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To cite this article: Ebony A. Utley (2017): Infidelity's Coexistence With Intimate Partner Violence: An Interpretive Description of Women Who Survived a Partner's Sexual Affair, Western Journal of Communication

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2017.1279744>



Published online: 01 Feb 2017.



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# Infidelity's Coexistence With Intimate Partner Violence: An Interpretive Description of Women Who Survived a Partner's Sexual Affair

Ebony A. Utley

*Infidelity is commonly understood as hurtful communication because it involves a relational transgression and devaluation. This qualitative study of 65 women who survived a partner's sexual affair expands the literature on infidelity and hurt by exploring its coexistence with intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV organizes the infidelity narratives into six categories: social, economic, emotional, and psychological aggression as well as sexual and physical violence. Infidelity's coexistence with IPV is not infidelity as a precipitating factor for IPV or infidelity as part of a pattern of violent or aggressive behaviors. Instead, in these narratives, infidelity embodies the aforementioned forms of IPV.*

*Keywords:* Hurtful Communication; Infidelity; Intimate Partner Violence; Qualitative; Relational Transgressions

"I really understand infidelity as abuse. It's abuse. It's abusive. It's without consent. It's a serious violation. I think I would like it if we culturally started talking about the dynamic."

(Forsythia)

This study posits that the hurt experienced via the coexistence of infidelity and intimate partner violence (IPV) communicates important yet underinvestigated messages about the self, the partner, and the relationship. Rarely are infidelity, IPV, and

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hurt studied together as a communicative phenomenon in which the experiences of the former two shape the latter, and even more rarely are there undisputed universal definitions of the three concepts. In their comprehensive study on infidelity, Blow and Hartnett (2005) propose this definition:

Infidelity is a sexual and/or emotional act engaged in by one person within a committed relationship, where such an act occurs outside of the primary relationship and constitutes a breach of trust and/or violation of agreed-upon norms (overt and covert) by one or both individuals in that relationship in relation to romantic/emotional or sexual exclusivity. (pp. 191–192)

This encompassing approach is useful because it includes infidelity's various types (sexual and emotional), sites (face-to-face and online), partnerships (heterosexual, homosexual, and polyamorous), commitment levels (dating, cohabitating, and married), and motives (excitement, companionship, or revenge). Complicating infidelity is necessary to understand the many norms that may be violated and the various messages infidelity may communicate in multiple contexts.

IPV also includes multiple components. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines IPV as “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner” (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015, p. 11). Psychological aggression is further defined as the “use of verbal and nonverbal communication with the intent to a) harm another person mentally or emotionally and/or b) exert control over another person (Breiding et al., 2015, p. 13). Dailey, Lee, and Spitzberg (2007) argue that psychological aggression is actually “a process of communication abusive to people's psychology” and communication should be foregrounded via the alternative conceptualization of communicative aggression defined as “any recurring set of messages that function to impair a person's enduring preferred self-image” (p. 303).

Hurt, like infidelity and IPV, is an interpersonal communication experience. “People feel hurt when they believe someone said or did something that caused them emotional pain” (Vangelisti, 2007, p. 122). Hurt is emotional injury that communicates by “provid[ing] people with information about themselves and their relationships ... [and] persuad[ing] individuals to change their attitudes or behaviors” (Vangelisti, 2009, p. 8). Individually, infidelity, IPV, and hurt as communication phenomena have been well documented. The unexplored relationship is how infidelity's *coexistence* with IPV functions as a hurtful form of communication. The essay proceeds with a literature review of infidelity's relationship to three perspectives on hurt, the methodology for gathering data on women's experiences with infidelity and IPV, an interpretive description of these experiences, and concludes with implications for communication studies research on hurt and infidelity's coexistence with IPV.

## INFIDELITY AND HURT

Hurt is a normal expectation when cultivating intimacy through vulnerability with another person (Feeney, 2005; Vangelisti, 2007). Scholars have taken different approaches to distilling the myriad types of recurring hurtful events especially in romantic relationships. Three

common rationales for understanding hurtful events include relational devaluation, relational transgression, and personal injury. Each will be reviewed in relationship to infidelity.

According to Leary, relational devaluation is a form of rejection and hurt that occurs when one partner does not seem to value the relationship as much as the other partner desires or when one partner feels their relational value has decreased. Leary (2001) explains, "Because the other person does not value the relationship as much as before, one experiences a deep feeling of rejection. This helps to explain why people are most often hurt by those with whom they are already close" (p.7). Infidelity in long-term committed relationships may be perceived by the receiving partner as a relational devaluation. Relational devaluation implies a relationship is no longer considered "valuable, important, or close" (Leary, 2001, p. 6).

Relational transgressions "involve violations of rules for appropriate relational conduct" (Metts, 1994, p. 218). The violation of these implicit and/or explicit agreements between partners is frequently a result of relational devaluation (Feeney, 2005). Relational transgressions are hurtful events when the target feels victimized and vulnerable (Vangelisti, 2001). Metts (1994) surveyed the research on relational transgressions and concludes that "the sexual affair is a prototypical example of a relational transgression even among couples who are not yet married" (p. 221–222). Metts identified other relational transgressions including: deception, betraying confidence, unfulfilled commitments, failing to privilege the primary relationship, fighting unfairly, and a lack of emotional reciprocity—all of which could also be entangled within a clandestine extradyadic engagement. Thus, infidelity is a productive site for understanding relational transgressions as well as the hurt that may emerge from these transgressions.

However, not all relational transgressions (including infidelity) are hurtful.<sup>1</sup> Feeney (2005) argues that the distinguishing feature is not merely relational devaluation or transgression but the experience of personal injury. According to Feeney,

Hurt is an emotion elicited specifically by relational transgressions that evoke a sense of personal injury and that generally (but not invariably) imply low relational evaluation. In this context, "personal injury" is defined as damage to the victim's view of the self as worthy of love and/or to core beliefs about the availability and trustworthiness of others. (p. 256)

Feeney associates hurt with attachment styles to argue that the traditionally understood infant-caregiver bonds are often remodeled in romantic relationships. When a partner's needs for safety and security are violated, hurt may be more intense and extensive as seen in "studies documenting the deep, visceral impact of acts such as sexual infidelity" (Feeney, 2005, p. 256). The extent of personal injury is always related to an individual's evaluation of the "loveability of the self and the availability and trustworthiness of others" within the relational context (Feeney, 2005, p. 269).

Feeney's research reveals a positive correlation between personal injury and attachment bonds. Personal injury may also result from the nature of the infraction. For example, when the partner on the receiving end of the infidelity is the last to receive the message, s/he might fear being perceived as "gullible or easy to deceive, obviously identity-threatening traits" (Afifi, Falato, & Weiner, 2001, p. 295). Humiliating public

infidelity discoveries intensify betrayal and hurt (Fitness, 2001) as do vengeful infidelities when the choice of extradyadic partner is a family member, friend, enemy, or other intentionally chosen individual (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007).

Hurt in romantic relationships is multifaceted. Feeney (2005) explains, “It seems that hurt feelings generally reflect a complex set of perceptions about the value of the self, the partner, and the relationship ...” (p. 270). Infidelity hurt becomes a visceral experience when relational devaluation is compounded by multiple relational transgressions and personal injury that may not only be humiliating but also has the potential to shatter a person’s sense of safety or security depending on their attachment to the offending partner. This essay extends these traditional understandings of how hurt may manifest within romantic relationships with infidelity by considering how the additional factor of IPV impacts an infidelity survivor’s “complex set of perceptions about the value of the self, the partner, and the relationship” (Feeney, 2005, p. 270).

## METHOD

This study’s Institutional Review Board approved data is a subset of a larger sample of 110 women from across the United States who defined themselves as having been cheated on, done the cheating, or been the other woman. Participants were asked about their heterogeneous experiences with infidelity to provide a more inclusive picture of how infidelity impacts women’s lives. The snowball sample emerged through word of mouth, social media, and my guest appearance on two Los Angeles talk radio programs where I mentioned the study and gave my voicemail number on air. Interviewees participated in an hour-long semistructured phone or face-to-face interview with me. No compensation was provided. With participant permission, interviews were audio-recorded. Each participant chose her own alias although a few have been changed to avoid duplicates. I began by asking them to define infidelity and, with that definition in mind, to describe their experience(s) with infidelity. It was common for a woman to share several stories during a single interview.

When reading the transcripts of the women who survived a partner’s sexual affair, I noticed the recurrence of aggressive behaviors so much so that I began researching various types of aggression and discovered that the data reflected the CDC’s definition of IPV with the exception of stalking. Because the psychological aggression category was so broad, I searched for more succinct typologies that would distinguish among the varied forms of aggression within the data. In her study about identifying multiple forms of nonphysical intimate partner abuse, Outlaw (2009) uses Miller’s (1995) framework and summarizes four types of abuse that also frequently recurred in my data.

Emotional abuse involves comments and actions intended to undermine the victim’s self-respect and sense of worth. ... Psychological abuse ... undermine[s] the security of the victim’s own logic and reasoning. ... Social abuse generally involves an imposed isolation—victims are cut off from family and friends, whether by threat, force, or persuasion. Economic abuse involves imposed economic dependence. ... (Outlaw, 2009, p. 264)<sup>2</sup>

Subdividing aggression into Miller's (1995) four categories and combining them with the CDC's definitions of sexual violence—nonconsensual sexual acts, as well as physical violence—physical contact enacted to control a partner, created a framework of six themes.

Sixty-five interviews met the criteria of surviving a partner's sexual affair and experiencing IPV. The women's ages ranged from 21 to 67 with an average age of 42. Fifty-five of the women had some or more college education. Participants wrote their own descriptors for race and sexual orientation. Forty self-identified as Black, 17 as White, 5 as Latina, and 1 was Asian. Two women identified as biracial, Black and White and White and Latina. Fifty-two women were heterosexual, 5 were bisexual, 4 identified as lesbian/queer, 1 did not identify a sexual orientation, and another 3 identified as heteroflexible—generally understood as predominantly heterosexual, but inclusive of some homosexual activity.

Direct questions about IPV were not asked during the interviews because I initially had no intention of collecting data about infidelity and IPV, but when over 150 distinguishable instances of IPV recurred within 65 interviews, its presence was undeniable. The major limitations of not asking directly about IPV are 1) not being able to determine the extent to which participants may see themselves as victims of IPV, 2) not having access to the interviewees' IPV histories, and 3) not being able to ascribe intention to the perpetrators because they were not interviewed. Developing a theory about the coexistence of infidelity and IPV is impossible with these limitations.

Constructing an interpretive description with this data, however, is not only applicable but an appropriately iterative and reflexive process of "comprehending data, synthesizing meanings, theorizing relationships, and recontextualizing data into findings" (Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004, p. 6). I extensively reviewed the aforementioned IPV themes and their definitions with two undergraduate research assistants. The three of us individually coded the transcripts then met to discuss discrepancies, after which I determined the final categorizations. Subthemes that reflected thematic frequency or represented particularly intense moments also emerged from the data and are included in the analysis. Interpretive description is an applied methodology that values "new knowledge pertaining to the subjective, experiential, tacit, and patterned aspects of human health experience—not so that we can advance theorizing, but so that we have sufficient contextual understanding to guide future decisions that will apply evidence to the lives of real people" (Thorne, 2008, p. 36). Interpretive description's emphasis on health and helping was particularly useful for exploring women's experiences with infidelity and IPV.

IPV is an appropriate framework for analyzing these women's infidelity narratives not only because it distinguishes the data's emergent themes into easily identifiable categories, but also because both infidelity and IPV communicate hurt. Compounded hurt is the lens through which the women in this sample received impactful messages about themselves, their partner, and their relationship. The coexistence of infidelity and IPV within this data was not a matter of infidelity as a precipitating factor that led to IPV or infidelity as part of a pattern of violent or aggressive behaviors. Instead, infidelity took on the characteristics of the form of IPV. For example, a transgressor became physically violent when his wife

confronted him about his affair or when he thought she was being unfaithful. The physical violence occurred in relationship to infidelity. Each theme explains the connection between infidelity and IPV in this way.

## **AN INTERPRETIVE DESCRIPTION OF INFIDELITY'S COEXISTENCE WITH IPV**

### *Social Aggression*

Seven women's narratives referenced social aggression which manifests as curtailing a partner's social interactions and/or excessive monitoring. Infidelity in relationship to social aggression is public humiliation that causes partners to limit their social interactions. For instance, when the partner who committed infidelity publicly lies and says the recipient of infidelity was the unfaithful party or otherwise at fault, she is more likely to feel belittled, embarrassed, and humiliated. For example, Erica's ex-husband lied and told people she slept with his stepbrother and had sex with a dog.<sup>3</sup> Hope and her husband divorced because of his infidelities, but he publicly justified their breakup by telling people she "had a really bad drinking problem." Accusing the innocent party to conceal the perpetrator's infidelity undermines the innocent partner's reputation for reliability/believability and socially isolates her which oftentimes can create more social space for the perpetrator to have a clandestine affair. FiFi's boyfriend of 1 year kept her isolated so that he could be free to cheat. FiFi explained.

I had to change my phone number because of him because he would get upset when guys would text me asking me how I am. I couldn't have any friends. I couldn't hang out with them. . . . He was very controlling. I couldn't tell him, "Oh I'm going to hang out with my friends today." I had to ask for permission to go out with them. I had to tell him when I got there. I had to tell him when I left. I had to text him during. I would be with my friends and he would text me, and I would ignore it because I'm talking with my girlfriends and he would be upset. He's like "God you're so rude. You can't even text me while you're there. I just want to see how you are." I realize all this now because he was doing shady things behind my back so that's why he wanted to make sure that I wasn't doing the same to him.

When 19-year-old Dot confronted her girlfriend of 3 years with evidence that she had been cheating on her for at least six months, Dot realized that her imposed isolation had been slowly happening over time.

All these little tumblers just clicked into place, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click. Wait a minute, you didn't want me to drive because you didn't want me out in the streets. Wait a minute, you had the black car service with me because they tell you everything I do, everywhere I go. Wait a minute, you kept me closed here inside the house so that I couldn't see or hear what you were doing out in the streets. You kept me in this little glass box and you kept me content and quiet and docile and meek and I was never a docile or meek person.

After their relationship ended, Dot received a letter from her ex-girlfriend's new girlfriend that confirmed numerous lies her ex had shared with her new partner and their mutual friends. Isolation may have limited these women's interactions with others, but it ultimately revealed their partner's intentions.

### *Economic Aggression*

Relationships face economic challenges and financial insecurity as a normal part of their development. Economic aggression involves "behaviors that control a woman's ability to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources, thus threatening her economic security and potential for self-sufficiency" (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008, p. 564). When economic aggression coincides with infidelity, the person being cheated on may tally the resources that they have lost because of a partner's affair as well as describe an imposed economic dependence. Thirty women experienced infidelity and economic aggression.

Sometimes an unfaithful partner redirects resources away from family and towards the affair. Florence's ex-boyfriend spent every weekend with his other child and this child's mother, but rarely spent time with her and their son. She said, "If I ever asked for money for diapers, it was always 'I'm too broke. You know I don't have money. I'll see what I can do.'" Erica's ex-husband's economic aggression occurred over Christmas. "Christmas was very sparse that year—and he bought toys and a tree for that lady or girl but when it came time to buy his own family gifts, he didn't have it." Tammy's husband spent money on the secretary. "I confronted him. I go, 'Why are you taking her to the chiropractor? You say I can't even afford to go to the chiropractor, and I've got back problems and you're taking the secretary?'" Tammy also believed the secretary's "seriously big paycheck" was excessive.

The indirect loss of time and money as resources is devastating as is the discovery that a woman is paying for her partner's affair. Sam's long-term girlfriend blurted out one day that she had been having an affair for several months, she didn't want to lie anymore, and their relationship was over. Sam was in shock and thought her girlfriend was joking until she started packing. Once Sam realized the breakup was real she described being on autopilot as she transferred money from their joint account into her personal account. Sam's instincts were correct.

She had taken this person to the beach when she said she was with family or with friends, gotten a ticket, not said anything about it, and I was left to pay it. All these times I have given her gas money or let her take my car. All those things to me were financial infidelity. Looking through joint statements, restaurant charges and stuff like that after the fact kind of doing little audits of my accounts and finding all these charges and stuff that were clearly part of this affair that was going on and so that was very frustrating to feel like I had paid for that.

India realized she had been paying her ex-husband's girlfriend's rent and car payment: "He had half of his paycheck going to a secret account, so in a way, I was paying it, because I would work extra hours to make up—thinking, gosh, he's not getting any raises." Kathy's ex-husband fathered two children with another woman during their 16-year marriage. "I added it all up and told him these kids have cost us \$80,000 out of our household...."

Several wives thought their ex-husbands refused to leave despite their infidelities because their wives were financially stable. Brenda's first ex-husband was unable to commit to their relationship or their house payments. She explained why she dissolved that relationship: "With him it was more the 'you will support me' than the infidelity." Brenda was further relieved when her second ex-husband's girlfriend came to visit their house because she wanted an excuse to leave that marriage too. She believed he married a college-educated wife for "prestige" not because he intended to be faithful. CeCe thought her ex-husband married and stayed with her throughout his numerous affairs because "I had a decent job, decent salary, and he wanted to buy this house or he probably would have never married me." Hope thought her serially cheating ex-husband wanted her for similar reasons: "During the time we were engaged he told me he got laid off. I don't know whether that's true now. I think he might've thought that he struck it big marrying a lawyer." Willa's husband fathered a child outside of their marriage but he will not leave her because as Willa notes, "I'm still a meal ticket. I'm still something he can claim. I still have benefits that he can use."

Fronting the money directly or indirectly for an affair is not the only price women have had to pay under the auspices of infidelity and economic aggression. There is also the cost of getting free. Willa described the exorbitant costs of being responsible and faithful when her husband was not.

I was going to file for divorce I would say maybe 8 or 9 years ago. I went to the lawyer. I was ready to move on, and I was told at that time because I was the reliable person in our partnership that nine times out of ten I would suffer greatly if I divorced him....

Willa's imagined costs of getting free rival the real life costs of Jane, Faye, and Forsythia. Jane and her partner owned property in the 8 years they were together. By the time they completely dissolved the relationship, Jane estimated, "she ended up cheating me out of a couple hundred thousand dollars, and I didn't fight it." Faye said her ex-husband "stormed out of the house one day and went to one of the strip bars and picked up a couple of girls and took them to Hawaii, and spent \$10,000 in five days." When Faye received a traffic ticket that said he was with two adult females in the car, she called the credit card company and pieced together his expenses. He never admitted to taking the trip. His economic aggression did not stop there. By the time they divorced, Faye recounted,

He stole everything. I mean, he took [our son's] college fund that required double signatures to get it out of the bank. He ran up the credit line on the house so that there was beyond no equity. The house was upside down. He ran up every card we had, and he took out more cards. When the dust settled, I owed about \$100,000 I didn't know I owed, and I spent the next 8 years paying it off.

Forsythia's ex-husband moved in with his girlfriend but still contested their divorce. Forsythia estimated her divorce also cost about \$100,000 inclusive of the money owed on property, credit cards, and attorney fees. She said,

I drew the line at him having access to half of my retirement, half of the proceeds for all my future royalties, half the advance for the future book that we had talked about in the car one day where I was tossing around ideas as we do. He said he had intellectual property claim to it, so things like that took a really long time. He tried to get alimony or spousal support. Yeah.

The costs of infidelity without economic aggression are already high (Crouch & Dickes, 2016). Economic aggression plus infidelity clearly communicates that an intimate partner is unfaithful to both the relationship and its finances.

### *Emotional Aggression*

Emotional aggression, sometimes called verbal aggression, also described as “ego-pummeling” by Miller (1995), “involves comments and actions intended to undermine the victim’s self-respect and sense of worth” (Outlaw, 2009, p. 264). AA described it thusly:

This kind of abuse, I think, is the worst kind. A lot of times you don’t see the scars; you don’t realize the scars are there; they’re invisible. Even if you feel a hurt or a pain and you don’t know where it’s coming from, the doctors can’t find it, you’re perfectly well and you’re physically fit, so nothing is wrong.

Except, oftentimes, everything is wrong. Emotional aggression may be difficult to identify but that does not make the effects any less real. The interviewees chronicled partners who called them names, humiliated them, were disrespectful and dismissive, withheld information, attention, and love as well as were prone to unpredictable and seemingly unwarranted angry outbursts. Additionally, 34 of the women’s narratives of emotional aggression and infidelity fell within the categories of blame and shame.

It was typical behavior to be blamed and shamed for an affair. Lola recounted her husband’s words: “At one point he did say, ‘Well, you know, go look at you. What do you expect? Why wouldn’t you expect me to try to find someone else? You gained all this weight.’” Dee’s husband cursed her out in front of their children declaring, “You’re a bitch and that’s why you don’t have a husband, that’s why ‘cause you don’t know how to treat a man.” Irene’s ex-husband railed against her for being lazy. She recounted, “His whole thing was I left because you didn’t keep the house and you wouldn’t work.” Hope’s ex-husband justified sleeping with other people because of her lack of sexual experience. Stacey remembered her husband saying,

“You don’t act like you love me, that’s why I left. You would just stand in the corner and kept your mouth shut.” So he actually blames me for the breakup; I let him do those things. I let him go to the club. I led him into having those affairs.

At times, partners were outwardly cruel with their blame but other times it was the choice of a particular type of other woman that had the shaming effect of emotional aggression on their women. Merrick’s ex-husband had chosen a curvier woman over her. “I always had a body insecurity. . . . I wanted to be curvier, I wanted to be—in my mind—prettier. And I could never do it.” Jessica’s and Melanie’s boyfriends also cheated with big women which made them feel insecure because they were small.

Discovering a partner's affair can devastate one's self-esteem, and comparing oneself to the other woman can make the entire experience even worse. Janet's boyfriend is 8 years younger and has been in a long-term relationship with someone 6 years younger than him for two thirds of the time he has been in a relationship with Janet.

God damn, what is it about her? And I start to question myself: how I look, how I dress, my age, just everything in general and I know I'm not a bad looking person. I'm not no beauty queen, but I'm not a bad looking person, and he knows when I clean up I look good so we hardly ever go out anywhere ever....

Anne lamented,

You feel like the ugliest person in the world. You feel like well, if my husband, the one who is supposed to love me and be attracted to me more than anybody else in the world, if he throws me to the dogs and throws me in the gutter I guess I'm just a piece of dirt that people can just step all over, and you feel so unattractive and ugly.

Elizabeth said, "I remember feeling ugly. I remember feeling unsexy. I remember feeling unlovable and old, which is different than thinking it was my fault."

Other women, however, accepted fault for their partner's affair and consistently asked, "What did I do wrong?" "What could I have done?" Dot describes the devastation of the emotional aggression that leads to accepting fault:

I mean, in theory, us breaking up would have left me technically homeless and jobless and everything-less but that didn't bother me, that wasn't what I was worried about. I was trying to figure out what was wrong with me, why wasn't I good enough for her because I had been everything that I thought she wanted me to be and everything that I thought a good wife, a good spouse, and a good mate was supposed to be so I couldn't understand what about me was so broken.

The "complaints, insults, put-downs, name-calling, public embarrassment, or even accusations" (Outlaw, 2009, p. 264) of emotional aggression are forms of criticism, devaluation, and accusation intended to communicate messages of worthlessness. Emotional aggression and infidelity are used to justify affairs and communicate to the victimized partner that she is unworthy of sex and love.

### *Psychological Aggression*

Psychological aggression differs from emotional aggression in its ability to undermine a victim's sense of safety and security. Psychological aggression and infidelity manifests when an unfaithful partner tries to control, threaten, and manipulate the other partner. Thirty-two women experienced psychological aggression. Psychological aggressors may control their targets by threatening physical harm. Forsythia described an ex-husband who threatened to kill her on multiple occasions after she found out about his infidelity.

He was really dangerous and there's something about this infidelity. There's like infidelity and there's something else wrapped up in it about him just being crazy. That I think it makes it infidelity plus and not to minimize anybody else's experience but there's something else mixed up in this mix that I can't separate the two.

What Forsythia described as “infidelity plus” can also be understood as infidelity plus psychological aggression. Forsythia’s ex-husband did not take responsibility for having an affair with a much younger work-study student whom he supervised. Instead, he blamed the affair on Forsythia because she refused to say unequivocally that she would die for him when she found out. He threatened to kill her as well as himself. He dragged out the divorce over petty issues like pet visitation. Forsythia’s intention to leave him activated an intense desire for control that, despite her description, was not crazy as much as it was a calculated attempt to regain control over a relationship he knew he was losing.

Antionette’s ex-fiancé also appeared to act irrationally to her discovery of his infidelities. Six months after Antionette accepted her boyfriend’s marriage proposal, she discovered that he was engaged to another woman. They randomly encountered his other fiancée at the mall. The two women pieced together a complete picture of his many lies. Once they returned home and Antionette confronted her fiancé, he beat her and tried to make her drink Clorox. She attempted to repair the relationship until she found out about yet another fiancée after which he put sugar in her gas tank, tried to get her fired, stalked her, and continued to threaten to kill her. She remembered, “It was more my fault that I found out about her than it was his fault. He never took blame in any of this. Ever. It was always my fault.” Antionette described him as a psychological aggressor. “He had placed terror in my heart.”

While it would be easy to describe these men as crazy or irrational, as psychological aggressors, their actions were strategic attempts to regain control. If infidelity and the secrets it necessarily entails are opportunities to exercise power over a partner, when those secrets are discovered, the psychological aggressor often shifts tactics to regain power. In addition to being controlling and threatening, those tactics also include manipulation in the form of gaslighting. The CDC defines gaslighting as “presenting false information to the victim with the intent of making them doubt their own memory and perception” (Breiding et al., 2015, p. 15). Instead of acting crazy, an unfaithful partner can try to convince the victimized partner that she is crazy. Janet recounted a conversation where her boyfriend attempted to convince her to accept her position:

“You should be secure in your position. You’re number one. You’re the main girlfriend. If we’re together we’re together, my phone doesn’t go off, no one calls me, no one disrespects you, no one calls your phone.” Those are the okay points I guess he was trying to give out and I’m just like “That’s not good enough because you’re not a main boyfriend for me. You’re not my main dude. You’re the only dude,” and a lot of times I feel stupid.

Even in her telling of the story, Janet’s confusion was evident. She acknowledged that he made “okay points” but then confessed that she felt stupid.

Florence labeled her ex-boyfriend’s manipulation reverse psychology:

He played that reverse psychology on me, and I fell for it. And I fell for it. He made me feel guilty for going through his phone, finding those pictures of her, and then he said, “Well did you check the response? Did you check to see what I sent back to her?” Well my reply was, “No! I found those naked pictures of her. Why are they

even in your phone?” Yeah. It was that reverse kind of psychology so I ended up practically begging him not to leave me again.

Ashley thought the communication required to maintain an open relationship would make the relationship with her ex-boyfriend less susceptible to infidelity, but when she would express discomfort with his decisions and try to establish boundaries, he made her feel like she was being unreasonable.

He was very manipulative and would make me think, “Well if you thought about it, you would agree that this is the right decision” even though you didn’t. So there was a lot of manipulation and now that that’s not in my life every day, I can really tell when it is again.

But when one is in the midst of a psychologically abusive relationship it can be difficult if not impossible to distinguish between reality and a partner’s version of reality. Miller (1995) describes it as “a subtle way to corrode the foundations of logic on which a person has learned to make decisions and take action” (p. 34). Kathy described it this way, “It’s the someone looking in your face and literally lying to you like that, just makes you completely lose rationality.” Tammy confessed, “It made me go insane. Infidelity ... created insanity.” The perpetual lies within infidelity and psychological aggression communicate that the victimized partner’s relationship is no longer safe and secure.

### *Sexual Violence*

Sexual violence is broadly defined as nonconsensual sex acts. Twenty-two women experienced sexual violence in relationship to infidelity as nonconsensual sex and/or the nonconsensual transference of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). One extremely devastating combination of infidelity and sexual violence happened to Seville who discovered that her ex-husband had been molesting one of their daughters.

He wanted to be closer to the kids and I had to go to \_\_\_\_\_ for a conference for my job, and I asked him, “Oh, just, you know, well, keep the kids, and I’m going to this conference.” While I was at the conference in \_\_\_\_\_, I got a phone call from the sheriff’s department. Come to find out, he was molesting her for years, and I didn’t know, and so that was something we had to deal with. My whole life was shattered.

Because Seville’s daughter did not want to testify against her father (which is common in these cases) no charges were brought against him and he still maintains visitation with their other children.

One of the recurring frustrations of sexual violence and its coexistence with infidelity is the women’s inability to receive retribution or justice for the crimes committed against them. Eighteen of the 22 women in the sexual violence sample were exposed to STIs by unfaithful partners. Three were virgins; two others had been with their husbands for over 20 years when their doctors informed them that they had an STI. Willa recounted, “Honey, I’ve had more STD’s than Carter’s got pills and I have been with no one other than him.” Stacey and CeCe explained why they

continued to have sex despite being exposed to STIs. Stacey's husband contracted herpes during their marriage while she was pregnant with her second child. Fortunately, neither she nor the baby had the disease, but Stacey continued to have unprotected sex with her husband. "It's not something I wanted to do all the time. But, how do you tell your husband that you don't want to have sex with him? I'm just mad that I let it go for so long. That I stayed." Even after CeCe's ex-husband exposed her to chlamydia she explained, "He wasn't gonna allow me to do anything extra to protect myself." She could neither use condoms nor refuse sex. "If I didn't want to have sex, he would force himself on me." She bid her time until she could leave. Although neither used the language, both women described obligatory actions that the CDC defines as sexual violence. Seven of the 22 women in the sexual violence sample discussed being or feeling "forced" to have sex without condoms even after they knew their partners were having sex with someone else.

STIs caused by infidelity are further compounded by the offending partner's denials. A majority of the women describe their frustrations with partners who refused to even admit they had transferred the infection even when she was monogamous, she knew his secondary partner had it, or her doctor had assured her that she had contracted it from him. Melanie contracted an STI from the father of her two children and admitted, "I never understood how I went from being clean to having chlamydia." The women also described the devastation of their men's failure to protect their health. When Vanessa had an abnormal pap smear, she learned she had contracted HPV from her ex-boyfriend. "It was very distressing for me because he was the first person I'd ever been with, and I had opened myself up, obviously emotionally, physically, mentally to him and I felt as if he had completely betrayed that now because he was messing with my health." Kelly said, "And that was another thing that hurt me so bad too because, if you're gonna fool around, you wouldn't use protection? I mean trichomoniasis is something very small, but it could have easily been AIDS, or HIV, or anything, you know?"

Most of the contracted STIs were curable with treatment, but not all of them were. Mary's husband transmitted trichomoniasis and herpes to her. Although she does not regret marrying him because of their three children, she regrets the disease and plans to use how she got it as a teachable moment for her daughter.

I don't have to go into a lot of details. I think that's where the destruction comes from, but I think I can give her these teachable moments saying, "Your mom was a faithful wife, faithful mom and hadn't been out in the streets," and this happened.

Sherry was another wife familiar with extreme betrayal. When she would argue with her ex-husband, he would say that he "made it where no other man would ever want her again." For years, she wondered what that meant until she was hospitalized for respiratory problems, and the doctors determined that she was HIV positive. Teah contracted two STIs from her ex-husband—the first could be treated but the second she described as a scarlet letter that defines her:

With almost every single person except one, I've felt like I've been harboring the deep dark secret that if they found out, I'd be untouchable, unlovable, unwhatever,

and I don't think I've been able to be as free or uninhibited or comfortable. I always felt like I was waiting for my cover to be blown or I was always waiting for them to find out something horrible and ugly about me.

She continued to explain how the incurable STI her ex-husband gave her affects her relationships.

I think when I get to a point where I really care about somebody, I think it could be that the guilt sets in and it's like I've got to leave because I can't do this anymore. I haven't been forthcoming. I didn't get a full disclosure. Blah blah blah blah. And now I have to either self-sabotage or I've got to run away or continue living a lie—or not disclose it. I made it like leprosy in my mind, and it's far from it, but I think in my mind I made it so bad that I even made it seem like I was unlovable because of it, on more than one occasion.

The presence of an incurable STI makes a partner's infidelity not just a betrayal that happened in the past but for many women it is an inescapable persistent betrayal that continues to communicate negative messages about her self-worth in her future relationships.

### *Physical Violence*

Whereas the sexual violence described above is also a form of physical violence, physical violence defined as “the intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury, or harm” (Breiding et al., 2015, p. 11) does not require a sexual component. Twenty-one of the women experienced physical violence and infidelity, which included but was not limited to fighting, beating, hitting, strangling, punching, pushing, grabbing, and being urinated on. Their stories describe intimate partner physical violence as a form of control that kept wives from cheating, was a reaction to being discovered as a cheater, and was an impetus to leave the relationship.

Sherry's first and second ex-husbands were unfaithful and physically violent towards her. She woke up in the middle of the night to her first ex-husband strangling her because he dreamt she was having sex with his best friend which she reminded him was not true. She analyzed the incident this way:

I realized that with a lot of men when they accuse a woman of cheating actually it's them that are cheating and are trying to make themselves feel better by convincing themselves “Oh she's cheating on me” when it's the other way around.

Although Faye described her second ex-husband as a “huge womanizer” she was the one being punished. She woke up to him aiming a gun at her and saying, “I just wish you were dead.” She remembered, “He often said, when I told him that I was unhappy or whatever, he said he would bury me before he would let me leave him.” Faye admitted that he would hit her and that the relationship almost killed her. When asked if she thought about a revenge affair she responded,

No, I was terrified. I was accused of it constantly. I never actually—I mean, the idea of actually doing something like that, I was already suffering for it. I couldn't imagine how bad it would be if I had actually done something.

At other times, men were physically violent as a reaction to their women discovering their infidelities. Antionette's ex-fiancé beat her when she confronted him with proof that he had another fiancée. Melanie had two children by her boyfriend who had been unfaithful with three women that she knew of. Because one of the affairs was ongoing, she would fight him when she was frustrated:

But I do feel like maybe he finally exploded because I had hit him in the past and he had never hit me back. He would push me and like grab me hard and tell me to calm down but he never hit me like this fight. He actually did like punch me multiple times. I knew it was something different. Like he finally said, "You know what I'm going to hit you till where you never hit me again."

Husbands and wives also used intimate partner physical violence as an excuse to leave the relationship. Anita's ex-husband had been unfaithful multiple times. She thought they had agreed to work on the marriage, but in retrospect she believes he intentionally orchestrated their first violent confrontation as an excuse to leave. Anita remembered,

He drummed up some big argument, and that was the first time he ever put his hands on me; he pushed me. . . . Then I remember him hitting me in my arm and then pushing me up against the wall and my head hit it. And then, at that point, I remember thinking about Oprah, and saying, "Oh, she says that you should leave when someone hits you." And I was devastated. . . . He left right after that, soon after that. So I think there was a plan in motion for him. He just didn't wanna to be in the marriage anymore. He didn't wanna be responsible for us.

Intimate partner physical violence is a recurring problem for couples that are not experiencing infidelity. However, its coexistence with infidelity communicates a cheater's insecurities about being on the receiving end of his actions as well as a cheater's excuse to leave a current relationship.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON HURT AND INFIDELITY'S COEXISTENCE WITH IPV**

A retrospective approach is usually considered a limitation of qualitative studies because participants are removed from the events and can thus craft narratives to suit their present positionality. In this study, retrospection revealed how the hurt partner's perceptions of the offending partner's actions raised her self-awareness. For example, when recounting infidelity and IPV, the women realized their partner's intentions to isolate them, remain financially dependent on them, impair their self-image via blame or shame, control, and manipulate them. The women acknowledged self-protectionist, in this case, male partners who punished them for his insecurity and indecisiveness and also when they discovered the truth or decided to leave. They

described how sexual and physical violence irrevocably altered perceptions of their partners and their relationships.

Vangelisti (2009) asserts that hurt's communicative function informs individuals about themselves and their relationships and persuades people to change their attitudes and behaviors. Infidelity's coexistence with IPV informed the women that their emotional injury was caused by more than a partner's sexual unfaithfulness and persuaded them to make decisions based upon this information. Ultimately, their hurtful experiences provided them with perspective. Reflecting on a partner's negative impact caused them to reevaluate themselves, their partners, and their relationships.

Because infidelity is a relational transgression much of the research on the topic necessarily prioritizes the relationship and its quality, satisfaction, devaluation, and conditions that could increase opportunities for infidelity (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007; Tsapelas, Fisher, & Aron, 2011). This study's nuanced approach focuses on a perspective shift by presenting how the recipient of infidelity (self) attributed intention to her partner's actions and thus began to see the relationship as detrimental to her "enduring preferred self-image" (Daily et al., 2007, p. 303). Infidelity research is notoriously imbalanced because the couple and the affair partner are rarely willing to recount their relational trauma together. Of course, more research should be conducted from the viewpoint of the person committing infidelity and IPV, but the communications received by women who survived a partner's affair were not only informative and persuasive, but they also offered a new *perspective* that prioritized the self first, her perception of her partner second, and the relationship's quality, satisfaction, and devaluation third. Infidelity's coexistence with IPV is indeed an interpersonal communication phenomenon worthy of further investigation.

The revelatory potential for infidelity and IPV could contribute to communication studies research in several ways. First, studying infidelity's coexistence with IPV could increase understandings of the deep hurt that can accompany both infidelity and IPV. Feeney (2005) and Shaver, Mikulincer, Lavy, and Cassidy's (2009) research on hurt and attachment as well as Bogaert and Sadava's (2002) research on infidelity and attachment can be expanded by considering how infidelity's coexistence with IPV affects personal injury and one's sense of security, safety, and the trustworthiness of others. How do individuals with various attachment styles respond to infidelity's coexistence with IPV? Perhaps, infidelity hurts some people more deeply than others because they are surviving infidelity plus IPV. Furthermore, polyvictimization or the simultaneous experience of multiple forms of IPV has shown to have greater negative impact than singular instances (Anderson, 2010). What, if any, influence does infidelity's coexistence with IPV have on polyvictimization? Research should begin to query the frequency with which infidelity's coexistence with IPV occurs.

Second, more research on infidelity and IPV would expand studies on hurt, intentionality, and relational quality. Tafoya and Spitzberg (2007) list jealousy, sex, and revenge as infidelity motives, but how might infidelity and IPV expand the list of rationales for infidelity? The literature suggests that interactions perceived as intentionally hurtful in general and psychological aggression in particular lead to greater distancing effects on the relationship (Dailey et al., 2007; Vangelisti, 2001). Because

this data preliminarily suggests women interpreted infidelity's coexistence with IPV as intentional, additional research must investigate how often infidelity's coexistence with IPV is perceived as intentional in comparison to the intention attributed to infidelity alone. If infidelity's coexistence with IPV is routinely perceived as intentional, what distancing effects does it have on the relationship? Are partners more likely to terminate the relationship when infidelity coexists with IPV? How much does infidelity and IPV decrease relational satisfaction in comparison to infidelity alone?

Third, Wood's (2000, 2001) suggestion that women normalize and dissociate from their intimate partner's violence could be revisited. This data offers no evidence of normalization of, minimalization of, or disassociation from IPV. Future research questions must ask, does infidelity's coexistence with IPV resist or reduce women's normalization of IPV? Does the combination make women more likely to terminate the relationship than experiencing infidelity or IPV individually?

Fourth, future studies about infidelity and IPV could provide comparative insight on heterosexual and homosexual relationships. With what frequency do women enact infidelity and IPV in their heterosexual relationships? Are there gender differences among various pairings of infidelity and IPV? Only three same-sex relationships were quoted in the analysis. Although they describe how unfaithful women can demonstrate IPV towards their same sex partners, a proper comparison of the ways that men and women cheaters may be simultaneously unfaithful and aggressive and/or violent towards their female partners is unavailable.

Fifth, infidelity and IPV could have important race and class implications. Sixty-three percent of this sample included heterosexual African American women in relationships with African American men. Race partially explains why many Black women experience infidelity with Black men. Racially biased socioeconomic impediments like high incarceration and mortality rates create an imbalanced sex ratio that makes fewer marriageable Black men available to marriageable Black women. This pattern contributes to witting or unwitting man sharing (Utley, 2011). The prevalent underemployment, unemployment, and other unequal employment opportunities among Black men may explain the confluence of race and class especially in the economic aggression narratives. All of the women who thought their partners were with them because they were financially stable were African American. According to Hampton, Oliver, and Magarian (2003), Black women who out earn their Black male partners are subject to higher rates of IPV. They further assert that Black women are more likely to leave an unfaithful partner not because of the infidelity but because he failed to fulfill his financial obligations as a provider.

Overall, intimate partner violence rates are higher among African Americans than Whites, in part because of these racial disparities. Scholars are thoroughly investigating Black women's unique cultural relationships to IPV (Hampton et al., 2003; Nash, 2005; Potter, 2008). Unfortunately, those queries are beyond the scope of this project. While highlighting structural disadvantages like the ones above help contextualize the experiences of the majority African Americans in this sample, it is equally important not to pathologize them simply because they are African Americans surviving the dark side of romantic relationships. Data collection was not focused on racialized

experiences with infidelity or IPV. None of the women explicitly mentioned the role of race when recounting their experiences nor were they asked to do so, but future studies must explore the relationships among infidelity, IPV, race, and class.

## CONCLUSION

Infidelity hurt is well documented. This exploratory survey of an unexpected data finding adds to that research by solidifying a relationship among hurt, infidelity, and IPV. It further suggests that infidelity's coexistence with IPV is informative, persuasive, and perspective altering. This approach highlights a unique set of circumstances that demonstrate how a hurt partner's perceptions of an offending partner's aggressive or violent actions led to a reevaluation of a relationship and a prioritization of self. Additional research on infidelity's coexistence with IPV must continue to investigate its communicative potential in various contexts.

## Notes

1. Not all infidelity or IPV is injurious and hurtful. Individuals less committed to a relationship or with lower relational satisfaction or higher relational alternatives may not be hurt by the breach of trust infidelity implies (Jeanfreau, Jurich, & Mong, 2014; Richardson, 1979). Relationships with infidelity may end or mend with one or both partners rethinking notions of sexual exclusivity and/or having learned valuable lessons about themselves and the relationship for which they are grateful (Allan & Harrison, 2009; Utley, 2016). Additionally, Spitzberg (2009) notes the paucity of research that explores how IPV may be "counterbalanced by co-occurring beneficial feelings or cognitions, or an important phenomenological springboard to other more positive experiences" (p. 209).
2. Abuse, aggression, and violence are socially constructed terms that vary depending on the types of violence, motives, perceptions of intent, and the cultural background of individuals involved (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Spitzberg, 2011). I have chosen to adopt the CDC's terms violence and aggression because of their attempts at succinct standardization, because of Spitzberg's (2011) admonition not to conflate physical pain with nonverbal transgressions, and because aggression (opposed to abuse) highlights its communicative aspect. However, Miller's (1995) typology of nonphysical intimate partner abuse usefully differentiates the CDC's broad category of psychological aggression and distills the inapplicable breadth of Dailey et al.'s (2007) Communication Aggression Measure for a qualitative study. For consistency, I refer to Miller's subcategories of abuse as aggression, i.e., social aggression, economic aggression, etc. In the analysis when I refer to psychological aggression, I reference Miller's definition and not the CDC's broad categorization.
3. Throughout the analysis, "ex" describes a partner with whom the woman was no longer in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview.

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