The impact of marital infidelity on the offended partner: Gender differences in a religious population

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### **Demographics**

- ➤ 17 participants, 7 men, all identify their faith as extremely important
- ➤ 16 were either divorced or divorce was pending/likely
- Cause of marriage dissolutioninfidelity
- Women stayed in relationships with infidelity longer than men

#### Relationship to divorce

- ➤ At times it was difficult to determine how much stress was from divorce & how much was from infidelity
- ➤ The group was divided in respect to some seeing the divorce as a relief and others struggling with both the divorce & infidelity



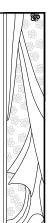
#### Infidelity as trauma

- All reported that the infidelity was one of the most traumatic incidents of their lives
  - > Most experienced PTSD symptoms
    - > Insomnia
    - > Irritability
    - > Difficulty concentrating
    - > hypervigilence



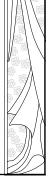
#### Gender differences

- Women with children still living at home had more difficulty coping
  - > Result of gender role differences
  - Men experience trauma of infidelity as abandonment of them. Women experience abandonment of them and their children
  - > Women didn't enter new relationships while children were at home



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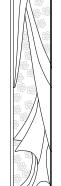


#### Gender differences

- Women with children still living at home had more difficulty coping
  - > Women never considered who would maintain custody.
  - > Caring for children became the focus of their lives and a reason for being
- Men in some cases became less involved with fathering
  - One case reported increased relationship with children

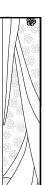
#### Gender differences

- ➤ Men were more resilient than women in resolving the crisis
  - > Men remarried
  - > Reported the experience as a growth experience
- Women used emotion-focused coping men problem-solving coping



#### Religious coping

- ➤ All but one used positive religious coping (major finding)
  - > Identified this as the source of their strength
  - > One who used negative religious coping was closest to trauma
- ➤ Women used emotion-focused coping men problem-solving coping



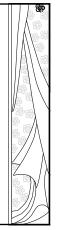
### Religious coping

- Negative experiences with protestant churches (minor finding)
  - > Divorce stigma
  - > Negative divorced church members
  - Excommunication from church for extramarital involvement after the divorce
    - > More traumatic than the infidelity



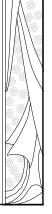
# Religious coping

- Negative experiences with Catholic churches
  - > All (3) Catholic subjects expressed concern about::
    - Annulment: cost, invasion of privacy, denial of reality of long relationships
      - ➤ Threats of not being able to volunteer or take communion
    - > Pressure to remain in the marriage in spite of the infidelity



## Other coping strategies

- > Similar for men and women
- > Friends & family
- > Individual counseling
- Medication, journaling, taking a college class, moving, long walks

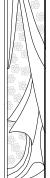


# Positive and negative counseling experiences

- Marital counseling not useful in any of the situations
  - > One partner already decided to leave
  - > One blamed secular counselor
  - > Other felt the counselor didn't know how to help

# Positive and negative counseling experiences

- Individual counseling useful in most situations
  - > Consistently with a Christian counselor
  - > Found support and shared values helpful
  - ➤ One counselor recommended meeting with 3<sup>rd</sup> party, after divorce
    - > Useful for that client (might not always be useful, especially early on)



# Positive and negative counseling experiences

- Individual counseling that wasn't useful
  - > Minister didn't have time, brushed her off
  - Another minister didn't ask for her side of the story, tried to get husband to say that he loved her
  - Minister suggested weight loss as the solution to infidelity problem, very offensive



## Impact of study

- Challenge for marital counselors to realize that it is often not effective for couples where there has been infidelity
  - > What is success?
  - > Critical importance of listening to both partners
  - > Lecturing the offender may not be useful
  - Preventive education prior to infidelity valuable



#### Impact of study

- ➤ The burden for caring for children is an added stressor for women whose husband's are unfaithful
  - Work to increase father's parenting involvement
  - Lessen couple conflict by helping them set aside their anger and focus on the best interests of the children



# Impact of study

- Positive religious coping is a strength that should be built on
  - Encourage involvement with church members who will offer spiritual strength not just emotional support
  - Intervention around negative religious coping is important in decreasing stress

