

The responses to each of these are discussed in the paragraphs below.

Hypotheses

For this study, commitment was conceptualized by examining personal dedication to a relationship as well as constraint commitment (or moral and structural commitment to the relationship). Based on the strength of an individual’s commitment to a relationship, it would seem likely that his or her attitudes towards exclusivity would also be strong. Simply stated, individuals who emphasized and valued exclusivity in their
primary romantic relationship would most likely exhibit strong commitment to that relationship. Within the first hypothesis, the significant differences were found to primarily occur between those who were low in exclusivity versus those considered more average in their exclusivity score when examining differences in commitment. For this particular study, a majority of the participants fell within the average exclusivity group, while the second largest group included participants who reported low attitudes of exclusivity within their current romantic relationship. This finding is contrary to the hypothesis posited by the researcher and may have occurred for various reasons. For example, when considering the dimensions and the number of items measuring each construct, we find that they are skewed more to the benefits that external relationships have versus the potential destructive or harmful consequences. While measurement issues may have been influential, there is also the potential for other explanations.

As detailed by Boekhout et al. (2003), people may exhibit inconsistencies when it comes to attitudes regarding exclusivity and specific exclusivity behaviors. However, individuals also tend to believe that their relational partners will fill all of their emotional and physical needs within their committed relationship. Despite this belief, this expectation may be unrealistic for couples during the course of their relationship. In other words, individuals do seek to obtain many relational benefits from a romantic relationship, but the fulfillment of these needs is not solely dependent on their romantic partner. Instead, people rely on friendships and family relationships in addition to romantic relationships for their relational needs. As Boekhout et al. (2003) noted, concerns regarding exclusivity may not occur as long as there appears to be a balance among all of a person’s relationships, or as long as one relationship is not receiving more
attention than another. It is this line of thinking that allows us to understand why commitment to a relationship may be strong, but exclusivity is negligible. The individual may perceive that they are committed to a relationship and acknowledge the existence and importance of other relationships that their partner may have and the social support, intimacy, and companionship they receive from these relationships.

To further assess the impact of commitment on romantic relationships, the second hypothesis tried to decipher the differences in coping styles based on commitment to the relationship. Individuals who reported that they would use the exit strategy in response to a hypothetical infidelity scenario significantly differed in commitment to their relationship when compared to those who indicated a preference for the voice strategy. Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983) have noted that many of these strategies are in fact loosely connected to commitment. Those who are not strongly committed to their relationships or those who perceive that their partners are not equally committed seem to be more likely to engage in the exit strategy instead of the voice strategy. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that some of these strategies may be tied to what is socially desirable. As Stanley and Markman (1992) noted, commitment is based on a combination of internal and external pressures. In cases where infidelity pervades a relationship, the external pressures to respond to the transgression may outweigh the internal pressures to try to work the relationship issues out and sustain the relationship. In this case, it is easy to see why an individual would choose to exit the relationship if outside influences (i.e. friends, family, social media,) are telling them what he or she should do in response to the lack of relational commitment demonstrated by his or her partner. Additionally, we could therefore assume that those who choose a voice strategy for coping with instances of
infidelity might be more committed to the relationship for various reasons, such as messages from external and internal influences that might encourage relationship maintenance and sustainment instead of termination.

Another factor to consider for this particular hypothesis is the way commitment was measured for this study. While it is understood that commitment is based on personal dedication to a relationship, as well as constraint, this measure relied on a perspective of commitment that emphasized constraint over personal dedication. In fact, correlations revealed that the strongest determinant of the overall rating for commitment was dependent on the score for constraint. While this can be attributed to the number of items for this particular construct, it may also be noteworthy to acknowledge the specific role that constraint played for the age groups. While older adults’ perceptions of relational commitment were not strongly influenced by constraint, young adults instead experienced an inverse relationship with constraint. Or, instead of external factors binding them to their romantic relationship, they may have played a role in actually encouraging them to dissolve the relationship. This change in perception of commitment across the lifespan seems to merit further investigation to determine the strength of the relationship between constraint and commitment to a relationship.

Research Questions

Infidelity has been primarily defined as either sexual or emotional in nature, but to determine whether these definitions are applicable in relationships throughout the lifespan, participants were asked to define infidelity in their own words by means of an open-ended question on the written surveys, and in interviews conducted by the researcher. Of the various categories drawn from the responses and interviews, the three
primary categories of definitions for infidelity included a) sex with someone who was not the primary relational partner, b) participating in physical behaviors that were not considered to be sexual intercourse (i.e. kissing, making out, or romantic touch), and c) emotional infidelity (i.e. building connections beyond friendship, romantic connections between the partner and another individual, closeness to another individual besides the current romantic partner, and falling in love with another individual).

Although these were the primary definitions for infidelity in a romantic relationship, and support findings conducted by other researchers, participants shared possible other definitions which are worth noting here, though they did not appear as frequently as those previously mentioned. These definitions include initiating other romantic relationships while still in the current romantic relationship; secret keeping or withholding information from the romantic partner; and betraying the relationship.

Participants for both the written survey portion and the interviews reported that asking other potential partners on dates, dating others while dating the current partner, considering other individuals to be a romantic partner, and getting personal information (i.e. phone numbers, email addresses) for future contact could be considered infidelity as well. Secret-keeping behaviors, such as doing things that could not be easily told to the current romantic partner or even keeping secrets from the current romantic partner were also seen as infidelity. Betraying the relationship included behaviors such as not being loyal to the relationship, being unfaithful, or having to hear about a partner’s actions from other individuals. One other definition for infidelity that emerged from the interviews, but not on the written surveys, was devaluation of the relationship. In these cases, participants implied that the primary romantic relationship was no longer seen as
important to one of the partners. It was defined or explained by behaviors such as replacing the primary partner in some way; ignoring the partner; acting as if one could live without one’s current partner; being rude or inconsiderate to the current romantic partner; or simply lacking love or connection in the relationship.

What these responses and categories show is that sexual and emotional infidelity involves multiple types of behaviors; it may not be as clearly delineated for individuals in relationships as researchers believe. While some behaviors are clearly sexual in nature, some of these responses reflect precursors to engagement in sexual activity with another individual, or an aspect of emotional infidelity that might be linked to commitment and relational intimacy. As Blow and Hartnett (2005) noted, researchers are starting to see the combination of these categories and a more complicated nature of infidelity in romantic relationships. There is also the potential for research findings to shift away from more evolutionary attributions for infidelity as we see that many of the responses from the participants did not reflect a more primal attitude towards engaging in such behavior (i.e. not about sexual satisfaction or having many partners). However, an awareness of commitment and intimacy and the role it may play in extra-dyadic relationships is beginning to emerge.

To further delve into the specific coping mechanisms adults choose across the lifespan in response to situations involving infidelity, a second research question was posed to find what differences exist. According to the results, there were significant differences between the age groups and coping mechanisms; emerging adults and young adults were more likely to rely on the exit strategy, while those in later adulthood were more likely to use the loyalty coping strategy. Although extensive research has been
conducted to determine specific responses to relational dissatisfaction (see Rusbult et al., 1982), there have not necessarily been connections to these behaviors and the age of the adult in the romantic relationship. It seems likely that younger adults may choose the exit strategy based on the idea that this is not the last romantic relationship they are likely to have, and would be better suited finding someone else more committed to them to be in a relationship with. Given their age and length of their current romantic relationship, participants in later adulthood may find it more difficult to seek out a new romantic partner or relationship. Therefore, remaining loyal to the relationship and hoping that the problem is temporary or waiting for things to improve could be less effort than other alternatives. There may other factors at play in this decision, many of which may be commitment related.

Besides trying to understand age and lifespan effects on the concept of coping, another research question asked whether or not ratings of exclusivity affected chosen coping strategies. Unfortunately, there were no significant differences between classifications of exclusivity for a relationship and a particular coping strategy. This could reflect the reason offered earlier about how exclusivity is conceptualized in a romantic relationship and how this attitude affects commitment. Overall commitment to a relationship is more salient to how one would cope with a relational stressor instead of exclusivity. In this case, it may not be beliefs about whether or not a partner *should* be faithful that influences the coping strategy, but instead whether or not they actually are.

The final research question tried to determine how commitment was affected by exclusivity and by preferred coping strategy. There appeared to be no effect on commitment when considering exclusivity, but coping strategies were affected by
commitment after the initial ANOVA and reexamination of the data through MANOVA. In this case, there was a significant difference between reported commitment and the preferred coping strategy. Once again, commitment seems to be a significant factor in whether or not a person chooses to leave the current relationship in the presence of infidelity, to voice his or her concerns about its occurrence, or to remain loyal to their partner. This conclusion supports conceptualizations of commitment forwarded by Stanley and Markman (1992), which indicate that personal dedication is not the only factor which influences commitment; instead, individuals must also actively cope with the multiple constraints that are attached to their romantic relationship. The fact that commitment did not have a strong effect could be explained by the fact that the groups were not equal in size, thus masking the prominence of one or more strategies. This research question did not consider the age of participants or their place in the lifespan. Given that there were a greater number of younger adults for this study, and that a previous research question revealed that younger adults might be more prone to using this strategy, this study can probably only explain commitment and coping as it applies to the young adult demographic.

Limitations

Despite some of the interesting and noteworthy findings produced by this study, a number of limitations did affect the overall conclusions and applications of this research. First, despite the numerous definitions that emerged for infidelity in romantic relationships, none of these definitions from this sample group were obviously communicative in nature, or exclusively a communication behavior. While
communication may have been used to initiate some of the more specific behaviors, it appears that communicative infidelity may need further definition and clarification.

This study also used a number of measures from other fields in the social sciences that were at times difficult to extend to a communication studies perspective. A clear example of this can be found in the use of the coping inventory (exit, voice, loyalty, neglect), in which the only clear communication variable is voice. Despite the presence of this variable, many of the items measuring this construct did not ask what type of messages would be used in coping with a stressful situation, nor did they ask about perceptions of a partner’s communication regarding such behavior. The Relationship Issues Scale was another instrument that asked individuals about their perceptions of exclusivity in their romantic relationship, but it did not assess whether this was a topic about which partners communicated in their relationship, nor identify specific messages used to indicate exclusivity. By not including communication as a way of measuring this variable, it became difficult to measure the influence that exclusivity has on a relationship, other than internal perceptions about this construct.

Many studies of infidelity feature an active discussion of relationship expectations and violations, and almost all emerge from studies of interactions between the romantic partners or perceptions of the extradyadic relationship. While these terms, expectations and violations, were frequently alluded to by various participants within this study, there was no explicit question asking what the specific expectations for their relationships were (other than through the assessment of exclusivity attitudes) or how the participants would perceive violations of these expectations (other than asking how they would respond to the presence of infidelity in their relationship). In this case, the use of measures assessing
a potential link to Expectancy Violations Theory may have proven useful. A study by Guerrero and Bachman (2010) has looked at a potential link between expectancy violations, investment, and forgiveness communication; and each of these concepts can be linked to a discussion of infidelity. Furthermore, the addition of this perspective could have provided communication variables for measurement within this context and supported findings regarding specific coping tactics, such as forgiveness, for situations such as this.

This study did benefit from a lifespan perspective by analyzing data gathered from participants across various age groups. However, these groups were noticeably unbalanced. For example, there were 127 adults aged 18-21, 95 aged 22-50, but only 55 adults fell between the ages of 51-84. While this did give some valuable data, more balanced group sizes might have produced more significant findings, or allowed the researcher to create more accurate generalizations for perceptions of commitment and coping style across the lifespan. There is also a debate amongst social science researchers for where the appropriate boundaries can be drawn for determining age groups across the lifespan. While some researchers have segregated age groups similar to this study, newer studies have attempted to draw more distinctive and appropriate boundaries based on developmental differences as they occur across the lifespan.

There were also limitations in the responses gathered from the interview participants for this study. Only 30 participants were recruited for this component of the study, and once again, the three age groups were not evenly represented in this sample. With an even representation across age groups, interview data also would have proven valuable for gathering more descriptive information about specific definitions for
infidelity as they change across the lifespan, and indicated whether or not communication is a salient coping strategy when dealing with relational stressors such as infidelity.

Finally, while this study did produce notable results, the manner in which they were obtained may have limited the power behind the findings. In order to determine results for the hypotheses and research questions, continuous measurements were categorized (e.g. high versus low exclusivity; preferred coping strategy). While this was beneficial for determining whether or not there were differences amongst emerging groups, many times we noticed that the significant differences might have only been negligible. Furthermore, a complete understanding of coping strategies available to individuals reveals that at any one time, they may choose to enact more than one; therefore, a more continuous application of this variable may be appropriate instead of limiting them to one strategy versus another. The same could be said for understanding commitment. While this study placed participants in categories of low versus high commitment, this is also something that can vary and may be limiting by simply reaching a “universal score/rating” for commitment. If commitment is conceptualized as a combination of personal dedication and constraint, obtaining statistics that determine which of the two factors is more influential in a relationship may explain more of the dynamic than a simple “high or low” dichotomy. Finally, the last disadvantage of performing the analysis in this manner can be found in the realization that instead of group means that can actively be compared with studies using the same instruments, average scores are instead driven by the sample gathered for this particular study.

Implications for the Advancement of Communication Theory
As mentioned previously, it may be impossible to predict when and if infidelity will occur within a romantic relationship. For the purposes of studies in communication, the value of using the context of infidelity arises in the addition of commitment and coping as variables for understanding how people use communication 1) to define and express commitment in their romantic relationships and 2) to cope with various distressing situations they may encounter within romantic relationships. Research has been concerned with each of these areas and is attempting to define and delineate the specific communication behaviors that encompass each of these topics.

Studies in commitment have been dominantly psychological in nature (see Rusbult, 1983) and have involved assessments based on perceptions of interdependence, investment, and intimacy between partners. More recent studies in commitment have achieved a more complete understanding of factors that allow individuals not only to define commitment as something they perceive in a relationship, but also to exhibit in a communicative behavior. More studies have emerged about the communicative aspects of commitment (see Ballard-Reisch and Weigel, 1999) and more researchers are encompassing communication as a measurable variable for understanding commitment. Although exclusivity may not seem obviously measurable as a communicative behavior, it is another approach to understanding the role communication can play within a relationship.

Explicit verbal and nonverbal statements can indicate beliefs and values about exclusivity and commitment in a relationship. The measure used within this research project was one designed by psychologists; however, there are constructs within this assessment that could be expanded to include more communicative characteristics. Even
more appropriate for the Relationship Issues Scale would be to construct a section that assesses how these beliefs are communicated within a relationship, as well as how strongly they are communicated. Constructing this section would support future studies in how commitment is communicative, and it could contribute to the emergence of theory. Furthermore, psychology researchers have noticed that there are patterns to how commitment develops and is maintained over time. If these patterns are noticeable from a psychological standpoint, it is likely that these conclusions would also emerge and be supported from a lifespan perspective, as well.

This study was a brief snapshot of the various stages of relationships in which people were engaged at the time they were surveyed. Realistically, this research helps our view of the commitment process that relationships go through over time. We can begin to fully understand the intricacies of commitment in the initial stages of a relationship, as well as in the more stable times.

Another area of research that is moving to the forefront of communication studies and could potentially emerge into a new theory is the focus on coping and communication. Research has acknowledged the various functions of coping (i.e. problem focused and emotion focused) and the role of social support in assisting those coping within various stressors (see MacGeorge et al, 2004). Furthermore, we know that coping mechanisms differ based on the perceptions of the relationship under stress (see Guerrero et al., 2005). While a majority of studies that focus on coping and on how communication functions as a tool in this area are nested within the health communication context, there are studies emerging in a broader interpersonal context, as well.
We must recognize that although the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect instrument was not designed as a communication assessment, it does encompass behaviors that are communicative in nature. Besides the obvious voice aspect to this instrument, the exit, loyalty, and neglect behaviors can function as both verbal and nonverbal coping mechanisms. What this instrument fails to capture in the partially communicative behaviors are the specific messages tied to these behaviors. An individual will most likely not “exit” a relationship without some clear explanation, discussion, or a statement that indicates that they are dissolving the relationship; and it seems likely that the same conditions would hold true for the loyalty and neglect aspects. This instrument does allow communication researchers to see clearly how communicative behaviors that could fall within the broader coping classifications of problem, emotion, and relationship focused coping behaviors.

However, we must recognize that alternative coping messages are possible, as well, each of which may be based on the severity of the relational stressor at the time it occurs in the relationship. Participants in developmental-stage relationships that experience relational infidelity might cope with the incident in very different ways than those in relationships of longer duration. Thus we can find how coping may differ not only across relational stages, but throughout the lifespan. The idea that a later-life adult is more skilled at coping with relational stressors than a young adult is not inconceivable if we consider the life experience available to each of these individuals. Whereas a younger adult may not be equipped to effectively use communication within the coping process, based on the particular stressor and his or her experiences from other relationships, an older adult might be able to do so; the reverse may also be true. We cannot discount that
life experience does vary across the lifespan, and the only way to achieve a better understanding of how coping changes across time, relationships, and stressors is through thorough investigation.

This study may only begin to scratch the surface in understanding the role of coping with infidelity in romantic relationships, but it does contribute to a better understanding of what potential variables may influence coping in a specific context.

**Contribution to Communication Studies**

Studies in infidelity have previously been limited to certain areas of social science, and have not been a notable context of investigation within communication studies. As Vangelisti and Gerstenberger (2004) stated, “[a]lthough scholars have identified a number of the variables that predict infidelity, they have yet to fully describe the processes by which they are initiated and enacted” (p. 77). Despite communication’s central role in the initiation of an extra-marital or dyadic relationship, very rarely is communication examined in understanding how communication is responsible for establishing, maintaining, and ending infidelity. Furthermore, studies in coping imply that communication itself could be used as a coping strategy in addition to the more well-known strategies frequently used for stressful events. This study contributes to understanding the role of communication within the coping process, in addition to understanding the communication of investment in a romantic relationship. Communication could also play a role in whether or not partners share attitudes about exclusivity with one another, which could lead to whether or not a couple does experience infidelity within the relationship. Perhaps the biggest contribution to communication is apparent through the lifespan perspective this project employs to
examine the variables of interest. There have been some studies examining social relationships and communication as it changes over the lifespan, and this study contributes directly to that area. The lifespan perspective could also provide a key understanding for determining how the definitions of relational investment and infidelity change over time. This perspective also ties into the context of communicative coping and its relevance or irrelevance to stressors as people age.

*Implications for Future Studies*

Although the definitions for infidelity have remained stable for quite some time, and the most basic (sexual and emotional) will most likely not change, there is something to be said for attempting to parse out the more detailed elements associated with these categories. Furthermore, we must be aware of new ways of defining communication and behaviors that could be associated with infidelity. For example, “virtual” relationships are now becoming more commonplace, and environments such as Second Life and other virtual arenas are now allowing individuals to build romantic relationships with others in a virtual world. Whether or not these relationships are considered to be infidelity rests solely on the individuals in the real world, and could bring about new or revised definitions for infidelity as we age. Technology may not affect older adults and their relationships presently, but those younger adults who are heavily immersed in technology and all its aspects may find that it affects their lives more and more as they age.

Another point uncovered by this study that should be considered is the influence of commitment and of age and place in the lifespan when considering coping strategies used for events like relational infidelity. In some cases, the researcher was clearly able to see a link between age and a chosen strategy, though, why this occurred or the reasoning
behind this choice were not examined. Whether this link is further teased out by quantitative or qualitative means is up to future researchers, but it deserves attention as we try to understand how romantic relationships develop and change over time, particularly as we place commitment and coping strategies within the lifespan context.

Finally, more research needs to explore the idea of exclusivity in romantic relationships, particularly if people engage in infidelity regardless of their beliefs in exclusivity. Boekhout et al. (1993) admit that their instrument needs further development or revision, and perhaps considering communicative aspects to this relational characteristic would help those in relationships begin to make connections between their beliefs and behaviors. The verbal expression between partners of ideas regarding exclusivity could influence the perceptions of exclusivity that could be gathered from the Relational Issues Scale. As is frequently argued in many communication studies, building a bridge between psychological contexts and communication could only benefit future research in both areas.

Conclusion

We cannot predict when infidelity will occur in romantic relationships, or why it occurs, for that matter. For as much as evolutionary psychologists attribute it to our most primal behaviors (i.e. the need to procreate and advance the species), and relational therapists attribute it to a lack of satisfaction in a relationship or other means, this context when looked at from multiple angles can help us understand the dynamics of and challenges to romantic relationships. The disclosure of infidelity is present in many forms in our daily lives; from actors and politicians in the media, or to our own friends and family members who experience it in their lives. We can learn how individuals
communicate expectations for their relationships by examining their ideas about
exclusivity, and we can teach individuals how to effectively cope with the situation using
communication as a tool. Perhaps in this case, the exit strategy would become less useful
in comparison to the voice strategy; at least, this change in behavior is what interpersonal
communication scholars should encourage.

Finally, addressing negative events, such as infidelity, in relationships should lead
us to find ways to teach individuals healthy ways to maintain their relationships. We as
communication scholars should be prepared to take our research out into the world to
guide others in their communication in relationships, not just by teaching these lessons in
the college classroom. It is time for us as communication researchers to voice our
opinions about relationships and about the communication that occurs in those
relationships. Communication scholars should own the knowledge we have worked so
hard to discover to further our field and to demonstrate its usefulness. We need to work
with the sociologists, psychologists, and therapists to explain the statistics and
characteristics of the society they are discovering, to guide the advice they are
dispensing, and to create more effective means to allow people to successfully combat
this and other negative events in relationships. By using our voices, we can help those
who find themselves dealing with infidelity and empower them to use messages that help
repair, maintain, and sustain their romantic relationships.
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Hello!

My name is Ladori R. Lara and I am a researcher at Penn State University, University Park in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences. Your child/grandchild, a student at PSU, provided me with your name and address as a part of a research study that s/he is participating in.

We would really appreciate your help with this research project, too. The purpose of this study is to learn how communication works to help people in romantic relationships cope with stressful events that occur within their relationship.

Your help with this project is completely voluntary and does NOT influence your child/grandchild’s participation in any way or any course credit they may receive for participation in the study. If you would like to participate in this research, all you will need to do is complete the survey, which is included, and mail it back to us. If you do not want to participate in this research, you do not need to do anything more.

Included in this packet are a consent form, a survey, and an envelope.

- The consent form provides you in information about the study. This is yours to keep. You do not need to return this.
- The survey contains questions we would like you to answer. These questions ask you about yourself, your current spouse or partner, and your relationship with your spouse/partner.

Please complete these questions by yourself, and do not share your answers or anything about the questions with your spouse/partner. We really want to know about your own experiences and perceptions. Please do not allow anyone else to complete your survey. If you would like to help with this research, it is important that we get your own feelings, and not anyone else’s.

When you are finished with your survey, place it in the envelope provided, seal and sign the stamped, preaddressed envelope, and mail it to Ladori R.
Lara in 234 Sparks Building, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802.

I am also seeking research volunteers for a 30-60 minute interview to be conducted over the phone for this project as well. The focus of this interview is similar to the questionnaire and will gather information about how you and your partner cope with stressful events in your relationship. If you do participate, you will be paid $20 for your time and assistance to this project.

If you have any questions or concerns about this survey or the study while you complete this survey, please feel free to contact Ladori R. Lara. Her email address is riselara@psu.edu and her phone number is (814) 867-1208.

Thank you, in advance, for your help with this research project.

Ladori R. Lara
Informed Consent Form for Adult Participants

Implied Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Communicative Coping and Relational Infidelity across the Lifespan: The role of Commitment during Relational Distress

Principal Investigator: Ladori R. Lara, Graduate Student
234 Sparks Building, University Park, PA 16802
(814) 867-1208; riselara@psu.edu

Advisor: Dr. Jon F. Nussbaum
234 Sparks Building, University Park, PA 16802
(814) 863-3619; jfn5@psu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to learn more about how the role of communication as a coping mechanism during the presence of relational distress. You will be asked questions that ask you to respond to questions concerning your current romantic relationship, a past romantic relationship, or romantic relationships in general.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to complete a questionnaire on relational infidelity and communicative coping. The majority of the questions posed in the questionnaire will ask about your relationship with your current dating/marital partner. Other questions will ask you to reflect directly about coping strategies that you would utilize in a stressful situation within your relationship.

3. Duration: Completing the questionnaire will take approximately 30-60 minutes of your time.

4. Risks/Discomforts: Many of the questions are personal and may cause possible discomfort in answering questions regarding your relationship. However, you may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may withdraw your participation in this project at any time.

5. Benefits: The benefits to you include the possibility of improved understanding of yourself, others, your significant relationships, and the role of communication within your interpersonal relationships. The benefits to society include an improved understanding of how communication functions during stressful situations within significant relationships.

6. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential and will not be shared with your child/grandchild, spouse, or parties not directly associated with this research project. The survey does not ask for any information that would identify who the responses belong to. In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared because your name is in no way linked to your responses. The following may review and copy records related to this
research: The Office for Human Research Protections in the US Department of Health and Human Services, Penn State University’s Social Science Institutional Review Board, and Penn State University’s Office for Research Protections.

7. **Right to Ask Questions**: Please contact Ladori R. Lara at (814) 867-1208 or riselara@psu.edu with any questions, concerns or complaints about this study. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

8. **Voluntary Participation**: Your decision to be in this research is voluntary and you can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Your refusal to take part or your decision to withdraw from the research study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise or are entitled.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. Completion and return of the survey implies that you have read the information in this form and consent to take part in the research. Please keep this form for your records or future reference.
APPENDIX C

Letter to Adult Participants- Version B

Hello!

My name is Ladori R. Lara and I am a researcher at Penn State University, University Park in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences. Your name was provided to me by ________________, who thought you might be interested in participating in a research project I am currently conducting.

The purpose of this study is to learn how communication works to help people in romantic relationships cope with stressful events that occur within their relationship.

Your help with this project is completely voluntary. If you would like to participate in this research, all you will need to do is complete the survey, which is included, and mail it back to us. If you do not want to participate in this research, you do not need to do anything more.

Included in this packet are a consent form, a survey, and an envelope.
- The consent form provides you in information about the study. This is yours to keep. You do not need to return this.
- The survey contains questions we would like you to answer. These questions ask you about yourself, your current spouse or partner, and your relationship with your spouse/partner

Please complete these questions by yourself, and do not share your answers or anything about the questions with your spouse/partner. We really want to know about your own experiences and perceptions. Please do not allow anyone else to complete your survey. If you would like to help with this research, it is important that we get your own feelings, and not anyone else’s.

When you are finished with your survey, place it in the envelope provided, seal and sign the stamped, preaddressed envelope, and mail it to Ladori R. Lara in 234 Sparks Building, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802.
I am also seeking research volunteers for a 30-60 minute interview to be conducted over the phone for this project as well. The focus of this interview is similar to the questionnaire and will gather information about how you and your partner cope with stressful events in your relationship. If you do participate, you will be paid $20 for your time and assistance to this project.

If you have any questions or concerns about this survey or the study while you complete this survey, please feel free to contact Ladori R. Lara. Her email address is riselara@psu.edu and her phone number is (814) 867-1208.

Thank you, in advance, for your help with this research project.

Ladori R. Lara
APPENDIX D

Relationship Demographics

Are you currently in a romantic relationship? YES NO

How long (in years, months) have you been in this relationship?

______________________________________________________________________

Is this an exclusive relationship for you? YES NO

Is this an exclusive relationship for your partner? YES NO

If you circled no, how many romantic partners do you currently have?

______________________________________________________________________

If you circled no for your partner, how many romantic partners do they currently have? (If you do not know, please write “don’t know”) ________________________________

In addition to your current romantic relationship, are you currently involved with someone your partner is unaware of?

YES NO

Have you been involved with someone in the past that your partner was unaware of?

YES NO

If so, how many times has this occurred? ________________________________

Have you ever discovered that your current romantic partner was involved with someone without your knowledge? YES NO

If you marked yes for your partner, how many times has this occurred? ______________
APPENDIX E

Inclusion of Other in Self Scale

Which of the following sets of circles best describes the closeness of you and your romantic partner? (Circle the number for correct set of circles)
APPENDIX F

Relationship Issues Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: People in romantic relationships have to deal with many issues. Among these issues are the decisions about how exclusive they want their relationship to be. Do they expect to spend all of their free time together and have all of their needs met by their partner, or is it acceptable for partners to spend time separately with same-sex and opposite-sex friends and have needs met in these various relationships? Likewise, the partners must decide what activities (e.g., sex) should remain exclusive to the relationship. This research explores people’s opinions and beliefs on these and similar relationship issues. For each statement listed below, fill in the response on the answer sheet that indicates how much you agree or disagree with that statement. Please answer the questions with your current romantic partner in mind.

For each statement:

0 = Strongly disagree with the statement
1 = Moderately disagree with the statement
2 = Neutral – neither agree nor disagree
3 = Moderately agree with the statement
4 = Strongly agree with the statement

My Attitudes/Values Regarding Romantic Relationships:

1. It is acceptable to date more than one person at the same time.
   0 1 2 3 4

2. An exclusive relationship does not mean that a man and a woman must give up all of their friends.
   0 1 2 3 4

3. Other friendships can be very stimulating/strengthening for the primary relationship.
   0 1 2 3 4

4. Having sex with someone other than one’s primary partner is a threat to relationship intimacy/stability.
   0 1 2 3 4

5. Once they are married, men and women should be free to have extramarital friendships.
   0 1 2 3 4
6. Casual sex with a variety of partners can be as satisfying as sex that is limited to an established partnership.

   0  1  2  3  4

7. Sexual intercourse with someone other than one’s primary partner is a betrayal.

   0  1  2  3  4

8. Sexual intercourse with someone other than one’s primary partner leads to problems in the primary relationship, such as anger, disappointment, and self-doubt.

   0  1  2  3  4

9. Sex with other people can be very stimulating/strengthening for the primary relationship.

   0  1  2  3  4

My Expectations/Perceptions/Behaviors in My Relationship:

10. I prefer to have all of my sexual needs met by one person.

    0  1  2  3  4

11. I expect to have same-sex friendships while in my primary relationship.

    0  1  2  3  4

12. I expect to have opposite-sex friendships while in my primary relationship.

    0  1  2  3  4

13. I expect to be the only one to meet my partner’s sexual needs.

    0  1  2  3  4

14. I expect my partner to have opposite-sex friendships.

    0  1  2  3  4

15. I expect my partner to have same-sex friendships.

    0  1  2  3  4

16. I am pleased with the comfort and protection of relationship unity.

    0  1  2  3  4

17. I am sexually satisfied with my partner.

    0  1  2  3  4

18. I get satisfaction from interacting with many people.

    0  1  2  3  4
19. I share all aspects of my life with my partner.

20. Regarding the fulfillment of my needs, besides my relationship with my partner, I would characterize the other relationships (e.g., friendships) that I currently have as:

21. providing social support and companionship.

22. a legitimate means of meeting my needs.

23. an opportunity for personal growth.

24. detracting from my primary relationship.

25. a way to express other aspects of myself.

26. positive experiences that can supplement my primary relationship.

27. providing intellectual sharing.

28. providing acceptance and understanding.

29. limiting the uniqueness and importance of the primary bond.

In an exclusive relationship, where it is expected that I would do everything with my partner and have all of my needs met by my partner, I would:

29. feel special.

30. tend to get bored.

31. not like having to tell my partner everything.
32. feel sexually satisfied.
   0 1 2 3 4
33. not have to worry about sexually transmitted diseases.
   0 1 2 3 4
34. want to build towards marriage.
   0 1 2 3 4
35. feel like I always had someone there for me.
   0 1 2 3 4
36. have more trouble finding the right person for me.
   0 1 2 3 4
37. have greater intimacy.
   0 1 2 3 4
# APPENDIX G

## Commitment Inventory

**Instructions:** Please answer each question below indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement as it applies to your former romantic relationship. You can circle any number from 0 to 4 to indicate various levels of agreement or disagreement with the statement expressed. Please try to respond to each item.

For each statement:
- **0** = Strongly disagree with the statement
- **1** = Moderately disagree with the statement
- **2** = Neutral – neither agree nor disagree
- **3** = Moderately agree with the statement
- **4** = Strongly agree with the statement

1. My friends would not mind it if my partner and I broke up (or divorced).
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2. If s/he had to, my partner could get along just fine without me.
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3. It would be difficult to make enough money to support myself if we broke up or divorced.
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4. If we ended this relationship, I feel fine about my financial status.
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5. This relationship has cost me very little in terms of physical, tangible resources.
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6. Even if I desired leaving, I would feel horribly guilty leaving my partner at this point in our lives.
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7. I would not stay in this relationship (if I wanted to leave it) out of concern for what my leaving would do to my partner.
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8. The steps I would need to take to end this relationship would require a great deal of time and effort.
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9. I still have many options for a good life if, for any reason, we were no longer together.
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10. I could not bear the pain it would cause my partner to leave him/her, even if I really wanted to.
   0  1  2  3  4
11. It would be difficult for my friends to accept it if I ended the relationship with my partner.
   0  1  2  3  4
12. It would be relatively easy to take the steps needed to end the relationship.
   0  1  2  3  4
13. I would not have trouble supporting myself should this relationship end.
   0  1  2  3  4
14. I would lose money, or feel like money had been wasted if my partner and I broke up (divorced).
   0  1  2  3  4
15. My life would probably be satisfying with or without my former partner.
   0  1  2  3  4
16. My family really wants this relationship to work.
   0  1  2  3  4
17. I would lose very valued friends if this relationship ended.
   0  1  2  3  4
18. I would have trouble finding a suitable partner since this relationship ended.
   0  1  2  3  4
19. I would feel guilty for “ruining” my partner’s life when I ended this relationship.
   0  1  2  3  4
20. I believe there are many people who would be happy with me as their spouse or partner.
   0  1  2  3  4
21. I have put a number of tangible, valuable resources into this relationship.
   0  1  2  3  4
22. Though it might take awhile, I could find another desirable partner if I wanted or needed to.
   0  1  2  3  4
23. I do not think that the actual legal steps of getting a divorce would be all that demanding in this day and age.

24. I would not have any problems meeting my basic financial needs for food, shelter, and clothing without my partner.

25. I have put very little money into my former relationship.

26. The process of ending the relationship would require many difficult steps.

27. I am not very attractive to the opposite sex.

28. If I felt I had to leave this relationship, I would not be slowed down by concerns for how well my partner would do without me.

29. My family would not care that I ended this relationship.

30. I cannot imagine how my life could be as good without my partner as it is with my partner.

31. My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.

32. I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.

33. I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of “us” and “we” than “me” and “him/her”.

34. I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now.
APPENDIX H
Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect Measure

Instructions: Read the scenario given below. Please list your partner’s initials where indicated and then fill in the rest of the blanks accordingly. After thoroughly reading the scenario, please respond to the items that follow.

You and your partner, ________________, have been dating/married ______________ months/years. You have recently discovered that your partner is currently involved in a romantic relationship with another man/woman. Given the situation that you and your partner, ________________, are in, please tell us how YOU would react to the situation by responding to the following items with one of the following five responses:

0 = Never do this
1
2
3
4 = Sometimes do this
5
6
7
8 = Always do this

1. I consider breaking up.
   0  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

2. I talk to him/her about what’s upsetting me.
   0  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

3. I patiently wait for things to improve.
   0  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

4. I sulk rather than confront the issue.
   0  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

5. I talk to him/her about breaking up.
   0  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8
6. I discuss things with him/her.

7. I wait awhile before saying anything to see if things will improve on their own.

8. I criticize him/her for things that are unrelated to the real problem.

9. I take action to end the relationship.

10. I tell him/her what’s bothering me.

11. I say nothing and simply forgive him/her.

12. I ignore him/her for awhile.

13. I think about ending our relationship.

14. I suggest changing things in the relationship in order to solve the problem.

15. I give things some time to cool off on their own rather than take action.

16. I treat my partner badly (i.e. ignoring him/her, saying cruel things, etc.).
17. I discuss ending our relationship.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

18. I suggest a compromise solution

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

19. I accept his/her faults and weaknesses and don’t try to change him/her.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

20. I ignore the whole thing and forget about it.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

21. I do things to drive my partner away.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

22. I work things out with my partner right away.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

23. I give him/her the benefit of the doubt and forget about it.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

24. I spend less time with him/her (i.e. I spend more time with friends, watch more television, work longer hours, etc.)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

25. I consider dating other people.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

26. I consider getting advice from someone else (i.e. friends, parents, minister, counselor, etc.)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

27. No matter how bad things get I am loyal to my partner.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
28. I refuse to talk to him/her about it.
APPENDIX I

Open Ended Questions

Instructions: Please respond to the following questions. If you need more space than is allotted, please feel free to attach extra pages for your response.

1. Infidelity in romantic relationship is defined in different ways by different people. Writing with as much detail as possible, please describe what you consider to be infidelity in a romantic relationship. (i.e. specific behaviors, contexts, etc.)
2. The survey on the previous pages attempted to identify possible reactions you might have in reaction to infidelity in your romantic relationship. Are there other strategies/reactions that you would have that were not mentioned? Please describe these in detail.
APPENDIX J

Demographic Questionnaire

What is your gender? (circle one)

Female

Male

Transgender

Other (please specify) _______________________

Age: __________________

Ethnicity: (circle one)

African-American

American Indian

Hispanic

Caucasian

Asian-American

Other (Specify) _______________________________

What is your sexual orientation? (circle one)

Bisexual

Gay

Lesbian

Heterosexual

Uncertain

Other (please specify) ______________________

Religious affiliation: ______________________________
Appendix G

Advertisement for Interview Participation

HELP WANTED!

This study is also seeking adults to participate in a 30-60 minute interview concerning how communication is used as a coping strategy for stressful events in romantic relationships.

**Participants will be paid $20 for their time and assistance.**

If you are interested, please contact Ladori Lara at riselara@psu.edu or (814) 867-1208 (w) or (806) 787-9748(c)
APPENDIX H

Interview Questions

1. Can you please answer the following demographic questions for me?
   a. Sex
   b. Age
   c. Married/ Dating
   d. How long have you been in this relationship

2. Can you describe what defines conflict in your current relationship? Is it disagreements, difference of opinion, etc?

3. When you experience conflict or a distressing situation in your relationship, how do you typically resolve or cope with the situation/stress? What things do you do on your own? What things do you do as a couple? Is there a particular issue that you feel tends to bring conflict or is threatening to your relationship?

4. One of the surveys you completed addressed infidelity in your romantic relationship, and I would like to get your thoughts on this subject.
   a. In your own words, explain to me what the word infidelity in a romantic relationship means to you. (Or, if someone were to ask you for a definition of infidelity, how would you describe it?)
   b. Do you believe that your definition will change the longer you are with your partner/ has changed as your relationship with your partner has progressed? (from dating to marriage, etc)
   c. Can you describe how you think it might/has change(d)?

5. Tell me about any previous experiences you have personally had with infidelity (e.g., in a previous relationship or in relationships of friends or family members)

6. Have you dealt with infidelity in the past? What happened? How did you cope with the situation on your own? How did you work to resolve the issue with your partner?

6a. If this is something you have not encountered in your current or previous relationship(s), what do you think you would do on your own to cope with infidelity in your relationship? What would you and your partner most likely do? Would you be willing to work with your partner to resolve this situation? Is there a situation where you would not be willing to work with your partner to resolve the situation?
Curriculum Vita

Ladori “Risé” Lara

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Educational History
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M.A. Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, August 2003; Major: Communication Studies; Thesis: Demand/Withdraw Conflict in Marriages: Examining Fitzpatrick’s Couple Types and Marital Satisfaction (Advisor: Dr. Patrick C. Hughes)

B.A. Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, May 2001; Major: Communication Studies Minor: English; Honors: Cum Laude

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Lecturer, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, Fall 2007 to Spring 2009

Instructor, Department of Distance and Continuing Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, Fall 2004 to Spring 2005

Graduate Instructor, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, Fall 2003 to Summer 2007

Instructor, Department of Communication Studies, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, January 2002 to May 2003